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The vanished Eden of SA's first people

By Drew Forrest

Housouana Woman, engraving from Travels into the Interior of Africa Via the Cape of Good Hope by Le Vaillant

The French naturalist and explorer François le Vaillant related a strange and touching anecdote about his encounter with a now-vanished Khoikhoi tribe of the Northern Cape in 1784.

These nomadic pastoralists — Le Vaillant used the abandoned designation “Hottentots” — had a taste for brandy and tobacco, which he always carried with him on his South African collecting missions.

On this occasion he had enough of the spirit to serve only the chief and what he thought were the prominent men of the Kaminou tribe. He was “stupefied” to see them hold it in their mouths without swallowing, then “go towards those who had not received any and share it from mouth to mouth ... in the same way as the gentle birds of heaven feed their young”.

Le Vaillant is moved “to the very depths of [his] soul” by this display of selfless egalitarianism. Throwing himself into the arms of the chief, who had also shared his brandy, he “flooded his venerable face with ... [my] tears”.

The incident is described in the second volume of Le Vaillant’s *Travels into the Interior of Africa via the Cape of Good Hope*, recently republished in English by Historical Publications Southern Africa (Hispsa) after a 200-year hiatus.

It forms part of an invaluable portrait of Khokhoi society at its last gasp before it fell to settler-colonial genocide.

But the *Travels* also highlight Le Vaillant’s exceptional qualities in an age when the “blue-eyed devils” of Europe — American writer and political activist Eldridge Cleaver’s phrase — decimated Stone Age groups from Canada to New Zealand. He was a man largely free of racial and cultural prejudice, who wrote that he would happily “gulp down whale oil with Laplanders”.

His “almost savage” childhood in Paramaribo, Dutch Guiana (now Suriname), partly accounts for his free spirit and love of the wild.

But as a member of the rising professional middle classes in France he was also heavily influenced by the French Enlightenment, the French Revolution and their great gift to the world — the idea of universal human solidarity.

Le Vaillant’s regard for the Gonaqua tribesmen he travelled with was deeply dyed by the Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who idealised the moral purity of pre-industrial peoples and condemned “civilisation” as the ruin and scourge of these “children of nature”.

Many will know Le Vaillant as the father of South African ornithology, who lent his name to Le Vaillant’s Cuckoo, Le Vaillant’s Cisticola and the Crested Barbet (*Trachyphonus vaillanti*).

Stubbornly individualistic, he brushed aside the binomial classifications of Linnaeus in favour of his own idiosyncratic system, which included the Bateleur Eagle (French for “acrobat”, from its rocking flight) and the Narina Trogon, named after a Khoikhoi woman he admired.

In a pre-photographic age he gave vivid pictorial expression to Africa's startling realities. He was a gifted illustrator, and broke new ground by mounting his specimens, preserved with arsenic soap, in lifelike poses.

Ian Glenn, editor of the first volume of the *Travels*, notes that the samples Le Vaillant gathered on his three South African forays between 1781 and 1784 provided 10% of the collection of the Museum of Natural History in Paris, and almost all its African birds. At the height of the Terror he applied to the Committee of Public Safety for the post of the museum's *aide-naturaliste*.

The *Travels* are also seen as the foundation of South Africa's printed literature — coinciding with the emergence and growth of a global consciousness, they were a bestseller across Europe.

But as works of anthropology they have a matching significance. Le Vaillant broke decisively with the medieval notion of Africa as the unexplored home of freaks and monsters, remarking that none of the “big books” could match the “book of nature” — first-hand observation.

The continent and its inhabitants “as distinctive in character as well as colour”, had yet to be studied by his contemporaries, he complained. “Under the pompous name of the study of man, everyone does hardly anything except study the men of his [own] country.”

Le Vaillant loved the freedom and escape from Europe his wanderings gave him. From his second excursion, one gains a vivid sense of the still unspoiled, “charming and magnificent” land of the Eastern Cape.

But he also runs into the smoking ruins of settler homesteads destroyed by “Caffres” – Xhosa – during the First Frontier War.

His sympathies were unequivocal — under the pretext that a few head of cattle had been stolen, he writes that the Xhosa had taken just revenge on the Dutch settlers, who had exterminated “whole hordes of [them], regardless of sex or age, [stolen] all their oxen and laid their country to waste”.

Warfare was a means of acquiring cattle that is “quicker than breeding them” — in one year the settlers purloined “20 000 [head] and mercilessly dealt with anyone who attempted to defend the livestock”.

Prominent in this account is the monstrous figure of Commandant Adriaan van Jaarsveld, “the Tiger of Bruyntjieshoogte”. A dedicated ethnic cleanser and military leader of the short-lived Republic of Graaff-Reinet, Van Jaarsveld was notoriously associated with the “Tobacco Trick” — the massacre of Xhosa after tobacco was strewn on the ground as a trap.

The Cape administration is presented as powerless to check “the abuse and cruel tyranny of the colonists”, while Jan van Riebeeck is shown as a devious trickster who “covered the lip of the poison cup with the honey” of brandy and tobacco.

“These masters of this portion of Africa by imprescriptible right ... were won over by [Van Riebeeck’s] cruel lures, and did not see ... how this culpable debasement was taking away their rights, their authority, their peace and their happiness.”

In a satirical tilt at Parisian high society, Le Vaillant remarks that the Gonaquas’ solar reckoning of time was adequate for a people who had “no gallant rendezvous, nor a case before the courts ... nor some perfidy to commit, nor calumnies to publish, nor some ignoramus of a protector to whom they must pay base and soul-destroying flattery, nor a new play at the theatre they must boo ...”.

In keeping with Rousseau’s principle of government according to the general will, the “Hottentot is neither poor nor wretched”, has “neither ... ranks nor priests” — and no words for them.

In the Gonaquas’ lost Eden, perfect equality and shared resources “ensure that everybody’s fate is exactly the same”. This includes the chief, who is installed by the tribe rather than by succession, and obeyed only if his counsel is considered valid.

Presciently, Le Vaillant warns of the divisive effect of wealth accumulation. If gold is found, he tells the Gonaqua, “you are lost ... [it] is the scourge of the earth, the source of all crimes and cruelties”.

Also born of the Enlightenment, anti-clericalism permeates his account of the Gonaquas’ religion — or lack of it. He pours scorn on the Dutch naturalist Peter Kolbe’s claim that they worshipped the moon, observing that they merely danced under the beams of that “peaceful star”.

The tribesmen had a vague idea of an afterlife, but no conception of a god or gods, and no priestly hierarchy, formal worship or sacred spaces.

Matrimony among the Gonaqua followed the Rousseauian model of a “marriage of the heart”. Lacking all sacramental significance, it needed only mutual consent to transact or dissolve.

Two of his company bulk large in Le Vaillant’s narrative — his trusty manservant Klaas, eponym of Klaas’s Cuckoo, and the young beauty Narina, whose name he conferred on the Narina Trogon, a striking forest bird.

That he should immortalise them in this way was touching proof of his attachment. One of his grand-daughters would later be named “Josephine Narina le Vaillant”.

The two are depicted in his illustrations with conventionally neo-classical overtones: Klaas as a Roman sentry, clad in animal skins, leaning on a spear; Narina as one of The Graces, posing coquettishly, woven basket in hand.

The precise nature of his liaison with Narina is left teasingly unclear. In one erotically charged scene, the naked Gonaqua women, gambolling and “diving with marvellous skill” in the Groot Vis River, submerge themselves out of natural modesty when he approaches. Retrieving her *cache-sexe*, she confronts him and begs him to leave.

Later, this “beautiful prankster” teases him, a non-swimmer, by holding out on the opposite bank with a bird he has shot. “Nothing I could do scared her”; he aims his gun at her, but this “just made her more mischievous and obstinate in refusing me my heron”.

The dalliance moves towards an ambiguous climax: “At last both of us, in a more peaceful mood, made our way back to my tent.”

Le Vaillant is no paragon. In a disturbing incident that foreshadowed the Sarah Baartman case, he offers a reluctant Khoi woman gifts to inspect her “Hottentot apron” – elongated labia.

“All self-conscious, embarrassed and covering her face with both her hands ... she permitted me to look in tranquillity at the object of my curiosity.”

And there are signs, particularly towards the end of his account, that Le Vaillant falsified certain events. Projecting himself as a great man of the hunt, he is dismissed by one of his contemporaries at the Cape as “a very timid and faint-hearted traveller”.

But he enormously expanded our knowledge of the early Cape colony, its wildlife and indigenous people.

In his account of the cruel dynamics of the frontier, he illuminated the forces that drove towards the great tragedy of institutional racism in South Africa.

Through his behaviour he showed that non-racialism was possible in his age, and that the right-wing complaint of “presentism” — that colonialism should not be condemned according to 21st century moral standards — is fallacious special pleading.

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I would have loved to see the Cape, my “second home” (“first” perhaps by heart) with here being my “first” (by chance and fate, grateful as I am for its mercies towards me), at this time. I shall also have a soft spot for the venerable old *Mail and Guardian* even if she’s “not what she used to be.” What print-based newspaper is?

Who were southern Africa’s first people? As I came to understand it, the Bantu hiving off southwards drove the Khoikhoi (“Hottentot”) pastoralists before them, who drove the Khoisan (“Bushmen”) hunter-gatherers before them. That there was “interaction” between all of them is evident in all the “clicks” in the languages, most in the Khoisan and least in the Zulu (behind the Xhosa).

M. Le Vaillant shows Westerners, even the best intentioned, have never been able to see Indigenous peoples other than through their own agendas and preconceptions. And often the “explorers” were eccentrics on personal crusades.

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