

## Grandmother-martyr-heroine: Placing Sara Baartman in South African post-apartheid foundational mythology

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Myths of redemption or suffering claim that the nation, by reason of its particularly sorrowful history, is undergoing or has undergone a process of expiating its sins and will be redeemed or, indeed, may itself redeem the world.

### Introduction

In July 1810, a Gonaqua woman bearing the colonial name Sara Baartman,<sup>2</sup> arrived in England after a journey that brought her to Europe from her native southern Africa. After spending five years on display on European stages in England and France as the “Hottentot Venus”, Sara passed away at the end of 1815 in Paris. In January 1816, one of Europe’s foremost scientists, Georges Cuvier, dissected the remains of Sara Baartman. Cuvier concluded in his study published in 1817 in the *Histoire naturelle des mammifères* – a volume about the studies of mammals in which Baartman was the only human represented – that the “Hottentot” body was more closely related to the great apes than to the human species.<sup>3</sup> A cast was made of Baartman’s body; her skeleton, genitals and brain were removed and preserved and subsequently displayed at the Musée de l’Homme in Paris until the 1970s.<sup>4</sup>

In 1995, the Griqua National Conference, led by genealogist Mansell Upham, approached the newly elected post-apartheid South African government to have the remains of Sara Baartman returned to South Africa. Upham perceived in Baartman “the plight of indigenous people, and a story of dehumanisation and the tragedies befalling black women in colonial societies”.<sup>5</sup> For Upham, the call to return Baartman’s remains

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1. G. Schöpflin, “Functions of Myth”, in G. Hosking and G. Schöpflin (eds), *Myths and Nationhood* (Hurst, London, 1997), p 29.
2. As Baartman’s original Khoekhoe name is unknown, it is necessary to continue to use her Afrikaans name. Sara Baartman’s name has been spelt in several different ways. The choice of spelling in this article is based on the Afrikaans spelling which was the language in which Baartman would have been named by her employers. I have chosen to defer from using the diminutive version “Sortie”, which is finding new popularity as a term of endearment amongst the Khoisan descendants who view Baartman as an ancestor. The official spelling of her name, Sarah – chosen by the South African Heritage Association – appears on her baptismal certificate, and is the Anglicised version. Because this reflects the period of her life when she was exhibited, this has also been excluded. The choice of spelling by other authors has been maintained in direct quotes.
3. J. Hobson, *Venus in the Dark: Blackness and Beauty in Popular Culture* (Routledge, New York, 2005), p 46.
4. C. Crais and P. Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus: A Ghost Story and a Biography* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2009). Baartman’s personal history is extensive. To date, Crais’ and Scully’s biography is the most extensively researched work on Baartman’s life.
5. Mansell Upham quoted in Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, p 152.

“appealed to a shared aboriginal past amongst South Africans of all races in attempts to reclaim an almost forgotten Khoekhoe/San heritage”.<sup>6</sup> After five years of failed negotiations, former President Thabo Mbeki entered into direct negotiations with the French government in 2000, and on May 2002 Baartman’s remains arrived in Cape Town. According to then Minister of Arts and Culture, Bridgette Mabandla, Baartman’s return to South Africa symbolised the return of African cultural heritage from Europe and thus an end to colonialism as well as illustrating her importance to a large majority of South Africans.<sup>7</sup> After a great deal of consideration, Baartman was buried in the small farming town Hankey in the Eastern Cape on 9 August 2002 – National Women’s Day.

This is the epic, yet sorrowful tale of Sara Baartman’s life and afterlife. However, Baartman’s journey continues in post-apartheid South Africa because her remains have become physically contested and ideologically distorted. Baartman’s story has been appropriated and adapted in order to serve as a narrative for nation-building in a nationalist agenda inherently constructed “from above”. According to Samuelson, “it is, after all, precisely the deeply emotive nature of Bartmann’s life and death experiences that has rendered them so appropriate to and appropriable by the forms of mythmaking”.<sup>8</sup> This article examines the many roles that the iconic figure of Sara Baartman has been assigned in South African post-apartheid nation-building politics. The mythologising of Baartman as grandmother, martyr, and heroine is indicative of the creation of a new foundational mythology for post-apartheid South Africa. This article will show that the return of Baartman’s remains to South Africa initiated the creation of the myth of Baartman as a national grandmother, martyr, and heroine as government rhetoric and the media generated significant publicity around the repatriation process that began in 1995. New and invented meanings were inscribed on her remains and lived experiences that would allow for the re-invention of her story within the context of firstly, Nelson Mandela’s Rainbow Nation, and later of Thabo Mbeki’s African Renaissance. This article contends that Baartman’s return to and burial in her “home-soil” serves as a symbolic ending to colonialism, slavery and racism – the central signifiers of Baartman’s life – and that this has made her a significant founding figure within the creation of a new foundational mythology in South Africa. This article will demonstrate how Baartman’s history was re-shaped, re-cast and re-invented into an ideal story for the South African transition, thus separating and dis-remembering the real, lived personality from the myth created to serve the process of nation-building.

### **Creating an icon: Sara Baartman’s historiography**

On 27 November 1810, Sara Baartman was interviewed by a coroner of the court of England, accompanied by a notary, two merchants fluent in Dutch and possibly Alexander Dunlop, the man responsible for Baartman’s presence and display in London,

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6. M. Upham, “From the Venus Sickness to the Hottentot Venus, Part Two”, *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa*, 61, 2, 2007, p 78.
7. Brigitte Mabandla quoted in R. Holmes, *The Hottentot Venus: The Life and Death of Saartjie Baartman, Born 1789 – Buried 2002* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg and Cape Town, 2007), p 172.
8. M. Samuelson, *Remembering the Nation, Dismembering Women? Stories of the South African Transition* (University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, Scottsville, 2007), p 89.

as well as his legal representative. Questions had arisen on whether Baartman was being kept as a slave in London by her “keeper”, Hendrik Cesars, and a case was brought before the court by Zachary Macaulay, a leading abolitionist. The interview lasted for three hours and this is the first time that Baartman’s voice enters the historical record. She denied that she was a slave; she stated that she was happy in her present situation and wished to remain in London. However, when Baartman spoke her voice cannot be removed from the context of power relations. Baartman, a black woman, spoke to four European men in Dutch, her second language and might even have been coached in her answers by Dunlop. For Crais and Scully “her words slip away; they mimic what might have been. They caution history, and those who believe in the power of the historical fact, that individuals rarely can speak truth to power”.<sup>9</sup> The case was dropped and the interview paraphrased and translated into English. Baartman’s spoken words were compromised and viewed through a European lens.<sup>10</sup> Sadiyah Qureshi contends that “it is precisely the difficulty in recovering her agency that makes [Baartman] amenable to employment as a cipher … unfortunately this only contributes further to her dispossession”.<sup>11</sup> The silencing of Baartman’s voice has resulted in her remains becoming a site upon which political ideologies have been inscribed and this has permitted people, communities, and a nation to reconstruct her in an image of their own choosing.<sup>12</sup>

Sara Baartman, the human being, promptly disappeared from the historical record after her death and the publication of Cuvier’s findings after her autopsy. However, during the twentieth century there has been a renewed interest in Baartman, or rather, the “Hottentot Venus”. The images of Baartman, produced during her lifetime and shortly after her death, were reproduced incessantly after the 1930s, specifically as a representation in discussions of the body. It would be difficult to remove the mythography of Baartman in post-apartheid South Africa from her historiography. Crais and Scully argue that “from 1810, Sara stood for more than just herself, just as scientists, scholars, and the post-apartheid nation would again demand of her in different ways after her death”.<sup>13</sup> Most writings about Baartman employ her as a symbol in order to explicate the historical contexts of nineteenth-century discourses of scientific racism, colonialism and gender and this has come to define how Baartman is perceived and has been fashioned into an icon for nation-building in post-apartheid South Africa.

The “Hottentot Venus” made her reappearance in Italian fascist writings in 1938. A picture of Sara Baartman appeared in the fascist regimes’ popular periodical, *La Difesa della Razza* (Defending the Race). This image served to discourage miscegenation in Italian East Africa after Mussolini’s declaration of the Italian Empire in 1936.<sup>14</sup> The side view image of Baartman, taken from her three day observation at the *Jardin du Roi*, was employed in order to illustrate the possibility of “monstrous” offspring resulting from

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9. Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, p 101.
10. Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, p 99.
11. S. Qureshi, “Displaying Sara Baartman, the ‘Hottentot Venus’”, *History of Science*, 42, 2004, p 249.
12. Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, p 173.
13. Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, p 80.
14. B. Sorgoni, “Defending the Race: The Italian Reinvention of the Hottentot Venus during Fascism”, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 8, 3, 2003, p 412.

miscegenation. Baartman's perceived “*steatopygia*”, served to illustrate the purported deviancy of the bodies of the offspring of miscegenation and thus provided a visual image to discourage this in the Italian colonies. This despite her being Gonaqua, an ethnic group not present in Italian East Africa.

Historian Percival Kirby reintroduced South African scholars to Baartman in 1949 after viewing her remains on display at the Musée de l'Homme. He produced three articles and one short note, briefly trying to recreate a biography for Baartman and realising the interest her story could hold to scholars and students of Africana. However, it was not until the appearance of Sander Gilman's article entitled “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature”,<sup>15</sup> published in *Critical Enquiry* in 1985, that Baartman became a popular icon and a subject of academic interest.<sup>16</sup> This article quickly became one of the most often quoted texts by scholars discussing gender, race, science, and colonialism in what Magubane has labelled a fetishisation of Baartman.<sup>17</sup> Certainly, it has been cited in every central text on Baartman. In his article, Gilman uses Baartman as an exemplar for his argument that racial and sexual differences are constructed through scientific, literary, and medical discourses, and that scientific discourse of degeneracy was inscribed in the pathologising of black bodies. Baartman, as a “Hottentot” body became a perfect example through which to deconstruct the processes that created the “other” within the nineteenth-century colonial context. Despite many of the criticisms consequently laid against Gilman's paper,<sup>18</sup> it shaped future discourse around Baartman and would inevitably influence her position in a post-apartheid South African pantheon of heroes and heroines as this country confronted its colonial and apartheid past. Indeed, it has come to define Baartman as little more than a body upon which meanings can be inscribed, and this will be shown in a discussion of Baartman's shifting meanings in post-1994 Rainbow nationalism and Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance.

### **The Grand/mother of the nation: Sara Baartman in Rainbow nationalism**

The time for the healing of wounds has come.<sup>19</sup>

The year 1994 denoted a period of swift sociopolitical transformation for South Africa. The transition from a system of racially driven authoritarian rule to a democracy occurred relatively peacefully. The 1994 election saw Nelson Mandela become the country's first

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15. S. Gilman, “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature”, *Critical Inquiry*, 12, 1985.
16. Z.S. Strother, “Display of the Body Hottentot”, in B. Lindfors (ed.), *Africans on Stage* (David Philip, Cape Town, 1999), p 1.
17. Z. Magubane, “Which Bodies Matter? Feminism, Poststructuralism, Race and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the ‘Hottentot Venus’”, *Gender & Society*, 15, 6, 2001, p 816.
18. Both Zine Magubane and Yvette Abrahams have levelled extensive critique against Gilman's article. See Y. Abrahams, “The Great Long National Insult: ‘Science’, Sexuality, and the Khoisan in the 18th and Early 19th Century”, *Agenda*, 32, 1997; Magubane, “Which Bodies Matter?.
19. N. Mandela, “Statement of the President of the African National Congress, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela at his Inauguration as President of the Democratic Republic of South Africa, Union Buildings, Pretoria, 10 May, 1994.

democratically elected president. This transitional period marked the beginning of a new era of nation-building under the ideology of Rainbow nationalism. The term “Rainbow Nation” was first coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, was quickly elaborated upon by Nelson Mandela, and came to indicate the concept of the peaceful co-existence of many cultures and ethnicities within the larger South African nation. Ozkirimli indicates that “[p]ost-independence movements based on a civic model of the nation will try to bring together often disparate ethnic populations and integrate them into a new political community replacing the old colonial state”.<sup>20</sup> This is a clear indication of what happened in South Africa after 1994 and which culminated in Rainbow nationalism.

Post-1994 and the Mandela presidency became a period where the truth of the apartheid past was confronted in order to promote national healing after the traumatic experiences and inherently divisive nature of apartheid. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was established as a platform where both the victims and perpetrators of the apartheid past could confront the atrocities committed and suffered during apartheid. It was implied that national narratives of healing and reconciliation could be built on the personal narratives of healing that came out of the TRC process.<sup>21</sup> Besides the theme of overcoming trauma as part of the nation-building process, a new foundational mythology had to be constructed to legitimise the new post-apartheid regime. The apartheid state had its foundational mythology firmly situated in the arrival and the diaspora of white settlers in South Africa and had created commemorative practices celebrating these events. The post-apartheid state had to create a more inclusive foundational mythology to legitimise the Rainbow Nation by critically re-examining its history to enable this transition. Overing argues that “the narratives of myths have the function of legitimating the social structure, and so myths come into play when the social or moral rule demands justification and sanctity”.<sup>22</sup> New national heroes and heroines were required to establish a new moral order in the Rainbow Nation after apartheid. Anthony Smith suggests that,

while definitions of grandeur and glory vary, every nationalism requires a touchstone of virtue and heroism, to guide and give meaning to the task of regeneration ... Heroes provide models of virtuous conduct, their deeds of valour inspire faith and courage in their oppressed and decadent descendants.<sup>23</sup>

These heroes and, indeed heroines, of the post-apartheid nation were mostly found within the struggle movement. However, Baartman’s story, firmly placed in colonial history, would become a powerful symbolic narrative for transition in South Africa. Moudelino contends that it is precisely the end of apartheid in South Africa that allowed for the possibility of Baartman’s return because “this geopolitical turning point allow[ed] Baartman’s case to be re-opened, since until that point her symbolic value belonged to a

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20. U. Ozkirimli, *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2000), p 182.

21. S. Young, “Narrative and Healing in the Hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission”, *Biography*, 27, 1, 2004, pp 146, 152.

22. J. Overing, “The Role of Myth: An Anthropological Perspective”, in Hosking and Schöpflin (eds), *Myths and Nationhood*, p 8.

23. A.D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1999), p 65.

tragic but remote colonial past whose connection with the present was nonexistent".<sup>24</sup> For Moudelino, Baartman's body undergoes a metamorphosis from a site of colonial temporality to a haunting remain that is included in the post-apartheid pantheon of almost exclusively male icons.<sup>25</sup> However, the Griqua National Conference's request to Nelson Mandela to take up the cause of the return of Baartman's remains to South Africa in 1995 meant that Baartman would become part of a national agenda rather than an exclusive Khoisan icon. Verdery argues that dead founding figures, being silent, are ambiguous and this allows their symbolic efficacy. What is shared by the nation is the recognition of these individuals as important and that the ambiguity – which can evoke a variety of understandings – is precisely what gives deceased individuals – whether symbolic or concrete – their effectiveness as a political tool.<sup>26</sup> The return of Baartman's inherently colonised remains to the country (now colonised) of her birth, came to symbolise an end to a traumatic colonial past. Indeed, according to Samuelson, "the story that Baartman's body is called on to express is of a nation recovering from a traumatic past".<sup>27</sup>

The call for the return of Baartman's remains in 1995 erupted in media hype in South Africa. National newspapers quickly picked up on this important female icon and Zola Maseko directed a film, *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman*, produced by First Run/Icarus Films in 1998. In an interesting turn, the media reported on Baartman as being a prostitute in the final days of her life in Europe. The media and government spokespersons focused especially on attributing Baartman's death to syphilis that she contracted during sex work "in the face of strong historical evidence to the contrary".<sup>28</sup> Several news reports indicate that Baartman died as a prostitute. The *Mail & Guardian* reported: "It appears Baartman worked as a prostitute in Paris ... She died in 1815 of an 'inflammatory and eruptive sickness', possibly syphilis."<sup>29</sup> SABC News on several occasions referred to Baartman as a prostitute: "Baartman died a prostitute"<sup>30</sup> and "Baartman drifted into prostitution ...".<sup>31</sup> News 24 also indicated that Baartman was a prostitute: "Baartman apparently ended her life as a prostitute in 1816."<sup>32</sup> In the *Citizen* it was stated that she "died a sick prostitute".<sup>33</sup> Controversial artist Pippa Skotnes stated:

in the interests of [Baartman] becoming a symbol for all sorts of struggles, indigenous peoples' struggles, feminist struggles, the historical veracity was shoved out the window. There was very little accuracy in what was written at the time of her repatriation.<sup>34</sup>

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24. L. Moudelino, "Returning Remains: Saartjie Baartman, or the 'Hottentot Venus' as the Transnational Postcolonial Icon", *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 45, 2, 2009, p 203.
25. Moudelino, "Returning Remains", p 203.
26. K. Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (Colombia University Press, New York, 1999).
27. Samuelson, *Remembering the Nation*, p 5.
28. Samuelson, *Remembering the Nation*, p 95.
29. "Bring Back the Hottentot Venus", *Mail & Guardian*, 15 June 1995.
30. "MP's Highlight Plight of Women on Women's Day", SABC News, 8 March 2002.
31. "Dignity at Last for Saartjie", SABC News, 29 April 2002.
32. "SA Impatient for Return of 'Hottentot Venus'", News 24 at <http://www.news24.com/>, accessed 5 September 2007.
33. E. Goddard, "Saartjie Baartman Back Home for Proper Burial", *Citizen*, 4 May 2002.
34. S.C. Dubin, *Transforming Museums: Mounting Queen Victoria in a Democratic South Africa* (Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2006), p 92.

Historical accuracy was disregarded in order to create an icon for post-apartheid South Africa. Baartman's case is not unusual. Post-apartheid icons such as Krotoa and Nongqawuse are women on whom nationalist meanings have been ascribed and their histories reconfigured. Samuelson expressively states:

In search of tractable symbols with which to express their ideals of homogenous unity, national and ethnic claims commandeer women's bodies and deny the more messy aspects of their legacies that cannot be neatly enfolded with the national script. Through acts of amnesia and foreclosure, or "disrememberings", women are shaped into the ideal forms that reflect the desired national body.<sup>35</sup>

Hence, the histories of women who carry symbolic meanings for the nation are deliberately reconfigured, created, and reconstructed to suit and serve a nationalist agenda at the expense of historical accuracy. Baartman was labelled the "grandmother of the nation", by Nealroy Swarts, a Khoisan historian when he said: "this is our grandmother. This is the nation's grandmother",<sup>36</sup> and Thabo Mbeki affirmed this sentiment when he spoke of "our grandmother, Sarah Bartmann".<sup>37</sup> This perceived sexual deviancy serves an incredibly specific agenda: As Baartman's body becomes symbolic of South Africa as a colonial subject, violated and dispossessed, the return of her remains to South African soil becomes a metaphor for the national dignity restored. For Samuelson, "the process of recovering and re-covering Bartmann's violated body with national soil will contribute to national recovery".<sup>38</sup> Thus the restoration of Baartman to South Africa and the end of her traumatic journey becomes symbolic of the end of South Africa's colonial and apartheid past. For Schöpflin, in his study on the function of myths:

Every group, every political system, virtually every area of human endeavour has to make a start and seeks to mark that by some special act which is accorded mythic qualities. In this connection, one is dealing with a moment of novation which is not necessarily as drastic and radical as a revolution, but which, it is felt by the participants, deserves special note in order to point to the future. The implicit, sometimes explicit, message is that afterwards everything will be different ("better") and that the newly founded system has dispensed with whatever made the old reprehensible.<sup>39</sup>

This indicates that the Baartman myth has not only served as, but has become an inextricable component of the narrative of national healing in South Africa. She has become the fundamental icon for national healing. Simultaneously, by referring to Baartman as the 'grandmother of the nation', her body becomes desexualised and removed from her perceived past as a prostitute and is enfolded in the gendered politics of nationalism within the role of nurturer and caregiver to the nation.

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35. Samuelson, *Remembering the Nation*, p 2.

36. Samuelson, *Remembering the Nation*, p 177.

37. T. Mbeki, "Opening Address at the 51st National Conference of the ANC", Stellenbosch, 16 December 2002.

38. Samuelson, *Remembering the Nation*, p 88.

39. Schöpflin, "Functions of Myth", p 33.

The date for Baartman's internment was decided by the Department of Arts and Culture and fixed for 9 August 2002, which coincided with National Woman's Day. Khoisan groups, claiming Baartman as an ancestor, resisted this date as they felt that Baartman deserved "a day that belongs to her alone ... She deserves a day that we will remember as the day that our Great Foremother has been buried".<sup>40</sup> Furthermore they insisted that Baartman was a "Khoisan ... icon, as she symbolised to us the abuse that our great foremothers were exposed to ... Ms Baartman deserves the peace that was never given to her spirit".<sup>41</sup> Despite these protests, the South African government continued with its plans to stage the funeral as an international event; especially since it had spent about R10 350 000 repatriating the remains to South Africa and creating the reference group which would oversee the return, burial and memorialisation of Baartman.<sup>42</sup> In addition, the government found in Baartman a figure that could become an important icon for nation-building and reconciliation. Crais and Scully, having gained access to an internal document of the reference group after a three-year process, show how Baartman became this icon. They quote:

It would be difficult ... to overrate both the national and international importance to South Africa of this event. It was a victory over colonialism, racism and sexism. It very visibly and publicly restored the dignity of a South African woman exploited and humiliated in her lifetime. It brought together and united South Africans of all backgrounds in seeing justice done.<sup>43</sup>

By linking Baartman's return directly to a unification of "South Africans of all backgrounds" her remains and, indeed, her legacy became part of a nationalist agenda rather than being moulded into an exclusive ethnic icon. Upham states that "before 1995 Saartjie Baartman was unknown to South Africans. Now ... she is virtually synonymous with Women's Day in South Africa".<sup>44</sup> Baartman was returned to the South African nation, not just to the Khoisan descendants. The state had claimed and spoken for Sara Baartman. Once again, Baartman was a body to be possessed, a commodity for a new nationalist project.

### **Martyr/Heroine: Sara Baartman in the African Renaissance**

The changing times tell us that she did not suffer and die in vain.<sup>45</sup>

With Mbeki replacing Mandela as the South African president in 1999, the prominent political ideology shifted toward an Africanist stance in the form of Mbeki's "African Renaissance".<sup>46</sup> Yet, the focus never truly moved away from ex-president Nelson

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40. Jean Burgess and Margaret Coetzee, quoted in Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, p 163.
41. Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, p 163.
42. Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*. This figure was gleaned by Crais and Scully from a budget document from the Department of Arts and Culture.
43. Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, p 164.
44. Upham, "From the Venus Sickness", p 77.
45. T. Mbeki, "Speech at the Funeral of Sarah Bartmann", Hankey, 9 August 2002.
46. P. Ahluwalia, "The Struggle for African Identity: Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance", *African and Asian Studies*, 1, 4, 2002; D. Herwitz, "Afro-Medici: Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance", in

Mandela's principal policy of reconciliation as can clearly be deduced from an analysis of Mbeki's speeches. Mbeki's speech at the 51st National Congress of the African National Congress (ANC) clearly illustrates this coalescence of ideologies when he stated: "The fact that we have gathered here together as compatriots, in conditions of freedom and peace, the descendants of Sarah Baartmann and Simon van der Stel ... make[s] the statement that all South Africa has embarked on an unstoppable journey toward its rebirth."<sup>47</sup> Mbeki, more than any other politician, has called upon Baartman when addressing the correction of South Africa's history of racial and gender inequality within the context of reconciliation. However, it is in Mbeki's speech at the funeral of Baartman that the shift between Rainbow nationalism and Mbeki's African Renaissance, as well as an emphasis on Baartman as heroine or martyr, can clearly be seen.

Sara Baartman was buried on Verganderingskop in Hankey in the Gamtoos River Valley – thought to be the place of her birth – on 9 August 2002. It was a highly publicised event with the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) televising the day-long event live. The cost of the funeral was R1 132 000.<sup>48</sup> The speeches throughout the day focused on Baartman's burial as restoring dignity to the South African people in general and specifically centred on women's rights. This slight shift towards Baartman as not only an icon for national healing in South Africa but also for women's rights, becomes indicative of the new meanings ascribed to Baartman's legacy at a time when violence against women was escalating in South Africa. The return of Baartman to South African soil indicated an end to the sexual exploitation that she had suffered during her life and after her death. However, it is important to note that as Meg Samuelson indicates: "these professions of closure in a time and place where (often sexual) violence against women has been on the upsurge are projections in the past tense that dangerously deflect women's lived experiences in the transitional present."<sup>49</sup> Thus, by emphasising Baartman's "victory" over abuse and exploitation at a time where violence against women was on the increase, there was a consequential de-emphasis on the experiences of women in the present. Bertha Gxowa, an ANC member of parliament, at the debate of the state of the nation address in 2004 said that "the ANC led government was able to restore the dignity of South African women by bringing back the remains of Sarah Baartman".<sup>50</sup> Yet this is but a single triumph which is largely insignificant to women subjected to violence in present South Africa. Despite this, Baartman's return and iconic status has led

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D. Herwitz, *Race and Reconciliation: Essays from the New South Africa* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2003); C. Marx, "Ubu and Ubuntu: On the Dialectics of Apartheid and Nation Building", *Politikon*, 29, 1, 2002; T. Lodge, *Politics in South Africa: From Mandela to Mbeki* (David Philip, Cape Town, 2002); M. Mulemfo, *Thabo Mbeki and the African Renaissance: The Emergence of a New African Leadership* (Actua Press, Pretoria, 2000); R. Suresh Roberts, *Fit to Govern: The Native Intelligence of Thabo Mbeki* (STE Publishers, Johannesburg, 2007).

47. T. Mbeki, "Address of the President, Thabo Mbeki, at the Opening of the 51st National Conference of the African National Congress", Stellenbosch, 16 December 2002.
48. Z. Pallo Jordan, "On the Wrong Reasons Why the Department of Arts and Culture is Called the 'Party Department' of Government", 6 November 2006, at [www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/speeches/index.html](http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/speeches/index.html) (accessed 6 July 2007).
49. Samuelson, *Remembering the Nation*, p 100.
50. B. Gxowa, "Statement by Mrs Bertha Gxowa, ANC MP, Delivered at the Opening of the National Assembly during the Debate on the State of the Nation Address by President Thabo Mbeki", 2002.

to a more positive result. A haven for abused women and children was erected in Baartman's honour. The developers named the centre after Baartman because they wanted to remember and honour "a woman who has become an icon ... to all women who know oppression and discrimination in their lives".<sup>51</sup> The Saartjie Baartman Centre for women and children is situated in the Cape Flats; an area known for its high levels of violence, gangsterism, child abuse, substance abuse, unemployment, and domestic violence.<sup>52</sup>

Thus the mythography of Baartman's legacy in South Africa was altered in order to include broader meanings as the post-apartheid state faced new challenges. Leonard Thompson has significantly stated that "all myths serve a purpose. As the purposes change, the myth changes with them".<sup>53</sup> Former President Mbeki, more than any other politician, has opportunistically employed the legacy of Baartman. He has altered and fashioned the mythology of her legacy to become part of his administration's socio-political ideology. Thompson argues that "political myths are much more than mere stories about the past. They are also indispensable, integral parts of a regime's ideology."<sup>54</sup> Within this context, Baartman's mythology in post-apartheid South Africa became a site on which Mbeki could construct and reiterate the new ideologies that would denote his presidency.

Mbeki's presidency built on the narratives of national healing of the Mandela era. Mbeki popularised the concept of the African Renaissance whereby Africa would become a significant geo-political power on its own terms, free of neo-colonial interference. It would define its own identity rather than be influenced by Western ideals. This served as a progression from decolonisation in Africa and the subsequent spread of democracy. It is this ideology that is clearly expressed in Mbeki's speech at the funeral of Sara Baartman when he says:

We are South Africans. To understand the meaning of all these things, we do not have to refer to England, Germany, France, or elsewhere in Europe. We do not have to recall a European history that extends to the 19th, the 18th earlier and later centuries. To understand the meaning of all these things, we need only start here, on the banks of the Gamtoos River and advance to the rest of our country.<sup>55</sup>

Mbeki continues to criticise Western science when he refers to apartheid as based on the "criminal notion that some had been called upon to enlighten and tame the hordes of barbarians, as Sarah Bartmann was enlightened and tamed".<sup>56</sup> While Baartman has been employed to criticise and denounce the Western racialised science of the nineteenth

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51. Saartjie Baartman Centre for Women and Children website, at [http://www.saartjiebaartmancentre.org.za/about\\_us.php](http://www.saartjiebaartmancentre.org.za/about_us.php), accessed 5 September 2007.
52. Saartjie Baartman Centre for Women and Children website, at [http://www.saartjiebaartmancentre.org.za/about\\_us.php](http://www.saartjiebaartmancentre.org.za/about_us.php), accessed 5 September 2007.
53. N. Davies, "Polish National Mythologies", in Hosking and Schöpflin (eds), *Myths and Nationhood*, p 156.
54. L. Thompson, *The Political Mythology of Apartheid* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1985), p 2.
55. Thabo Mbeki, "Speech at the Funeral of Sarah Bartmann".
56. Mbeki, "Speech at the Funeral".

century, it is clear that Mbeki is issuing another message through this condemnation of this negated science. The criticism toward European nineteenth-century science in this speech was reflective of Mbeki's stance on the medical basis of the HIV/AIDS crisis in South Africa. Mbeki had consistently questioned the medical link between HIV and AIDS and was sympathetic to a policy of HIV/AIDS denialism.<sup>57</sup> Mbeki questioned the validity of modern science as the once accepted racialised science of the nineteenth century had been proven incorrect. This stance is echoed in the speech at Baartman's funeral when he condemned the prominent Western scientists:

Among the truly monstrous were the leading scientists of the day, who sought to feed a rabid racism such as the distinguished anatomist, Baron Georges Cuvier ... Sarah Bartmann was sucked into evil purposes pursued by those who defined themselves as a "man *par excellence*", with a manifest destiny to enlighten and to tame.<sup>58</sup>

He went on to say that Baartman's people became enlightened about the barbarism of these men '*par excellence*' insisting that it was the Western scientists of the nineteenth century that were the barbarians rather than their intended "subjects". Crais and Scully indicate that these denunciations of Western science and one of its most distinguished scientists is also an attack on modern science. Crais and Scully state:

the Mbeki government has regularly issued scathing denunciations of Western science as part of its denying the medical basis of the HIV/AIDS crisis ... Now the president of South Africa deployed Baartman and her history as part of a harangue against science and the West.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, Baartman's legacy is deployed in aid of Mbeki's criticism of Western science in order to berate the dominant discourse of a definite link between HIV/AIDS.

Mbeki goes on in this speech to claim that "the changing times tell us that [Baartman] did not suffer and die in vain".<sup>60</sup> Here, Baartman is significantly assigned the status of martyr. Her story becomes a lesson and rallying-point for post-apartheid South Africa that is confronting and attempting to comprehend its history and that is preoccupied with reconciliation through the production of "truth" about this history. In his address on the occasion of Heritage Day in Cape Town on 24 September 2006, Mbeki refers to Baartman as "our Khoi heroine". This statement reinforces the point made above in the context of a new South African nationalism. Thus, Baartman becomes part of a greater nationalist narrative through her identification as a shared national historical heroine. Journalist Lisa Jones, as early as 1995, saw the process of martyrdom taking place when she noted that Baartman was being "resurrected as a *cause célèbre* and bestowed with Frida Kahlo-like martyrdom"<sup>61</sup> likening her to Mexican artist Frida Kahlo's increase in popularity during the rise of Mexican nationalism in the 1940s.

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57. Crais and Scully, and Holmes raise this interesting interpretation in their respective biographies of Sara Baartman. Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*; and Holmes, *The Hottentot Venus*.

58. Mbeki, "Speech at the Funeral".

59. Crais and Scully, *Sara Baartman and the Hottentot Venus*, p 167.

60. Mbeki, "Speech at the Funeral".

61. L. Jones, *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair* (Doubleday, New York, 1995), p 76.

Baartman's death and dissection, although not truly a martyr act as she did not sacrifice herself for a greater cause, has given testimony to the dehumanising effect of racism. Nicole Kelley contends that "the martyr acts functioned ... as vehicles for the inculcation of a particular set of values ... it is as her story is told and retold that it becomes effective for those who share the same values, the same commitment".<sup>62</sup> The values and commitment of post-apartheid South Africa to put an end to racial discrimination and prioritise the need for a new independent African identity could be inculcated through the telling of Baartman's poignant story as a vehicle for the dissemination of these values. It is within this context that Baartman has been assigned the status as a martyr for the struggle against colonialism, neo-colonialism and apartheid in South Africa by former President Mbeki.

## Conclusion

Baartman was obscured by her image as the "Hottentot Venus" in nineteenth-century popular culture and is once again eclipsed by her mythic role as "(grand)mother of the nation" and as "Martyr of all Black Female Martyrs".<sup>63</sup> Upham asks: "Should Sarah Baartman, her story and legacy, be reduced to a woman's issue or to being a sex icon? Now that she is finally buried, do we merely symbolically exhume her annually as a feminist afterthought and victim of abuse?"<sup>64</sup> As the South African state faced a new transitional period in 1994, it employed Baartman to negotiate this transition and create a new foundational mythology for which Baartman's life became a central signifier and, indeed, a sacral object of redemption as the country was confronted by narratives of trauma in the TRC process. Discourses of healing were inscribed on Baartman's remains as her personal history could be shaped to serve the processes of nation-building. As the case for the return of Baartman's remains from France to South Africa progressed in 2002, the Mbeki presidency formulated new political ideologies. Once again, the mythology of Baartman was overwritten with new meanings to support the ideologies of the new political dispensation. Qureshi maintains that South Africa runs the risk of "re-establishing [Baartman] as a curiosity merely renamed as cultural icon".<sup>65</sup> For nearly eight years her gravesite in Hankey was largely neglected up until the recent unveiling of the model for the Sarah Bartmann Centre of Remembrance in Hankey during Women's Month in August 2010. The unveiling of the model is not only part of a Department of Arts and Culture legacy project to identify sites of women who have made a cultural contribution in different spheres of the liberation struggle,<sup>66</sup> but is also a government effort to address the historical imbalances in the heritage sector of South Africa,<sup>67</sup> particularly with regard to the under-representation of Khoisan heritage. According to then Minister of Arts and Culture, Lulu Xingwana, who unveiled the model for the

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62. N. Kelley, "Philosophy as Training for Death: Reading the Ancient Christian Martyr Acts as Spiritual Exercise", *Church History*, 75, 4, 2006.

63. Hobson, *Venus in the Dark*, p 56.

64. Upham, "From the Venus Sickness", p 78.

65. Qureshi, "Displaying Sara Baartman", p 251.

66. K. Ndabeni, "Model of Baartman Centre Unveiled", *The Herald*, 24 August 2010.

67. "Sarah Baartman to be Honoured at Cultural Celebration", University of Western Cape website at [http://www.uwc.ac.za/index.php?module=cms&action=showfulltext&id=gen11Srv7Nme54\\_9324\\_1236237783&parent=gen11Srv7Nme54\\_5450\\_1210050423](http://www.uwc.ac.za/index.php?module=cms&action=showfulltext&id=gen11Srv7Nme54_9324_1236237783&parent=gen11Srv7Nme54_5450_1210050423), accessed 8 August 2010.

centre: “Sarah Baartman is close to every South African’s heart as she represents the slaves, as well as the abuse some South African women go through.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, Sara Baartman continues to be a representation for socio-political concerns in South Africa in the present. As the “memory” of Baartman traversed the twentieth century and the first sixteen years of post-apartheid South Africa, her legacy and, indeed, the mythology constructed around her, were continuously altered as old and new struggles required a silent, female icon. As these struggles have changed, and are changing, so do the meanings invented, re-invented, and re-emphasised on Baartman’s legacy change. It is apparent that the mythology of Sara Baartman, like any other political myth, depends on propitious circumstances for its efficacy. The establishment of a Centre of Remembrance indicates that Baartman occupies a central place in the post-apartheid pantheon of heroes and heroines and subsequently has become a significant icon in a new foundational mythology.

### Abstract

#### **Grandmother-martyr-heroine: Placing Sara Baartman in South African post-apartheid foundational mythology**

This article examines the many roles that the iconic figure of Sara Baartman has been assigned in South African post-apartheid nation-building politics. The mythologising of Baartman as grandmother, martyr, and heroine is indicative of the creation of a new foundational mythology for post-apartheid South Africa. This article shows that the return of Baartman’s remains to South Africa initiated the creation of the myth of Baartman as a national grandmother, martyr, and heroine as government rhetoric and the media generated significant publicity around the repatriation process that began in 1994. New and invented meanings were inscribed on her remains and lived experiences that would allow for the re-invention of her story within the context of firstly, Nelson Mandela’s Rainbow Nation, and later of Thabo Mbeki’s African Renaissance. This article contends that Baartman’s return to and burial in her “home-soil” serves as a symbolic ending to colonialism, slavery and racism – the central signifiers of Baartman’s life – and that this has made her a significant founding figure within the creation of a new foundational mythology in South Africa. The article demonstrates how Baartman’s history was re-shaped, re-cast and re-invented into an ideal story for the South African transition thus separating and dis-remembering the real, lived personality from the myth created to serve the process of nation-building.

**Keywords:** Sara Baartman; martyr; heroine; mythology; myth-making; foundational mythology; Rainbow Nation; African Renaissance; founding figure; post-apartheid state; nationalism

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68. Lulu Xingwana quoted in Ndabeni, “Model of Baartman Centre Unveiled”, *The Herald*, 24 August 2010.

## **Opsomming**

### **Ouma-martelaar-heldin: Die plasing van Sara Baartman in 'n Suid-Afrikaanse post-apartheid en mitologiese grondslag**

Hierdie artikel maak 'n studie van van die vele rolle wat die ikoniese figuur, Sarah Baartman, toegedig word in die politiek van 'n post-apartheid nasie en met nasiebou. Die mitiese siening van Baartman as ouma, martelaar en heldin is aanduidend van die skepping van 'n nuwe grondslag mitologie van post-apartheid Suid-Afrika. Hierdie artikel dui aan dat met die terugkeer van Baartman se reste na Suid-Afrika dit gelei het tot die skepping van 'n mite van Baartman as 'n ourma, martelaar en heldin deur die regering se retoriek en media-gegenereerde en betekenisvolle publisiteit tydens en na die repatriasie proses se begin in 1994. Nuwe en versinde betekenis is aan haar gebeendere en ervarings tydens haar leeftyd toegedig wat dit moontlik gemaak het om haar storie te herskep binne die konteks van, eerstens, Nelson Mandela se reënboog nasie en ook later as deel van Thabo Mbeki se Afrika Renaissance. Hierdie artikel voer aan dat Baartman se terugkeer en haar begrafnis in haar "tuisgrond" dien as 'n simboliese beendiging van die kolonialisme, slawerny en rassisme – die sentrale aanduidings van Baartman se lewe – en haar daarvolgens as stigters-figuur 'n beduidende rol laat speel het in die grondleggende mitologie in Suid-Afrika. Hierdie artikel poog om te wys dat Baartman se geskiedenis herskep, hergiet en herontdek is as 'n ideale storie vir die oorgang na 'n nuwe Suid-Afrika. Hierdeur word vergeet en die lewende persoonlikheid geskei van die mite wat geskep is om die proses van nasiebou te ondersteun.

**Sleutelwoorde:** Sara Baartman; martelaar; heldin; mitologie; mitologiese grondslag; Reënboog Nasie; Afrika Renaissance; stigters-figuur; post-apartheid staat; nasionalisme