

# **Hottentot, Bushman, Kaffir: Taxonomic Tendencies in Nineteenth-Century Racial Iconography**

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In her perceptive study of scientific racism in Great Britain, Nancy Stepan notes that

a fundamental question about the history of racism in the first half of the nineteenth century is why it was that, just as the battle against slavery was being won by abolitionists, the war against racism in European thought was being lost. The Negro was legally freed by the Emancipation Act of 1833, but in the British mind he was still mentally, morally and physically a slave (Stepan 1982: 1).

Answers to this question have been sought in the intellectual climate of that period, particularly in the shifts of thought that marked the transition from a revolutionary Romantic age to an imperialistic Victorian one.<sup>1</sup> The tendency has been to examine the words and deeds of the leading thinkers, policy makers and adventurers of those times - the scientists, the statesmen, the explorers and travellers - and to trace through them the evolution of a distorted image of black peoples that both attracted and repelled the fair-skinned, reinforcing irrational assumptions of fundamental racial difference. Throughout Europe native Africans were stereotyped as brutish, dimwitted, naive, emotional, undisciplined, uncultured - in short, children of nature who needed to be civilized and domesticated. British abolitionists sought to protect them from gross exploitation, while the British government aimed to harness their raw energy for the development of colonial commerce, an enterprise deemed beneficial to Africans themselves, for it would give them useful employment, raise their standard of living, and thereby help to refine their ways. The paternalistic relationship between colonizer and colonized was thus perceived as a necessary symbiosis that was morally correct. At an abstract intellectual level British racism after the Enlightenment may have been largely benign, or intended as such, even while its concrete effects were often malignant in the extreme.

Racial stereotypes were also powerfully conveyed to the common man through the popular literature of the day, especially the adventure fiction set in various corners of the colonial empire. A study aptly titled *The Africa That Never Was*

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Curtin (1964) and related studies by Cohen (1980), Gilman (1982) and Frederickson (1971).

documents the role imaginative literature played in disseminating farfetched racist ideas to English readers (Hammond and Jablow 1970; Killam 1968). Such value-laden discourse, directed at a mass audience, probably did more collective harm than the published papers of scientists, many of whom in the latter half of the nineteenth century became increasingly preoccupied with formulating 'objective' racial theories based on comparisons of quantitative data derived from precise measurements of various anatomical parts, especially the skull (Gould 1981). But the subjectivity of the pop writers and the objectivity of the scientists pointed toward the same conclusions because they were based on the same premise: that Africans were by nature inferior to Europeans.

Among men and women of conscience it was believed that this inherent difference in biological status made certain moral demands upon the superior race. Clearly it was unethical to enslave an inferior, but it was considered perverse to marry one. In dealing with subnormal human beings some balance had to be achieved between enforcing total social control and allowing absolute personal freedom. Blacks had to be released from oppressive physical captivity yet kept strictly confined to their proper biological niche at the bottom of the natural human ladder. The civilized and the savage had to remain distanced from one another, if only to prevent disastrous taxonomic confusion. For otherwise the neat, color-coded distinctions that marked significant gradations in varieties of mankind could become blurred and indecipherable. It would then be impossible to distinguish at a glance between the Self and the Other.

One very effective method of distancing Africans from Europeans was through visual images. Even the illiterate masses could understand a picture, and the picture didn't have to be accurate to convey a powerful impression. Indeed, before the advent of photography, hand-drawn sketches of black people functioned as a kind of ocular shorthand, reducing complex human beings to a pattern of schematic lines meant to represent their essence. Some of this racial iconography aspired to exact representation undistorted by bias or overstatement, but much of it consciously or unconsciously expressed a bigoted attitude toward the individual or group depicted, emphasizing differences that set this race apart from others. Blacks were thus made to appear less than fully human at precisely the time their full human rights were being secured through legislation. The paradoxes of British racial paternalism are indelibly inscribed in the visual arts of the nineteenth century, particularly in those arts that forthrightly aided and abetted racist thinking.

Racial arguments were advanced in media ranging from careful illustrations in scientific texts to highly exaggerated political caricatures and lampoons, from picturesque portraits in travel books to grotesque images on posters and handbills advertising ethnic entertainments. Some of the best examples of this graphic tradition can be found in depictions of three southern African peoples: the Khoikhoi, the San and the Zulu, popularly known throughout the nineteenth century as the Hottentot, the Bushman and the Kaffir. What may have made these three African ethnic groups more visible in British art than others was the fact that specimens of each occasionally were conveyed to England and displayed publicly

as examples of uncivilized humanity. The artists who drew them therefore did not have to rely on tall tales or hearsay for their impressions but could record their own responses to living creatures they could see with their own eyes, close up, and in the flesh. The various distancing devices these artists adopted to portray such subjects tell us something about racial attitudes in Britain in the nineteenth century, a century that began with attempts at exploration of selected parts of Africa and ended with Europe's aggressive expropriation of the entire continent.

## 1. THE HOTTENTOT VENUS

The most famous African performer on the British stage in the early nineteenth century was Sartjee Baartman, a woman who made her debut in London in September 1810 and remained on display in cities and towns throughout the British Isles and Europe until her death in Paris in December 1815.<sup>2</sup> Billed facetiously as the "Hottentot Venus," she had one remarkable attribute, a steatopygous rump, that made her an anatomical curiosity. Her manager, a Boer farmer from the Cape, sought to add further novelty to her exhibition by having her emerge from a cave, perform rudimentary tasks on command, sing, dance, and play a few melodies on a simple stringed instrument. But the big attraction for those who came to see her was her enormous bottom, the authenticity of which some skeptics insisted on testing by patting, pinching or poking with a cane or parasol. To spice up her act, she was outfitted in a skintight, skin-colored garment that made her appear nude under her native ornaments. So this outlandish Venus offered the British public at least three kinds of sideshow stimulation: she was part freak, part savage, part cooch dancer.

The degrading nature of her exhibition did not please everyone who witnessed it. Members of the newly formed African Institution, led by the famous abolitionist Zachary Macaulay, took her manager to court, charging that this woman could not possibly have consented to being displayed in this humiliating manner, that she therefore was being kept in a condition of involuntary servitude, and that under protection of British law she ought to be released from her captivity and repatriated to Africa. The petitioners also claimed that the show was indecent, but they chose to contest only the legality, not the morality, of the exhibition. Her manager flatly denied all the charges (Lindfors 1985).

To settle the matter, the presiding magistrate arranged for the woman to be interrogated for several hours in low Dutch in the presence of witnesses for both sides. To the surprise of the plaintiffs she testified in support of her manager, swearing she had willingly agreed to the terms of the contract she had with him, that she was under no restraint but was well treated and earning good money, and

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<sup>2</sup> The most detailed accounts of her career in show business are by Kirby (1949; 1953) and by Altick (1978). Her career in science is summed up by Gould (1982).

that she wanted the show to go on. On the strength of this testimony the magistrate had no alternative but to dismiss the suit and allow Sartjee Baartman to continue her show business career.

The resolution of this unusual case, which was remarked on in all the London papers and picked up quickly by the provincial press, added immeasurably to the notoriety of the Hottentot Venus, making her a household word throughout the British Isles. Ballads, doggerel verse, quips and jokes inspired by the incongruity of her situation began to make the rounds. Several humor magazines published letters in broken English purportedly written by her, and comic artists quickly joined in the fun, graphically inflating her strange tale. To sustain such hilarity, crude caricature became the dominant verbal and iconographic idiom.<sup>3</sup>

The best-known burlesque image of Sartjee Baartman was an aquatint by Frederick Christian Lewis used to advertise her exhibition (Fig. 1). Its emphasis rested squarely on her buttocks, which protruded like oversized basketballs from an erect frame seen in profile. Sander L. Gilman, in a suggestive essay on the iconography of female sexuality, advances the idea that "when the nineteenth century saw the black female, it saw her in terms of her buttocks... Female sexuality is tied to the image of the buttocks, and the quintessential buttocks are those of the Hottentot" (Gilman 1985). Using Sartjee Baartman as a spectacular case in point, Gilman finds that "it is indeed in the physical appearance of the Hottentot that the central icon for sexual difference between the European and the black was found" (Gilman 1985: 83). One could go further and argue that to the European mind the pronounced steatopygia of the Hottentot Venus not only made her appear sexually different from white women but also placed her much closer to the animal world both literally and symbolically. Her buttocks were an outward sign of her primitive nature as well as an emblem of her unbridled lust. By exaggerating a trait presumed to signal corporal and cultural atavism, Lewis was adding flesh to a racial myth that dehumanized Africans.

Another physiological peculiarity of Hottentot females that increased their reputation for voluptuousness, further exciting the curiosity of European scientists and laymen, resided in their genitalia. Early travellers in southern Africa had reported that these women possessed an "apron" of tissues that dangled between their legs to extraordinary lengths.<sup>4</sup> Le Vaillant's *Travels from the Cape of Good Hope into the Interior Parts of Africa* (1790) even included an illustration of a woman with such appendages extending halfway to her knees (Fig. 2) (Le Vaillant 1790: 349). This characteristic was cited as further evidence that Hottentots were more closely akin to apes and chimpanzees than to human beings. Their primitive organs pointed toward primitive origins.

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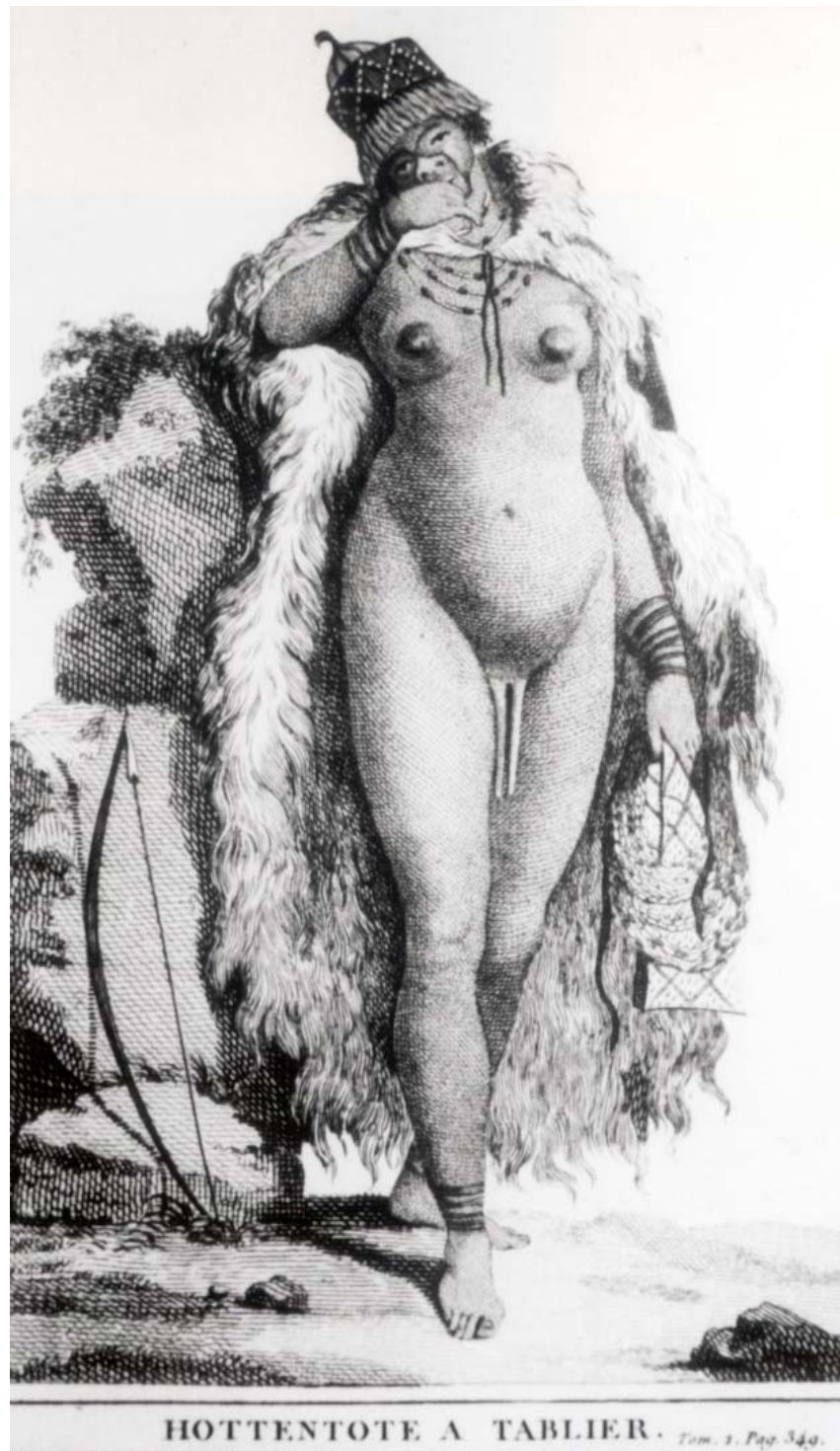
<sup>3</sup> For examples, see Lindfors (1984).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., the extract from Cowley 1960: 105-06; Rhyne 1686 (1933: 47); Kolb 1731: 118-19.



SARTJEE, THE HOTTENTOT VENUS.

**Figure 1.** Frederick Christian Lewis, "Sartjee, the Hottentot Venus," an aquatint used to advertise her exhibition. This copy is from the British Museum Collection of Prints and Drawings. For further information see the brief discussion in Mary Dorothy George (1978), *Catalogue of Political and Personal Satires in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum*, Vol.8, No 11602, p. 959.



**Figure 2.** François Le Vaillant (1790), *Voyage dans l'intérieur de l'Afrique par le Cap de Bonne-Esperance*, Vol. 2: 349.

It is not known whether the Hottentot Venus exposed her genitals to the spectators who flocked to her shows. It is unlikely that this would have been tolerated in the British Isles as part of her public routine, but private viewings may have been arranged occasionally behind the stage curtain, especially in Paris. One French scientific source states that Sartjee Baartman was reputed to have been a woman of amorous disposition who "did not scorn those of her admirers who had the kind of morals that made Sodom famous" (Verneau 1916: 178).<sup>5</sup> Yet she is also reported to have been so modest when posing in the nude for a team of French anatomists and figure painters that no one afterwards could say with assurance whether or not she possessed any kind of genital anomaly, even though several casual attempts had been made to discover if she did (de Blainville 1816). It wasn't until the most eminent comparative anatomist in France, Baron Georges Cuvier, dissected her body a year later and published a classic scientific paper on her buttocks and genitalia that the full truth became known. Indeed, Cuvier must be credited with having finally unraveled the mystery of the Hottentot apron, identifying it correctly as consisting of nothing more than hypertrophied nymphae. Yet his elaborate description of her person and personality is remarkable for its tendency to compare her quite matter-of-factly to an orangoutang. Cuvier is known for his belief in the fixity of species and his resistance to evolutionary theories, but apparently he was tempted to view Sartjee Baartman and her kind as constituting a marginal species, half-animal and half-human. Without going so far as to say so directly, he hinted through his comparison that he regarded her as some sort of missing link (Cuvier 1817).<sup>6</sup>

Many of the European scientists who subsequently made use of Cuvier's discoveries or who independently took measurements of her skull, skeleton or other carefully preserved remains were equally convinced that she represented a lower order of being, perhaps a transitional one in human evolution. In a textbook diagram of craniometrical variation, her skull was placed midway on a continuum between European man and the wolf (Cloquet 1821: 80). The shape and size of her skull relegated her to this humble position.

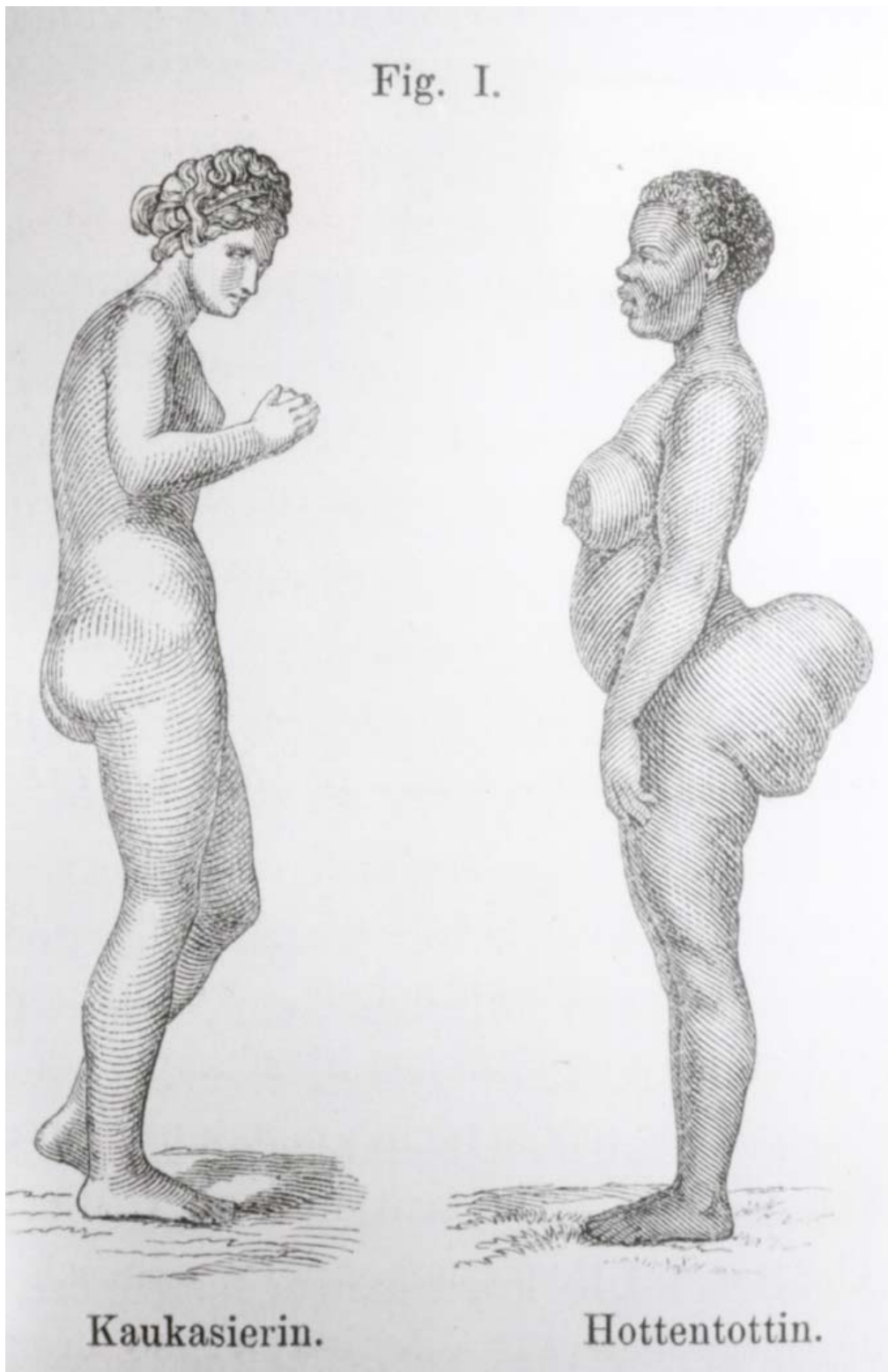
Images of Sartjee Baartman were also used to illustrate early ethnological studies, sometimes being placed beside idealized images of European beauty such as the Venus de Milo or the Venus de Medici (Fig. 3) (von Luschka 1864: 8). European viewers could be left to draw their own conclusions from such contrasts. In addition, she turned up regularly in illustrated encyclopedias on the races of mankind and once even made an unexpected appearance in a comprehensive study of world costume (Racinet 1888).<sup>7</sup> In most of these 'scientific' uses of her body

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<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Martin Sonenberg for translating this passage.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of Cuvier's role in nineteenth-century science, see Coleman (1964).

<sup>7</sup> She is portrayed inaccurately as wearing a white body stocking beneath her loincloth, beads and native ornaments.



**Figure 3.** Hubert von Luschka (1864), *Die Anatomie des menschlichen Beckens*, Vol. 3 of *Die Anatomie des Menschen in Rücksicht auf die Bedürfnisse der praktischen Heilkunde*, Tübingen: H. Laupp, Vol. 2, p. 8.



there was a very deliberate attempt at verisimilitude, at faithful and exact reproduction of her physical characteristics. This was science, after all. No obvious distortions of surface phenomena could be permitted in an unbiased quest for truth. But the strategy underlying the selection and placement of her image often betrayed blatant racist assumptions. Objective portraiture only served to buttress highly subjective notions about natural gradations in the variety of the human species.

Caricature, an art based on flagrant distortions of reality, fed on the same assumptions and used ironic juxtapositions of European and African figures to make unspoken racial points. In the earliest political cartoons based on the original Lewis aquatint, Sartjee Baartman was placed rump to rump with Lord William Wyndham Grenville, a former Whig prime minister who in 1810-11, when George III was showing clear signs of irreversible mental illness, favored forming a broadly based coalition government under the Prince Regent. Grenville and his backers therefore had come to be known popularly as "Broad Bottoms," a term that "connoted the comprehensive character of the Ministry and the bulky posteriors of the Grenvilles" (George 1978: 410), so naturally they became easy targets for graphic satire. In one unsigned engraving entitled "A Pair of Broad Bottoms", the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan is shown half-kneeling between the mirrored figures, measuring Sartjee Baartman's bottom with calipers and exclaiming that "such a Spanker beats your Lordship's hollow."<sup>8</sup>

In other words, here was a lowly Hottentot who had outstripped Lord Grenville in fundamental excellence; she was by far the broadest of the Broad Bottoms. The humor sprang from an inversion of accepted notions of Hottentot inferiority and backwardness. Indeed, the absurdity of juxtaposing Sartjee Baartman and Lord Grenville rested on an implicit assumption that Hottentots and English noblemen were so radically different from one another as to be incomparable. Africans, especially Hottentots, could not be placed on the same footing as Europeans, much less elevated above them. The very idea was comical.

The same sort of humor informed caricatures that dealt with Sartjee Baartman's potential as a love partner. The word "Venus" in her title was enough to trigger numerous mock-romantic visions of hearts and cupids.<sup>9</sup> But perhaps the best illustration of this kind of visual gag can be found in Charles Williams's travesty of the Duke of Clarence, who in 1811 was striving to find a very wealthy woman to marry. He had proposed six times to a young heiress and then had relentlessly pursued a number of others, all of whom had turned him down. He was averaging about one marriage proposal per month when Williams's engraving entitled "Neptune's Last Resource or the Fortune Hunter Foiled, a Sketch from Heathen Mythology" appeared depicting him as a long-bearded admiral trying to seize Sartjee Baartman's money bags.<sup>10</sup> The Hottentot Venus was represented as spurning

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<sup>8</sup> George (1978), Vol. 8, No. 11578, p. 948, attributes this engraving to William Heath.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g. George, Vol. 10, No. 14449, p. 338.

<sup>10</sup> George, Vol. 9, No. 11748, pp. 38-39.

his suit, having divined his true motive for approaching her. Even the rudest barbarian, it was suggested, could see through the clumsy advances of the Duke of Clarence.

The portrayal of Sartjee Baartman as a young woman financially well-endowed and mindful of the value of her assets may be indicative of public awareness of her remarkable success in show business. Occasionally one finds in the press of that period waggish suggestions that she might now make an advantageous match for an ambitious suitor: "The damsel, it is said, has picked up some cash, and may become a desirable object in the eyes of some of our minor fortune hunters."<sup>11</sup> The image of her as a female worthy of amorous attention was, of course, something that the satirists continued to exploit. But in Williams's caricature of the Duke of Clarence, the comic accent was on money rather than love. Any nobleman desperate enough to marry an African for financial gain clearly violated English norms of acceptable elite behavior. A duke's marriage with a Hottentot was unthinkable for it would be a betrayal of all the verities of race, class and gender.

So the iconography of Hottentots in early nineteenth century England emphasized their biological incompatibility with Europeans. They were regarded not just as social and intellectual inferiors but as a breed apart, a throwback to earlier evolutionary times, a rudimentary link in the great chain of humanoid beings. And this closeness to nature, manifested in their strange anatomy and raw vitality, made them fascinating and attractive to scientists, travellers, artists, and the ordinary man on the street. They were the exotic, primitive Other against whose arrested development one's own progress could be measured. The Hottentot Venus was therefore much more than a living icon of sexual difference; she was Otherness personified - a singing, dancing, jiggling incarnation of one extreme in a rigidly hierarchical taxonomic paradigm. She gave body to racist theory.

## 2. THE BOSJESMANS AND THE EARTHMEN

The San who were exhibited in the British Isles were also assumed to be among the very dregs of humanity. The first troupe, consisting of two men, two women and an infant, arrived in 1846, shortly after P.T. Barnum's Tom Thumb had stormed Europe, popularizing the display of unusual small people.<sup>12</sup> In newspaper

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<sup>11</sup> Daniel Lysons, *Collectanea; or a Collection of Advertisements and Paragraphs from the Newspapers, Relating to Various Subjects*, Vol. 2. This unpublished scrapbook is available only at the British Library (1881.b.6).

<sup>12</sup> Tom Thumb's first European tour had started in London in 1844. At the end of the summer of 1845 two "Bushmen Children" had been exhibited in London for a short time, but they do not appear to have made much of an impact and vanished quickly from the stage; a sketch of them was published in the **Illustrated London News**, September 6th 1845, p. 160. The Bosjesmans, on the other hand, remained on tour for several years and were a very popular attraction. There is evidence to suggest that they were abandoned in Rouen by an unscrupulous manager in December 1853 (see Goblot 1983: 40).

advertisements the manager of the "Bosjesmans" claimed that these dwarfish folk and their few crude implements

show how very nearly sentient beings may sink to, or rather have never risen above, the condition of animals unendowed with reason to guide or govern their instinctive propensities....They are supposed to belong to one of the numerous tribes of their benighted country which have not yet emerged from absolute barbarism (**Liverpool Mail**, November 14th 1846, p. 3).

Apart from their small size and odd facial features, what appears to have made the Bosjesmans particularly fascinating was their life style, which was utterly different from that of any people the British had ever encountered before: they owned very few possessions, used only the simplest tools, built no permanent structures, and wore hardly any clothing. All these traits could have been traced to the fact that they were a hunting and gathering people and therefore had no need for belongings or paraphernalia that would impede their mobility, but the British interpreted a lack of things as a lack of culture and thought less of the Bosjesmans as a result. Commentators tended to agree with the oft-quoted assessment offered by the learned traveller Dr. Lichtenstein that

there is not perhaps any class of savages upon the earth that lead lives so near those of the brutes as the Bosjesmans; none perhaps who are sunk so low, who are so unimportant in the scale of existence; whose wants, whose cares, and whose joys, are so low in their nature; and who are consequently so little capable of cultivation.<sup>13</sup>

In short, the Bosjesmans were presumed to be an utterly hopeless lot.

Nonetheless, thousands of spectators turned out to see them, if only to confirm at an intimate but safe distance xenophobic prejudices against brutish beings from the Dark Continent. Charles Dickens probably summed up the public reaction best when he wrote:

Think of the Bushmen. Think of the two men and the two women who have been exhibited about England for some years. Are the majority of persons - who remember the horrid little leader of that party in his festering bundle of hides, with his filth and his antipathy to water, and his straddled legs, and his odious eyes shaded by his brutal hand, and his cry of "Qu-u-u-u-aaa!" (Bosjesman for something desperately insulting I have no doubt) - conscious of an affectionate yearning towards that noble savage, or is it idiosyncratic in me to abhor, detest, abominate, and abjure him? I have no reserve on this subject, and will frankly

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted on page 19 of *History of the Bosjesmans, or Bush People; the Aborigines of Southern Africa* (London: Chapman, Elcoate & Co., 1847), a pamphlet sold at later shows. M.H.C. Lichtenstein's *Reisen im südlichen Afrika in den Jahren 1803, 1804, 1805 and 1806* (Berlin, 1811-12), first published in English translation in London (1812-15), was subsequently reissued as *Travels in Southern Africa in the Years 1803, 1804, 1805 and 1806* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1928). This quote is taken from the latter edition, Vol. 2, p. 244.

state that, setting aside that stage of the entertainment when he counterfeited the death of some creature he had shot, by laying his head on his hand and shaking his left leg - at which time I think it would have been justifiable homicide to slay him - I have never seen that group sleeping, smoking, and expectorating round their brazier, but I have sincerely desired that something might happen to the charcoal smouldering therein, which would cause the immediate suffocation of the whole of the noble strangers (Dickens 1853: 337-38).

Dickens was debunking the Romantic myth of the Noble Savage but he wasn't entirely joking. Believing as he did that the Noble Savage's "virtues are a fable; his happiness is a delusion; his nobility, nonsense" and that "the world will be all the better when his place knows him no more," Dickens recommended more than half-seriously that it would be "something highly desirable" for all such people to be "civilized off the face of the earth" (Dickens 1853: 339). If this wasn't a cry for literal genocide, it must at least be recognized as a call for cultural genocide, which perhaps amounts to the same thing.

Dickens wasn't their only detractor. Pictorial representations of the Bosjesmans in the media of the day were not at all flattering, the consensus among observers being that these were exceedingly ugly creatures who differed as much from Europeans in appearance as in intelligence. To heighten the contrast between savage and civilized, some illustrated papers such as the **Pictorial Times** and **Sportsman's Magazine** printed sketches of the Bosjesmans dancing wildly while their fashionably dressed exhibitor stood sedately in the background looking on (Fig. 4).<sup>14</sup> For the show itself a large poster was prepared, illustrated with scenes said to be typical of Bosjesman life: "Quarrels of Bushman," "Fight of Bushman," "Tracing the Footsteps of the Enemy," "Killing the Puff Adder," "Preparing for Dance," etc. Significantly, the borders between the vignettes were lurid with snakes and animal heads.<sup>15</sup> Less sensational images of the women and child in the troupe were used in the fourth edition of a leading ethnological textbook, James Cowles Prichard's *The Natural History of Man* (1855), but even these "scientific" plates did not make them look attractive (Prichard 1855: plates xvii and xviii). David Livingstone may have been right when he said of the Bosjesmans that "the specimens brought to Europe have been selected, like costermonger's dogs, on account of their extreme ugliness." But one wonders if he was justified in making a still more demeaning comparison: "That they are, to some extent, like baboons is

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<sup>14</sup> **Pictorial Times**, June 12th 1847, p. 376; **Sportsman's Magazine**, July 10th 1847, p. 319. Although the sketch is the same in both papers, the **Pictorial Times** identifies the figure in the background as Dr. Robert Knox, while **Sportsman's Magazine** says he is Mr. J.S. Tyler. Knox, an Edinburgh anatomist who had been involved in the notorious Burke and Hare scandal, gave an anthropological lecture as part of the show; Tyler was the manager who accompanied the Bosjesmans on their tour. The **Illustrated London News**, June 12th 1847, p. 381, printed a similar sketch of the group and identified the gentleman sitting in the background as Tyler.

<sup>15</sup> This poster is preserved in the John Johnson Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

true, just as these are in some points frightfully human" (Livingstone 1875: 35). Whether this was a fair assessment or not, British artists and illustrators who drew the Bosjesmans evidently agreed with it entirely.



**Figure 4.** Pictorial Times, June 12th 1847, p. 376.



BOY AND GIRL OF THE EARTHMEN TRIBE, FROM FORT NATAL.

They then live upon locusts, which the women of the tribe gather during the season. They also eat the larvae of ants, and a root resembling garlic. They are sometimes so straitened for food as to be compelled to gnaw the skins of the animals which they have previously shot. The tribe thus destitute of every vestige of civilisation is found along the whole extent of the Orange River, but they so cautiously avoid the settlements, that many colonists who have resided in Natal and other districts of South Africa for years, have never seen them. This Lilliputian race of human beings have, however, the character of great docility, and are said to be very faithful to those to whom

of animals. The girl wears a head-dress and lappet of coloured beads, a leopard-spotted piece of wool around her waist, and strips of hair cover her legs. Her demeanour is modest and feminine. Both children display so much aptitude for learning and for imitation, that in a few years it is probable their acquirements and habits will in no respect differ from those of the English children with whom they may be brought up.

ENTRANCE OF THE FIRST STEAMER INTO

**Figure 5.** Illustrated London News, November 6th 1852, p. 372.

This is not to say that the British eye was incapable of appreciating Bushman beauty. The public reaction several years later to the exhibition of a fourteen-year-old boy and a sixteen-year-old girl misleadingly identified as "Earthmen from Port Natal" was quite favorable, in part because they were much better-looking specimens than their predecessors. Several papers carried handsome sketches of them,<sup>16</sup> and the **Illustrated London News** (Fig. 5) noted with approval their "pleasing hue... lustrous black eyes... perfect docility and mildness of disposition... good natural faculties... (and) excellent ear for music... Martinus is a fine little savage, beautifully formed, and with well developed muscles. Flora is also a nicely-made child, of more slender and delicate frame, but perfectly healthy" (**Illustrated London News**, Nov. 6th 1852: 371). A handbill for one of their shows claimed that they were "the only Specimens of this Extraordinary Race ever beheld in Europe,"<sup>17</sup> but this was questioned by a number of informed spectators. They had been dubbed "Earthmen" because in South Africa they were alleged to have slept in hollows in the ground made by burrowing; however, members of the English Ethnological Society, noting their resemblance to the Bosjesmans, preferred to classify them as "Bushman-Troglodytes, or Troglodyte-Bushmen."<sup>18</sup>

Like other human curiosities before them, Martinus and Flora danced, sang and mimed to entertain their customers, but their 'act' differed in one important respect: they performed entirely in English. They were able to do this because they had lived for two years with a British family in Croydon before being put on stage. During that time they had acquired a fluency in English, had learnt to play the piano, and had built up a repertoire of songs that included "Buffalo Gals," "I'm Going to Alabama," "Annie Laurie," "Britons Never Shall be Slaves," and a number of black American tunes. Their musical talents were much admired, but audiences were most impressed by their mastery of a "civilized" tongue. One provincial paper reported that "the most interesting part of the *séance* is found to consist in the spritely conversation they carry on with their visitors" (**Brighton Guardian**, Oct. 5th 1853: 5.), and another exclaimed that "their knowledge of the English language, together with their musical proficiency, is very remarkable for the time they have been in this country, showing even a greater intelligence than that evinced generally

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<sup>16</sup> **London Journal and Weekly Record of Literature, Science and Art**, 17 (1853: 325); **The Illustrated Magazine of Art**, 1 (1853: 445); **Illustrated London News**, November 6th 1852, p. 372.

<sup>17</sup> Regent Gallery handbill, hand-dated August 22nd 1853, in the John Johnson Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

<sup>18</sup> Latham (1856: 149). John Conolly, the President of the Ethnological Society, in his *The Ethnological Exhibitions of London* (1855: 27-28), stated that "The name of Earthmen, given to these little Africans, is of very doubtful propriety, and associated with a more than doubtful account of their living in holes burrowed in the earth; for which their delicate feet and hands seem unfitted, and for effecting which they are said not to have implements or utensils of bone, wood, iron or other material. It is very probable that they partly cover themselves with leaves or loose earth, not very dissimilar to them in colour, when they wish to elude observation. This is said to be the practise of the Bosjesmen."

by the more civilized children of our own country" (**Brighton Examiner**, Oct. 11th 1853: 5). To such observers Martinus and Flora were miracles of transformation, savages turned to some extent genteel, base Earthmen transmuted within two years into reasonable facsimiles of pure English folk. More than anything else, it was their ability to chatter and sing in English that made them recognizable as fellow human beings; such lively interlocutors could not possibly be mistaken for baboons, orangoutangs or other species of monkeys. Soon Martinus and Flora were being hailed as "a direct Contradiction to the Theory lately set forth, of the Impossibility of Rendering the Savage a Thinking, Feeling Being."<sup>19</sup> Given this high degree of enthusiastic public acceptance, it is not surprising that these youngsters were treated more kindly by graphic artists than the Bosjesmans had been. Their basic humanity was never in question.

### 3. THE ZULU KAFFIRS

During the same month of 1853 that the Earthmen were first exhibited, another troupe of South African performers arrived on the London scene.<sup>20</sup> These were the "Zulu Kaffirs" - eleven men, a woman and a child - who performed events alleged to be representative of the tenor of their brutish life. Of all South African peoples, the Zulus may have been the most notorious abroad for their warlike ways. Reports of the military prowess of this "wild and formidable race" (**The Court Journal**, May 7th 1853: 300) had been filtering back to England ever since the reign of Shaka thirty years before. After England annexed Natal in 1843, emigration to the new colonial territory was encouraged, and within ten years thousands of British settlers found themselves sharing an unstable frontier with Zulu farmers and herders. So there must have been considerable curiosity back home about the aggressive natives who inhabited this remote corner of the empire and occasionally made trouble for kith and kin.

But even without such a reputation, the Zulus would have been an interesting novelty in Victorian England, for they put on an exciting show, displaying themselves and their traditions with uninhibited energy yet with remarkably professional stage presence. The **Times** gave the spectacle a rave review:

Now the Caffres are at their meal, feeding themselves with enormous spoons, and expressing their satisfaction by a wild chant, under the inspiration of which they bump themselves along without rising in a sort of circular dance. Now the witchfinder commences his operations to discover the culprit whose magic has brought sickness into the tribe, and becomes perfectly rabid through the effect of his own incantations. Now there is a wedding ceremony, now a hunt, now a

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<sup>19</sup> Regent Gallery handbill, hand-dated August 22nd 1853, in the John Johnson Collection, Oxford University.

<sup>20</sup> They opened at St. George's Gallery at Hyde Park Corner on May 16th 1853 and remained in London for three months before going on to tour the Continent.



military expedition, all with characteristic dances; and the whole ends with a general conflict between rival tribes. The songs and dances are, as may be expected, monotonous in the extreme, and without the bill it would be difficult to distinguish the expression of love from the gesture of martial defiance. Nevertheless, as a picture of manners, nothing can be more complete; and not the least remarkable part of the exhibition is the perfect training of the wild artists. They seem utterly to lose all sense of their present position, and, inspired by the situations in which they are placed, appear to take Mr. Marshall's scenes for their actual abode in the vicinity of Port Natal. If 11 English actors could be found so completely to lose themselves in the characters they assumed, histrionic art would be in a state truly magnificent (**Times**, May 18th 1853: 8.).

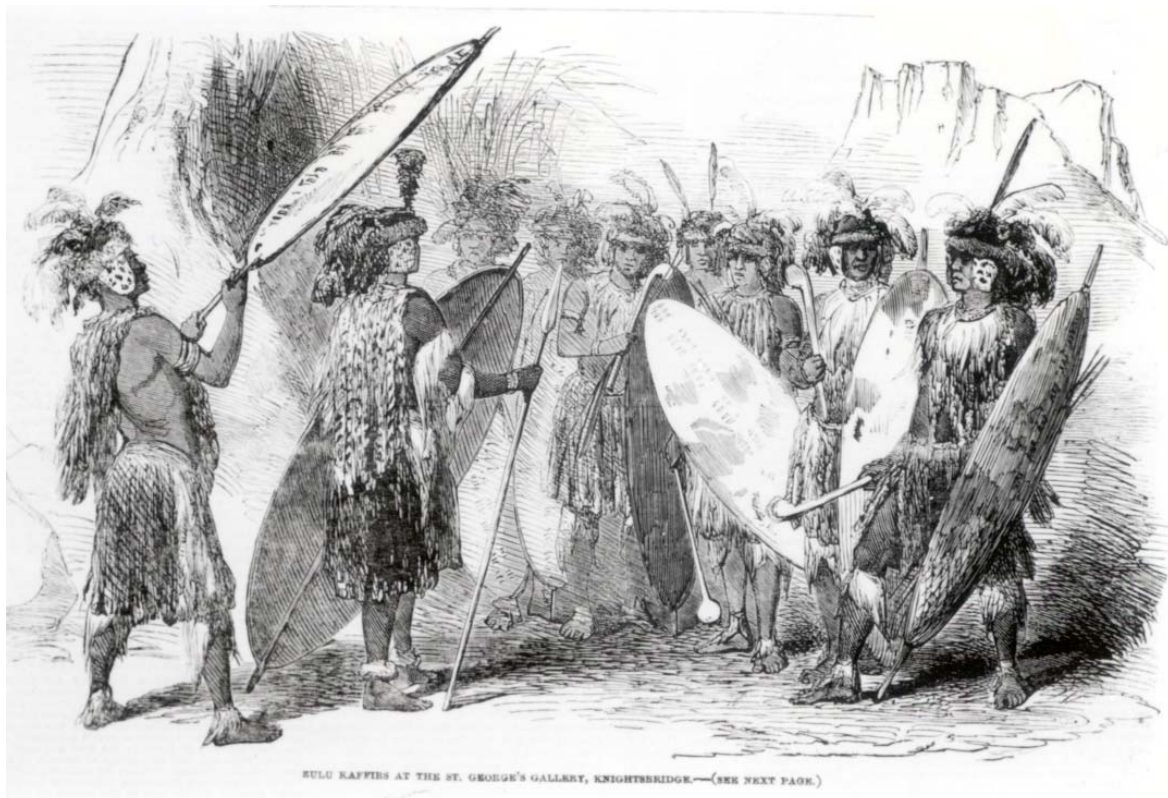
The reviewer for *The Spectator*, equally impressed, maintained that "the exhibition transcends all others we have witnessed of the kind... As for the noises - the howls, yells, hoots and whoops, the snuffling, wheezing, bubbling, grovelling and stamping - they form a concert to whose savagery we cannot attempt to do justice" (**Spectator**, May 21st 1853: 485). The **Illustrated London News**, which carried a sketch of the performers in action (Fig. 6), praised some of the same scenes and sound effects and concluded that "the Zulus must be naturally good actors; for a performance more natural and less like acting is seldom if ever seen upon any stage" (**Illustrated London News**, May 28th 1853: 409).

Indeed, it was a performance by this very troupe that prompted Dickens's comic diatribe on "The Noble Savage," for he found much to ridicule and nothing to admire in their dramatization of Zulu life. Parts of the exhibition, he asserted, were totally incomprehensible to a cultivated mind:

What a visitor left to his own interpretations and imaginings might suppose these noblemen to be about, when they give vent to that pantomimic expression which is quite settled to be the natural gift of the noble savage, I cannot possibly conceive; for it is so much too luminous for my personal civilisation that it conveys no idea to my mind beyond a general stamping, ramping, and raving, remarkable (as everything in savage life is) for its dire uniformity (Dickens 1853: 338).

Dickens went on to recount in hilarious detail the customs and traditions he saw enacted before him - everything from murder and mayhem to witchcraft and weddings - and concluded that "if we have anything to learn from the Noble Savage, it is what to avoid" (Dickens 1853: 339).

Dickens of course was also to some extent playing a theatrical role himself: that of an impatient Victorian pragmatist eager to puncture inflated Romantic notions of the dignity of "primitive" peoples. For him the Zulus were simply a convenient case in point, a group so far removed from Europe in custom and culture that they could



**Figure 6.** *Illustrated London News*, May 28th 1853, p. 409.

easily be held up as examples of an underdeveloped race obviously in need of moral improvement and mental refinement. Yet it is interesting to note with what contempt he and other humorists viewed Zulu traditions and institutions, for underlying such ethnic satire was a broad streak of undisguised racism, a belief that Zulus were in every way inferior to Europeans. The numerous comments on their smell, their bizarre modes of dress (and undress), their noises, their monotonous songs, rabid incantations, and wild, demoniacal dances, betray an arrogant assumption that the Zulus were overgrown children of nature who had not yet developed the inhibitions, self-discipline and polite manners that distinguish more civilized folk. They were savages pure and simple, primitives in the raw.

Zulu savagery became an iconographic cliché later in the century, especially during and after the Anglo-Zulu wars. Issues of the **Illustrated London News** and other pictorial mass media in 1879 were full of gory battle scenes displaying heroic British soldiers and settlers struggling manfully against ferocious hordes of spear-wielding warriors. The popular adventure fiction of H. Rider Haggard, G.A. Henty, Bertram Mitford and others, while sometimes respectful of Zulu courage or chivalry, contained illustrations reinforcing the notion of such people as militaristic and fiendishly dangerous.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the single exception to this iconographic

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., the illustrations in Haggard (1887; 1892), Henty (1885) and Mitford (1893; 1894).

tradition was the Spy portrait in *Vanity Fair* of the deposed Zulu monarch Cetewayo, who lived for a time in London; he was shown dressed rather modestly in a grey suit, cravat and blue slippers, and seated quietly on a divan (**Vanity Fair**, August 26th 1882). But his enormous bulk and toothy grin connoted that he was still an unpredictable force to be reckoned with. His seemingly innocuous appearance contrasted all too sharply with his reputation for barbarism. The Spy cartoon thus played upon a perceptual incongruity: here was a notorious savage deceptively clad in civilized costume.

Fed by such media images, public curiosity about Zulus peaked in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, and well-known writers and showmen tried to capitalize on their trendiness. George Bernard Shaw included Cetewayo and his retinue in *Cashel Byron's Profession* (1886), a novel about boxing; and P.T. Barnum was so eager to obtain Zulus for his shows that he offered Queen Victoria's government \$100,000 for permission to exhibit Cetewayo for five years, a petition that did not amuse the Queen (Wallace 1959: 111). A rival showman outdid Barnum by putting on display not only three of Cetewayo's nieces (whom he billed as the chief's daughters, true "Zulu princesses") but also a baby, another Zulu chief, and twenty-three warriors who had surrendered to British authorities in South Africa; it has been reported that "their arrival in London was greeted by over one hundred thousand people on the docks and as far up the street as the eye could reach."<sup>22</sup> Other showmen couldn't ignore such palpable signs of popularity, and soon spears, shields, feathers and war paint could be found in abundance in every carnival sideshow as well as in circus 'specs' or opening pageants. Any subterfuge that could be of advantage was used: a handbill for an exhibition of "Farini's Friendly Zulus" at the Royal Aquarium in September 1880 brazenly quoted accolades from the **Times** review of the 1853 Zulu Kaffirs as if these praises had recently been bestowed on the Farini troupe (Fig. 7).

Needless to say, many of the Zulus hauled up for public display were frauds. More than one circus veteran has commented on this in his memoirs:

I recollect at the time of the Zulu war how one showman conceived the idea of exhibiting a number of Zulu warriors. There was only one drawback - not a single Zulu was at that moment in the country. But drawbacks do not exist for the born showman and a party of ordinary niggers were easily made up into Cetewayo's savage soldiery (Walker 1922: 130).

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<sup>22</sup> Coup (1901: 166). The same show may have gone to the United States, for a poster for W.C. Coup's United Monster Shows at the Great Paris Hippodrome in Chicago in 1881 advertises "Princess Amazulu, King Cetewayo's Daughter and Suite." A newspaper advertisement for the same circus the following year bills "Zulu Princess Amadage, daughter of King Cetewayo, and her maids of honor"; these women were also said to be "the only Female Zulus who ever left Zululand and the only genuine Zulus in America." These materials can be found at the Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

Sept 28 1880

# Royal Aquarium.

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## FARINI'S FRIENDLY **ZULUS**

Who were originally brought over by Mr. N. BEHRENS,  
FROM SOUTH AFRICA for MR. G. A. FARINI,  
OF THE ROYAL AQUARIUM, WESTMINSTER.

THE TIMES (speaking of Farini's Zulus) says—"The songs and dances are difficult to distinguish the expression of love from the gesture of martial defiance. Nevertheless as a picture of manners nothing can be more complete; and not the least remarkable part of the exhibition is the perfect training of the wild artists. They seem utterly to lose all sense of their present position; if English actors could be found so completely to lose themselves in the characters they assumed, histrionic art would be in a state, truly magnificent."



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NEW ARRIVAL OF  
**PRINCESS AMAZULU, AND THE YOUNG CHIEF INCOMO!**

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**Zulu Table d'Hote at 6.30.**

THE PUBLIC INVITED.

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SPECIAL PERFORMANCES ... 2.30, 5.30, 9.30.  
**Admission, One Shilling.**

**Figure 7.** Royal Aquarium handbill hand-dated 28 September, 1880. From my own collection of ethnic iconography.

Managers in this kind of show business quickly learned that pseudo-Zulus were far easier to handle than real ones. When James Lloyd engaged a dozen bonafide tribesmen for a show that toured Ireland, he found that

Their wildness (in performing dances) was disturbingly genuine; this being one of the disadvantages encountered by showmen who, with more honesty than aesthetic perception, prefer Nature to Art. Nature, it has been said, is pulling up on Art; but she has still a long way to go before she produces savages who are equal to the other for show purposes (McKechnie n.d., p. 210).

By the end of the century it appeared that Art had overtaken Nature, that painted Irishmen or indigenous British blacks were now displacing true Africans in British show business.

The pseudo-Zulu eventually became a stock comic character like the "nigger minstrel," a humorous stereotype recognized and accepted as a gross exaggeration. Almost anybody could play the part. James T. Tanner, in his 1896 musical "My Girl," took the unusual step of casting a "genuine negro (Mr. W. Downes)" in the role of a pseudo-Zulu prince who performed an athletic "witch-song and dance".<sup>23</sup> The drama ended with the other characters discovering that this negro in savage dress was neither a Zulu nor a prince but a brazen imposter who was not as black as he seemed. Such an ending reveals that the stereotype had already taken on a life of its own, spawning a tradition of humorous inauthenticity.

But then in 1899 an extravaganza called "Savage South Africa," certainly the biggest spectacle of its kind ever presented to the British public, opened at the Empress Theatre in London (**The Sketch**, May 3rd 1899: 47-48). Organized by Frank Fillis, a South African circusman, it included two hundred genuine "natives" who, along with twenty Boers, reenacted episodes from the Matabele Rebellion. These performers also participated in the Greater Britain Exhibition at Earl's Court in May of that year, and some of them later were recruited for supporting roles in a Boer War Exhibition that toured Europe and made a sensation at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis. In England there was public concern voiced in the media about the friendliness of some of these African men toward British women and vice versa:

...why do so many women take pleasure in touching and patting and even stroking these black persons? These blacks do not represent the highest, but the lowest in man. If the Earl's Court savages were a collection of astronomers or physiologists, if they were in any way noted for their brain power they would create no interest at all among women of this kind. Minds weigh not at all against matter with many women. It is not a pleasant thing to say; but this Earl's Court show has not tended to show the niceness of women (Shephard 1984: 40).

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<sup>23</sup> See the review of this production in the **Times**, July 14th 1896, p. 11.



**Figure 8.** Dudley Hardy, "Kaffirs Booming," a caricature from my own collection.

Another paper, after noting that "grown women not only shake hands with them but stroke their limbs admiringly," joined the masculine chorus of disapproval:

Nothing is left undone by certain misled English females to gratify the vanity of these miscellaneous African natives in whose delightful manners and customs this show is presumed to instruct us. The Kaffir Exhibition at Earl's Court has in fact degenerated into an exhibition of white women visitors, and a very disgusting exhibition it is. These raw, hulking and untamed men-animals are being unwillingly and utterly corrupted by unseemly attention from English girls (Cited in Scobie 1972: 124).

The situation got worse in July when there was an actual attempt at marriage between the leader of the Matabele troupe, "Prince" Peter Lobengula, and a white woman, Miss Kitty Jewell, daughter of a Cornish mining engineer who had emigrated to South Africa.<sup>24</sup> The managers of "Savage South Africa," the local vicar, the Chancellor of the Diocese of London, and Kitty's mother closed ranks and succeeded in thwarting the marriage, but not before the affair had generated heated vituperations in the press against the evils of miscegenation. A milder critique of such heterosexual co-mingling appeared in a caricature by Dudley Hardy entitled "Kaffirs Booming." (Fig. 8). If nothing else, this well-publicized incident exposed another of the obvious dangers in importing true "native warriors" to the British Isles for ethnological shows: clearly it wasn't only their vaunted military prowess that intrigued spectators. How could an appropriate distance between civilized and savage be maintained in such close quarters? The stereotype of the African as a lower form of humanity had taken such firm hold of the British imagination by the end of the century that xenophobia was inspired by the very thought of race mixing.

The iconographic record of the nineteenth century thus tends to confirm in popular culture the answer Nancy Stepan gave to her own question about the rise of racial thinking in the West: why at the time of abolition, and after, was the war against racism in European thought being lost? Her conclusion was that the long tradition of scientific racism, which extended well into the twentieth century, testified to "the deep psychological need Western Europeans, scientists among them, seem to have felt to divide and rank human groups, and to measure them negatively against an idealized, romanticised picture of themselves" (Stepan 1982: 189). The same kind of taxonomic impulse, the same sorting and sifting of human groups into hierarchical categories, the same tendency toward self-congratulation, can be seen in European visual arts of the nineteenth century that depicted Africans and other non-Western peoples. It didn't seem to matter how much more one had learnt about such peoples over the years or how many specimens of each could be seen and inspected firsthand. Graphic stereotyping persisted and grew, feeding upon its own traditions of bias, distortion and caricature. The visual image, a form of ideational shorthand, simplified what it represented, reducing complexities and concealing contradictions so as to reaffirm prevailing preconceptions.

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<sup>24</sup> Shephard's article (1984: 36-41) gives the fullest account of this scandal.

In Britain the Hottentot, the Bushman and the Kaffir were all assumed to be savage races, but important distinctions were made between them so each could be distinguished from the others and placed in its own barbarous pigeonhole. The Hottentot, morphologically deviant yet sexually potent, represented man's link to the animal world. The Bushman, stunted in stature and devoid of culture, stood as an example of human degeneration. The warlike Kaffir symbolized mindless anarchy, bloodshed and brutality. The three together could thus be viewed as emblematically recapitulating stages in the eternal life cycle: Birth, Decline and Death.

Only the Earthmen escaped this kind of inexorable reductionism, and one is justified in asking why. Could it possibly have been because these young people, singing and dancing to a new tune, approached the English public through the ear rather than primarily through the eye? Could familiar sounds in the mouths of such strangers have made them appear less alien? Could comprehensible utterance alone have made the crucial difference, undoing the effects of years of racial stereotyping? In searching for a plausible explanation of why the Earthmen were treated so humanely and given a far friendlier reception than any of the other African peoples in the British Isles in the nineteenth century, one returns inevitably to their most remarkable singularity: their ability to speak directly to their audiences in English. For the average Englishman a few words may have been worth a thousand pictures. Language may have spoken louder than racist iconography.



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