

## **Hendrik 'Hennie' van Wyk, Khoisan Chief, and the question of Khoisan identity**

### **Biography:**

Hendrik 'Hennie' van Wyk was born in Vredendal, [Cape Province](#) (now Western Cape) on 14th July 1936. His childhood witnessed the final days of colonial rule and the transition to the apartheid regime in 1948, and in 1950, he and his family were forced to register as Coloured, according to the Population Registration Act.

In 1951, at the age of fourteen, he moved to Cape Town to continue his education at Wellesley Training College, as there had been no high schools in his home area for Coloured individuals. He remained in this school until Grade Ten, when he left for economic reasons in 1955. His Grade Ten exams were the last integrated examinations in the apartheid period – after that, examinations and curriculums in South Africa were segregated by race. During this period in Cape Town, Van Wyk boarded with a Mr and Mrs Lewin, a highly political couple under whose guidance he was first exposed to a political education, and as a teenager, he delivered [African National Congress](#) (ANC) newspapers, *The New Age* and *The Torch*.

After leaving education in 1955, Van Wyk began to take on menial jobs in order to keep money coming in. From 1957-58, he worked with a travelling salesman, journeying between Durban, Johannesburg and Cape Town. It was during this period, which saw the introduction of the [Group Areas Act](#) (1958) that he experienced apartheid discrimination at its worst. While travelling in [KwaZulu Natal](#) (then known as Natal), he recounts being unable to walk at night in White suburbs, and having to sleep and eat in staff quarters of hotels. One day, he missed an assigned mealtime at a hotel restaurant, where staff refused to serve him even a sandwich or tea because of his racial classification. Experiences like this, he claims, left him with a feeling that he had no choice but to become politically active.

In 1960, Van Wyk married Joanna M. Jacobs. The couple had seven children: five daughters and two sons, and now have fifteen grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. When his children were born, Van Wyk promised to educate all of them as far as possible, and would later encourage their involvement in student politics.

In 1961, Van Wyk joined the City of Cape Town Municipality, for whom he worked for 34 years. Through this, he became an active member of the Cape Town Municipal Workers' Association (CTMWA), his first involvement with any trade union movement. His political consciousness and sense of injustice in the apartheid regime was heightened from 1968, when his promotion to the role of a meter reader meant that he regularly began to enter White homes. This exposed to him the differences in living standards in White and non-White communities, and to a deep sense of humiliation, although he was unable to confront these issues directly at the time. His political consciousness was further heightened in the wake of the [Soweto Uprising](#) in 1976, which sparked a new wave of anti-apartheid resistance from the Coloured community.

Van Wyk's involvement with trade unions and community organisations in the liberation struggle grew in the early 1980s. He joined the Steenberg Housing Action Committee in 1980, affiliated with the [Cape Areas Housing Action Committee \(Cahac\)](#), and was elected to its steering committee in 1985. That year, Van Wyk was also active in the newly established [Congress of South African Trade Unions \(Cosatu\)](#), due to his involvement in the CTMWA. At this point, trade unions were becoming increasingly militant and politicised as part of the anti-apartheid movement.

During this period, Van Wyk was also instrumental in the formation of a support group to help his daughters and their contemporaries through struggles and discrimination that they were facing at school. The students' involvement in student uprisings and liberation movements caused them to face harassment at school, and when his youngest daughter refused to write her final exams in protest, she was victimised by her teachers. Another of his daughters had also been beaten up in a 1985 march against the state in which she participated with the newly established student council.

Due to this increasing involvement with the liberation struggle, Van Wyk was detained by the security branch of the police on 15th June 1986 for political involvement threatening the state. At 4.30am that morning, his house was surrounded by heavily armed police. He was initially detained at a police station, Wynberg Charge Office, where he was pressured – and where he refused – to make a statement against others involved in the anti-apartheid struggle. He was then transferred to Victor Verster Prison where he was detained for 90 days. He was one of over 50,000 individuals detained across South Africa for political participation in this period.

Inside the prison, he explained, criminal and political prisoners were separated, creating a very political environment in which he and his 'comrades' formed their own structures and systems. They fought for better conditions in the prison, for example, demanding better mattresses and blankets, and started a hunger strike when coloured and black prisoners were given different food. Van Wyk refers to his time in prison as a learning process that was hugely important in his political education, describing it as an equivalent of politicisation through a university education or student activism.

This was Van Wyk's first experience of detention, one which he describes as traumatic. He was temporarily put in isolation, and for the first eight days, he was unable to see either his family or a lawyer. He was later charged with the possession of dangerous weapons, specifically a sharpened spoon, but refused to give a statement without legal representation. On 28th August 1986, he was ordered to pack up his goods and told that he would be going home. Instead, he was transported to Steenberg police station, only 500 metres from his home, where he was held in a solitary cell until 9th September, when he was released without charge. His family and friends came to collect him, since he was afraid to walk home alone.

During the period of his detention, Van Wyk was never physically harmed, although he describes some of his experiences as mental torture, and suffered some psychological harm, including instances of claustrophobia and memory loss. Moreover, after his release, he became security paranoid for some time, and was constantly conscious of being watched. He refused to use the telephone, and his house was repeatedly searched by the police, often in the middle of the night. Moreover, many friends and acquaintances distanced themselves from the family after his detention, as they were afraid to be associated with any organisation challenging the state. As a result of this, Van Wyk joined the Detainee Parent Support Committee (DPSC). This organisation, which was connected to the [United Democratic Front \(UDF\)](#), provided an important source of support for those who the apartheid government had detained without trial.

Despite his detention and its adverse effects, Van Wyk continued to be politically active through the late 1980s and early 1990s. In addition to his roles with the DPSC, Cosatu, and Cahac, he became a member of the ANC after its legalisation in 1990. Moreover, he also became active in the South African Municipal Workers' Union (Samwu) from its establishment in 1987, and was instrumental in a public meeting of this union, relating to a 13 day worker-initiated strike against the Cape Town municipalities in 1990. This strike was the first time in South Africa's history that 11,000 workers, predominantly Coloured, participated in a strike of this nature. Furthermore, Cahac took a significant role in engaging civic organisations across South Africa for the creation of the South

African National Civic Organisation (Sanco) in 1992, for which Van Wyk became a councillor from 1995-1996.

Through his involvement with Sanco, Van Wyk participated in a 1994 exchange programme for local government officials. For this programme, Van Wyk travelled to Ethiopia, Eritrea, Washington, Toronto, New York, Sao Paulo and Curitiba. He took part in a second exchange in 1997, during which he spent two months in San Diego, California, engaged in various talks with communities learning to establish social involvement with local governments.

In 1995, Van Wyk was appointed as a councillor for the Fishhoek Kommetjie, Noordhoek Transitional Council, on which he served until 1996. That year, he became a councillor for the ANC, serving in the South Peninsula Municipality until 2000. Later, from 2005-2006, he served as a councillor in the Cape Town Municipality.

Since the ending of the apartheid regime in 1994, and more particularly since joining the Gorachouqua House in 2003, Van Wyk has shifted his political focus to the cultural field, increasingly asserting his Khoi identity. He rejects a 'Coloured' identity, and specifically, he refers to himself as Nama, an ethnic group under the Khoi nation, the descendants of the indigenous peoples of South Africa. Having grown up in a short period of colonialism, and spent most of his life in the apartheid era, during which his family was forced to register as Coloured, he first came to acknowledge and assert a Khoi identity in 1985. Later, in meetings with ANC leadership, he repeatedly stressed the need to open the debate on Khoikhoi identity, but claims that in this, he was subtly marginalised and isolated. His involvement with the Khoisan community deepened further when he joined the Khoi Gorachouqua House in 2003. Then, when Chief Harleen Sassman died in 2008, Van Wyk was appointed to lead the House, culminating in his formal appointment as Chief in a restoration ceremony on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2010.

Van Wyk is currently working towards recognition of Khoisan indigenous rights in South Africa, although his focus is on cultural recognition and promotion, as opposed to any ethnic division. He is keen to use research into Khoi history and identity, including various writings on early colonial explorations of South Africa, to work out a written history of its indigenous peoples, which he feels has heretofore been neglected and ignored. His central concerns – and the concerns of many of his contemporaries – centre on the recognition of land and language rights, which they believe to be central to Khoisan identity in post-apartheid South Africa. Such rights, he argues, should be granted to the Khoisan peoples under the UN declaration of 2007 on indigenous rights, which have not been fully implemented in South Africa. Along with various others, he is currently busy with a court case against the government for cultural genocide, although the case is struggling with a lack of financial resources, limiting its likelihood of success at present. Nevertheless, steps are now beginning to be taken towards the recognition of Khoisan identity in South Africa.

### **The Question of Khoisan Identity:**

In his [State of the Nation address](#) on 9th February 2012, [President Zuma](#) uttered a promise that provisions would be made 'for the recognition of the Khoi-San communities, their leadership and structures'. He continued:

*'It is important to remember that the Khoi-San people were the most brutalised by colonialists who tried to make them extinct, and undermined their language and identity. As a free and democratic South Africa today, we cannot ignore to correct the past'.*

This address held special significance as one of the first official recognitions of Khoisan communities in the history of modern South Africa. In a similar way to that in which Van Wyk has more recently come to assert his identity as a Khoisan leader, Khoisan identity in a wider sense has undergone a revival in recent years, most notably since the end of apartheid in 1994.

Nevertheless, the issue of Khoisan recognition as an indigenous population of South Africa is at present far from resolved, and the wider question of Khoisan identity remains contentious. The Khoisan people, who at various points have been referred to using the derogatory terms 'Bushmen' and 'Hottentots', as well as Kung, Kxoe, Khoi Khoi, Ovahimba, San, Vatsa and !Xun, are an ethno-linguistic group that has traditionally been marginalised throughout South African history.

Indeed, the use of the term 'Khoikhoi' meaning 'men of men' or 'people' actually came to prominence in opposition to the offensive label of 'Hottentot' applied to herding communities by white colonialists. 'San' as a term came to be used to denote the hunter-gathering communities who did not speak Khoi languages – known to white settlers as 'Bushmen' – in contradistinction to the Khoi-speaking herders. However, the term 'Khoisan' is a relatively recent invention, coined in 1928 by Leonard Schultze as a collective category for early hunter-gathering and herding peoples of southern Africa, and a term which increasingly causes a degree of tension and controversy. Traditionally, the Khoi Khoi were largely pastoralists, whilst the San lived primarily off hunter-gathering, and hence the differences in their livelihoods, culture, languages and identity make for some significant distinctions between Khoi and San peoples, despite their having some common ancestry and cultural commonalities. Increasingly, some San communities, claiming the ultra-marginalisation of their people, even in comparison to the Khoi Khoi, are beginning to assert a distinct identity, encouraging the use of 'Khoi and San' as opposed to 'Khoisan' or 'Khoi-San' in official references to these populations. Officially, however, the 'Khoisan' as an ethno-linguistic group remains a recognised identity.

Both the hunter-gatherer San and the pastoralist Khoi Khoi are estimated to have been living in parts of southern Africa for at least two thousand years. However, with the arrival of European settlers from 1652, and the establishment and growth of colonial settlements over the ensuing two and a half centuries, the Khoisan peoples lost many of their claims to land, land which largely has never been restored to them. Since the [Land Restitution Act of 1994](#) does not make provision for land which communities lost before the assigned cut-off date of 1913, with the proclamation of the ['Native Land Act'](#), land restitution in the post-apartheid era has held little benefit for the Khoisan peoples. This is due to the fact that Khoisan communities were dispossessed of most of their land during the earlier colonial era, especially in the early nineteenth century, and hence the 1913 Native Land Act did not make any mention of Khoisan land confiscation.

In addition to this, Khoisan communities also underwent a sharp decline in population with the arrival of European settlers, largely due to warfare and diseases such as smallpox which arrived with the colonialists. The Khoisan had no natural immunity to these imported diseases, and were hit hard by epidemics. In 1713, for example, an estimated 90 percent of the Khoisan population is thought to have been wiped out by smallpox. Moreover, the traditional lifestyles and cultures of distinct communities were often altered by intermarriage with different ethnic groups, especially in the Western Cape. There is evidence of intermarriage both between Khoikhoi and San populations and with colonial slave populations, as well as with Bantu-speaking farmers and white settlers. This created a degree of fluidity in Khoisan identity, in terms of both economic activity and language. Through such intermarriage and assimilation, Khoisan populations were exposed to languages from not only Europe and other parts of southern Africa, but also from South East Asia, with the huge presence of slaves from Dutch colonies such as Malaysia. The connection of the Khoisan with a slave

heritage is significant in contemporary understandings of Khoisan identity, with various Khoi leaders today asserting their heritage from and links with Cape slavery.

Later, under the apartheid government, Khoisan peoples were forced to register as 'Coloured', a label which later came to be widely resented, especially from the 1980s, for its neglect of their distinct identity. However, the issue of Coloured registration and identity is a complex one. Within the Coloured category, there existed various sub-groups, including Cape Coloured, Cape Malay, Griqua, Nama, and 'other Coloured'. The Khoisan community was not neatly categorised within one of these groups, but instead individuals with slightly different heritages were categorised as belonging to different subgroups. Those of Khoikhoi and Afrikaner descent, for example, often classified themselves as Griqua, whilst those with a stronger slave heritage tended to be classified as Cape Malays. Such policies of classification or self-classification, along with land dispossession that came as a result of forced relocation policies, Khoisan identity was fractured further in its lack of official recognition.

In one sense, the Coloured category allowed the Khoisan socio-political and economic privileges denied to the black population, such as not being required to carry a pass book. Nevertheless, so-called Coloureds remained subject to harsh discrimination, including the segregation of amenities such as schools and restaurants, and the forcible relocation of over half a million Coloured people after the [Group Areas Act](#) of 1950. In this process, property owners were meagrely compensated, and long-standing communities found themselves broken up, contributing to a further fracturing of Khoisan identities. In addition to this, Coloureds were removed from the common voters' roll in 1956. They were placed on a separate voters' roll which would permit them to elect four Whites to represent them in the House of Assembly, an activity which was seen as pointless by many members of the Coloured community. As a result, their political participation declined, with only 50.2% of Coloureds voting in the next election, and many refusing to register for the new voters' roll.

In the 1970s and 1980s, various members of the Khoisan community accepted positions as trackers for European hunting companies, and a significant number were employed by the [South African Defence Force \(SADF\)](#) to track guerrilla fighters during the anti-apartheid struggle. In their employment by the SADF, various cultural and racial stereotypes regarding the Khoisan came to the fore. Khoisan trackers were employed based on stereotypical perceptions of them as expert trackers, and were instrumental in the SADF's pursuit of the African National Congress (ANC) and [South West Africa People's Organisation \(Swapo\)](#). Consequently, some Khoisan communities have since been subject to retaliatory attacks from other members of society, as the stereotypical image of the Khoisan tracker working for the apartheid government has proved enduring.

Since 1994, the Khoisan are no longer classified as 'Coloured' as per the apartheid system, and have increasingly demanded recognition as a distinct group with its own identity. There is an increased desire on the part of Khoisan communities for Coloured rejectionism and the reaffirmation of an indigenous heritage which entailed geographic rootedness, a sense of belonging, entitlement and ownership, in addition to unity and legitimacy as an ethno-national group. This has culminated in legal proceedings, such as the case of 'cultural genocide and discrimination against the Khoisan nation' that was brought to the Equality Court in 2010. In this case, leaders had particular opposition to the use of the term 'Coloured' in with reference to the Khoisan peoples, asserting the use of the classification to keep the Khoisan population in bondage. Their demands included government recognition not only of their leadership, but also of eighteen clans, including Namaqua, Griqua and Hassequa. Furthermore, demands have been made to the government in Pretoria this year both for recognition as South Africa's first and original inhabitants and for land rights historically denied to them. These demands were handed to Phumzile Simelela, Chief Director in the Office of the Director

General, and centre on land reform discussions aiming for the legitimisation of land claims prior to the [1913 Native Land Act](#).

Indeed, the issue of land restitution and traditional land claims has become of crucial importance in the post-apartheid era, as the Khoisan affirmation of identity has become stronger. Under the [Land Restitution Act of 1994](#), persons or communities who lost their property as a result of apartheid laws or practices after 1913 were invited to submit claims for restitution or compensation. The Land Act of 1913 had formalised the land dispossession of Black South Africans and limited African land ownership to 'native reserves'. However, this Land Act had little practical effect on the Khoisan populations, whose land had largely been confiscated earlier in the colonial period, from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Therefore, since the 1994 Land Restitution Act excludes land dispossession prior to 1913, any Khoisan claims to the land that was confiscated from them prior to this point have not been taken in hand. Such loss of land is hugely significant in any consideration of the contemporary identity of a group with strong ties to land as part of their traditional way of life, and so continued displacement from traditional land cannot help but have an impact on Khoisan identity. This is a major concern of many contemporary Khoisan leaders such as Van Wyk, and a case for the recognition of Khoisan land claims was in fact brought to the government in Pretoria in February 2012.

Another concern of many contemporary Khoisan is the return of the remains of their ancestors that were taken in the colonial period to their native territories. In 2002, for example, the remains of Sarah Baartman, often known under the derogatory name of 'The Hottentot Venus', were returned to South Africa from a French museum. She had been transported in 1810 from South Africa to Europe as a living exhibition of a supposedly primitive African physiology, and after her death, her remains had been kept in Paris' Musee de l'Homme, where they were displayed until 1974. After an extensive campaign, her remains were finally returned to South Africa in 2002, and properly buried, marking a significant albeit poignant victory for the Khoisan. However, the lack of return of the remains of various other Khoisan individuals continues to be a significant concern of these peoples today.

In addition to this, there are further questions pertaining to Khoisan identity within post-apartheid South Africa which continue to be topics of debate, especially among Khoisan leaders. A central facet of these concerns regards the use of Khoisan languages. Of South Africa's eleven official languages (which include English, Afrikaans and nine Bantu languages) not one is a Khoisan language. Interestingly, however, the South African coat of arms features a phrase in Xam, a now-frozen Khoisan language (that is to say, it exists in written form, but there are no living speakers remaining), potentially implying the growing perception of the importance of Khoisan history and culture in wider South African identity.

The populations who speak these indigenous languages are generally rather small, due to the 'language death' resultant of the Khoisan people's displacement from traditional lands and related economic practices over the course of the colonial and apartheid eras. Indeed, many Khoisan adopted Afrikaans during these periods, especially in the Western Cape, where Afrikaans is a dominant language. As a result, many of their indigenous languages are now either endangered or extinct, most with no written record. Many Khoisan today, including Van Wyk, speak Afrikaans and English, but have only limited knowledge of the indigenous languages of their people. This tendency extends even to the names of many Khoisan individuals, who have Dutch or Afrikaner names dating back to the colonial period. Many members of Khoisan communities were either given names by colonial administrators who were unable to pronounce their names in Khoi or San languages, or adopted these names over time due to the impact of colonial rule and religious conversion.



Despite such influences and declines in Khoisan languages since the advent of colonialism, these languages are not entirely extinct, and they continue to form an important aspect of Khoisan identity. There remain several thousand Nama speakers in the Namaqualand area and along the Orange River, and approximately a thousand Khoedam speakers currently live in Schmidtsdrift, near [Kimberley](#). In addition to this, there remain approximately a quarter of a million KhoeKhoe speakers in southern Africa, although these individuals live primarily in Namibia.

Whilst they have never been recognised as official languages, indigenous Khoi and San languages are constitutionally recognised. The current constitution recognises 'the historically diminished use and status the indigenous languages of our people, [and that] the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages'. Indeed, whilst no Khoi or San language has previously been taught formally in South African schools, recent developments show some schools beginning to revive their use, and new books in these vernaculars are being created. In Schmidtsdrift, moreover, there is a Khoisan radio station, XK-FM, with an estimated 5000 listeners, concentrated in the Northern Cape. Programmes are broadcast in the !Xhu and Khwe languages, covering news, current affairs, story-telling, education, drama and music. Furthermore, the Pan South African Language Board currently claims to promote the development and use of Khoi, Nama and San languages. However, there is no legal obligation for the state to provide services in these languages, potentially undermining the government's aim to advance their use and status, and having a detrimental effect on Khoisan identity.

Another important aspect of the Khoisan assertion of identity in the post-apartheid period is that of political participation and civic organisations. As intimated earlier, members of the Khoisan community have been active in stating their claims to the South African government, for example with the 2010 lawsuit, and the current demands for the restitution of land rights. Whilst individuals from Khiosan - or earlier, Coloured – backgrounds have long been involved with wide political organisations such as the ANC or South African National Civic Organisation (Sanco), the recent land restitution claims have seen the involvement of broader organisations, such as the South African Progressive Civic Organisation and the AfriYouth Forum, in more strictly Khoisan affairs, demonstrating the extent to which Khoisan identity is becoming more widely viewed as significant within South Africa.

In South Africa, the government officially recognises [the Congress of Traditional Leaders of South Africa \(Contralesa\)](#) as a body of traditional or 'tribal' leaders, but there is some controversy regarding Khoisan membership of this. Some chiefs, including Chief van Wyk, refuse to be part of this organisation, as they consider themselves indigenous, rather than traditional leaders. However, the wider Khoisan community has developed the National Khoisan Consultative Conference as a tribal representative body, established in 2001. The Conference consists of a group of 20 representatives from different Khoisan communities, representing ten different religions, and acts as an umbrella body for Khoisan peoples across South Africa.

There have been some controversies about this organisation, especially from San leaders, who were concerned about the possible dilution of explicitly San identity within this combined structure. Nevertheless, the very existence of the Conference is significant in the way in which it demonstrates the growing assertion of Khoisan identity in the post-apartheid period. At the opening ceremony of the National Khoisan Consultative Conference in March 2001, then-Deputy-President Zuma declared it a 'defining moment the history of our country in general, and that of the Khoisan people in particular - the first indigenous people of our country'. He went on to expand and explain that:

*This conference is also a powerful demonstration of the enduring strength of the Khoisan people. It was, after all, the Khoi-Khoi in the Cape who waged the first wars of resistance against the colonial onslaught of the seventeenth Century. It is of historical significance that the descendants of those who were cruelly victimised, repressed, exploited, driven from their homes and suffered worse injustices and inhuman treatment, are today joining together to participate in building a better and stronger South African nation.*

[Address by Deputy President Zuma to the Opening Ceremony of the National Khoisan Consultative Conference, 29th March 2001]

The key aims of this council are, according to chairperson, Cecil le Fleur, centre on raising awareness of Khoisan heritage, rendering the pursuit and preservation of culture more significant than traditional political campaigning. Indeed, his comments appear apt for the position of Khoisan identity and its assertion in contemporary South Africa more generally, not merely with the council. He says:

*We need to re-introduce the pride of who we are. We want to penetrate the coloured community. There's so much gangsterism because people want to belong. They want to fit in and be part of something. They call themselves 'Coloured' but they don't know where they originate. The Western lifestyle was pushed on them throughout the colonial period. They can't see how important it is to see their roots. We need to unite our people. We need to show them where they belong.*

[Rhodes Journalism Review, September 2001]