

Introductory Essay

The Portuguese explorer Bartholomew Diaz first saw the Cape of Good Hope—the Southern-most point in Africa—in 1488. No attempt was made by a European nation to establish a permanent settlement there, however, until 1652, when the Dutch East India Company (VOC) set up a refreshment station. The Cape was approximately mid-way between Europe and India, which made it an ideal stopping point where trading ships could pick up fresh food and water.

The Cape was not empty when the Europeans arrived. There was a large population of Africans from the racial group now known as the Khoisan. “Khoisan” is a term that describes two related ethnic groups—the Khoikhoi and the San. In the past, the Khoikhoi were called “Hottentots,” while the San were called “Bushmen.” The two groups were difficult to identify separately—they shared a variety of beliefs and practices, and spoke similar languages. This essay focuses on the Khoikhoi, thought to be the more populous of the two groups. The Khoikhoi were semi-nomadic pastoralists. They herded cattle and sheep, stayed in one area until their herds had eaten the good grass, and then they moved on. They usually moved in a cyclical pattern that followed the seasons, and stayed within the same region. The Europeans depended on the Khoikhoi for knowledge of the natural resources of the Cape and for trade. This trade drew the two groups into close, but not always cordial, contact. In the 1660s and 1670s the Khoikhoi staged two wars against Dutch rule. They continuously raided their cattle in order to hinder permanent European settlement.

The various Khoikhoi tribes were not all in agreement, however, and finally a tense peace was negotiated so that trade could continue. European farms continued to spread, slaves were brought to do farm labor and construction work, and though the Khoikhoi tribes were legally considered independent nations, many individual Khoikhoi became farm laborers or worked in Cape Town.

Women’s experiences in this mix of people are under-studied. This essay comments on each racial group, and summarizes the main issues affecting the lives of women. Although the lives of women from each of the groups were quite different, there was a great deal of interaction and interdependence.

Khoikhoi

At the base of Khoikhoi social organization was the nuclear family—husband, wife, and unmarried children. Each family had its own hut, made of a rounded frame of sticks, and covered with straw mats—like a beehive tent. A group of 10 to 20 of these huts and families made up a kraal (the village or clan unit), headed by a senior man (often called the Rich Man or Captain). A group like this included roughly 100 members. A group of related clans made up a tribe, which recognized a particular Rich Man as head of the whole tribe. Individual land ownership was not recognized, but particular clans had the right to use resources (pastures, water, and game hunting) in an area, and clans unrelated to the tribe had to ask permission to use these areas.

The Khoikhoi measured their wealth in livestock—cattle, sheep, and goats. Men and boys were responsible for guarding the herds; they also hunted and made implements like poison arrows or utensils like clay pots. Typically, women did domestic chores closer to the kraal, although they also hunted for edible plants in the surrounding countryside. Although they did not kill animals, women were involved in making decisions about the family's herd and took responsibility for butchering livestock and distributing the meat. Women seem to have had strict control over the household—even regulating such things as when a man was allowed to have a drink of milk, which was part of the staple diet.

There is debate over how equal men and women were in this society. The excerpts on Krotoa (also known as Eva) on one level show a woman playing a leading role in important trade negotiations. On another level, Eva's life shows how ambiguous and prone to negative conclusions European attitudes were toward the Khoikhoi, even though they depended on both Khoikhoi and slaves for various necessities of life.

Europeans

In 1655, Jan van Riebeeck, the first Dutch Commander at the Cape, recommended colonizing the whole area around Table Bay. In February 1657, nine employees of the Dutch East India Company were released from their contracts as sailors to become farmers—known as freeburghers. They received land, tools, rations, and livestock in return for which they sold produce and meat at fixed prices to the VOC. By 1700, the total freeburgher population of men, women, and children had grown to about 1,350, and settlers were pushing out further and further into the land around Cape Town. The European settler population was quite diverse, including Dutch, German, Scandinavian, Swiss, and French people.

European women at the Cape either lived on homesteads and farmed, or lived in the towns (Cape Town and Stellenbosch) and participated in trades such as inn-keeping and brewing. Elite colonial women, like Johanna Maria van Riebeeck, were well-educated and did not work for economic gain, but managed households and made advantageous marriages within the political hierarchy. For most of the first 100 years of Dutch colonial rule at the Cape, the ratio of men to women was around two to one. Thus, there was great pressure on women to marry, and some married as young as age 13. Husbands were usually at least five years older than their wives at the first marriage, and were likely to die first. Women often remarried two or three times over the course of their lives. Through inheritance, even women of relatively low status were able to build up wealth, and therefore became better able to direct the course of their lives. A quite stable economy, healthy climate, and the early age of first marriage meant that women bore an average of five children over the course of their married lives.

The official religion at the Cape was the Dutch Reformed faith (Calvinism). Catholicism was forbidden, but other Protestant faiths, especially Lutheranism, were tolerated. Visitors to the Cape remarked that more women attended church than men, but some also said that women regarded this as a social occasion where they could assert their status rather than a devotional time. In fact, it is difficult to know what role women played in religious issues, such as the controversy over whether to baptize the children of slaves.

Slaves

VOC policy forbade the enslavement of indigenous people. However, slavery was a part of the Dutch colonial enterprise, and the first shipload of slaves arrived at the Cape in 1658. These slaves were from West Africa, but all subsequent slaves came from Asia or East Africa. Thus, the slave population of the Cape colony was ethnically heterogeneous, and those who did not work in Cape Town served on relatively isolated farms. The slave population at the Cape increased from fewer than 200 in 1658 to more than 6,000 in 1762. In the early 1700s, the Cape economy became largely dependent on slave labor, and owning slaves became a status symbol. Slaves and their masters lived in close proximity, however; often in the same house.

There was an even greater imbalance in sex ratios for slaves than for Europeans, with men outnumbering women by about four to one. This had a variety of consequences for the slave population, including allowing relatively few slaves to have any kind of family life. It was formerly argued, in order to suggest the benign nature of slavery at the Cape, that women slaves played important roles in settler families as wet nurses and nannies. This put them in a privileged position in the household, lightened their workload, caused them to identify with their masters, but also had the consequence of lowering their fertility since they were always caring for European children. There is as much evidence that slave women actually did much of the hard labor in the fields as that they were widely used as nannies. In the sources that follow, there is very little that suggests that slave women enjoyed any privileges.

Conclusion

In 17th and 18th century South Africa, Khoikhoi, slave, and European women lived in close proximity, and interacted regularly for economic and social purposes. This interaction produced a mixed culture that must have made the Cape a fascinating place to live. Nevertheless, the European settlers shared a hierarchical mentality that they were able to enforce on colonial society as a whole: Europeans were at the top, followed distantly by the Khoikhoi and the slaves.