

SELLING WITH THE SAN



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Bushmen have recently been appropriated by the advertising media, reflecting certain ideological issues which are typical of the changing socio-political circumstances in South Africa. These issues are discernible in a range of recent commercials, not all discussed here, for both print and electronic media.

Representations of Bushman people and artefacts

The people who form part of the subject matter of this paper belong to what is generally called the Khoisan group of people, who, according to current academic usage, are generally called 'Khoisan' or 'San'. I use the currently acceptable 'Bushman', as it is not specifically insulting whilst 'San' has derogatory connotations in the Namibian context. I do not use the term 'Bushman' comfortably for several reasons. The name comes from the seventeenth century Dutch 'Boeschjesmans', which is culturally and politically loaded with sexist and racist connotations which continue to this day. Use of 'Bushman' reflects an age-old partiality; that of the male-centred world which obscures the presence of women. Woman is silently excluded. Lastly, the people themselves, composed of different groups from different areas, do not have one all-encompassing word to describe themselves. The terminology 'San' or 'Bushman' is therefore an imposition and a construct.

This paper, which presents an art historian's perspective on the ideology of specific representations, aims to examine recent South African print advertisements in which Bushmen and their cultural artefacts are employed and depicted. It examines the relationship between the people represented

in the advertisements, the Bushmen, and the culture for which the advertisements were produced. This relationship demonstrates strategies of subjection and power as the visual images become part of the techniques intrinsic to the exercise of power.

Images help create the mechanisms of power as they assume an economic, political and social function on behalf of the dominant group. Visual images, reflecting their producing society, create a site for the formation of further knowledge. The advertisements under review expose a mythological vision of a pristine ethnicity which reveals an almost universally accepted discourse determining the way Bushman people are viewed by the receiving multicultural, yet strongly Western, consumer-oriented audience.

Many of the advertisements show an utopian concept of an age-old nomadic people living completely in tune with, and secure in their environment. The land of the hunter-gatherers becomes an observed symbolic space, quite separate from that of the viewing, consumer society. Harsh reality, on the other hand, reveals a people who despite having co-existed for about 1 000 years with other indigenous people, have in the past few

centuries been subject to varying degrees of extermination. The supreme irony inherent in the image of content nomads, revolves around the fact that the few remaining Bushmen are no longer wanderers, as they have systematically been deprived of their land. In addition, obscuring issues of power and land, several of the advertisements attempt to depict people frozen in time, thus perpetuating a fantasy about the Bushmen.

Socio-political context

These advertisements, made in the late 1980s and early 1990s, encompassing the period of secret high level negotiation to the dismantling of apartheid, need to be understood in the particular socio-political context in which they were produced and disseminated. They reflect a largely new concern of much of the white élite to recognize and even celebrate South Africa's African context. Intrinsic to this concern was an increasing lack of comfort with, and perhaps even rejection of apartheid,¹ its associated vision of racial separation, and European identification for whites. The organizations for which the advertisements discussed in this article were made, were South African Airways (SAA) and Spoornet.²

As state and parastatal organizations they in particular presumably felt the need to separate themselves from their apartheid 'past'. In this context, the Bushmen were used to symbolize these new sensibilities.

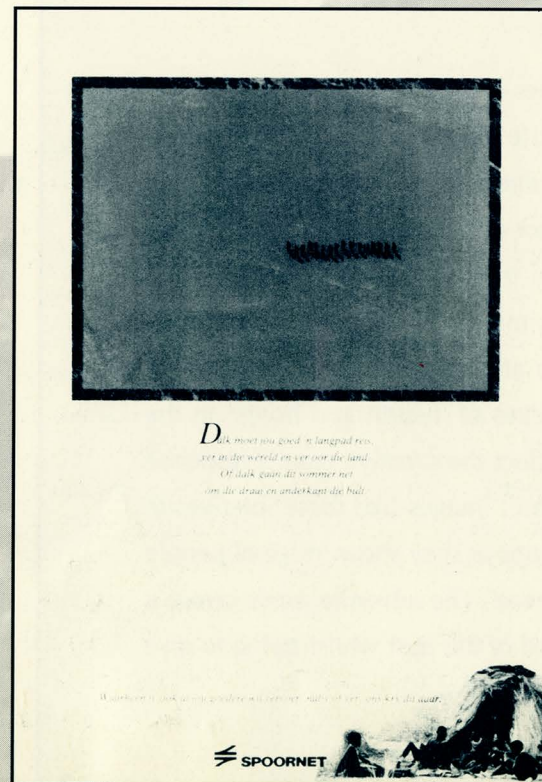
Bushmen offer symbolic advantages to the advertiser. To the average viewer and consumer, Bushmen are largely uncontested and uncontroversial symbols of blackness and African-ness.³ They connote Africa and black people, without being encumbered by negative or controversial political and symbolic meanings.

Bushmen are considered by many to be distinct and removed from the day-to-day conflicts that engulf South Africa. As such, they allow viewers to embrace the idea of being part of black Africa and multiracial South Africa without making the audience and consumer identify with other socio-political groups.⁴ The Bushmen thus become available for nation (or company) building, and myth making.

Bushmen evoke a Van der Postian, utopian and idyllic past, untouched by apartheid, development and industrialization. In the world represented by these advertisements South Africa can move from the Edenic world of the Bushmen, where blackness, Africa, the environment and indigenous people are unthreatened; to a part-Western, part-African, post-apartheid multicultural society where all members of the population share common roots in Africa.

A marginalized and liminal group, Bushmen are thus used to suggest a whole nation, as they symbolize blackness, and yet are seen to be different from the other black people and organizations that populate the socio-political terrain. They are not white, and yet provide a bridge between whites and African-ness by the white claim to identify them, and identify with them. The very absence of Bushmen from daily discourses and experiences thus makes them available as unthreatening symbols and metaphors to encode and recode the new.

Spoornet campaign



A range of images using Bushmen people and their artefacts was produced for Spoornet during 1992.⁵ In the advertisement *Langpad Reis*, the agency has taken the Bushman people who, in reality, exist in Southern Africa as a subordinated social, racial and cultural group and elevated them symbolically and visually, decontextualising them from a twentieth century reality. The romantic level to which they have been elevated is vastly different from their current experience. The creative team relied heavily on the notion of an ancient nomadic people who, through force of circumstances beyond their own control, are no longer nomads. There is no acknowledgement of dispossession from their land and the radical way in which their traditional life style has altered.

Instead, set within the Western artistic tradition of the sublime and picturesque, poetically showing the harsh African landscape, they are presented as part of a vision of a popular symbolic space. Several of the Spoornet advertisements utilize the South African fine art tradition of landscape. The primary image of *Langpad Reis* centres around the symbolic presentation and use of space, including the spatialization of the 'train' of people, as they wind their way within the flat landscape. The advertisement suggests that the authentic African way of traversing the inhospitable landscape is firstly the Bushman way and then secondly, the Spoornet way.

Whenever you've got to move your goods, big or small, lots or little, strange or normal, near or far... Just fall in line.



Other visuals in the series *Just fall in line* zoom in on romantic images of people from an immutable past living in the hostile landscape. Textual messages asserting SpoorNet will deliver goods from near or far, are placed next to cosy domestic scenes which intimate that long journeys across the alien desertscape lead to the safety and security of home. Relying on other pictorial clichés like rosy sunscapes, the series follows an established convention which shows that the conclusion of the expedition has led to a safe arrival at home.

The transcendent qualities of *A time for sharing*, focus on a traditional way of life. They tell of the Bushman people's special knowledge of their environment and the manner in which they not only can traverse the land, but survive to maintain the traditional family values most societies espouse. This message was considered to be particularly appropriate at Christmas time. The tone of this and the small vignettes of 'hearth and home' in the other advertisements reflect the creative team's response to their brief 'to be warm'. Images like these interweave myths of place and persons as they show 'original people in the original environment'. The advertisements create a mythical idealised record of the past whilst trying to give meaning to the present.

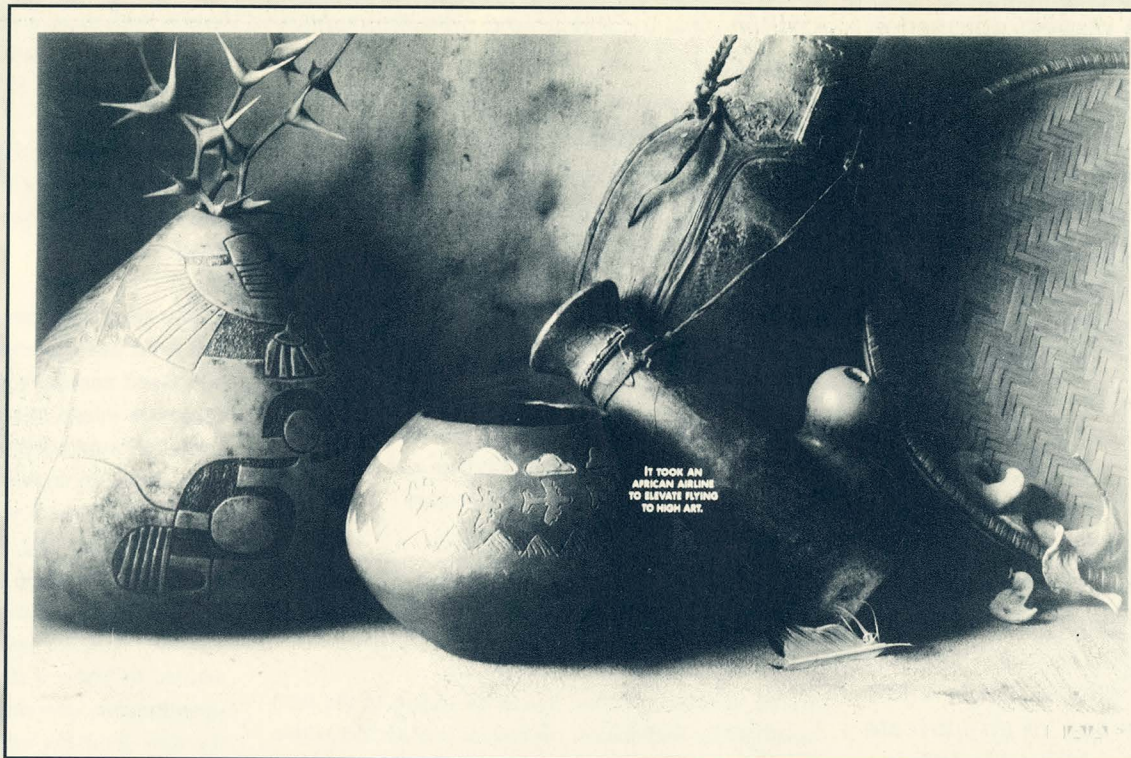
Whenever you've got to move your goods, big or small, lots or little, strange or normal, near or far... Just fall in line.



*A time for sharing,
a season of peace,
a moment of warmth*

We at SpoorNet wish all our clients a joyful Christmas and a prosperous new Year

SPOORNET

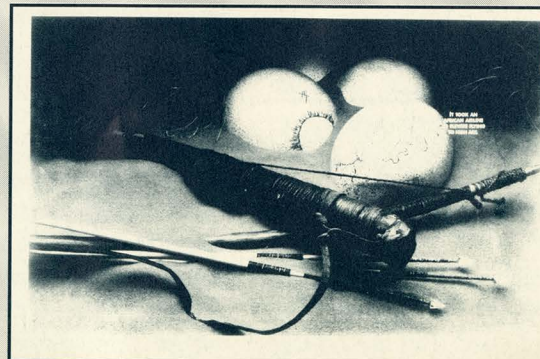


SAA campaign

The Spoornet advertisements possess a Eurocentric cultural authority which can be likened to Western notions regarding the allure of authenticity which is associated with the original work of art. Allusion to this concept is overtly stated in the set of advertisements, produced by the same agency, for South African Airways. The notion is repeated in both image and text.

The catch phrase *It took an African airline to elevate flying to a high art* was used for a range of images that incorporated both

traditional African cultural objects and contemporary objects as works of art. Although the series utilises authentic and appropriate Bushman artefacts, the advertising agency manipulated some of these by etching



their own symbols onto the ostrich eggs so that it was not really the so-called 'nomadic tribe' who made the 'art' form. Similarly, the clay pots with aeroplanes, made in Sandton, would be more likely to be associated with agro-pastoralists. Again there is a romanticising and mythologising of African people and their objects.

Advertisements and power relations

Like all visual images, advertisements are replete with both implicit and explicit meaning. Advertising images, as representations of both their producing and receiving society, are part of systems of cultural signification. As constructs of an ideology, they in turn serve as cultural indicators and are part of complex political and social processes. The popular notion of the Bushman people and their material culture, which are seen as one, is a conflation of common ideas. This construct encompasses a view which has been built into an established, Western vision of the Bushman people. Representations of Bushmen show them as if they were a timeless, changeless people whose traditional culture and way of life has altered little since the eighteenth century. The result is a neat composite that conflates a prehistoric, historic and contemporary people. This view itself demonstrates an historical partiality and specificity.



Although there is a popular assumption that an advertisement represents a 'truth', I have argued that it reflects a subjective perspective. It is constructed with a clear aim in mind and uses social formations which one must consider are often partial and whose construction is also rooted in certain prejudices. Advertisements do not represent a homogenous society, nor do they necessarily reflect a society's stance fairly.

Whilst advertising using images of the Bushmen purports to be respectful of Bushman culture and society, cultural objects are sometimes adapted and modified to suit the needs of contemporary advertisers. To be generous, perhaps this sort of construction is undertaken out of ignorance. But as many Bushman artefacts are part of an intricate ritual and belief system, this only serves to endorse the opinion that knowledge of Bushman people is scant and superficial. The adaptations and alterations result in a somewhat contradictory tactic which affects the way in which a so-called empathetic approach to the Bushman is contrasted with the insensitive manner in which belief systems are trivialised.

Bushman people are appropriated by the consumer society and their ritual objects reduced or altered to a Western aesthetic dimension. Complex systems of thought frame the world view of the producers. The image, which is itself a site of meaning, signifies relations of power. Visual representations as conscious constructs made by advertising agencies are not self-contained, but are on the

contrary, inextricably bound up with a variety of practices of the whole social group who produced them and for whom they are produced. Representations of the two juxtaposed societies suggest that the value systems and cultural attitudes of each group present contested domains.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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NOTES

1. The various and often imprecise usages of the term apartheid by individuals, companies and sectors within business is almost a case study in the differing and changing nature of the term. Lee and Buntman (1989:117-119) have concluded that in popular usage 'apartheid' has six main meanings, which in reality may be found along a continuum of social discourse.
2. While the advertisements which appeared in mass media, from billboards to newspapers like *The Star* were targeted at the general public, they were also specifically aimed at predominantly white, moneyed opinion makers through the pages of *The Financial Mail* and *Leadership* magazines.
3. Zulus, for example, were frequently used in the nineteenth century to represent Africa or black people to British and other audiences. In addition, the Zulu have strong claims to the land, whereas the Bushmen, a politically negated people are not strongly identified with specific land claims. But today, by contrast, 'Zulu' means different things to different people, and at a symbolic

level is likely to inspire emotion and strong opinion rather than be an easily manipulated signifier available for the advertising agency's uses.

4. This gave the audience and consumer leeway and allowed him/her not to have to make partisan choices and identify with groups like the then UDF, the ANC or Inkatha.

5. The advertising campaign, which included television and print advertisements, had its roots in the newly privatised company and its name change. The new corporate image needed a message that asserted the company 'would deliver on time'. The agency brief was for a corporate commercial that was 'warm and would make people aware of what the railways is about' (Van den Berg 1993). The advertising agency's creative team devised a series that would be 'unique to Africa' and would provide 'beautiful images that create warmth and empathy with the public' (Van den Berg 1993). They wanted to 'show a train without a train' and decided upon the idea whereby they would 'let the Bushman tell the story about the train in Africa' (Van den Berg 1993). The agency representative explained further that they did not want to use words to convey their concept but wanted the visual to imply 'train' (Van den Berg 1993). It is clear that they utilized the notion that mobility which is fundamental for survival, affects most aspects of Bushman life (Marshall and Ritchie 1984:74).

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