

HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY TRAVELOGUES OF FRANÇOIS LE VAILLANT

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Key words: Age of Enlightenment; Cape Town; civil rights; colonialism; critical thinking; Coetzee; Conrad; eighteenth century; France; freeburghers; free-roaming; Great Fish River; inalienable rights; indigenous peoples; Koina; land seizure; narrative writing; natural rights of man; Orange River; ornithology; Rousseau; settlers; social contract; Sonqua; Southern Africa; specimens; travelogues; Ubuntu; urbanised; VOC; Xhosa

1 Introduction

Human dignity and human rights, land restitution, inequality, development and the protection of the environment continue to dominate the political agenda in our post-colonial society. These issues are not new, however; they have been recognised ever

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** Quotations from the eighteenth-century travelogues retain the names for certain population groups such as Hottentots, Bushmen and Caffres as used in the original documents. The text of the article, however, replaces them by their present ethnographical terms, namely Koina, Sonqua and Xhosa respectively.

since the early days of colonisation when legal minds and philosophers identified them in their writings and explorers and travellers discussed them in their travelogues.

More than two hundred years ago, during the Age of Enlightenment, philosophers and legal thinkers such as John Locke in England, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Mirabeau and Montesquieu in France and Thomas Jefferson in the United States stood up for civil liberties and human rights. Their views have been well summarised by Mirabeau in his *Adresse aux Bataves* where he refers to a number of political and civil rights, to religious freedom and a free press as “inalienable and imprescriptible rights without which it is impossible for humankind in any climate to preserve dignity, to secure development or to enjoy in tranquility the blessings of nature”.¹

Enlightened thinking on human rights paved the way for historic documents such as the Bill of Rights of 1689 in England, the Declaration of the Rights of Man in France and the American Bill of Rights, both of 1789, and, more recently, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights of 1981 and even the adoption of a Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution of 1996. Mirabeau’s and Rousseau’s vision on human rights remains relevant today. This vision has been challenged, however, particularly in Africa, for its Eurocentric approach and its emphasis on the emancipation of the individual and on civil and political rights. Critics feel that not enough attention is given to second generation rights, namely economic and social rights and the right to development, and to third generation rights or group rights such as the right to culture, religion, language and a healthy environment. It is also often claimed that the Eurocentric vision on human rights misses the element of human interconnectedness as expressed in the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which is based on the social bond in society rather than on individual social contracts.² David Johnson refers to it as the “dissonance” between the values of Enlightenment thinkers, which are still reflected in the model of the modern Western state, and what could be described as the economic and social priorities in other parts of the world, including South Africa – a country which still struggles with decolonisation in the age of globalisation.³

Philosophers such as Locke and Rousseau inspired many liberals and free-spirits of their day. One such free-spirit was the Frenchman François Le Vaillant who, between 1781 and 1784, made two extensive journeys into the interior of Southern Africa. His first journey took him East, along the southern coast up to the Great Fish River. The second journey took him North, up the atlantic coast, to the area of the Orange River. Each journey was recorded and, upon his return to Europe, published as travelogues. The first travelogue, in two volumes, was published in 1790, first

1 See Robertson 1972: 3. He refers to Lhéritier (1951) *Mirabeau et nos Libertés* (Paris) for the English translation of a quotation from Mirabeau’s *Adresse aux Bataves* in *Mémoires biographiques, littéraires et politiques de Mirabeau écrits par lui-même, par son père, son oncle et son fils adoptif* (Paris, 1834).

2 See Donne 2012: 3.

3 See Johnson 2012.

in French and almost simultaneously in English. The second travelogue, in three volumes, was published in French in 1795 and in English in 1796.

In South-Africa, Le Vaillant is known for his water colors of birds, animals, insects and tribal life, several of which have illustrated his travelogues and are based on sketches made to scale⁴ during his travels in the field, “executed under my inspection, and engraved from my own design”.⁵

Le Vaillant is, however, also known for the giant, silk map of Southern Africa which documents his travels and which was drawn up in 1790 for French King Louis XVI. It was handcrafted on the basis of Le Vaillant’s instructions and elaborately annotated with names of places, mountains, rivers and camps, illustrating the topography, bio-diversity and animal and bird distribution in Southern Africa. According to Ian Glenn, it is the first map to record animals and birds as belonging to a particular habitat,⁶ a map with powers of imaginative transport, narrative supplement, discovery and private spectacle.⁷ Le Vaillant’s map is, however, also important from a historic and legal point of view as it documents the location of several indigenous populations groups such as the Koina communities of the Gonaqua, Namaqua, Kabobiqua, Koriqwa etc, marking the land of the Bushmen, the Sonqua, and placing the land of the Caffres, the Xhosa, to the East of the Great Fish River, still significant today to document restorative justice.

2 Le Vaillant’s historic relevance

Contrary to the detached style in travelogues by other eighteenth-century European travellers and explorers in Southern Africa, such as the Swedish naturalist Anders Sparrman and the Frenchman Abbé Nicolas de la Caille, Le Vaillant adopted a new, personalised style of travel writing. He wrote a narrative in which he became the main actor and in which he revealed his personal thoughts and feelings.

His style became a mixture of truth, imagination and exaggeration, of scientific observation and anecdotes, impressions and feelings, including the pastoral and the erotic, commenting on fauna, flora, colonial life and tribal customs, political and social criticism, exposing settler brutality and abuse of indigenous peoples. He made the reader part of events and kept the suspense going from one volume to another. According to James Augustus St John, Le Vaillant wrote in a graceful, natural, inspiring and engaging style, never done by a European before.⁸ And Ian Glenn is of the opinion that Le Vaillant was the first to turn a hunting trip into an important new genre – the safari, going, beyond shooting animals, into a new experience of

4 Le Vaillant 1795b: 302.

5 Le Vaillant 1790a: 230.

6 Glenn, Lauga Du Plessis & Farlam 2007a: liv.

7 Glenn 2007b: 37.

8 St John 1832: 262-326.

interacting and seeing the world differently, a media revolutionary, showing nature through all the media available.⁹

Le Vaillant was much appreciated by European readers of the late eighteenth century, curious and fascinated by the unknown and the exotic. Le Vaillant's travelogues were, therefore, highly popular and were translated into several languages, amongst which Dutch, Russian and Swedish. To a certain extent, Le Vaillant was the forerunner for later authors of political travel literature such as Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*¹⁰ and JM Coetzee, who used the form of the historic narrative to express social and political criticism in *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee in Dusklands*,¹¹ an intricate mix of reality and fiction in the rewriting of the journey¹² of eighteenth-century explorer and hunter Jacobus Coetsé.¹³ The difference between all three is that, to express criticism, Conrad used a fictional narrative and Coetzee used a historic narrative while Le Vaillant wrote his own travel account.

According to Vernon Forbes, Le Vaillant opened a window on a new land, playing a central role in everything he experienced, maybe superficial in the details but giving a broad picture that is accurate.¹⁴ Karel Schoeman is even more specific when he writes that Le Vaillant, through a spirited description of the Koina population of South Africa, or Hottentots as they were called at the time, may have contributed to widen eighteenth-century Europe's interest in travel and the exotic, which until then was mainly focused on Cook and Bougainville in the South Pacific.¹⁵ According to Schoeman, Le Vaillant wrote his criticism at a time when several Koina communities who had survived their contact with European settlers were losing their independence and were being reduced to a status little better than slavery.¹⁶ And Ian Glenn concludes that Le Vaillant's travelogues were the first lavishly illustrated account that used the freedom of wilderness to attack civilised conventions; the first highly critical account of Dutch colonialism and the brutality of settler expansion; and the first detailed ethnological account based on fieldwork.¹⁷

Le Vaillant's political and social critique was much appreciated during the Age of Enlightenment, within the liberal context of late eighteenth-century Europe, and his travelogues attracted the attention of the leadership in revolutionary France. A review by Chamfort in the *Mercure de France* in 1790 commended him for his critical analysis of colonisation and for denouncing colonial abuse in South Africa.¹⁸

9 Glenn 2008: 368-371.

10 Conrad 1995 (first published in 1902).

11 Coetzee 2004 (first published in 1974).

12 Kannemeyer 2012: 253.

13 Schoeman 2011: 296ff; Schoeman 2014: 33-34; Stewart 2016: 36.

14 Forbes 1973: 99.

15 Schoeman 2012: 1032.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Glenn, Lauga Du Plessis & Farlam 2007: dustcover.

18 *Idem* xlii.

His anthropological description of the Gonaqua Koina community, including their vocabulary, customs, dress, artifacts and musical instruments, became useful for establishing a guide for anthropologists¹⁹ when Le Vaillant joined, upon his return to France, the anthropology branch of the *Société des Observateurs des Droits de l'Homme*, the society of observers of human rights.

Le Vaillant became less popular, however, as the scramble for Africa and aggressive colonialism prevailed during the nineteenth and a large part of the twentieth century. As a result, Le Vaillant's travelogues were pushed into oblivion, certainly in the Anglo-Saxon world which had always looked upon the Frenchman with condescension for being too extravagant, flamboyant and careless with facts and figures. John Barrow, who lived in the Cape in the early nineteenth century, regarded Le Vaillant's work as "valuable matter and ingenious observations jumbled together with fiction and romance".²⁰ Jane Meiring, as late as 1973, states that exaggerations and embellishments in his writings raise contempt and incredulity and detract from the true value of his work. She, furthermore, considers his "jibes and witticisms" aimed at settlers and at officials of the Dutch East India Company (the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*; hereinafter referred to as the VOC) to be mere attempts to ensure immortality.²¹ And Matthys Bokhorst was of the opinion that revolutionary France had exaggerated the role of Le Vaillant in exposing conditions at the Cape "which were common to colonies all over the world in the eighteenth century".²² These critics mainly focused on Le Vaillant's flamboyant style but failed or were unwilling to see his true contribution as a social critic.

According to David Lloyd, Le Vaillant's enlightened legacy only reemerged in South African literature with liberal writers such as William Plomer²³ and, later, Laurens van der Post and Alan Paton, when they addressed interracial relations. Lloyd notes, however, that, after a century of imperialism, there always remained, contrary to Le Vaillant, a barrier between Black and White hidden in their work.²⁴ Ian Glenn is further of the opinion that Le Vaillant had a powerful influence on the hunting narrative, which was to become an important literary product in South Africa.²⁵

In 1963, the South African Parliament purchased 165 of Le Vaillant's water colors at auction in London. They are housed in the Mendelssohn Africana Collection at the Library of the South African Parliament. According to the then Chief Librarian of Parliament, they are, from an artistic point of view, considered to be the most comprehensive collection of water colors left by an eighteenth-century traveller in

19 *Idem* liv.

20 Stewart 2016: 82.

21 Meiring 1973: 233-234.

22 Bokhorst 1973: 10.

23 Lloyd 2004: 53

24 *Idem* 61

25 Glenn 2007b: 34.

South Africa.²⁶ More recently, even wider prominence was given to his work in 2013 during a well-documented exhibition at the IZIKO Museum in Cape Town, showing water colors from the parliamentary collection as well as the giant map, which, until then, had been safeguarded in the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, the national library, in Paris. This renewed interest has been confirmed by the publication, in 2007, of the abovementioned new, edited English translation of Le Vaillant's first travelogue by Ian Glenn, with the assistance of Catherine Lauga Du Plessis and Ian Farlam.²⁷

3 Le Vaillant's background

Le Vaillant was destined to become an inquisitive traveller. He was born in 1753 to French expatriates in Dutch Guyana, now Surinam, where he spent the first ten years of his life before the family returned to France. From an early age, his parents instilled in him a true love of nature, a sense of discovery and an interest in collecting specimens of fauna and flora. He grew up in a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural environment, where he developed a taste for the exotic, “[e]ducated by enlightened parents, who endeavored to procure those valuable and interesting objects, which are dispersed throughout the country, I had continually before my eyes the fruits of their labor and I enjoyed at my ease the whole of their curious collection”.²⁸ And he continues as follows: “Being educated more than any other person in quite different principles, I always entertained a most ardent desire for travelling ... I crossed the seas, as I wished to survey other men, other productions, and other climates.”²⁹ Le Vaillant was a naturalist, a trained ornithologist, a collector of specimens and an excellent taxidermist who dreamed of “those parts of the globe which had never been explored”,³⁰ especially the interior parts of Africa, “a country as yet untouched by the naturalist”.³¹

At the age of twenty-seven, he went to Amsterdam where he met the Treasurer of the VOC, a collector of specimens, from whom he obtained passage on board a VOC ship to Cape Town with letters of introduction to VOC officials at the Cape and a commission to collect specimens in Southern Africa.

Being a naturalist, Le Vaillant's travelogues mainly focus on the observation of birds, and to a lesser extent on animals, insects, plants and trees. He was the first ornithologist to visit Southern Africa, collecting specimens which he forwarded to Amsterdam. Upon his return to France in 1784, Le Vaillant would mainly become known for his work in ornithology, especially for his publication *Histoire naturelle des Oiseaux d'Afrique*, considered to be the first comprehensive work on African birds.

26 Quinton & Robinson 1973: xvii.

27 Glenn, Lauga Du Plessis & Farlam 2007a.

28 Le Vaillant 1790a: 2.

29 *Idem* ix-x.

30 *Idem* 13.

31 *Ibid.*

He did not come to Southern Africa as a philosopher or as a human rights activist. He came as an ornithologist and a collector of specimens. However, his philosophical background, liberal upbringing and gregarious personality turned him into a committed and sensitive observer of man and nature and an important social critic of his time. He was not an explorer but a traveller; his journeys, even though in wild territory at times, remained largely on known paths and never far away from European settlement.

4 Le Vaillant's historic context in France

Le Vaillant grew up during the Age of Enlightenment, the years leading up to the French Revolution and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man, a time when social thinking was dominated by philosophers such as Mirabeau, Montesquieu and Rousseau. Like John Locke in England, Rousseau believed that man, in an idyllic natural society, is born free and inherently good, enjoying natural, inalienable rights such as the right to life, freedom and equality. As society becomes more intricate and structured, more corrupted, man is forced, according to these philosophers, to find harmony through a social contract with the state, the guarantor and protector of his rights.³² These philosophers laid the foundation for human rights as we know them today, still broadly defined as “God-given rights that are fundamental to human beings and are therefore inalienable”.³³

Le Vaillant's view on indigenous peoples reflects Rousseau's ideal of “the primitive self-contained community in which people live harmoniously together, satisfied in their contact with nature through their hard but contenting work and the simplicity of their life”.³⁴ Having been raised in the exotic environment of Dutch Guyana as an adventurous and self-confident youngster, Le Vaillant was a natural man, free and at ease in nature, because “[m]y first years were spent in the deserts and I was born almost savage ... Nature, therefore, was my earliest instructor, because it was towards her that my views were first directed”.³⁵

Le Vaillant was the very incarnation of Rousseau's ideal, a living example of Rousseau's “Emile”, as he grew up “free” in Dutch Guyana, with nature as his instructor, embodying Rousseau's model of a liberal education, developing man's innate goodness without the constraints of society.³⁶

He appreciated Rousseau and even named one of his sons after him, but he does not specifically refer to him in his travelogues. To the contrary, with a certain sense of self-importance, Le Vaillante deems that his own experience of man in the field is superior to “drawing room” philosophy as “the reader, in this plain narration, will

32 See, in this respect, Van der Vyver 1975: 5-6. See, further, Stoerig 1969: 109.

33 Heywood 2007: 77.

34 Friedmann 1967: 125-126.

35 Le Vaillant 1790a: 2-3.

36 Stoerig 1969: 109.

acquire juster ideas respecting the African savages, than from all the dissertations of philosophers”.³⁷

Enlightenment had brought a major change to European thinking as scientists and explorers started to discover and appreciate the exotic. For centuries, Europeans had vilified other societies and cultures as brutish, uncivilised, wild and dangerous, classifying people in categories of good and bad, noble and ignoble.³⁸ Le Vaillant, a man of the Enlightenment, wanted to educate the European mind by “turning my thoughts towards those parts of the globe which, having never been explored, might, by affording new knowledge, help to rectify that already acquired”.³⁹

Apart from being a child of nature, Le Vaillant, in the spirit of Rousseau, but not in accordance with the African philosophy of Ubuntu, strongly believed in the value of the individual in society, in the emancipation of every single man as “[b]y the freedom of my will ... and by my complete independence, I really perceived in man the monarch of all animated beings, the absolute despot of nature”.⁴⁰

This high sense of freedom, of leaving civilisation behind and to be the master of nature, is well expressed as Le Vaillant prepared for his first journey out of Cape Town: “I returned, as I may say, to the primitive state of man; and I breathed, for the first time in my life, the delicious and pure air of liberty.”⁴¹ As a result, he declined several offers from freeburghers, European immigrants, to accompany him because “I wished to set out alone, and to be absolute master of myself: I therefore kept firm to my purpose; and, rejecting all these offers, cut short every proposal of the kind that was made to me”.⁴² And he feels that “[i]f I deceived myself, I had only to reproach my own judgment”.⁴³ That same sense of being his own master also prompted Le Vaillant to refuse regularly hospitality of settlers along his journeys because “[p]roud of his origin, man thinks it an indignity that people should beforehand dare to number his steps. I have always avoided beaten tracks; and never thought myself completely free, but when surrounded by the rocks, forests and deserts of Africa”.⁴⁴

This love of nature, the sense of freedom and escape from civilised society explains Le Vaillant’s excitement at finding free-roaming communities of indigenous peoples and his unreserved assimilation with them.

5 Context of Le Vaillant’s travels in South Africa

Le Vaillant travelled through Southern Africa between 1781 and 1784, more than a century after the establishment, at the Cape, of a service station for the ships of

37 Le Vaillant 1790a: 375.

38 Lloyd 2004: 53-62.

39 Le Vaillant 1790a: 13.

40 *Idem* 150.

41 *Idem* 118.

42 *Ibid.*

43 Le Vaillant 1790b: 130.

44 Le Vaillant 1790a: 150.

the VOC in 1652 and only a few years before the first British occupation of the Cape in 1795 and the demise of the VOC in 1799. He arrived one year after the first Border War between European settlers and the Xhosa at the eastern frontier of the colony. It was a time of political unrest amongst the freeburghers and a weakening of VOC authority throughout the territory. The political climate at the time of Le Vaillant's visit has been illustrated by Dan Sleight in his novel *1795* in which the main character, a leading political figure, dreams of independence for the Cape after the example of the American Revolution.⁴⁵

Since servicing VOC ships was more demanding than anticipated,⁴⁶ the station had to expand continuously for food production beyond the immediate surroundings of Cape Town and into the hinterland. The territory, therefore, turned into a *de facto* colony.⁴⁷ The VOC had a policy to treat indigenous people well, to employ them and not enslave them.⁴⁸ This is documented, for example, in a Resolution of the Political Council dated 9 May 1662 which ordered the local garrison to treat the indigenous Hottentots well.⁴⁹ The VOC, however, never had a strong administration and, despite good intentions, this led to weak protection of the indigenous peoples against settler abuse. This brings Le Vaillant to observe that “the foreseeing eye of policy has been opened too late on those possessions which are at a distance, and which every day become more remote from the metropolis ... (and) the authority of the governor ... does not extend far enough ... to check ... irregularities ... in the interior parts of the country”.⁵⁰

When arriving at the Cape, Le Vaillant, first of all, encountered the population of European descent, the VOC officials but also the freeburghers, people either released from their contracts with the VOC or immigrants who settled in and around Cape Town as professionals, traders and farmers. Gradually these Europeans moved further into the hinterland, settling, during Le Vaillant's travels, already as far as the Great Fish River to the East and the Orange River to the North, many of them living in precarious conditions.

Secondly, Le Vaillant encountered the indigenous peoples of the Cape area, the Koina and the Sonqua, who lived deep into the Cape hinterland and whom Le Vaillant colloquially referred to as Hottentots and Bushmen. During his journeys, Le Vaillant almost exclusively interacted with the Koina. They were mainly herders who lived in roaming, structured communities⁵¹ all through the Cape area while the Sonqua, hunters and gatherers, lived in more remote areas.⁵² Tension between the

45 Sleight 2016: 21-22.

46 Schoeman 2012: 119.

47 Schoeman 2014: 62.

48 Schrire 2015: 17-18.

49 Suid-Afrikaanse Argiefstukke 1957a: 281.

50 Le Vaillant 1790a: 321.

51 See Le Vaillant 1790b: 38ff, 349ff and Le Vaillant 1795b: 170, 171, 398.

52 See Le Vaillant 1790b: 345ff.

VOC and the Koina and the Sonqua mainly arose as soon as freeburghers started to expand into the hinterland, encroaching on their grazing and hunting lands as well as on their water supplies.⁵³ Two wars broke Koina resistance and, further affected by several epidemics, they soon became diminished, uprooted and impoverished.

As a result, at the time of Le Vaillant's travels, many Koina had given up their traditional life in search of employment with the VOC or with the freeburghers.⁵⁴ They became impoverished and forfeited their identity, their customs.⁵⁵ Some regrouped in criminal bands of outlaws of different backgrounds, called the Bosjesmans.⁵⁶ Other Koina, deeper into the Cape hinterland, along the routes which Le Vaillant would follow, continued to live a tribal life, seemingly untouched by the arrival of the VOC and still preserving "all the purity of their primitive manners".⁵⁷ They, however, continuously had to move further away and Le Vaillant feared that soon all would be lost as "the planters endeavor to extend their possessions ... misery must be the portion of these happy and peaceful people; and every trace of liberty will be destroyed by massacres and invasions".⁵⁸

It is with these tribal Koina, living a traditional life in their natural habitat, that Le Vaillant became fascinated during his journeys. He must have encountered the last vestiges of Koina "freely moving around in those areas not given over as farming land to the Europeans, ... living in poor circumstances ... and their cultural identity almost completely abandoned".⁵⁹ According to a census of 1805, only *ca* 20 000 Koina had remained in total, most of them almost completely integrated into a Western life style.⁶⁰

Le Vaillant summarises his criticism of this situation as follows: "The Hottentots, thus confined, pressed, and harassed on all sides pursued plans entirely opposite. Those who were still interested in the preservation of their flocks, penetrated among the mountains towards the north and north-east; but these were the fewer number. The rest, ruined by a few glasses of brandy, and a few rolls of tobacco, impoverished and stripped of everything, did not think of quitting their country; but absolutely renouncing their manners, as well as their ancient and happy condition, of which they have no remembrance at present, they basely sold their services to the whites ..."⁶¹ He also warned that the indigenous people "will never forget the perfidies of the planters. Their resentment is so violent, that they have always the dreadful word *vengeance* in their mouths".⁶²

53 Schoeman 2012: 264.

54 Sleight 2004: 63ff.

55 Le Vaillant 1790a: 271ff.

56 See Le Vaillant 1790b: 343ff.

57 Le Vaillant 1790a: 275.

58 Le Vaillant 1790b: 100.

59 See De Jongh 2016: 31, who still uses a different name for the Koina, namely the Khoekhoen.

60 De Villiers 2012: 47.

61 Le Vaillant 1790a: 272-273.

62 Le Vaillant 1790b: 347.

A third group of people which Le Vaillant encountered during his travels are the Xhosa, Bantu-speaking populations living on the outside of the eastern frontier of VOC territory, which was established in 1775 at the Great Fish River.⁶³ Violations of the arrangement by both the European settlers and the Xhosa, led to violent clashes and Border Wars in 1779, 1793 and 1799.⁶⁴ This illustrates the unrest that prevailed when Le Vaillant reached that area.⁶⁵

Slaves were the fourth group which made up the population at the Cape. They were imported as a result of the VOCs high demand for labor. They came from several African countries such as Angola, Guinea and Madagascar but also from the Far East. Slaves worked for the VOC, for the freeburghers in and around Cape Town, as well as, to a lesser extent, for settlers on farms deep into the hinterland. Some of them had been freed by the time Le Vaillant visited and he found them occasionally in and around Cape Town but also on farms along his routes.⁶⁶ Although enlightened thinking during the eighteenth century somehow improved their living conditions, slaves at the Cape, as anywhere else in the world, lived a miserable life, without freedom and social status. Towards the end of the eighteenth century there were *ca* 26 000 slaves in service, both imported and born in slavery, compared to *ca* 20 000 freeburghers. Approximately 1700 slaves lived free.⁶⁷

6 Le Vaillant and the natural man

Nature is the scene of Le Vaillant's travelogues. He adores nature, wishes to build an altar to nature and saw it as his mission to increase his readers' knowledge of nature.⁶⁸ Nature means freedom and liberation from the confinements of civilisation. Contrary to other travellers and explorers who approached their journeys from a more academic point of view, Le Vaillant's travels into the interior of southern Africa are a spiritual experience. Nature, as a consequence, becomes the defining factor in his approach to man.

The glorification of the natural man – man not corrupted by civilisation, need and greed – runs like a red thread through Le Vaillant's travelogues. One is reminded, however, that these travelogues have been written from a European point of view when he writes that “[t]hus, amidst the deserts of Africa, I introduced the customs and polite manners of the most civilized nations of Europe”.⁶⁹

With respect to the natural state of man, several citations in his travelogues refer to the natural goodness of man, such as: “In an uncivilized state, man is naturally

63 Sleight 2004: 89.

64 De Villiers 2012: 56-57.

65 Le Vaillant 1790a: 309ff; Sleight 2004: 89.

66 Le Vaillant 1790b: 370.

67 Shell 2012: 70.

68 Le Vaillant 1795a: 13.

69 Le Vaillant 1790a: 261.

good.”⁷⁰ Other citations refer to the natural equality amongst men as “misery is a point of comparison of which he has no conception ... complete uniformity and the same resources, rendering the lot of all perfectly equal”,⁷¹ and still others refer to the issue of rank and authority, namely where there is no authority of one man over the other.⁷²

Civilisation, however, corrupts the natural man as “[i]n all countries wherever the savages are absolutely separated from civilised nations, and live sequestered, their manners are mild; but they change and become corrupt the nearer they approach them. When the Hottentots live amongst them, it is very rare that they do not become monsters”.⁷³

Because he recognized in the roaming Koina the ideal of the natural man, Le Vaillant became mesmerised with several of their communities such as the Gonaqua, the Namaqua, the Kabobiqua, the Koraqua, the Kaminouqua and other whom he met along his travels to the Great Fish River or up to the Orange River. He was captured by the roaming Koina in their natural environment and identified with them to such an extent that he let himself fall in love with a Gonaqua girl,⁷⁴ adding romance to his narrative and setting himself even more apart from scientific or academic travel writing.

It is interesting to note how Le Vaillant, unwillingly, makes a distinction between the free-roaming Koina and the urbanised Koina, namely those who had given up their natural state and who had integrated into the structures of the colony.⁷⁵ The urbanised Koina no longer correspond to the ideal of man within the context of Enlightenment. Le Vaillant does not glorify them as he does the free-roaming Koina because “too much intercourse with the whites has ruined and corrupted their manners; and of the truth of this assertion, the Hottentots of the colonies are a striking example”.⁷⁶ This does not mean that he did not like the urbanised Koina, especially those that were part of his travelling party, calling them “faithful companions of my enterprise ... I have the same confidence in you as I have in myself”,⁷⁷ or referring to them as those about whom “polished nations never speak but with horror or contempt ... the refuse of nature ... an African savage, a Caffre, a Hottentot”.⁷⁸ He also protected them with vigor and without hesitation against violations of their rights or against insults, especially from settlers crossing his path,⁷⁹ to such an extent that settlers in

70 Le Vaillant 1790b: 125.

71 *Idem* 133.

72 *Idem* 134.

73 Le Vaillant 1790a: 275-276.

74 *Idem* 378ff.

75 *Idem* 270ff.

76 Le Vaillant 1790b: 115.

77 Le Vaillant 1790a: 242.

78 *Idem* 228.

79 Le Vaillant 1795b: 248.

the hinterland started to question whether he had come to the continent in support of the Whites or of the indigenous peoples.

In the roaming Koina, as opposed to the urbanised Koina, Le Vaillant recognises that they “still preserve ... all the purity of their primitive manners”⁸⁰ along the general lines of Rousseau’s philosophy, namely freedom and equality as the basis of happiness, existing in primitive communities but lost in modern civilisation.⁸¹

Le Vaillant showed a similar fascination with the Xhosa. His relationship with the Xhosa had to grow, however, as he was at first prejudiced against them, under the influence of the Koina who feared the Xhosa, claiming at one point that “a numerous troop of Caffres ... carries fire and sword along with them; that nothing was seen everywhere around but disorder an pillage, fields ravaged and habitations laid waste and reduced to ashes”.⁸² He did, however, learn to appreciate the Xhosa who “informed me that the oppression and cruelty of the planters were the only cause of war, and that justice was on the side of the Caffres”.⁸³

The ideal of the natural state of man shaped his view on human rights and on related issues such as colonialism, race relations and slavery. This pre-disposition at times distorted his judgment as he would become fascinated with the natural state of living. He, consequently, would automatically accept tribal life at face value and not question certain customs, not even on general issues such as gender equality, the role of women or the structures of authority. On the contrary, he would criticise earlier travellers as incorrect and ill-informed for recalling, in their travelogues, certain tribal customs such as circumcision, incest or the killing of twin-babies, probably because this could place those communities in an unfavorable light amongst his European readers and, most likely, because it distorted his ideal of the natural man.

Le Vaillant’s sympathy for the point of view of the Xhosa in their conflict with the settlers and his lack of sincere interest in the settlers’ position raises a similar question of objectivity and lack of critical assessment when defending the rights of the natural man. This lack of evenhandedness does not diminish, however, his value as a social critic in his exposure of human rights abuses.

7 Le Vaillant and human rights

When Le Vaillant encountered the free-roaming communities of Koina, he no longer remained neutral in his observation, but became emotionally involved because he felt, as mentioned above, “that he returned to the primitive state of man”.⁸⁴ Confronted with the ideal of the natural man, he became a human rights activist, defending the right to dignity, development and the enjoyment of nature.

80 Le Vaillant 1790a: 275.

81 Friedmann 1967: 125-126.

82 Le Vaillant 1790a: 280-281.

83 *Idem* 303.

84 *Idem* 118.

Settler brutality against Koina, such as murder and robbery, was known to the VOC and is recorded in documents of the Political Council.⁸⁵ Le Vaillant's merit, therefore, does not lie in the fact that he made the VOC aware of it. His merit lies in the awareness which he raised internationally, through his travelogues, and the attention that he drew to the violations of inalienable or imprescriptible rights of indigenous peoples, namely "those rights which mankind inherits from nature".⁸⁶

According to Ian Glenn, it is significant that he used the language of human rights in a colonial context.⁸⁷ He took the glorification and protection of the natural man out of the orbit of romanticism into the legal sphere, not as a distant academic but as an eye-witness critic of VOC rule and of land seizure.

Le Vaillant describes the imprescriptible rights of the roaming Koina as follows: "[T]hese savages, the unlimited masters of all this part of Africa, did not perceive how many of their rights, and how much authority, repose and happiness, the guilty profanation deprived them of."⁸⁸ And he adds to this that "[f]rom that moment these unhappy savages bid adieu to their liberty and to that pride which is inspired by a sense of those rights which mankind inherit from nature".⁸⁹ The English translation of his travelogue uses the word "unlimited" where Le Vaillant, in the French original, uses "imprescriptible",⁹⁰ which is a better term to describe the rights which nature bestows on man.

Le Vaillant also addresses the inalienable rights of the Xhosa when, confronted with the possibility of several Xhosa tribes collaborating against the settlers in the Border Wars, he writes as follows: "[A]nd who knows what might be the consequence of such a confederation, formed for the purpose of defending inalienable rights, and of avenging ancient injuries."⁹¹ Le Vaillant here links inalienable rights with historic injustices, illustrating, again, his relevance with respect to present-day political issues such as land restitution and wider issues of racial discrimination.

For Le Vaillant, a first concern of imprescriptible rights is the unlimited land seizure, namely that "founded upon a logic which destroys the laws of property, so sacred and so respectable ... the Dutch seized indiscriminately at several times, and even without having occasion for them, all the lands which government, or individuals favored by government, thought proper or found convenient".⁹² In addition he wrote that the success of the colony "drew every day a number of new settlers ... the will of the stronger party was a sufficient title for it to extend its possessions".⁹³ In doing

85 For example Suid-Afrikaanse Argiefstukke 1957b: 131.

86 Le Vaillant 1790a: 271.

87 Glenn, Lauga Du Plessis & Farlam 2007: n 122.

88 Le Vaillant 1790a: 270-271.

89 *Idem* 271.

90 Le Vaillant 1791: 183.

91 Le Vaillant 1790a: 321.

92 *Idem* 272.

93 *Ibid.*

so, Le Vaillant considered – contrary to Rousseau’s thinking but in line with Locke – property as a natural right of man, the property of the indigenous people, destroyed by sheer power of the invading settler: thus illustrating the context for present-day claims to land restitution.

Imposing power, will and force, was a very sensitive issue for Rousseau who felt that power cannot give rights, only a social contract can do so, namely replacing the natural rights which had disappeared because of civilisation with civil rights based on a contract with the state.⁹⁴ Le Vaillant, when encountering communities of Koina and Xhosa, repeatedly stressed that one cannot succeed with people through intimidation and threats but that one must love them, show empathy and try to gain their trust.⁹⁵

A second concern of violations of imprescriptible rights is the use of power by the VOC, unregulated by a social contract as Rousseau would have envisaged it: “The colony insensibly increasing, and acquiring more strength, that formidable power which dictated laws to all this part of Africa ... and removed ... everything that attempted to oppose its eager ambition.”⁹⁶

His third criticism concerns the alleged unjust interference by the VOC in choosing the leaders of free-roaming Koina communities which, although not urbanised, had continued to live within the boundaries of VOC territory: “Thus, without any preliminary information, and even without any regard to justice, a helpless and feeble horde are obliged to receive laws from a man often incapable of commanding them.”⁹⁷

His fourth criticism concerns the lack of control by the VOC administration over the settlers whom he accuses of having committed the worst crimes during their violent confrontation with the Xhosa: “I have enough to show the character of the planters of this part of Africa, whom the inactivity of government suffers to go on in their excesses, and is even afraid of punishing.”⁹⁸ Le Vaillant accuses the settlers, for example, of plundering and destroying Xhosa lands, extermination of whole communities, destroying Xhosa villages, killing Xhosa prisoners just to amuse themselves etc, all under the pretext of reprisal for violating the border agreement and alleged theft of cattle. Le Vaillant claimed that the VOC administration was not only incapable but also unwilling to exercise strict control as the Company depended on the loyalty of the settlers to defend the territory against possible English invasion.⁹⁹ Ten years after Le Vaillant’s journeys, the British would take the Cape within the context of the Napoleonic wars.

94 Stoerig 1969: 109.

95 Le Vaillant 1790b: 32-33.

96 Le Vaillant 1790a: 272.

97 *Idem* 274.

98 *Idem* 318.

99 *Idem* 324.

8 Le Vaillant: The peace broker

During his first journey, arriving at the far end of VOC territory in the middle of violent conflict, only one year after the first Border War between the settlers and the Xhosa in 1779, Le Vaillant, in enlightened style, sees himself as a peacemaker: “As I was very desirous of being thoroughly informed respecting the motives and rise of these atrocious wars, which thus disturbed the tranquility of the most beautiful parts of Africa ...”¹⁰⁰

He first planned to meet the settlers “with the hopes of finding among them some well-disposed people, who approving of my plan of pacification with the Caffres ... would heartily join me ...”¹⁰¹ He failed, however, as “no one of them showed the least inclination to second me”¹⁰² and he felt that this “shows the character of the planters of Africa, whom the inactivity of government suffers to go on in their excesses, and is even afraid of punishing. In this place are committed all the cruelties that hell can invent”.¹⁰³

After his failure to convince the settlers he received a Xhosa delegation, listened to their complaints and then decided to meet them again on their ground. He agreed to their request to contact the authorities in the Cape and plead their case because “of the destitute condition into which they had been thrown by the atrocious injustice of their persecutors”.¹⁰⁴

9 Le Vaillant and race relations

The issue of racism is not relevant in Le Vaillant’s account, probably because it does not affect man in his natural environment directly. He did not really defend the Koina or the Xhosa against the VOC administration and the settlers on racial grounds. He only wished to protect their natural way of life against encroachment, both by land seizure and by civilisation, namely the European way of life imposed on them, in general.

He even, at times, made remarks, which, today, would be labeled as racist, such as claiming that the children of Europeans “are always suckled by female slaves, the familiarity which reigns between them has a great influence upon their manners and education”.¹⁰⁵ He also, for example, accepted without comment the separate warm baths for Whites and Blacks, built by the VOC close to the present town of Caledon.¹⁰⁶

100 *Idem* 303.

101 Le Vaillant 1790a: 309.

102 *Idem* 313.

103 *Idem* 318.

104 Le Vaillant 1790b: 272.

105 Le Vaillant 1790a: 31.

106 *Idem* 127.

10 Le Vaillant and slavery

Le Vaillant was also quite unconcerned about slavery as an institution, surprisingly so at a time of mounting international pressure for abolition, especially by philosophers such as Rousseau who condemned slavery as the final manifestation of the degrading principle of authority.¹⁰⁷

Writing about his youth in Surinam in the introduction to his first travelogue, Le Vaillant simply, in an unmoved manner, mentioned slaves as a normal asset of his household, at times assisting him with his collection. Later, at the Cape, he mentioned slavery as a natural aspect of daily life, an economic necessity. He never raised moral or legal arguments, not at the Cape or later when he met some freed slaves on smallholdings deep into the hinterland during his journeys. He even felt that “there is no country in the world where slaves are treated with so much humanity as at the Cape”,¹⁰⁸ referring to the conditions for freeing slaves or to the fact that slaves were not heavily punished for running away. His tone changed, however, when slavery was brought into the context of the natural man, when he warned the Koina against urbanisation with the advice to “[t]reat with contempt those people who reduce you to a state of slavery ... ”¹⁰⁹

11 Le Vaillant and colonialism

Le Vaillant did not really condemn colonialism as an institution. He was mainly concerned with the attitude of the VOC administration and with the behavior of the immigrant settlers when they encroached upon the natural habitat, the development and the happiness of the indigenous peoples. He condoned European colonial presence as long as it did not threaten the dignity and the well-being of the Koina and Xhosa.

He even claimed that it was never his intention to give a political connotation to his journeys through Southern Africa as “it was not part of my plan to enter into any detail respecting the manners and customs of the inhabitants of the Cape, much less respecting the political, civil, and military forms of its government ... I have my own reasons for acting with this reserve”.¹¹⁰ One of these reasons could indeed have been that, as an ornithologist and taxidermist, politics didn’t really interest him. Another reason could have been that he felt unwilling, at first, to criticise the VOC administration, taking into account that they had offered him passage to the Cape and that VOC officials had facilitated the preparations of his journeys. Moreover, while travelling, he continuously used the VOC to send collected specimens via Cape Town to Amsterdam.

107 Thomas 1997: 464.

108 Le Vaillant 1790a: 100ff.

109 *Idem* 154.

110 *Idem* 108-109.

Rather than criticising colonialism as a policy he occasionally offered advice to the VOC administration on how to improve economic growth with respect to economic production in general and agriculture, forestry and transport in particular. For example, he recommends port infrastructure as follows: “[T]he government ought to establish warehouses and repositories for timber ... it might be transported to the Cape ... draw a great number of intelligent planters ... the Company have nothing to do but to form here a proper establishment ... increase the happiness of a populous colony”.¹¹¹ He commented on the underutilisation of fertile land “which would produce corn in abundance: but the planters cultivate no more than what is necessary”.¹¹² He also gave some political advice when he warned against mixed races which, in his opinion, could in the long term destabilise the colony,¹¹³ and he advised the VOC administration on control over the settlers at the eastern border because “the authority of the governor ... does not extend far enough to check ... irregularities ... in the interior parts of the country”.¹¹⁴

Towards the freeburghers in and around Cape Town he had a somewhat condescending attitude although he treated them with sympathy and respect. He did, however, despise most settlers, especially those living deep into the hinterland whom he considered to be low-class immigrants.¹¹⁵ He did not really question their presence but condemned the loss of dignity and the loss of imprescriptible rights of the Koina and the Xhosa as a result of land seizure and abuse and, indirectly, as a result of colonisation in general.

Le Vaillant’s two journeys seemed to have been an eye-opener as he discovered, to a large extent unexpectedly, man in his natural state, or what was left of it. These journeys changed his view on conditions in the colony, well summarised when he returned at the end of his second journey. Crossing the border back into VOC territory, he allegedly sensed a loss of freedom because authority and oppression were taking over again, despite the fact that also the natural state had become less idyllic to him as a result of theft of land and the degradation of living conditions of the indigenous peoples.¹¹⁶

12 Le Vaillant’s relevance today

Le Vaillant remains relevant in our day and age, especially within the historic context of land claims, the allocation of natural resources and the restoration of injustices of the past.

111 *Idem* 209-212.

112 *Idem* 156.

113 Le Vaillant 1790b: 134ff.

114 Le Vaillant 1790a: 321.

115 Le Vaillant 1795c: 185.

116 *Idem* 461.

In 1790 already, Le Vaillant noted that the indigenous peoples of southern Africa were under threat, that they were dispersed and that they had lost their identity under pressure for land from the coloniser, referring, like Mirabeau, to imprescriptible rights: “These savages, the unlimited masters of this part of Africa, did not perceive how many of their rights, and how much authority, repose and happiness, this guilty profanation deprived them of ... From that moment these unhappy savages bid adieu to their liberty, and to that pride which is inspired by a sense of those rights which mankind inherit from nature.”¹¹⁷

He even launched a warning, pointing at the possible repercussions of colonialism and imperialism and mentioning the possibility of fanaticism as a reaction to abuse when he somehow predicted the refugee crisis in Europe today: “Should the savages of Africa or America take it into their heads, someday, that they live miserable, deprived of our arts, riches, and all the resources of our genius; and, uniting together in arms, should hasten to inundate Europe, and to drive us from our possessions, with what countenance could we receive these barbarians ... persecuted to a state of slavery ... blinded by interest or fanaticism ...”¹¹⁸

More than two centuries later, Virginia MacKenny, from the Michaelis School of Fine Arts at the University of Cape Town, recognised Le Vaillant’s relevance today when she included, in 2013, his giant map amongst important documents and works of art related to land issues, the exploitation of resources and the movement of peoples as part of a centenary exhibition commemorating the 1913 Land Act at the Iziko Museum in Cape Town. Le Vaillant’s detailed map illustrated, according to MacKenny, the link between cartography and colonialism, a marker of conquest and hegemony, the identification of resources of use to the coloniser, a representation of power over nature and indigenous peoples.¹¹⁹ The link between maps and land issues has also been highlighted by Michael Blanding in his book *The Map Thief*, when he refers to a court case in the United States in 2006 in which the British Library submitted a memorandum arguing the value of early British maps of North America as they “mark the rise of British dominance, the origins of a new nation and the demise of a native population”.¹²⁰

Le Vaillant’s map and his travelogues have a similar historic relevance for South Africa, documenting VOC dominance, the rise of a new nation and the demise of an indigenous population, especially when he writes that he “penetrated into some of the unknown deserts of Africa ... and conquered a small portion of the earth”.¹²¹

117 Le Vaillant 1790a: 271-272.

118 Le Vaillant 1790b: 125-126.

119 MacKenny 2013: 42.

120 Blanding 2014: 193.

121 Le Vaillant 1790a: ix-x.

13 Conclusion

If Jonathan Crewe, in a literary review in 1974, can claim that JM Coetzee's *Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee in Dusklands* is a South African *Heart of Darkness*,¹²² then the same could be said of the travelogues of François Le Vaillant, with this difference, however, that JM Coetzee uses the style figure of an historic narrative to express his criticism while Le Vaillant does it on the basis of own experience.

Le Vaillant may have provoked condescending criticism for his flamboyant and exaggerated style of writing, quite egocentric, placing himself at the middle of a narrative. He, however, widened the knowledge of southern Africa amongst the European reader public of his time and he drew their attention to the plight of indigenous peoples in the face of expansive colonialism. Several other travellers and writers did the same, to a certain extent at least. Le Vaillant, however, has the merit of introducing the concept of human rights, imprescriptible rights and inalienable rights of indigenous peoples into a colonial context. In doing so, his travel account remains relevant, today, as it is part of the historic context to address pressing contemporary issues around land restitution, human development, inequality, extraction of natural resources and environmental degradation.

Contrary to the general belief that the Enlightenment overemphasised political and civil rights, Le Vaillant, already in the eighteenth century, raised the issue of social, economic and cultural rights, today widely referred to as second and third generation rights. He placed the rights of indigenous people in the wider context of land, property and development, traditions, peace and happiness and the enjoyment of nature. He regularly pointed at abuse and at the sense of vengeance for injustices. In a remarkable manner, he drew the attention of his world to the risk of uncontrollable flows of refugees and the rise of fanaticism as a result of colonial policies, insults and violations of imprescriptible rights.

ABSTRACT

In seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe, the Age of Enlightenment, eminent political and legal thinkers such as Locke and Rousseau defended the emancipation of the individual and the inalienable, natural rights of man such as the right to life, freedom and equality. They argued that every man is born free and inherently good but that he becomes corrupted by the constraints of society and civilisation. A certain harmony can be found again through a social contract with the state, the ultimate protector of man's inalienable rights. Within this philosophy, education is crucial to develop young people naturally without the negative impact of society. Only nature can elevate man. Enlightenment opened European minds to the exotic and the unknown and, as a consequence, broke with the prejudice of previous centuries against cultural difference.

122 Kannemeyer 2012: 265.

Enlightenment influenced many free-spirits of the day. One such free-spirit was the Frenchman François Le Vaillant who travelled through southern Africa between 1781 and 1784. He was not only influenced by the ideas of Rousseau but he was, because of his unusual and liberal education, the very incarnation of Rousseau's philosophy. As he travelled through Southern Africa, Le Vaillant became mesmerised with its indigenous peoples, especially the roaming Koina communities and the Xhosa, who, at that time, still lived a traditional and natural life. Even though he set off on his journeys as an ornithologist and a collector of specimens, Le Vaillant became, as he encountered the Koina and the Xhosa, a defender of the inalienable rights of the natural man. He became an emotional critic of encroachment by colonial settlers upon indigenous lands, forcing the Koina and the Xhosa into poverty, economic dependency, cultural alienation and loss of natural life.

Le Vaillant published two travel journals; he introduced a new style of travel writing and made the European reader familiar with southern Africa. In doing so, he played a significant role in the defense of human rights through his criticism of the effects of colonial rule on indigenous peoples, not from an academic point of view but from the heart, based on first-hand experience in the field.

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