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## “What Am I Supposed To Say?”

### Engagement, Epistemic Friction, and Exhibitionary Practice at the South African Museum and !Khwatla San Heritage Centre

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**ABSTRACT:** Since its closure in 2001, the San diorama at the South African Museum has dominated much of South Africa's critical museology. In recent years, there has been a significant drive for more sustained engagement with particular San communities by museums in Cape Town. This article utilizes the experiences of practitioners at the South African Museum and !Khwatla San Heritage Centre to ask questions about how knowledge is produced in the space that the closure of the diorama left behind, reflecting, in particular, on the epistemological contours of San participation in exhibitionary practice.

**KEYWORDS:** Cape Town, engagement, epistemic justice, exhibitionary practice, Indigenous people, San, South African Museum, !Khwatla

The Bushmen have never been allowed to be just people, like everyone else. They're always a symbol, an exhibit, a display item on somebody else's agenda. That's where the Bushman spirit stays trapped, between the truth and the lie, the myth and the reality, frozen in the amber of the past. (Belinda Kruiper, quoted in Hendricks 2010: 58)

In the early twentieth century, around 65 resin casts of San people<sup>1</sup> were made for the natural history collection of the South African Museum by cast-maker James Drury. Under the leadership of Louis Péringuey, the director of the South African Museum from 1906 until his death in 1924, Drury trawled the interior of South Africa hoping to salvage “pure” examples of what was believed to be a dying race, coercing mainly Northern Cape farm workers, shepherds, and prisoners into undergoing the suffocating casting process (Hendricks 2010: 25–30). While some of the life-casts had previously been displayed, in 1960 a diorama featuring several nostalgic hunter-gatherer scenes was opened to the public (Cedras 2016: 71). I can recall vividly my visits to this diorama as a child in the 1990s, mesmerized by the brightly-lit boxes glowing incandescent in the stifling gloom of the museum. After several decades of criticism, particularly from San and Khoe (Khoekhoe/Khoi/Khoikhoi)<sup>2</sup> communities, the diorama was “archived” in 2001, and eventually dismantled; the life-casts are now considered human remains (Davison 2018: 83–84).

The diorama's role in racial science, colonial violence and apartheid nationhood has been extensively interrogated (Rassool 2019; Witz, Rassool and Minkley 2017; Davison 2001; Legassick and Rassool 2000; Kasibe 2020; Cedras 2016; Hendricks 2010). The San diorama, like most ethnographic collections, was a foil, delineating the bounds of whiteness and colonial knowledge-production through a process of collecting the Other. According to Leslie Witz, Gary Minkley, and Ciraj Rassool (2017), it functioned as a living fossil, situating the colonizer and the colonized within a “developmental time’ of stages, sequences, and progress,” the latter “either cast in the ‘flat time’ of an assigned stratum or in the ‘degenerative time’



of people whose lifestyle was a relic and whose being was stagnating and regressing” (Witz, Minkley, and Rassool 2017: 182). The diorama is just one node in the San representational landscape in which, as Belinda Kruiper highlights in the quote that begins this article, academic and popular discourse has refashioned San in an array of simulacrum—as savages to be exterminated, freaks to be exhibited, a child-like race to be protected, a specimen to be researched (Barnabas 2015: 78–81); it remains, however, one of the most enduring myths of the San in the national imagination. This article is concerned with the *post*-diorama museum space, focusing specifically on an analysis of knowledge-production and epistemic injustice in engagements between the South African Museum, !Khwa ttu (a San cultural center), and particular San and Khoe groups. Epistemic injustice is a term first popularized in academic literature by Miranda Fricker and broadly “refers to those forms of unfair treatment that relate to issues of knowledge, understanding, and participation in communicative practices” (Kidd et al. 2019: 1). Two key concepts are testimonial injustice, which incorporates biases that prevent listening and through which the speaker “*is wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower*” (Fricker 2007: 20); and hermeneutical injustice, which renders a speaker unintelligible and/or curtails them from participating in meaning-making activities because their social reality has not been encoded into the dominant communicative framework.

Rebecca Tsosie (2017) and Shahid Vawda (2019) have both connected the discussion on epistemic injustice to museums and Indigenous cultural heritage, Vawda arguing that the “privileging of ‘museum desires’” creates “a hermeneutical community of unequals” (Vawda 2019: 76). While some San and Khoe voices were adhered to in the dismantling of the diorama, they were not involved in rebuilding an epistemological base for the future of the museum or the exhibition space it left behind. For example, a significant grouping of San and Khoe wanted the diorama reinstated, one San leader from Botswana pointing out that the “exhibition is about our old people and it is important that people know how our old people lived” (Dubin 2006: 78). While this was not the only response (and nor does it necessarily mean that the diorama *should* be reinstated), it signals a hermeneutical dissonance, an opportunity to pause and look inward: Whose values are reflected in the exhibitionary practices of the museum? How are conflicting views incorporated into practice? What determines what/whose knowledge is displayed and in what ways? The most consistent response from the museum, however, was to interpret this hermeneutical gap as a deficiency on the part of the epistemological Other, dismissing their claims as “ethnographic elaborations that perpetuate the very intellectual frameworks and cultural histories they wish to overcome” (Rassool 2009: 116). This article thus functions as one such “pause,” highlighting where hermeneutical gaps have been encountered by museum practitioners involved in engagements with San, and encouraging us, through these examples, to “*remain open to epistemic counterpoints*” (Medina 2013: 79). “Privileged subjects,” argues José Medina, operate from a “meta-blindness,” unable to identify their “cognitive gaps and limitations” (ibid.: 56–57). It is only by engaging in the practice of “actively searching for more alternatives than those noticed,” and focusing on spaces of “epistemic friction” that knowledge can be expanded (ibid.: 79).

The discussion that follows is based on several site visits and interviews with practitioners at the South African Museum and !Khwa ttu, conducted between 2019 and 2020 as part of doctoral research into Indigenous urban heritage.<sup>3</sup> Notions of temporality, tradition, display techniques, and cosmologies were identified by the museum practitioners I spoke with as sticky areas within which the museum’s traditional knowledge-production along a Cartesian duality, trans-Indigenous ontologies, and post-colonial museologies were forced to be reconsidered. These practitioners, discussed throughout the article, were candid about the tensions they encountered, frequently expressing frustration at the limited options available to them. I do not propose to provide neat answers here, nor is this an indictment of museum practitioners navigating a particularly complex landscape; rather I aim to highlight several moments of epistemic friction between these two institutions and the San communities whose stories they ostensibly tell, and identify the questions this friction raises about the epistemic dimension of San engagement by museums in the context of exhibitionary practice.

As a general caveat, this article is not an anthropological study; it purposefully attempts to disengage from discussions around “authenticity” and makes no claims to having located a San “voice”—this is, by now, hopefully an untenable aim of any academic offering, particularly that conducted by non-San researchers. When I was speaking to social history curator Lynn Abrahams at the South African Museum in 2020, she expressed frustration at the constant demands to scientifically prove a Khoe and/or San identity for others.

“The problem is,” she told me, “we’ve always been spectators to our own heritage. People participated *for* us and decided *for* us, to write *for* us” (Abrahams 2020). Indeed, it is a contention of this article that for too long San and Khoe people have been discussed within quite stifling parameters, needing to perform to ever-shifting criteria of authenticity determined by popular and academic discourse. While this article thus notes where engagement may be informed by the assumption that Indigenous activities can be neatly categorized as “hegemonic imposition or counter-hegemonic resistance” (Sahlins 1999: 406), it is intended to get beyond analysis of identity formation to situate museum practice instead as the object of study.

## The Iziko South African Museum

Lying at the head of the broad tree-lined avenue that borders the Company Gardens in Cape Town, the South African Museum (SAM) was established in 1825 and moved to its current premises in 1897. Its placement is not coincidental. A publication marking the museum’s jubilee states that “[i]ts situation on the site of ‘The Company’s Garden,’ begun by Van Riebeeck in 1653, links it with the earliest history of our country” (Summers 1975: 1). Van Riebeeck, an administrator in the Dutch East India Company, founded the victualling station at the Cape, the first European settlement in South Africa. In this narrative, one embedded in the physical and symbolic foundations of the SAM, history thus begins with European settlement. In 1998, the SAM, along with 10 other museums in Cape Town, amalgamated under the Iziko umbrella, and in 2003, two years after the San diorama was archived, a new, sleek rock art gallery, */Qe: The Power of the Ancestors and Rock Art*, opened. The exhibit’s major drawcard is the Linton Panel, referred to as the “Mona Lisa” of rock art, which sits far from its original home in the Eastern Cape behind a thick panel of polished glass. Beyond the mountain and the sea—the landscape itself—this exhibit remains the only permanent, tangible site in the city that speaks to San presence.

Mona Hendricks argues that */Qe*’s uncritical repackaging of the |Xam narratives from the Bleek and Lloyd archive through decontextualized extracts that situate them as “self-contained, bounded and disembodied blocks of knowledge divorced from the circumstances in which they were produced” (Hendricks 2010: 9), as well as the use of the “trance metaphor” as a marker of authenticity, means that it serves merely as “a modification” of the diorama. The Bleek and Lloyd archive comprises letters, photographs, notebooks, and “folklore,” the records of a fourteen-year research project in the mid-nineteenth century between three European researchers and a group of San from the Northern Cape who were incarcerated in the Breakwater prison in Cape Town (Rassool 2006: 244). Ciraj Rassool takes issue with the way in which the archive has been constituted as a site of cultural salvage, refashioned as evidence of a moment of equality between European researchers and Indigenous informants, where it is “mined for a lost, extinct authenticity” (often shamanistic) as opposed to being interrogated as a biased and mediated articulation of |Xam language and culture through a Eurocentric lens (Rassool 2006: 248). This shamanistic, cultural salvage reading of the archive, while increasingly interrogated in textual analyses (see, for example Barnabas 2015: 72), has been taken up uncritically by the rock art gallery of the museum.

Hendricks also highlights how the insertion of a video of various San talking about their spiritual connection to rock art gives the false impression that they were involved in the exhibit’s curation, or have at least gained something of benefit from its presence (Hendricks 2010: 44). The video was in fact part of a research project on the N|uu language, which was *appended to* the exhibition on rock art, not developed *in concert with it* (ibid.: 59). The most glaring dissonance, Hendricks points out, is that while the exhibit seeks to fabricate itself as a repository of San voice, voice it situates as integral to the making of the post-apartheid nation, in reality the voices represented here are of people who “remain marginalised and ravaged by poverty” (ibid.: 40). Rassool (2019) points out that the closure of the diorama and its replacement by an exhibit that seamlessly shifts the museumgoer into some other past world, has effectively enabled the institution to avoid a confrontation with their complicity in the “blood and brutality of the KhoiSan experience” through the incipient trade in human remains that accompanied the casting project and the collecting of rock art.

The term “engagement” is fraught, and, like much “inclusive” terminology, such as “diversity,” often aids as a barrier to real transformation in that it is seen to have been achieved within museum spaces through the inclusion of “voice.” The “engagement zone” in which practitioners and communities participate is

“untidy and fluid” with “unpredictable outcome[s]” (Onciul 2015: 75–76). It is thus important to view engagement as a dynamic, constantly shifting, and incomplete process, rather than an outcome, and to gauge the effectiveness of engagement processes through relationships rather than, or at least in concert with, the exhibitions they produce. When Iziko’s chief curator of art and social history, archaeologist Wendy Black, accompanied various San and Khoe groups, including the †Khomani and the Kei Korana, around the rock art gallery, she told me in 2020, they expressed confusion, sadness, and anger at its interpretation of their spirituality. They pointed out that their voice, while seemingly tangible in the space, was in fact absent from the gallery (and indeed much other commentary on rock art) precisely because, as Black phrases it, “no-one’s asked us” (Black 2020). A field trip to the exhibition by !Khwa ttu residents<sup>4</sup> in 2007 reveals the ease with which voice in a literal sense can be deployed as part of an aesthetics of engagement. A video on display at the time had been filmed at !Khwa ttu, and the group broke into laughter when Andre Likia appeared on screen. Likia could apparently be heard saying “What am I supposed to say?” As Siona O’Connell, who led the field trip, points out, “[t]o the viewer of this video this is not apparent, as all they would hear are the seemingly tell-tale ‘clicks’ that make this an ‘authentic’ Bushmen commentary” (O’Connell 2008: 80). This is a cogent reminder that “authenticity” is often no more than an aesthetic practice, choreographed by a museum “expert” just out of shot.

However, even here we should pause when ideas, vaunted in the literature, are challenged by communities. Sylvia Vollenhoven, a descendant of one of Bleek and Lloyd’s most prominent informants, //Kabbo, views his arrival in their Mowbray home as the culmination of a “Vision Quest” that set him on a course to Cape Town to relate his stories to Bleek and Lloyd (Vollenhoven 2016: 2). Vollenhoven identifies a similar process in her own approach to the narrative endeavor: “I am chosen by the stories I tell,” she writes (Vollenhoven 2021: 47). Vollenhoven’s approach differs to the post-colonial critique of the Bleek and Lloyd archive as discussed above, in that she is less concerned with analyzing the motivations of Bleek and Lloyd, than she is with raising questions around (lack of) access by descendants to what she sees as a rich archival repository. Reflecting on our epistemological orientation is, however, often intensely confronting. O’Connell recalls her dismay when the group from !Khwa ttu, discussed above, having grappled extensively with the ethical transgressions of the casting process, still insisted that the diorama be restored. Looking back at the encounter, she concedes that her response at the time had been to retreat into her academic enclave, not pausing to listen to the logic of the group’s perspective: “We failed to see that this space at the museum was, to many of the group, recognition of the very fact of being Bushman” (O’Connell 2008: 98). I would add that the group’s response may also have been partially motivated by a desire to be active participants in the conversation surrounding their representation (which their interaction with the casts had facilitated), a conversation so often confined to “elite” spaces—conferences, museum staff rooms, academic journals.

The clearest example of what Vawda terms an “epistemological violence” (2019: 76) can be demonstrated by the SAM’s response to the †Khomani San’s exhibition proposal. In 2017, a group from the †Khomani<sup>5</sup> approached the SAM with an exhibition concept for the recently deaccessioned “ethnographic hall,” of which the San diorama formed a pivotal part. Titled “Light in the Darkness” the proposed exhibition was to form part of the activities of a newly-formed Creative Collective and would feature “a narrative that zooms in on the contemporary relevance of traditional Bushmen world views, unifying Bushmen communities on the one hand, but also the wider global audience that is currently looking to indigenous culture for ways of reconnecting to the natural world and to each other” (Hugo Bodenham, cited in Tichmann 2019). Director of Collections, Paul Tichmann, explained to me in 2020 that it was also clearly motivated by a desire to address socio-economic issues, to essentially create within the museum a site of healing. After some deliberation the proposal was turned down, as the SAM was concerned about the ethics of displaying people and natural history together. The †Khomani group pointed out that this distinction was illustrative of the Western paradigm: for them, humans *were* very much part of the natural world. Tichmann was disheartened by the museum’s decision—he had felt that the exhibition proposal:

was an opportunity actually for restorative justice almost in a sense, an opportunity to get the San to tell their own story, and maybe ... perhaps that was naïve, I don’t know, and perhaps that would have led to problems ... but the strong argument was, you know, you’ve had this very skewed portrayal in this space and then you continue... (Tichmann 2020)

In 2019, responding to the disappointment of the rejected exhibition proposal, Tichmann facilitated a visit by four leading members of the #Khomani (traditional leader Chief Petrus Vaalbooi, Itzak Kruijer, Lydia Kruijer, and Annamarie Vaalbooi) to view ancestral objects held in the SAM collection. In light of what these #Khomani elders identified as the continued erosion of knowledge within their communities, Tichmann recalls that the group expressed gratitude for the museum’s role in preserving their ancestral “objects.” At the same time, Tichmann’s recollection of the visit highlights the disjuncture between #Khomani and museum approaches to collection management and curatorship. The visitors described the objects not as artifacts, but as “living culture,” intended for specific purposes. While all were anchors for particular narratives, the group pointed out that some objects held sacred potency that required care in handling. Some objects were strangers to the group—knowledge of their ritual use had not been retained—while others brought them back into contact with ancestors. Lydia Kruijer’s father and Chief Petrus Vaalbooi’s mother, Elsie Vaalbooi, for example, were identified in the photos the group were shown from the Bleek and Lloyd collection (Tichmann 2019).

Collections manager Lailah Hisham confided to me that the workshops provided a space for the academic assumptions inherent in their work to be destabilized (Hisham pers. comm. 2020). Through these interactions she realized how important relationships, rather than the collection, are to the interpretive work they do. While the SAM gained new knowledge through this interaction, they were unable to give much back in return. The 800-kilometer trip from the Northern Cape to the museum took important leaders away from the community for several days. Tichmann thus felt despondent about the fact that what the #Khomani wanted for their communities—such as training for emerging artists—the museum was not able to assist them with; nor could they adequately compensate the communities for the time in which leaders and healers were away from their work. These issues, he points out, are not understood by administrators and finance departments. In another epistemic sleight of hand, Tichmann tells me that there is no mandate to use the #Khomani’s narrativization of these objects in displays (Tichmann 2020).

When Iziko was formed in 1998 (an amalgamation of five national museums and satellites in Cape Town), it merged the “ethnographic” (non-white) and “cultural history” (white) collections into the new Social History Collections Division, thus erasing the racial distinctions inherent in previous colonial and apartheid displays (Davison 2018: 89). On paper this was transformative, and while it may have catalyzed more interdisciplinary research on the people of South Africa, it did not seem to have had much effect on San representations. Of the practitioners I spoke with, I observed that archaeologist Wendy Black was the most involved in engagement with Indigenous communities in terms of these older histories; collections manager Paul Tichmann could facilitate access to the collections for San communities, could collate the stories attached to the objects, but could do nothing with them; and social history curator Lynn Abrahams, while involved with Khoe and San communities in terms of liberation and resistance narratives, pointed out that for the most part the historical narratives of “Khoe and San are continuously framed [...] through anthropology and archaeology” (Abrahams 2020). It appears that almost two decades on, in practice, the San are still situated within the confines of the natural history museum according to colonial categories of display. Not supporting a San-curated exhibition or utilizing their narratives within this space has effectively resulted in a double-silencing of San communities within the museum.

It should be reiterated that the #Khomani are not synonymous with *the* San, but constitute one group within a very diverse San and Khoe demographic, and their adoption of certain “markers of authenticity” are not shared by all (Ellis 2015: 12–13). Pluriversal engagement strategies entail taking each interaction seriously, while simultaneously remaining aware of how engagement may influence inequitable distribution of epistemic currency between particular groups. Chief Melvin Arendse of the Kei Korana and the Khoi-Boesman-Nguni Coalition was particularly incensed by his exclusion from the #Khomani visit, Tichmann told me, accusing the museum of perpetuating colonial divisions between the Khoe and San. The #Khomani group, Tichmann added, in fact emphasized the need for the museum to extend the invitation to discuss collections management and exhibition design to other San and Khoe groups, and Chief Petrus Vaalbooi was adamant that the museum allow each group to determine their identity in relation to these discussions. The museum practitioners I spoke with continue to explore new avenues within the engagement zone, contending not only with ideas that contrast to those of the museum, but also with conflicts between different San and Khoe groups.

A particular complexity in this regard is the KhoiSan Revivalist Movement centered in the city. Unfortunately, writing about the movement has largely been preoccupied with debates concerning authenticity and identity politics (Mulder 2022; Verbuyst 2021). Tichmann highlighted the fact that there has been no move by the museum to collect from the movement, and the SAM exhibition space thus encodes San and Khoe:

within the representational apparatus of state-sanctioned heritage in post-apartheid Cape Town: San naturally belong in the museum ... in a space carved out of the city to privilege colonial collecting, notions around Indigenous “purity” and the urban as the epicentre of knowledge; KhoiSan or Khoe, on the other hand, belong in the activist spaces of the street as a political phenomenon. (Mulder 2022: 86)

In response to this need for pluralistic, inclusive engagement strategies, Black spoke to me about a community curatorship program she was hoping to launch. The program would allow different San and Khoe groups to effectively take turns curating the exhibit, with the aim of divesting power from the academic, shamanistic narrative of rock art significance, to focus instead on those stories and perspectives held by communities. When I asked Black who “the community” was, she pointed out how problematic it is to articulate, because communities are “fluid and dynamic and forever changing and there’s often in-fighting” (Black 2020). She related how legitimate anger at the museum as a colonial institution, along with internal leadership conflicts (which are themselves a colonial legacy), often derail public consultation forums. Along with the #Khomani, Black notes that the museum has also engaged with the Kei Korana, the Nama, local Khoe groups, and the A|Xarra Restorative Justice Forum. While COVID-19 appears to have delayed these plans, in 2022 another visit by the #Khomani took place, led by Chief Petrus Vaalbooi; and, as I write, a new exhibit within the rock art gallery, *The Evolution of Indigenous Art*, has opened. Featuring contemporary Indigenous artwork alongside the rock art, the exhibition was curated by Annelize Kotze and Lukretia Booysen in collaboration with the Khoena Art Institute.

I end this section with a story of a research visit to the Iziko Social History Centre in 2020. It’s a sweltering day in Cape Town, the temperature extending uncomfortably far into the thirties. The lamp above my desk in a dusky corner of the center’s reading room gives off an insipid glow, but I’m grateful for the coolness of low-lighting. I’m looking through the Iziko museum archives, comprised of notebooks and annual reports. I have limited time, and unfortunately the journals are largely written in an unintelligible scrawl. A reference to five “of the originals” in the 1912 *South African Museum Annual Report* catches my eye. The report explains that these “originals” (referring to the models for the casts) were brought to the museum in 1911. I imagine they must have been in the city already, possibly to perform in the national pageant taking place that year. During this visit, two men were induced to make a “kwe ka kka (digging stick)” and the report notes that all “vehemently declared that they did not know how to bore the hole in the stone, nor how it was done; they found them already bored in the veld just as the numerous ones I gave them to choose from.” This was at the height of Péringuey’s obsessive quest for “pure examples,” and it no doubt troubled him that these people, whom he had determined through the aegis of the casting program were the last members of a dying race, did not appear to hold the corresponding timeless knowledge.

I find no further mention of this visit in the correspondence; I’m disappointed. Looking through the few available documents in the diorama archive, however, I determine that there is a high probability that two of these men were Cornelius and Piet Roosekrans (referred to only as casts 31 and 32 in the index to the diorama). As I lift up a letter from 1923, a matchbox black and white snapshot, slipped in between the sheaves, falls out. It features Cornelius, dressed in a shirt and long pants, squatting beside a toy cart he had constructed out of wire. The cast of him was also taken in a squatting position, but in the diorama, he wore a loin cloth and held a bow and arrow. The author of the letter offered to send Cornelius’s cart to the museum to be displayed next to his “statue.”

Museum staff could not confirm whether this object was held in their collection, but could state that if it was, it had never been displayed. I think we can safely assume that this object was not one that resonated well with the museum’s remit in the early twentieth century, nor of their representation of San as semi-naked and located in some primordial past. Of course, this photo cannot be taken as a counter-production

to the exhibitionary practices of the museum, itself highlighting an inequitable distribution of power—the white photographer, the San subject, the collecting of his industry for the museum. It does, however, point to the alternative perspectives that are occluded when they run counter to the singular “truth” the museum wishes to convey.

### **!Khwa ttu San Heritage Centre**

Sitting at the end of a dusty gravel road that branches off the R27 west coast highway, about one hour’s drive from Cape Town, lies !Khwa ttu, a San cultural center (see Figure 1). While it has been in operation since 2000, a project spearheaded and funded by the Ubuntu Foundation in collaboration with the San communities of southern Africa, the heritage centre/museum was opened only in 2018. Before arrival at the information center, which also houses a shop and restaurant, the visitor walks through a pathway fringed with several panels outlining the aims of the site. !Khwa ttu’s motto is “San Spirit Shared,” which is not, I am told by San consultant Joram |Useb (Hai|om), an exercise in essentializing the San, who have many spirits, but is rather meant to emphasize the center as a collaborative endeavor. |Useb, who took me through the museum in early 2020, explained the siting of the center as strategic—situated close to Cape Town, on |Xam ancestral land (“our first ancestral land,” noted |Useb), but not located within any present-day San community, thus not benefiting any one community above another. For longtime activist |Useb, !Khwa ttu is a space where he can “sit back and see that what I’ve been fighting for has started to materialize.” A museum, according to |Useb, “should be a place of interaction, a place of learning, where people engage each other [and] the landscape” (|Useb 2020).

Then director of the center, Chris Low, spoke to me in 2020 about the origins of the museum and the engagement process. While the creation of a museum had been attempted several times since 2002, it was only in 2013, after a call for a collaborative museum space began emanating from San communities themselves, that the project was pursued in earnest. When Low was approached by the Ubuntu Foundation, he was wary. Like so many of the “development-oriented” projects in San communities that have been driven by outsiders, he knew that the project would fail if there was no significant buy-in from San themselves. “People come in,” he told me, “but they’re so bound up in ego and dream, which we all have ..., but they



**Figure 1.** Exterior of the museum at !Khwa ttu, 2023. Photo courtesy of Lauren Rautenbach.

don't listen, they don't hear what people are telling them" (Low 2020). A workshop held at !Khwatlu in 2014 therefore aimed to establish whether the San network that had been developed through the center over the previous several years deemed a museum to be a viable project and, if they did, to attempt to outline what that museum would look like. Questions sought to determine what key elements should be included to make San feel at home in this space—smells and sights, for example—and what information should be excluded. Those participating in the meetings, Low told me, included past and present interns and staff, !Khwatlu San board members Frans Doeseb and Christian Tities (both members of the Working Group of Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa), and the traditional leader of the #Khomani, Chief Petrus Vaalbooi. In order to extend the conversation beyond !Khwatlu, traditional authorities in South Africa (including the South African San Council, !Xun and Khwe Councils, and community leaders in Upington and Platfontein), Botswana (including Job Morris and Xukuri Xukuri), and Namibia (including Kileni Fernando, Chief Bobo, and other community leaders in Gobabis, Windhoek, and Tsumkwe) were consulted. A "representative" from Zimbabwe was included in the discussion over email. For the next year, ideas were developed by the San Advisory Group (comprising #Khomani, Hai||om, Naro, Ju|'hoansi, !Xun, Khwe, and G|ui members)<sup>6</sup> and then taken out into communities for feedback. This latter process included three "basic outreach trips" of one to two months duration each, conducted in 2015, 2016, and 2017. These trips visited San communities in South Africa (the #Khomani of Upington, Askham, Andriesvale and Welkom, and the !Xun and Khwe of Platfontein), Namibia (the Ju|'hoansi of Gobabis, Drimiopsis, Aminuis and the Nyae Nyae Conservancy, and the !Xun of the N|a Jaqna Conservancy), and Botswana (the #Khomani of Struizendam, Naro of D'kar and various small settlements around Ghanzi, and !xóó from Kang and Monong and other settlements between). The San Advisory Team then reviewed panel drafts. They "would really read everything and take it apart and say 'no you can't say this' and 'you can't say that,' 'that's true of my people but it's not true of those people'" (Low 2020). Every word in the museum, said Low, has been "parsed through the San" (Low 2020).

The approach of bringing already developed proposals to the "engagement table" within San communities is in some ways antithetical to the idea of true consultation; however, Low said that this resulted in reduced suspicion by communities regularly "harvested" for knowledge. |Useb pointed out that after years of exploitation and being studied like specimens, the San are generally distrustful of *any* research agenda. Transparency in the form of communicating explicit project aims is thus of utmost importance. Low's approach was to travel through the Kalahari Basin with his team, visiting isolated communities, identified above, and enabling as many people as possible from these communities to participate. Respecting gate-keeping structures is of course necessary, he explained to me, but he wanted to get away from the reinforcement of the same voices, of the same people who, because they are confident, or because they speak English, feature in every research project and have become accustomed to "saying particular things" (Low 2020). It was also a way of breaking that colonial mold, Low explained, which groups people into homogenous "communities" where one voice is seen to stand for the whole, an approach particularly contrary to San social structures, which are far more egalitarian. While they couldn't include all 130,000 San voices, Low said, they attempted to get as close as possible.

On our tour through the museum space, |Useb explained to me the key issue in terms of engagement between museums and San communities in southern Africa:

[S]ometimes people have got a vast knowledge, but people are not on the same level as we are, the way we are seeing the things. For them it's quite opposite, they have never been to big cities, big towns, if they are coming to this kind of city or museums, they don't quite understand the concept. (|Useb 2020)

Here is a classic case of hermeneutical dissonance: two different epistemological traditions encountering one another, where both embody knowledge and concepts not easily translatable into the other's "language." To get beyond this hermeneutical lacuna, Low explained that part of the consultative process involved people utilizing non-verbal means, such as drawing, to articulate their ideas for a museum.

The center comprises a native tea garden and nature reserve, both of which feature tours, while the museum, the result of the engagement process discussed in more detail below, is made up of three small white-washed cottages (a converted cow shed, a converted sheep shearing shed, and a brand-new building



that was a collaborative community-informed endeavor), roughly divided chronologically: the first building includes oral narratives, traditional objects, and archaeological projects (past); the second provides an insight into the horrific decimation of San communities through genocide contrasted with present-day communities’ challenges and opportunities, suffering, and resilience (present); and the third, the most immersive of the three, features San voices, a wraparound glass wall overlooking the landscape of !Khwa ttu, and a video room of footage showing continued traditional activities (future).

Low, who led the engagement and outreach process with the San team, described the negotiations that had taken place around the epistemological foundations of the museum. Ideas contributed by the San, he told me, sometimes resembled colonial approaches to display—glass cabinets and semi-naked traditional dancing to attract tourists—possibly, Low suggested, because this was the only way they had seen themselves represented in the context of museums. While it is a definite possibility that the San were grasping for a familiar museum “discourse” with which to communicate their ideas, as with the dismissal of San who wanted the diorama at the SAM reinstalled, we should be cautious of slipping too easily into an epistemological arrogance, of assessing San responses to museums according to Western epistemologies, as if they do not have their own epistemological schema to draw from.

Low was clearly not unaware of this hermeneutic dissonance, but explained that the tension it produced was not simple to address. Indeed, traditional performances reconstituted in the museum space communicate something quite different to that of dancing within a community space. For the San community, it was possibly understood as a vitalization, an integration of their identity into Cape Town, whereas for Low, and no doubt other museum-goers, it signals the touristic exoticism often encountered in sites around South Africa. Formulating appropriate ways to insert “the desire to be traditional” into the museum space, Low contends, is a particularly post-apartheid complexity (Low 2020). State-sanctioned heritage in post-apartheid South Africa is based on the concept of “Rainbowism,” which has been used “to foster ‘social cohesion,’ ‘nationhood’ and ‘national identity’ ... yet simultaneously the state privileges a dominant and selective historical past that might not necessarily serve the diverse cultural representation of the people of South Africa” (Manetsi 2017: 30). These ethnographic categories of display are frequently employed in nation-making agendas through touristic displays of “tribalism,” a fate the San have not been spared. We need, however, to ensure that we are differentiating between contrived performances for capitalistic gain by a non-San entity and constructions of tradition deployed for pedagogical, healing, or identity purposes, or even economic gain, by the community itself. The academic team, Low told me, were generally loathe to portray San in *any* “traditional” ways because of the backlash they had received from San and Khoe communities in Cape Town after the controversial *Miscast* exhibition by Pippa Skotnes.<sup>7</sup> Low described the deliberate exclusion of hunting in an exhibit focused on hunter-gatherers as “an interesting position,” especially when the communities involved felt it would be a natural inclusion (Low 2020). Here, academics are motivated less by community desire and more by fear of criticism.

At these points, where older colonial categories were being reproduced in ways that would perpetuate negative stereotypes of San for museum-goers, Low and the San team paused, exploring whether there were other ways of expressing the community’s desires. Low explained to me how integral talking through issues was for the San communities they engaged with; giving equal space to all involved was thus the way in which an agreed way forward was established. The negotiation, the space of epistemic friction itself (perhaps more than the resulting exhibition), is thus where co-curation exists, alive and able to hold many truths. As |Useb, one of the San consultants mediating between !Khwa ttu and various San communities, confirmed, the process was long and involved a constant back and forth dialogue so that there was consensus from everyone.

During the engagement process, for example, Low said, most of the San constituents were quite clear that they wanted a chronological rendering of their story within the museum. The idea of “past, present, and future” was ubiquitous. In order to delink from the archaeological discourse of human origins that this chronological view would necessitate, welcoming visitors into a space that perpetuated ideas of primitivism, Low said, he sought to “introduce everyone to the origins of the San through the San,” by prefacing their stories of “the beginning” and then focusing on archaeological projects in which the San had participated (Low 2020). In the search for origin stories in order to tell “the beginning” through the San themselves, rather than archaeological discourse, however, Low realized that the model emanating

from Native American cultural centers did not work in the context of San cosmologies. “San ideas about the origin of the world are rooted in a belief that long ago the world was more fluid and one thing could change into another” (Low 2021: 126), and the stories that Low and the San team were provided with were rather more “nebulous” and “melded” than the stories that are encountered in many other Indigenous communities, such as those in North America, where “a flavour of the sacred and the origin [has been brought out] in a way that hasn’t happened with the San” (Low 2020). According to Peter Goro (Bugakhwe), animal folk tales, which included animal sounds, were told by elders in the evening as lessons to “teach us the way of life for the future generations” (Low 2021: 132). Low says that the team thus also:

...got some of the staff to tell their own stories, to give it very much a flavor of still being alive and current. ... they’re not in any sense what you would call a traditional story, I suppose, but they are entirely, because they’re what the community are telling, they mix up the past and the present ... they’re a real melding ... (Low 2020)

There is of course great utility to be found in global Indigenous responses to colonialism, prefaced as they are on framing interactions with cultural institutions through concepts of Indigenous agency and sovereignty. We should be cautious, however, of blanket trans-Indigenous frameworks in academic discourse that create homogenous expectations of epistemologies and cosmologies across very different contexts.

It is the third building of the museum, “The way of the San” (the “future” in this chronological rendering), that so evocatively sets this museum apart from most others I’ve been in (see Figure 2). Low explained that the design brief was to create “a building that wasn’t a building that represented a sort of San traditional life that isn’t traditional” (Low 2020). Here, the red earth of the Kalahari sits within the coastal dunes of the Cape, a physical palimpsest of a continuous southern African San ancestral landscape; the display poses questions about change and continuity within different San communities, places, histories,



Figure 2. The immersive interior of The Way of the San building, 2023. Photo courtesy of Lauren Rautenbach.

and times. It is in this space that the singing, the voices of the San, drowns out my conversation with |Useb at times, which is frustrating for the researcher, but speaks, at a metaphorical level at least, to the success of a space which privileges San voices, San agendas, and a San worldview over Western knowledge economies. Collin Louw, Chairman of the South African San Council, recalls that when “all San people” gathered at !Khwa ttu “I heard all of them say one thing: ‘This is our place’” (Low 2021: 113).

Now that the museum has been established, the relationship hasn’t ended—the next phase is to support linked heritage initiatives (which in some cases will be digital platforms) beginning in five communities that were identified as being in the most accessible areas with the best infrastructure: !Xun and Khwe in Platfontein; #Khomani, centered in Andriesvale; Ju|’hoansi in Gobabis; and Tsumkwe in Namibia and Botswana. !Khwa ttu is intended to operate more as a central headquarters, with a mandate to send collected knowledge and possibly even objects outward, back into communities via these community cultural centers that, according to |Useb, will be “mostly based on preserving their local culture, generating some income, livelihood around their culture, at the same time continuation of their heritage and culture of the younger generation” (|Useb 2020). This is supplemented by an internship program (training people from these communities in collections management and the requisite skills to spearhead cultural heritage initiatives) and connecting San communities with their ancestral objects held in the collections of international institutions. Time, and hopefully some targeted research in the future, will tell what the impact of this is on the communities themselves.

## Conclusion

As Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes, “[k]nowledge and the power to define what counts as real knowledge lie at the epistemic core of colonialism” (Smith 2021: xii). This discussion has identified several moments of hermeneutical dissonance between the institution (the SAM and !Khwa ttu), and the San and Khoe communities with whom they are engaging. To varying degrees “the dominant position of the museum expert *vis-à-vis* the marginalized and alienated ‘knower’ as the Other [has triggered] an epistemological violence and injustice” (Vawda 2019: 76). Museum responses range from textbook epistemic injustice, where the San have been stripped of their role as “knowers,” to moments of negotiation, where practitioners have sought to elevate San voices beyond an “aesthetics of engagement.” The San diorama, over two decades after its closure, continues to haunt critical museology because it represents the unfinished business of community participation in exhibitionary practice.

You will have noticed, however, that this analysis is largely parsed through the experiences of these practitioners, rather than the San communities they engaged with. It is thus impossible for me to comment on how closely, for example, the museum at !Khwa ttu remains true to the aspirations of the communities who workshoped these ideas in the arid regions of southern Africa, and my aim has thus been far more modest—to interrogate how practitioners at these two cultural institutions are navigating moments of epistemic friction. While further research into San perspectives of engagement will of course enrich this discussion considerably, as has been highlighted, there are ethical considerations attached to any type of engagement with Indigenous communities, particularly the San, who remain significantly marginalized and yet consistently “harvested” for a more powerful entity’s agenda. Nonetheless, we can draw out some general conclusions about the current epistemological terrain of engagement between cultural institutions in Cape Town and the San (and Khoe).

For both !Khwa ttu and the SAM, the most complex issue has been in regard to incorporating “tradition” within displays. While this is a global issue, it has a particular resonance in Cape Town due to the highly-publicized controversy around the San diorama, the lack of San presence in the city’s official heritage offerings, and the complexity of post-apartheid identity politics. At the SAM, no doubt a consequence of the difficulty in shifting the institutional bulk of the colonial museum, San desires are less likely to be acknowledged or integrated into exhibitions, despite the willingness of practitioners to do so; in contrast, !Khwa ttu’s establishment as a cultural center with the input of San communities in southern Africa has allowed for a more collaborative approach to working through hermeneutical dissonance. The negotiatory context itself, the talking and expressing of opinions that was identified during !Khwa ttu’s engagement

process as a productive space of tension for developing a diverse San approach to co-curation, occupies adjunct spaces within the machinery of the national SAM museum, where proposals are assessed by museum experts, and practitioners attempting to make change have to squeeze in the complex and under-resourced work of consultation in gaps amidst the everyday “business as usual.”

Regardless, neither of these museums operates outside of its particular socio-cultural milieu. The fact that the #Khomani have to rely on the SAM to care for their “living culture” and, as of yet, !Khwatla has not been able to locate a San successor for Chris Low’s previous position as director, which is the ultimate aim, illustrates the continued epistemic and socio-economic disparities that beset San communities in southern Africa, disparities which cannot be divorced from the legacy of collecting and display of their culture. The relinquishing of curatorial authority by museums needs to be addressed within this larger context. While the recent appointment of !Khwatla’s first San curator, Magdalena Lukas (#Khomani), who has been working with Wendy Black of the SAM to revamp the rock art gallery (set to open in August 2023), is great progress in this regard, nevertheless, particularly where the SAM is concerned, there is a marked inequality in the resourcing of engagement. While salaried staff engage in consultation activities as part of their everyday work, the San largely participate on a voluntary basis. Without building the capacity of San communities to engage as hermeneutical equals in decisions regarding what and how their culture is displayed, it will be a struggle to get beyond tick-box consultation activities.

These are not black and white issues, and it is, as the age-old adage goes, more about the journey than the destination. If relationships and discussion are where co-curation happens, we need to be consistently aware of *who* is included in the conversation and *which* particular communities get a seat at the table in the first place, especially considering historical and continuing preoccupations with “authenticity.” Questions remain in this regard: is the SAM’s consultation with San and Khoe communities extensive enough? Is there space for Khoe (or KhoeSan) narratives at !Khwatla? This is, ultimately, an ongoing conversation, and one that requires tending. Just as closing the San diorama did not completely transform the relationship between the South African Museum and the San communities whose objects they hold, as evidenced by the continuing struggles of particular groups to see their desires supported and reflected in the museum’s displays, so exhibitions developed today need to be consistently critiqued. These moments of epistemic friction are opportunities, which, as this article has highlighted, can illuminate epistemological blind spots and support collaborative, pluriversal exhibitionary practices. We should be searching for these moments rather than hiding from them.

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## NOTES

1. Descended from the earliest hunter-gatherers in southern Africa, and with a rich rock art heritage, it is estimated that around 130,000 San currently live throughout southern Africa, the majority in Namibia and Botswana, with smaller numbers in South Africa, Angola, Zambia, and Zimbabwe (Low 2021: 43). Given this large geographical spread it is not surprising that San communities are culturally and linguistically diverse, speaking around 12 extant languages (Low 2021: 48). This diversity poses a nomenclature conundrum when writing about these communities, especially in the context of the post-apartheid museum space. Both of the more common umbrella terms—San and Bushman—are contested to varying degrees, and Low highlights that it is best to use a “specific group name, such as Khwe, !Xung, Ju|’hoan or Hai||om” (ibid.: 46). When this has not been possible, for ease of reading this article uses the term San, as it is “currently the most commonly used referent in academic, advocacy and political circles” (Ellis 2015: 5), and is the term used by the practitioners who are quoted here.
2. The historical distinction between San and Khoe, once believed to be simply a difference between hunter-gatherers and herders, is the focus of much debate in contemporary South Africa. The !Xam San group lived along the Western Cape coast in mobile hunting groups until about 1000 CE, when they moved to the mountainous interior of the Cape (Mellet 2020: 48), while the Khoe culture (and non-endemic stock) arrived in the Western Cape in the early second millennium (Mellet 2020: 107). The term KhoiSan (or KhoeSan), although developed by a German zoologist, is used by some today to denote the connection between the various groupings (Boezak 2017: 262).
3. Megan Mulder, “Towards Spatio-Epistemic Justice in the (post) Settler-colonial Cityscape: Indigenous Urban Heritage in //hui !gaeb and Te Whanganui-a-Tara” (PhD diss. Museum and heritage studies, Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington, 2022). My research at !Khwa ttu was approved beforehand as part of the center’s adoption of the San Code of Ethics, developed in 2017 to ensure that any research with San communities be conducted with care, honesty and respect, and adhere to community-approved research protocols (Schroeder et. al. 2019). Some information contained in the article was clarified and expanded on by these practitioners in conversations held between 2022 and 2023.
4. It is likely that this group is made up of the !Khwa ttu residents that O’Connell refers to in her acknowledgements: Grukke Thys (#Khomani), Rita Munawgo (Khwe), Maria Karemba (!Xun), Roma Deja (Khwe), Kondion Samba (!Xun), Carlos Munawgo (Khwe), Johan Vaalbooi (#Khomani), Andre Likia (!Xun), Donika Dala (!Xun), Paula Armandus (!Xun), and Lienkie Thys (#Khomani) (O’Connell 2008: 8).
5. The #Khomani San are a reconstituted group of San in the Northern Cape. Land dispossession and poverty have left their members scattered throughout the province—some work as performers for tour operators, others labor for white farmers. In 1999 they were the successful recipients of a land claim, based on their presentation of a cohesive group identity. However, they have struggled to live on the land since and still suffer from high rates of poverty and other socio-economic issues. While no doubt this is partly due to attempting to create a unified Indigenous collective from a fractured and dispersed community of diverse “traditional” and “modern” post-foraging identities, Fleming Puckett (2018) points out that the real burden is having to adapt a consensus-based participatory democracy to the representative democratic hierarchical community governance structures imposed on them by land reform legislation.
6. N#aisa Ghauz, Baba Festus, Kileni Fernando, Andre Vaalbooi, Jobe Gabototwe, Anton Doeseb, Nunke Kadhimo, Gwakemotho Satau, Job Morris, Kuela Kiema, Joram |Useb, Ivan Vaalbooi (Low 2021: 81).
7. Curated by artist Pippa Skotnes in 1996 and displayed at the South African National Gallery in Cape Town, *Miscast* attempted to interrogate past dehumanization of the San. The exhibition’s use of visuals of naked women and the casting project attracted widespread criticism from San and Khoe groups in Cape Town (Davison 2018: 88).

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