Article

Sacred Heritage and the Politics of Similarity

Gerald Philip Klinghardt

Iziko Museums of South Africa

gklinghardt@iziko.org.za

Abstract

The sacred is not static, for even in a religious context notions of what is sacred evolve and change. Sacred objects can be desacralised and even resacralised with new meanings, while new forms of the sacred can be derived from secular forms. This paper examines an ambivalent dimension in the formation of the sacred, in which similarities in attributes and symbolic representations can become the source of conflict when they appear to have been appropriated and alienated. I suggest that differentiation and conflict among people can arise as much from claims made to distinctiveness based on differences, as from disputes over cultural commonalities or shared symbolism, especially in situations where powerful external forces are at work in promoting integration. Drawing upon field studies of a church museum at Pella in Namaqualand, of the Griqua cultural centre at Ratelgat near Vanrhynsdorp, and of the anthropological exhibition in the Iziko South African Museum, I argue that the concept of "inculturation" being used by the universalist Christian churches as a way of indigenising their versions of Christianity in Africa and throughout the world, is vital to an understanding of the politics of similarity and its effects on museum practice in portraying cultural and religious diversity in South Africa.

Keywords: Namaqualand; missions; inculturation; social identity; symbolism; sacred; heritage; similarity

Introduction

The "politics of difference" (Wilmsen and McAllister 1996) implies that there may also be a "politics of similarity." In modern discourses of ethnicity and nationalism, assertions of cultural difference almost universally play a large part in ethnic and religious conflicts. On the other hand, in the literature one rarely comes across accounts of conflicts in which those involved claim themselves to be politically and socially incompatible because they are too much alike (Cohen 1994; Horowitz 1985). Antagonists may assert that "inherent" differences are the source of their conflict, even when outsiders may see that those involved are similar and contesting similar symbols, as a rationalisation for denying self-evident similarities.

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It seems to be generally assumed that actual or perceived differences lead people to identify one another as part of one or more opposing ethnic groups. I have found, however, that differentiation arises not so much from distinctiveness in itself, but from claims that are made about such distinctiveness. Conflict on whatever level arises at least in part from competing claims to the same or similar symbols of identity that have been used by groups in constructing their identities, especially when the historical range of potential symbols has been shared with one or more other groups through force of circumstance. The result is that a group's members see their identities as overlapping in cultural terms with those of another group. They then perceive the other group as a hindrance to the full realisation of their own aspirations.

Another assumption following from the first is that cultural commonalities and shared symbols imply social cohesion. A consciousness of shared culture, however, can at times be a source of conflict and confrontation rather than a source of solidarity. While it may seem illogical for groups to become as much opposed to one another through their similarities and resemblances as they do through their perceived differences, the demarcation disputes that consequently arise over cultural or ethnic symbolism actually serve to sustain ethnic boundaries in situations where powerful external forces are at work in promoting integration.

This paper explores an example of a case from my research on Catholic and Protestant mission communities in Namaqualand where people who are apparently of the same or very similar backgrounds, have constructed boundaries that symbolically mark them off as different from one another, in order thereby to contest rights over resources held in common. While I am primarily concerned with situating this study in terms of social identity formation, I would also see it as relevant to the growing—though rather uneven—anthropology of Christianity, with its focus on the significance of cultural discontinuity rather than on continuity as is characteristic of much mainstream social anthropology (Robbins 2007). A striking feature regarding studies of the social organisation of communities in the former reserves of Namaqualand done by anthropologists over the past century (cf. Boonzaier 1980; Carstens 1966, 2001; Hoernlé 1918, 1923, 1925; Klinghardt 1978, 2003, 2005; Luyt 1981; Sharp 1977; and Tucker 1913) has been the general absence for the most part of any consideration of the contemporary role of the church (Elphick 1995) in the "politics of identity" in the various reserves. Just as remarkable, and related to this point, is the way in which some of these recent studies have dismissed cultural processes of great complexity, particularly the revolution in modes of expression that was a consequence of the evangelisation campaigns of the early missionaries, and the "modernity" of the communities that emerged from the Christianisation of imagination through conversion, indoctrination and liturgical repetition.

The outstanding feature in the social histories of all the reserve communities has been their steady absorption into the economic, politico-legal and social structure of Namaqualand within the agrarian-industrial complex of South Africa. In the sphere of cultural expression there was a massive assimilation of the aboriginal population into the surrounding colonial society during the 18th and 19th centuries. Indigenous cultural traits (primarily those of

Nama and Damara herders) have been merged into those of European and "Baster" colonists in the course of the processes which have produced the present cultural pattern of the region. Many traditional cultural practices, extant until little more than a generation ago and associated with nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralism (which in the case of "Baster" people were already a synthetic combination of Nama and European traits, and in that of Damara people between Herero and Nama traits), have since disappeared or are only rarely observed. While the origins of many traits in the cultural inventories of the communities can be readily identified (Klinghardt 1994), particularly regarding items of material culture such as dwellings, clothing, utensils and farming equipment, it is often difficult to determine with certainty the origins of other components, such as elements of folklore and magical beliefs, in which a complex combination of European and Nama elements has produced an entirely new synthetic form. It is only in the persistence of certain ritual observances that direct cultural connections can be found between the present inhabitants and their forbears and the indigenous population that preceded them; yet the resemblances seem superficial when set against the essential Europeanisation of the entire population which occurred under the influence of missions, government, traders, miners and farmers in the 19th century.

One should note too some of the similarities and dissimilarities between the reserves, or "rural coloured areas" of Namaqualand—which have now become communal areas in the wards of the municipalities of the region—and the former African reserves, or "homelands" elsewhere in South Africa. Despite disparities in size, population and surrounding legal frameworks, and differences in regional historical experiences, the Namaqualand reserves were never simply instruments for domination by a ruling elite or by "white" capital. The strength of the communities created by the missionaries, and the local identities which emerged as a result and which were characterised by specific notions of local citizenship rights with access to communally-held land, produced an absence of common feelings of identification as a class with urbanised "coloured" people in Namaqualand, and with "black" people elsewhere in South Africa. At the local level this also led to a negation of apartheid government policy which was intended to ensure the formation of a single "coloured nation." Those people in Namaqualand who chose to remain residents of the reserves may be seen as having called into question the notion of a single "coloured" (or indeed "black") identity by affirmatively asserting enduring separate identities which lay outside the then current racist and populist discourses, and which still today continue to shape those people's participation in socio-political processes in South Africa.

The Mat-House as Symbol in Namaqualand

To illustrate the points above I would like to consider the changing significance of the mat-house (*matjieshuis*) in the reserve communities of Namaqualand, as this provides an example of contrasting symbolic values, both secular and religious, attached to an indigenous cultural artefact held in common by different groupings of people. The mat-house is one of a number of cultural resources, including objects and practices, that are associated with domestic activities that people in all the reserve communities of Namaqualand claim as differentiating them from outsiders (Sharp 1977). Material cultural traits such as these are, of course, only

some of a vast range of heritage resources that exist as icons of collective memory: others include sites, places, landscapes, structures, books, art, and so forth. These tangible aspects are part of a bigger whole, operating and existing together with intangible modes of existence and memory, values, traditions, languages and oral histories. Yet just one icon of material or tangible culture lodged within such a matrix can centre all of them, as I shall show in the case of the mat-house. While these resources have been shared with other Namaqualanders, and many are no longer actively sought by the inhabitants of the reserves, they have been used not only to legitimate claims to land, but also to create the basis of ethnic identities which called into question categorisations such as "coloured" which were imposed on the reserve-dwellers by outsiders in order to justify intervention in these communities (Sharp and Boonzaier 1994). The mat-house has become a powerful symbol of identity among present-day inhabitants of Namaqualand, as well as being used more widely in the visual vocabulary and rhetoric of contemporary Khoe-San identity politics to evoke a sense of continuity with a romanticised past which contains a rejection of European conquest in the 18th and 19th centuries. For those living in the former reserves, it is an item that sets them apart from others living in villages and towns, while for Namaqualanders it distinguishes them from other South Africans.

The mat-house is the vernacular dwelling that was formerly used by Nama-speaking Khoekhoe pastoralists in Namaqualand and southern Namibia. As a semi-permanent structure it was well suited to the requirements of pastoralism. It could be dismantled and loaded together with other possessions onto the backs of pack-oxen for easy transportation across the semi-desert plains and mountains of Little and Great Namaqualand. This facilitated the mobility of Nama herders, who travelled great distances when moving their cattle and sheep to seasonal grazing areas. The form of the mat-house had numerous practical advantages (Haacke 1982; Klinghardt 1987). A taut dome-shaped framework of thorn-tree poles, bound together with plant-fibre string, enclosed maximum volume while occupying a relatively small ground area; the upward curve of the structure gave the interior a spacious feeling although the actual interior volume was restricted; sedge mats fastened over the framework in particular patterns regulated atmospheric conditions within. In dry weather, air could pass through the mats to cool the interior and when it rained the sedge expanded to provide a water-tight roof. The front and back entrances, which faced east and west respectively, were each protected by a mat that could be rolled up to increase ventilation and augment the light that filtered through the structure. Making the mats was a laborious task undertaken by women, but once the mats had been hung on the framework, maintenance was minimal. The mat-house was, furthermore, a model polar-centred dwelling (Michell 1994); circular, with the main door facing the rising sun, and nearly always having a central hearth that separated clearly defined activity areas for sleeping and storage. It was centred in every sense upon a symbol of the world-pole, which is itself a symbol of eternal law around which every household and community replicates social structure.

A few examples of mat-houses have been preserved in museums, such as the Iziko South African Museum. The example there is the centrepiece of an exhibition of a 19th-century Nama herder's camp and clearly illustrates the polar-centric layout of the dwelling, the

separate domains of men and women, the cultural value of livestock and how boundaries were created between nature and culture, as well as certain religious beliefs exemplified by the inclusion of artefacts, animals and small natural features associated with the spiritual realm.

Nowadays variants of the mat-house are found side by side with European-style houses in the former reserves of Namaqualand and the communal areas of southern Namibia, but most examples in use today have hessian, plastic or corrugated iron over the domed framework. Changes in size and materials have paralleled the processes of cultural change that produced new patterns of material culture and social organisation among the descendants of Nama herders. In the 19th and 20th centuries, when household mobility was no longer required by people who had been settled on reserves or in missionary-controlled farming communities, mat-houses were made to a larger size with near-permanent frameworks. Increasing use was made of materials such as canvas and sacking supplied by traders after loss of land had made it difficult to obtain sedge and fewer people had the skill to make mats, while in some places bushes were packed on the frame as a covering. Despite these changes, however, the dome shape has been retained even in cases where metal rods have replaced wood for the framework.

Mat-houses were also used quite extensively by sectors of the “white” settler population in Namaqualand. Its positive practical features clearly outweighed any negative connotations associated with its Nama origin, pointing to a significant degree of cultural integration between the colonial and indigenous populations in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the 1930s most farmers still used mat-houses when they moved to stockposts in the winter-veld during the lambing season (Kotze 1942, 86). During the 1930s, however, the government and the Dutch Reformed Church began concerted efforts to persuade “poor white” farmers to become sedentary by providing them with land, bore-holes and money for building houses. Mat-houses were stigmatised as being unsuitable for settled “white” people who eventually ceased to use them. As late as the 1950s, however, *trekboers* (migratory, landless stockfarmers) in Bushmanland continued to use mat-houses as a convenient form of shelter (Van der Merwe 1945; Van Onselen 1961).

Many present inhabitants of Namaqualand nonetheless regard the mat-house as an important part of their cultural heritage, despite their complete absorption into the expressive sphere of the broader economic, politico-legal and social structure of the region and their inclusion in the agrarian-industrial complex of southern Africa. In the former reserves of Namaqualand today, some people who are critical of government development programmes invoke the mat-house as a symbol of continuity with a romanticised past of pre-colonial freedom. Other reserve-dwellers have viewed the mat-house more broadly as a reminder of the connection between their indigenous ancestors and their more recent colonial forbears. In the 1990s, the use of the mat-house in evoking historically-rooted Nama identity has been interpreted as a strategic response to the post-apartheid situation in which claims to land in Namaqualand could only be legitimised by proof of links to the pre-colonial inhabitants of the region (Sharp and Boonzaier 1994).

Claims to identity constitute the main reason for the modern use of reconstructed versions of the vernacular mat-house, not only in ceremonies of communal importance, but also in a range of other situations, such as in schools and tourist camps, where the persuasive presence of the mat-house can be used to proclaim Nama identity both to community members and outsiders. Even outside the reserves, some “white” Namaqualanders, descendants of the pioneer Dutch farmers in the region, now faced with profound political and socio-economic changes at national level, have reclaimed the mat-house and view it as a symbolic claim to their historical occupancy in the region. Beyond Namaqualand and southern Namibia, the mat-house has been given a role in Khoe-San identity politics by self-conscious groups such as the Griqua, who have used it in ceremonies to celebrate the binding of people from a diversity of Khoekhoe origins into their own unique blend of nationalism and religious identity. In brief, the changing symbolic value of the mat-house intersects and mediates current social concerns in the complex political and cultural domains of contemporary Namaqualand and southern Africa.

The use of the mat-house in these ways was part of a broader assertion of ethnic identities based on indigenous origins that took place in nearly all reserves of Namaqualand as a result of changing political and socio-economic circumstances in South Africa during the 1980s and 1990s. During that time the government was seeking to end the system of communal land tenure in the reserves and, with the support of wealthier inhabitants, to impose a system of individual tenure that would have had the effect of depriving the majority of the poorer inhabitants of access to land and thus jeopardising their livelihoods. Although the contemporary situation was rooted in complex processes of transformation and colonisation, the inhabitants of the reserves could assert a form of Nama identity, based on a combination of local knowledge and recorded information that was appropriate to the purpose of securing their claims to land on the basis of a generalised notion of descent. In the 1990s, the removal of apartheid legislation posed new challenges to the basis of communal rights to land in Namaqualand and created uncertainty regarding the future system of tenure. At the same time, this caused the established reserve communities to become concerned about outsiders seeking to settle there. The new fluidity in local politics that followed has resulted in ever greater ambivalence in claims to Nama identity, which can mean a range of different things to different people and to the same people at different times (Sharp 1997, 16).

The symbolic value of the mat-house has also extended beyond Nama identity politics to that of Khoe-San identity in general, about which there is considerable debate nowadays. Every year Khoe-San cultural organisations—such as the Griqua National Conference (GNC) and the Khoe-San Representative Council—stage ceremonies to celebrate their heritage and the processes they have initiated to reclaim and popularise hidden histories in order to reconnect people to their ancestral roots. A key focus of the ceremonies is always a mat-house, often only an improvised structure that serves to evoke a generalised image of a dwelling common to the forebears of all those claiming Khoekhoe descent. While it may sometimes serve as a site for the symbolic performance of a female puberty rite as part of the ceremony, its simplified construction avoids reference to more specific identities that could be indicated by

the patterns in which the mats are hung on the framework, for as a symbol it needs no accurate details.

In contrast, when the Griqua National Conference established a cultural centre at Ratelgat north of Vredendal in southern Namaqualand in 1999, attempts to represent something said to be "authentic" did matter. In that year the Ratelgat farm was donated to the "Griqua people" by the government as a symbolic form of land restitution, and it has subsequently been developed as a ritual centre of pilgrimage for the Griqua Independent Church (G.I.C.) that was founded by A. A. S. le Fleur I in 1920. A monument was erected at the place where Le Fleur claimed to have received revelations from God, while at Ratelgat water-hole a village of some 30 mat-houses was constructed as accommodation for visitors. Each mat-house was covered with sedge mats made on commission by Nama women from the Leliefontein Reserve in central Namaqualand, and the village as a whole creates an appropriate setting for the annual exercises of spiritual and cultural renewal performed by members of the G.I.C.

The Mat-House and Inculturation

As noted above, in the late 1990s there were significant changes in local government in Namaqualand and these altered the balance of power in the former reserve communities. Together with shifting contests over land claims, these changes led to a process of reassessing and revaluing cultural identities. An interesting example is Pella, which until 1974 had been a mission farm under the Roman Catholic Church and where those of the inhabitants who had been classified "white" had controlled local affairs until they were expelled on the proclamation of Pella as a reserve. The "Baster" inhabitants then dominated local government until the mid-1990s and were able to control farming activities and the infra-structural development of the reserve to their advantage—and to the disadvantage of the Damara inhabitants, who were a minority that was discriminated against on racial and cultural grounds by the "Basters"—even though they were all Catholic. When the Damara inhabitants (people of Herero, Dama and Xhosa descent) at Pella and elsewhere in northern Bushmanland began tentatively identifying with the black majority in South Africa and translated this into support for the ANC, the "Baster" inhabitants of Pella began vigorously asserting their Nama *origins*—as opposed to making connections with the contemporary Nama population against which they also held strongly negative prejudices—and also started to assert and represent Nama elements in their cultural identity. Though this was, for the most part, expressed in discussions over local issues and in the campaign to obtain the incorporation of additional land for Pella, the establishment of the *Kultuur Koffiekroeg* was an interesting result in material terms.

In 1997 Jan and Christina Jannetjies, members of a minor "Baster" family, which had risen to prominence in Pella through participation in the local government structures of the 1980s and through success in its farming activities before 1994, established the celebrated *Kultuur Koffiekroeg* (Culture Coffee Bar) for both commercial and cultural gain. As a small local business venture it was intended to provide accommodation for the growing number of tourists visiting Pella, and was marketed nationally and internationally with the assistance of

the Northern Cape provincial tourism authority. It comprised a large mat-house and three smaller ones around an outdoor cooking enclosure. Each contained basic amenities, the simple furnishings being similar to those found in ordinary mat-house dwellings in Namaqualand, including locally-made skin mats and quilted bed covers, and were meant to give tourists a living experience of Nama culture, as interpreted by Christina Jannetjies. In symbolic terms, however, it had far wider significance. Not only had the *Kultuur Koffiekroeg* been built in a central position in the commercial hub of Pella village next to the Catholic mission grounds, and on a plot of land that had formerly been the property of the Thünemann family (formerly the leading "white" family in Pella), thus indicating that the "Basters" saw themselves as the successors in title to the former power-holders in Pella, but it also served as a highly visible statement to everyone in the area of the Nama origins of the "Basters" in Pella. In 1998 plans were also being made by a women's group associated with the church to establish a museum in the vicinity of the *Kultuur Koffiekroeg.* The plan was to construct a classic mat-house that would be complemented by displays of local material cultural objects, the stated intention being to reinforce the new-found sense of continuity among the local "Basters" with their newly-claimed Nama ancestry, contrary to whatever the "Basters" may have previously asserted about their origins. By the end of my fieldwork, neither the Damara nor the Nama inhabitants in Pella had reacted directly in material terms to the "Baster" response to their challenge to far-reaching land claims of the "Basters" in northern Bushmanland.

It would be easy to follow Sharp and Boonzaier (1994) regarding this response of the "Basters" as an "instrumentalist" use of Nama identity by association for political ends—the political motivations of the conservative and moderate "Baster" factions as well as the Damaras being quite obvious. It would be equally easy to agree with Robins (1997, 26) that it constituted a "recuperation of memory" of Nama tradition, a staged and short-lived outward expression of "cultural hybridity" in identity politics that "reflects and contains the traces and embodied evidence of Nama historical experience" (Robins 1997, 26), that can be situated in a global process of revitalisation of indigenous identities. Conspicuously absent from the analyses cited above, however, is the ongoing role of the Christian churches in shaping patterns of identity in the reserve communities of Namaqualand. The resurgence of Nama identity among people in Namaqualand began in the late 1980s, reached a peak during the 1990s, and from the mid-1990s increasingly became part of Khoe-San identity politics. This period coincided with the "Decade of Evangelisation" pursued by both the Catholic Church as well as the Protestant churches in the run-up to the Millennium 2000 event, and that was intended as a stimulus for the churches to focus on their basic commitment to proclaiming the gospel and the process of indigenising the Christian Church in Africa. As early as 1975, as part of the reforms introduced in the Catholic Church after Vatican II, Pope Paul VI pointed out that evangelisation had to be addressed "to culture, as part of the human phenomenon" (Shorter 1994), an insight contained in the pivotal conciliar document *Lumen Gentium* (Flannery 1977, 350–426) which contributed directly to the development of the idea of "inculturation"—or a dialogue between faith and culture—as an indispensable aspect of evangelisation.

"Inculturation"—a process the Catholic Church understood to be necessary for integrating Christian (and specifically Catholic) beliefs into local cultural patterns in all their global diversity, and without contingent domination and alienation ("incarnation")—was subsequently developed at least in theoretical terms by Catholic anthropologists, notably Fr. Aylward Shorter (1994). The incarnation of the Christian faith through the indigenisation of the hierarchy of the church was regarded as central to the process, one which is itself an outgrowth of the revolutionary concept of adaptation first followed by Jesuits in the East and the Americas during the 16th and 17th centuries. Adaptation started soon after Vatican II in the 1960s when Catholics were given permission to translate the Latin liturgy into vernacular languages (in Namaqualand this was Afrikaans). The idea was soon developed by anthropologists in the service of the Catholic Church into "inculturation" proper, whereby the process of building the indigenous church would grow "from below" with the gospel as a seed, instead of being imposed by the metropolitan church. The abolition in 1969 of the *Ius commissionis* which sustained full missionary activity in perpetuity, cleared the way for the eventual replacement of the foreign missionary clergy with local indigenous clergy, but this has been an uneven process in many parts of the world (including Namaquqland). In post-colonial Africa, the creation of an inculturated African Catholic Church, relevant to the context and life-situation of all people in Africa, came to be regarded as an urgent task for the 21st century (McGarry and Ryan 2001).

Throughout the 1990s, and up to the present, "inculturation" has been the determining feature of the programme of evangelisation and renewal, its implementation involving the restructuring of Catholic communities world-wide according to a paradigm of mission that will lead eventually to a "culturally polycentric church" no longer centred in Europe. The restructuring process in Namaqualand, which falls under the Diocese of Keimoes-Upington, has since the early 1990s focused on the formation of "Basic/Small Christian Communities" under lay leadership and guided by "indigenous" regular or secular priests and other religious personnel (Bauer 1994, 307). The indigenisation aspect of the programme has, however, proceeded only as far as the first stage with the institution of lay participation through parish councils as "grassroots" structures to foster "inculturation" through "self-evangelisation." In addition, the process of Catholic renewal has also involved encouraging parishioners to familiarise themselves with the new Catechism, and an ongoing campaign urging them to read the Bible for themselves, particularly the New Testament in which the Gospels and Letters set out the principles important for everyday Christian life. Greater freedom of liturgical interpretation has been allowed in the services of the church, particularly through the introduction of music, choral accompaniments and dance that reflected concepts of Christian worship practiced in the Nama congregations at Catholic missions in southern Namibia.

At Pella the process also included the establishment of a small ecclesiastical museum, in conformity with the programme of the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, which gives such museums the purpose of preserving artefacts and artworks no longer in use in churches. The displays in the museum, set up in a former community hall that had been part of the school in the mission complex next to the Cathedral (Pella is the seat of

the Bishop of Keimoes-Upington), chart the history of the Catholic mission at Pella and include most of the furnishings and religious objects removed from the Cathedral in the 1970s after the reforms initiated by the Vatican II Council. It thus offers insights into changes in the form of worship in the church at Pella over the past century, and illustrates the ongoing creative diversity in Christian culture that is occurring as the church continues to transform itself.

The intersection that was thus created between religious renewal and community revitalisation among the inhabitants of Pella can be seen to have added a new dimension to the heightened cultural awareness in the various groupings at Pella in the late 1990s. In conjunction with the changing political situation, the inhabitants of Pella felt encouraged by the changes in the practices of the church to develop a sense of their "own authentic culture" that underpinned (even if it did not determine) their use of mat-houses as iconic of that sense, as in the case of the *Kultuur Koffiekroeg* at Pella. The "inculturation" process gave claims to particular forms of cultural identity a religious sanction that they have not thus far had in the Protestant-dominated reserves of Namaqualand. This parallels a similar process of appropriation of the mat-house by the Griqua Independent Church and the GNC as part of their assertion of Griqua nationhood. It is very significant, however, that at Pella the mat-house has been used as a symbol only in its own right, with no attempt being made to stage Nama or Khoekhoe ceremonies, such as the initiation of girls to womanhood. Staged ceremonies such as these have become the practice of the Khoe-San revitalisation movements (see above), though even the most radical Nama and Khoekhoe leaders have so far made no attempt to revive key non-Christian beliefs in asserting their interpretations of their indigenous cultural and religious heritage, in contrast to European pagan revival movements such as Ásatrú, the Odinist Rite and Wicca (which also have followers in South Africa) (Jones and Pennick 1995). At Pella, the classic mat-house, as a polar-centred traditional dwelling, can thus be seen to have been incorporated into the "inculturation" process and taken on a symbolic meaning far beyond those suggested by instrumentalist and recuperative interpretations of their significance.

Conclusion

I have shown how the strengthening of ethnic identities in the former Namaqualand reserves, exemplified by the situation in Pella, developed into a contest over a commonly-held cultural symbol, the "traditional" Nama mat-house. This can be situated, as Robins (1997) has done, as a staged and short-lived outward expression of "cultural hybridity" in identity politics that reflects and contains the traces and embodied evidence of Nama historical experience in a global process of revitalisation of indigenous and other identities, that is running in parallel to an increasingly uneven long-term decline in the powers of the state. Sahlins (1999, 410) has commented on such cultural revitalisation as "this surprising paradox of our time: that localisation develops apace with globalisation, differentiation with integration; that just when the forms of life around the world are becoming homogeneous, the peoples are asserting their cultural distinctiveness." He thus joins other scholars of globalisation in noting the surge in the marking of cultural difference as a response to the hegemonic threat of world capitalism.

The politics of similarity and the politics of difference have thus to do with the indigenisation of modernity and the creation of autonomous cultural space as a mode of cultural production. As Kuper (2003, 395) has argued, it may be possible to regard this international movement as a fostering of "… essentialist ideologies of culture and identity … [that] … may have dangerous political consequences." Yet, as I have pointed out, we need also to consider the ongoing role of the universalist Christian churches in shaping patterns of identity. Such a role is still today being played out in the former reserve communities of Namaqualand, just as clearly as it is occurring elsewhere in the world, at least by the Catholic Church with its commitment to "inculturation" as a way of indigenising its version of Christianity in Africa and throughout the world. The effects of the church playing that role are to reinforce local commitments to neatly bounded social groupings and to the boundaries that are understood to separate them.

The notion of "inculturation" depends on communal consensus about cultural configurations and continuity in forms of expression. As I have shown in my consideration of the multiple uses and interpretations of the classic Nama mat-house and its symbolic variations, the potential is very high for conflict arising from indeterminacy, the co-existence of contradictory traits, the absence of fixed references or their eradication, and the decontextualisation of features; yet simultaneously these are favourable to the birth of new cultural and religious patterns that will cross-cut and replace existing ones.

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