

Reply to Chief! Garu Zenzile Khoisan: What happens when issues of land and heritage clash?

Editor's note – In *New Agenda* 78, Chief! Garu Zenzile Khoisan, leader of the Goringhaiqua Cultural Council, argued in favour of the massive and controversial proposed development of the River Club at the Two Rivers Urban Park in Observatory, Cape Town. This development is on land that is now privately owned, but which is significant to the Cape Peninsula's Khoi and San people who were the historical custodians of the area. After the development plan was announced, representatives of the local indigenous people, as well as local stakeholders, found themselves divided by bureaucratic disputes around spatial planning and its consequences.

Invoking the concept of “cultural agency,” the First Nations Collective (of which Chief Zenzile is a member) argues that it got the developers to revise their proposal to include a world-class facility where the First Nations Collective will permanently collate and curate their heritage, practise their craft and culture, tell their own stories and train their own people.

Chief Zenzile said that indigenous people should use cultural agency to effect an objective, rather than getting gridlocked in the bureaucratic planning system. “Through this act of agency, we cut our own path of destiny through a minefield,” he wrote.

Other stakeholders take another position entirely. We have continued the debate in this issue of *New Agenda* by including other points of view. We publish a response from the Observatory Civic Association which argues that the planned development represents the interests of capital and

is the product of an alliance between the developers and one section of the Khoi nation, helped by powerful influencers. The argument is made that development would be better achieved by recognising the cultural and historical significance of the area at the confluence of the Liesbeek and Black rivers and respecting the area as part of South Africa's intangible heritage.

We also publish an article by Tauriq Jenkins who is Supreme High Commissioner for the Goringhaicona Khoi Khoi Traditional Indigenous Council, under Paramount Chief Aran. He argues that most Khoi groups strongly oppose the proposed development and regard the contest with the developers as yet another battle to defend Khoi and San heritage, being fought today on the very site on which the First Nations defended it against colonialist attack in 1659.

The Institute for African

Alternatives (IFAA) has devoted much space to this debate – and hosted a lively but very well moderated forum on this issue last year – because our democracy is supposed to be about accommodation and reconciliation, and open debate. This extends beyond the River Club dispute to encompass issues of land usage, spatial justice, land redistribution, history and heritage, the environment, and the challenges faced by those who have a claim to the land. In this case, a group of cultural stakeholders who demand the right to defend their heritage are pitted against community activists who are concerned that an alliance with capital enables one group to exercise undue influence over other groups in decision-making in urban development. This dispute also shows the consequences of what was termed ‘divide and rule’, as an agreement between stakeholders becomes ever more elusive.