

Reviews

The Life and Times of Sara Baartman. 1998. 53 minutes. Colour. Directed by Zola Maseko. Narration in English, interviews in French with English subtitles. Producers: Icarus/First Run Films, Mail and Guardian Television, Dominant 7, SABC 2, Dola Bill Productions; camera: Giulio Biccari; sound: Karen Boswall and Robin Harris; editor: Lise Beaulieu; distributed by: First Run/Icarus Films; 32 Court St, 21st Floor, Brooklyn, New York, 11202; Tel.: (718) 488 8900; email: info@frif.com

The story of Sartjie Baartman, the Hottentot Venus, has received much publicity in the wake of the recent controversial and triumphant return of her remains to South Africa, where she was buried in her native Gamtoos River valley in the Eastern Cape. This ceremony took place on South Africa's National Women's Day, thus emphasising awareness of the oppression and subjugation of both women and people of colour in South Africa's history. Baartman's story provides both the inspiration for a long-awaited challenge to colonial domination, and a lesson regarding the racism, sexism and oppression that inform our global heritage.

The Life and Times of Sara Baartman is a documentary about a young Khoi woman taken to Europe in the early 1800s, exhibited as a freak and examined for scientific proof of the inferiority of her race. Sartjie (renamed Sara) Baartman was born in the Eastern Cape in 1790. After a Dutch commando attacked her community, she was taken to Cape Town where she worked as a slave for a farmer, Peter Cezar, and was "discovered" by Cezar's brother Hendric, who was aware of Europe's "morbid fascination" with the "special" genitalia of the Khoi women. Cezar took Sara to London in 1810. There she performed in popular freakshows as "The Hottentot Venus". After her exhibition met with disapproval in London, she was taken to France, where slavery was still condoned, and sold to an animal trainer. In 1815, Sara was examined by three eminent French scientists, who wanted to view her "Hottentot apron", the existence of which, they believed, would prove the inferiority of her race. This was prevented by her modesty, but the problem was circumvented by her unexplained death in 1816.

The documentary does not attempt to re-enact this disturbing story, but tells it through the testimonies of historians and anthropologists; through newspaper reports, advertisements and letters of the time; through portraits, caricatures and cartoons, and through revisiting places where the events took place. This technique gives an educated sense of the historical context of Sara's life and also makes the film less visually harrowing than a Spielberg version could have been.

The film deals primarily with the issue of racism as it pertains to Sara's existence, death, and socio-cultural significance. Sara's status in South Africa as

a slave meant that she was unable to make decisions about her life. The farmer for whom she worked was in a position to say to his brother “You find her bum interesting - take her and do with her what you will,” as South African historian Yvette Abrahams put it.

The cruel way in which Sara was treated was motivated primarily by racism, by the perception of difference. Freak shows, which started in royal courts, were great attractions in Europe. The “Hottentot Venus” show, at two shillings a head, was a huge success. A British journalist, however, wrote of the Baartman exhibition, that “the ‘Hottentot’ was treated like a wild beast, a bear on a chain. She was kept in a cage, forced to dance even when she was ill, and threatened with fists or sticks when she did not co-operate.” This reflects the racism entrenched in European society. The film describes only a single, poignant incident where Sara was treated like a human being. A journalist who witnessed her crying during one of her shows spoke to her afterwards, and she told him how unhappy she was and that she did not deserve her fate.

In 1815 Sara was examined by three eminent French scientists, including Georges Cuvier, at the Museum of Natural History. They did not succeed in viewing her “Hottentot apron”, as she clung to her modesty and refused bribes to reveal herself, yet they described her in relation to an animal - “lips like a chimpanzee”, buttocks resembling those of a female ape. They associated Sara with the animal rather than human realm. Contemporary scientists placed the Khoi somewhere between apes and humans, as a subhuman race. They were obsessed with the need to classify, to find the line where humans stop and animals begin.

After Sara’s death, the animal trainer gave her corpse to the Museum of Natural History. The cause of her death was not revealed in the postmortem, as Cuvier was far more interested in having a corpse to dissect that was unable to resist. He cut off her genitals, bottled them and presented them to the Academy of Science as evidence of Sara’s subhumanity. Cuvier’s report of the autopsy has been described as “very exaggerated and fundamentally racist”. According to Abrahams, “scientific racism was built on her body”, which established the kind of thinking and classification that would later support apartheid.

The representation of Sara Baartman relates to identity in the face of the Other. It seems that the Europeans wanted to reassure themselves that the “Hottentots” were the Other. Their fascination with freak shows stemmed from the desire to see anything “different”. Also, they needed to prove that Sara was subhuman, another species, in order to justify their inhumane treatment of her. This desire to classify, to identify the Other, establishes a mode of relations, a hierarchy on which colonialism is based and which is necessary to support Western hegemony. The representation of the “Hottentot Venus” focuses on difference. Her larger buttocks and unique genitalia are cited as proof of such difference. Interestingly, the Bushman paintings shown in the film also depict Khoi people with disproportionately large buttocks. For them, perhaps, it is a matter of cultural pride, a feature which distinguishes them as a group. Yet for Sara in Europe it made her a “rare specimen”, a source of profit, a “mythical phenomenon”. A French journalist, after seeing a Medici Venus, pointed out that she was not a very appealing Venus. Her title “The Hottentot Venus” was

more about revulsion than beauty, more about her “extraordinary” sexuality than her womanhood.

Representation is a significant theme in *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman*. The voiceover at the beginning of the film observes that Sara “has been both a servant and a great attraction, both a Venus and an exotic freak ... she’s been a woman and she’s been an ape ... how could the same person play so many different parts?” It does not seem, however, that Sara ever chose the roles she was to play. Her life was merely a consequence of the way others chose to represent her. Even in her death she was not allowed to be at peace, she was an object, “like a beast drawn, measured and chopped, precisely preserved”. She was not considered to be a woman with emotions and beliefs, a family or a husband-to-be, but a skeleton in case 33.

The exaggerated plaster cast of Sara’s body, which depicts her with her eyes closed, also suggests subhumanity. The eyes are often believed to be the window of the soul, and portraying Sara with her eyes shut suggests that she is a creature without a soul. Her image, her skeleton, the plaster cast of her body, her portraits and caricatures, visually dominate the film. This reminds one that it was her representation - in myth, in art, in literature, in science - that destroyed her life.

The film expresses direct criticism of the attitudes that underlie racial discrimination. This is illustrated by the inclusion and discussion of a cartoon drawn after Sara’s first exhibition. The picture shows her next to some Scottish soldiers. The soldiers and another woman are trying to look up Sara’s skirt, while a dog is sniffing up one of the soldier’s kilts. The depiction of the Venus, looking calmly ahead, connotes nobility, elegance, tradition. The image of the dog sniffing up the kilt suggests a connection between the dog, whose lack of social decency permits it to put its nose where it does not belong, and the curious Europeans who have no more respect for human dignity than an animal. The cartoonist makes Sara into a symbol of the Other, who is not treated with the respect a human being deserves.

Since the demise of apartheid in South Africa, there has been much debate about the return of Sara’s remains to South Africa. At the time of filming this documentary, the long process of negotiation regarding Sartjie’s body was still in progress. According to Khoi belief, a soul cannot be at rest if the body is not respected. Thus there is profound social and historical significance in the returning of the remains of the “Hottentot Venus”. In 1996, then President Nelson Mandela, on behalf of the Griqua National Conference, approached then French President Francois Mitterand, with a request to help bring Baartman home. This request was met with some resistance and resulted in six years of diplomatic games between scientists, ambassadors, government ministers and ethnic interest groups (*Sunday Times Lifestyle*, 11 August 2002, 8). The resistance seemed to stem from France’s unwillingness to revisit its history of racism and a concern that “giving up Sarah Baartman’s remains to her country of origin would open the floodgates on demands for the return of countless relics by all whose countries, cultures and people had been plundered during the colonial era” (*Sunday Times Lifestyle*, 11 August 2002, 9).

Eventually, on 6 March 2002, a law was passed providing for the return of Sara Baartman to South Africa. After further debate regarding the protocol for her burial, she was buried on the banks of the Gamtoos River, in an inter-faith service. Her grave was sprinkled with traditional herbs and covered with a cairn (*Sunday Times Lifestyle*, 11 August 2002, 9).

Sara has become a symbol, for post-apartheid South Africa, of injustice and discrimination that need to be redressed. The song played at the end of the film, *Going back to Africa*, seems to suggest that the wrongs Sara suffered will be put right if her body is returned to Africa where she belongs. Obviously, this will not make up for the tragedy of Sara's life. This documentary can be perceived as an attempt to change ways of thinking, to prevent the propagation of discrimination. It evokes racist signs which result in an emotional response, openly condemns racism, trying to persuade people to behave in a democratic manner, and aims to produce new responses to racism - resistance instead of acceptance. Gail Smith, who was part of the historic mission to repatriate Sartjie's remains describes her experience: "I wept for Baartman, I wept for every black woman degraded and humiliated by men obsessed with the secrets they carry between their legs. And I wept for every brown South African reduced, degraded and humiliated by being called 'Hotnot' and 'AmaBoesman'. I also wept tears of joy and gratitude because I had been chosen as a witness to a brief and victorious moment in history." (cited in *Mail and Guardian*, 17-23 May 2002, 10).

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The Great Dance: A Hunter's Story. 2000. 75 minutes. Colour. Directed by Craig and Damon Foster. For more information, contact Earthrise Productions, 14 Dunluce Ave, Cape Town. Email: Earthrise@iafrica.com

*The Great Dance*¹ describes the life of the !Xo people of the Kalahari. It is told by !Nqate (meaning “always walking”) Xqamxebe, a San Bushman hunter. The film depicts the Bushman skills in hunting and tracking, their traditions and beliefs, and the way in which their lifestyle is altered and compromised as a result of the impact of the Western world and modernity. It seems to attempt to understand San cosmology. *The Great Dance* gives an idea of the free, self-reliant lifestyle of Bushmen in the past, and the actuality of their life in the present. According to the directors, members of the San community portrayed in the film were involved in the processes of producing it.

The Great Dance differs from the *Gods Must be Crazy* films in that it depicts Bushmen less as romanticised sources of amusement for “civilized” Westerners, and more as highly skilled, dedicated and intelligent experts in the intricate arts of tracking and hunting. The hunter is shown to be tireless in his endeavours to feed his family. The scenes depicting the “hunt by running” or “chasing hunt” in which Karoha runs a kudu to the death, emphasise endurance and skill, the way in which the hunter is able to “put on” the animal’s mind. The portrayal of hunting seems to resonate with San Bushmen viewers. According to Belinda Kruiper, interviewed in the Northern Cape on 28 September 2000, “I watched Vetkat watching it and the Bushmen. And they were in the soul of the hunter and in the hunted all the time ... catching the truth and the essence of what happened between man and beast.”

The film shows the San’s extensive knowledge of nature and how they are able to track animals by studying the faintest of prints in the baked earth. Their tracking skills are also demonstrated through the use of black and white images, which create the effect of flashbacks, and show the mental images the Bushman has of the animal’s movements and activities through glancing at the tracks on the ground. The Bushman’s skill in hunting is seen to result from his insight into the behaviour and instincts of his prey. The hunting scenes also show the way in which the Bushman’s environment has changed and degenerated in recent times: “once we were near animals, now we must walk far to find them.”

Political issues filter into the narrative, which describes the San’s ultimate political dislocation from their land, and consequently from their spirituality and livelihood. !Nqate laments that they no longer move from place to place, but that their land has been taken for cattle farms and wildlife parks: “Today we are told that we don’t own our land, we don’t own our animals.”

The film shows how globalisation has affected the once independent ways of life of this San community. This is reflected in the Western clothes

1. Editor’s note: For a review article presenting a different reading, see S.Douglas, ‘The re-enchantment of the world and the threat to reason: *The Great Dance: A Hunter’s Story*’, *Kronos*, vol. 27, 2001, 304-319.

worn, the combination of indigenous entertainment with radios, and in their familiarity with commerce. It indicates that the makers of the documentary were concerned with presenting as “realistic” as possible a portrayal of contemporary San society. There still appear to be elements of romanticism, however. The hunters are mostly bare-chested, their clothing in neutral colours suggesting the traditional skins. The !Xo people are aware that “our ways are being changed.” !Nqate says, “sometimes we feel we have no future.” He is very concerned that their children should learn their culture and the “ways of the dance”. The film suggests a post-industrial need to tap into a romantic, pre-modern condition,² to return to the past. !Nqate’s statement “our ways are being changed” implies that the San have no agency, that they have no choice, not only regarding political issues, but regarding their own lifestyle and cultural practices. Perhaps despite efforts to the contrary, this film can be seen to portray the San as Other, as an underdeveloped people, unable to cope with or adapt to modernity.

Dancing is a significant theme in the film, and is possibly symbolic of the residual San culture and previously traditional ways of life. They believe that tracking is like dancing because the body is happy. They also dance to bring rain and to celebrate when they have food. The people believe that “when you are tracking and dancing you are talking to God.” Thus in *The Great Dance*, dancing seems to represent joy and fulfillment in the !Xo people’s culture. As the film ends, !Nqate is dancing beside a fire and then (as words appear on the screen telling the audience that since the making of the film the !Xo people’s individual hunting rights have been revoked, and that they still hope to gain rights to the ancestral land where their forefathers hunted and gathered for 30,000 years), we no longer see him dancing. This statement is not entirely accurate, however. The existing hunting rights have fallen away, as legislation has been introduced allowing for communal hunting rights and the granting of permits for hunting.

The visual aspect of *The Great Dance* makes a significant contribution to the message conveyed by the film. The tracking scenes, showing black and white flashbacks of a cheetah, a springbok, as the hunter traces the tracks on the earth, emphasise the Bushman’s understanding of and closeness to his environment. The San seem to be at one with the vast skies, rolling clouds and endless desert, illustrating the point of the injustice of their dispossession. The hunting scenes, in which animals are skinned and their blood and organs consumed by hunters, emphasise the cultural differences between the San and their Western counterparts. The flickering firelight on their glistening dark skins makes the Bushmen appear exotic, romantic, primordial.

In comparison to earlier films, which represented indigenous people as Other in a conscious/subconscious attempt to justify discrimination against them, *The Great Dance* makes significant inroads into developing a more conscious, balanced portrayal of the life of San-Bushmen in present society, bear-

2. See K.G.Tomaselli, ““We have to work with our own heads” (/Angn!ao): San Bushmen and the Media”, *Visual Anthropology*, vol. 15 (2), 2001.

ing in mind the political pressures on the lives and cultures of these First People of the Fourth World. However, the representation of the San is to some extent romanticised and fails to affirm the agency of the San in directing their own destiny. As a political statement, it may have the potential to make a difference, but this has yet to be seen. Much as *The Great Dance* attempts to praise, protect and defend San culture, it is still informed by the perspective of paternalism and the concept of a cultural isolate under siege from modernity.

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A Concise History of South Africa. By ROBERT ROSS. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. 219 pp. ISBN 0 521 57313-0.

A Concise History of South Africa is a meticulously written scholarly work. The author, Robert Ross, addresses a number of very important themes in South African history. From this work, the reader comes to grips with South Africa's environmental history, archaeological history, socio-cultural history, and, most importantly, economic and political history. The genesis and course of events are succinctly presented. Ross begins his work with the sentence, "South Africa is a single country" (1). Preempting his reader's concerns, he adds that his statement is both banal and highly contested. His study sets out to demonstrate how this unity came about, taking his readers through a number of political moments in South African history, moments that have become signposts in the country's historiography.

The peopling of South Africa is one of the themes addressed in his book. Ross identifies three groups: the hunter-gatherers, who later became known as "Bushmen" or "San"; the pastoralists, known as the Khoikhoi; and the agriculturalists who spoke Bantu languages. Most school history books have 1652 as their starting point. Ross's line of departure in which he addresses precolonial population groups, saliently debunks the impression that South African history began when the Dutchmen under Jan van Riebeeck settled at the Cape. Not only does Ross mention the three precolonial population groups, he goes on to look at the complexities of each. He discusses their cultural differences, means of subsistence, and gendered labour systems.

The value of cattle looms large in his narrative. Cattle played a pivotal role, not only as the source of meat, milk, and cowhide, but also for elevating one's social status. Men used cattle to pay bridewealth, and "a man with many wives was able to offer much hospitality, above all in the form of beer, and thus to increase the respect in which he was held by his peers" (15). The author links pre-colonial governance to the possession of cattle. He argues that pre-colonial South Africa was under a monarchical system of government. The leaders had more cattle, married many wives, and thus could support more people and increase their following.

According to Ross, the peopling of South Africa took another turn in the post-1500 era after Europeans started sailing to Asia via the Cape. From 1652, the Dutch, under Jan van Riebeeck, settled at the Cape. The San resisted white encroachment. This provides the background to the extermination of this indigenous population group and its marginality in the Cape during later years.

Slavery is one of the sub-themes of the peopling of South Africa. Ross argues that slave masters, their slaves, and the Khoikhoi, "created the tripartite structure of colonial South Africa before the nineteenth century" (23). His concerns about the peopling of South Africa demand that he introduces each population group that came in. The Dutch appropriated land from the Khoikhoi. Some of the Dutch immigrants were freed from the VOC's control and became free citizens. These are the people who put pressure on Jan van Riebeeck to secure per-

mission from the VOC's headquarters in Batavia, to allow them to enslave the local communities. The need for fresh food supplies made the authorities reluctant to grant such permission. After all, the Cape was meant to be a refreshment station and not a permanent place of residence. As the labour need increased, Dutch authorities acquiesced to the introduction of slavery. However, they insisted that slaves be brought in from outside the Cape. It was under these circumstances that the first group of slaves from the East Indies arrived at the Cape in 1658.

In many instances, Ross tries to explain how and/or why certain events took place. In his section on colonial conquest, he provides a detailed account of the Cattle-Killing movement in the eastern Cape between 1856 and 1857. He concludes his narrative by saying that "given South African ideas of pollution, and the great crisis the amaXhosa were in, this is at least intelligible" (53). Not all sections of the history of amaXhosa are given in detail. For example, Ross maintains that: "The frontier wars of 1835-6 (Hintsisa's War) and 1846-7 (the War of the Axe) had destroyed much of their property" (47). People who are not conversant with South African history are left in the dark about these two wars. The author is silent on how these wars came about and were named.

The speed with which he moves through certain events makes it difficult for him to be comprehensive. In his discussion of the 1899-1902 South African War, he holds: "In the Transvaal, involvement in the war was more direct. Military action, in the strict sense, was rare, though one Boer commando was nearly wiped out by a Zulu attack" (73-74). After making this point, he briskly moves on to talk about what happened to the land that was lost by the Afrikaners. Given that blacks are generally said to have played a non-combatant role in the South African War, one would expect Ross to provide more contextual detail about this "rare" incident in which amaZulu faced the Boers head-on. Where did Zulu and Boer forces meet? What was the nature of the war? Was it a hasty incident or did it take a long time? Why was the Boer commando nearly wiped out? Was it due to Zulu war techniques, sheer luck, or even negligence on the side of the Boer commanders? Ross is silent on all these important questions.

The author provides an impressive analysis of the politics surrounding the formation of the Union of South Africa. He delves into the complexity of the political situation and the uncertainties faced by different leaders concerning the merger of the four provinces. He argues that this unification did not entail uniformity even amongst whites. Conversely, "it provided the opportunity for latent conflicts to become manifest" (84). As he persuasively points out, some whites had not come into terms with their defeat in the South African War by the British forces. It is for this reason that when Prime Minister Botha took a decision to enter the First World War in 1914 on the side of the Allies, other Afrikaners reverted to a revolt. They thought that their autonomy or "independence" as a union would be jeopardised if they had to participate in the war just because Britain wanted them to.

What is puzzling is the manner in which Ross deals with the 1914 rebellion. His interpretation is that "the 1914 revolt was not really serious politics, and had no chance of short-term success" (*Ibid*). He may have a case for the latter point, but not for the first. If the revolt was "not serious politics" as he

asserts, why did these Afrikaners revolt? Were their actions not politically motivated? How does Ross understand and define “serious politics”? Writing about the revolt after eight decades makes conjecture inevitable. However, reducing it to an insignificant incident is unjustifiable. One wonders, for instance, how Ross would have conceptualised the revolt had it succeeded. Would that elevate its status and make it “serious politics”? Would it still be insignificant just because it involved a few Afrikaners?

These concerns are given substance when one looks at the manner in which Ross addresses the political impact of the 1922 Rand Revolt. Here he attributes the loss of the South African Party in the 1924 elections to these revolts. The question that arises is: would Ross have accorded the same status to the revolts had the South African Party retained its position in 1924?

One of the strengths of this author’s work is the way it addresses the rise and fall of apartheid. There is a general tendency by uninitiated commentators to assume that apartheid blossomed overnight. Ross correctly reiterates the point made by scholars such as Deborah Posel (1991) that the emergence of apartheid was a gradual process. He gives the impression that it was, in fact, chaotic in its infant stages, beginning in 1948. As he puts it, “Malan’s party did not come into office, however, with a fully operationalised programme of action” (115). The government had to secure its continuing in office. Thus it enfranchised whites in South West Africa (Namibia) with the hope that they would support the National Party. As part of the government’s self-preservationist endeavours, “a long and constitutionally messy process was initiated to remove the coloureds in the Cape Province from the common role, as they were seen as swinging a number of seats towards the United Party” (*Ibid*). According to this trajectory, apartheid used the trial and error method - it was late in the process that it took shape.

Other conclusions drawn by Ross on apartheid are less persuasive. He maintains that whatever apartheid meant, it entailed the recognition and separation of specific groups of people and that “the criteria by which these were demarcated were not racist, at least in the formal sense of the word” (116). Ross ignores a couple of points in his assertion. Firstly, the Afrikaners who won the 1948 elections were not newly arrived immigrants. Racial prejudice was not a new terrain for them. They had been in South Africa long enough to know how to play the race card to their advantage. In 1908, when discussions were held to decide whether South Africa would become a union or a federation, politicians like J.B.M.Hertzog were vocal on race being one of the key variables in deciding South Africa’s fate. The 1913 and 1936 Land Acts were based on racial prejudice. Unless Ross provides a “formal” explanation of race as he understands it, and proves that the proponents of apartheid did not fit that explanation, his point is not convincing.

The manner in which he explains the demise of apartheid is more convincing though. He makes the significant observation that apartheid died a slow death and argues that “the whole development of apartheid, and its eventual demise, can be seen as driven by attempts to control the numbers and behaviour of Africans within South Africa’s cities, and by the resistance to such control by the victims of such policies” (116).

He then goes on to provide an account of the birth of South Africa's freedom in 1994. He gives a dispassionate view of each of the parties that were involved in the negotiation process. From this author's narrative, political transformation was a concerted effort by different parties. No individual or political party can claim to have been the key player in bringing about change. Each one had to make a compromise in order to ensure that a peaceful solution was found.

The stubbornness of the apartheid regime could no longer hold ground. Neither could apartheid be considered a legitimate political institution by the international world. The armed struggle by organisations like the ANC and the PAC could not bring freedom. Gatsha Buthelezi failed to liberate the country by opposing apartheid from within its structures as he claimed to be doing. Conservative Afrikaners like Constant Viljoen and Eugene Terre'blanche made vain attempts to secure a "Boerestaat". A different political strategy was a sine-qua-non for a new political dispensation. Ross provides a convincing assessment of Viljoen's political actions during the negotiation process and on the eve of the first democratic elections in 1994. The latter led his 4,000 forces to Bophuthatswana in an attempt to help his comrade-in-arms, Lucas Mangope. Three men in the convoy were executed by a Bophuthatswana colonel. Ross correctly concludes: "That symbol of the new balance of forces closed off Viljoen's options. Almost immediately he agreed to participate in the elections" (193). Thus, Viljoen's participation in the elections was a situational response and not entirely a voluntary decision. Ross is absolutely correct in saying that Viljoen saw the elections as "the best way of achieving his objectives" (*Ibid*).

The political avarice of leaders like Lucas Mangope, Oupa Gqozo, Constant Viljoen, Gatsha Buthelezi, and others, is also clearly demonstrated. Buthelezi first exhausted all possible avenues to retain power and only joined the 1994 elections at the eleventh hour when he ran out of options. He realised that the elections would continue with or without his Inkatha Freedom Party. He acquiesced to the elections, not because he wanted to, but partly because he wanted to retain some of his power in what was called Zululand. There were more chances for Inkatha to win the province now called KwaZulu-Natal and that would ensure Buthelezi a political power base. This last-minute decision by Buthelezi to join the elections was also a political strategy. Had he lost KwaZulu-Natal to the ANC (something that almost happened), he would have used his late participation in the elections as an excuse.

Very few people would dispute the fact that F.W. de Klerk and Nelson Mandela took vital political decisions that culminated in the liberation of South Africa's masses. Ross does not question this. However, he tries to explain the reasons behind certain decisions. He argues that De Klerk acknowledged Namibia's independence and unbanned the ANC and other political organizations, not because he wanted to, but because the South African state was being strained financially. Giving independence to Namibia would relieve the South African government of the financial burden. Unbanning liberation movements would mean that there would be no need to guard against "terrorist" attacks. With these liberation movements back in the country, government programmes like "the Total Strategy" would no longer be a financial strain to the government.

Moreover, the issue of Namibia and the liberation movements “served to increase international indignation towards, and thus pressure on South Africa. This had military, economic and moral consequences” (183). In a nutshell, a confluence of factors had a direct or indirect impact on De Klerk’s historic announcement on 2 February 1990.

One general problem with this book is the style used by the author. This work contains fascinating factual material. However, there are neither footnotes nor endnotes to direct the reader to the sources from which certain information is taken. As mentioned earlier, Ross moves quickly on a number of issues. Had he made use of fuller referencing, it would be easier for the reader to follow up intriguing points. The list of sources suggested at the end of the book are not the most useful. Ross admits that “the list is a personal and partial selection of books written, or at least published, in English” (202).

Having said that, *A Concise History of South Africa* is still a substantial contribution to South African historiography. It takes the reader through different historical moments. Environmental, economic, social, religious, cultural, and political histories are all touched on in his study. One of the greatest strengths of this book is the extent to which it contextualises events and moves away from an unequivocal chronologically-driven account. It creates the impression that the South Africa that emerged after the 1994 elections was the product of a complex confluence of events.

Ross alludes to the fact that the journey towards South Africa’s liberation was thorny and had to be travelled with caution. Whilst some of the negotiators had national interests at heart, others were preoccupied with finding ways of elevating themselves as individuals. As Ross correctly postulates, sustaining this hard-fought liberation was never going to be an easy task. There were a variety of time-bombs: different political ideologies, racial differences, ethnic consciousness, different religious beliefs and cultural practices, rural-urban dichotomies, economic inequalities, and many others. The Government of National Unity (GNU) tried its best to build a “Rainbow Nation”. As Ross correctly observes, sport was used as a unifying force. Blessings fell on the GNU as both the soccer and rugby national teams won the competition in their respective codes. However, disillusioned politicians and the masses found different ways of responding to realities in post-1994 South Africa. The National Party broke out of the GNU, some of the unemployed resorted to crime, some new incumbents in government positions were implicated in corruption and nepotism, the rural masses felt ignored by their leaders, racist farmers turned their anger against the innocent farm workers and evicted them from what they considered to be their homes. Ross takes the reader through all these more recent political moments. He does not fill all the gaps, but provides the reader with much to ruminate about. The title of the book thus befits its mission, that is, to provide a condensed account of key episodes in the long history of South Africa and raise questions for other scholars to follow up.

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