

## **Speech at the Funeral of Sarah Bartmann**

9 August 2002

Fellow South Africans:

The day should be a day of celebration and joy. After all, today is National Women's Day as well as the historic day when we return the remains of Sarah Bartmann to the land she walked as a child and a young woman.

Difficult as it may be, we must still celebrate. But we could not be human and not be deeply saddened and weighted down with grief as we reflect on the short life of Sarah Bartmann who has, at last, returned to her people.

This occasion can never be a solemn ceremony in which we bury her remains and bury the truth about the painful circumstances of her death as well.

To this day, 186 years after she died, we feel the pain of her intolerable misery because she was on us and we, of her. When we turn away from this grave of a simple African woman, a particle of each one of us will stay with the remains of Sarah Bartmann.

We cannot undo the damage that was done to her. But at least we can summon the courage to speak the naked but healing truth that must comfort her wherever she may be.

I speak of courage because there are many in our country would urge constantly that we should not speak of the past. They pour scorn on those who speak about who we are and where we come from and why we are where we are today. They make bold to say the past is no longer, and all that remains is a future that will be.

But, today, the gods would be angry with us if we did not, on the banks of the Gamtoos River, at the grave of Sarah Bartmann, call out for the restoration of the dignity of Sarah Bartmann, of the Khoi-San, of the millions of Africans who have known centuries of wretchedness.

Sarah Bartmann should never have been transported to Europe.

Sarah Bartmann should never have been robbed of her name and relabeled Sarah Bartmann. Sarah Bartmann should never have been stripped of her native, Khoi-San and African identity and paraded in Europe as a savage monstrosity.

As the French Parliament debated the matter of the return of the remains of our Sarah to her native land, the then Minister of Research, Roger-Gerard Swartzenberg said: "This young woman was treated as if she was something monstrous. But where in this affair is the monstrosity?"

Indeed, where did the monstrosity lie in the matter of the gross abuse of a defenceless African woman in England and France! It was not the abused human being who was monstrous but those who abused her. It was not the lonely African woman in Europe, alienated from her identity and her motherland who was the barbarian, but those who treated her with barbaric brutality.

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, who dissected Sarah's body after her death. It is Cuvier who said after he had dismembered her:

"The Negro race... is marked by black complexion, crisped or woolly hair, compressed cranium and a flat nose, The projection of the lower parts of the face, and the thick lips, evidently approximate it to the monkey tribe: the hordes of which it consists have always remained in the most complete state of barbarism.... These races with depressed and compressed skulls are condemned to a never-ending inferiority... Her features had something that reminded one of the monkey and her external genitalia recalled those of the orang-utang."

It was the distinguished Baron who wrote:

"The white race, with oval face, straight hair and nose, to which the civilised people of Europe belong and which appear to us the most beautiful of all, is also superior to others by its genius, courage and activity, (And that there is a) cruel law which seems to have condemned to an eternal inferiority the races of depressed and compressed skulls... and experience seems to confirm the theory that there is a relationship between the perfection of the spirit and the beauty of the face."

Almost two centuries later, an honourable Member of the Parliament of France, Jean Dufour, sided with the truth and said:

"Enslaved, exploited, shown as an animal, (Sarah) was dissected by scientists who wanted first and foremost to confirm their theory of the superiority of a race over the others."

A German predecessor of the Baron Cuvier, Johann Winckelmann, a priest and art historian, had stated the matter boldly, thus:

"The European, called by destiny to run the empire of the globe which he knows how to enlighten by his intelligence, tame by his abilities, is man par excellence; the others are nothing but hordes of barbarians."

It was as one among these barbaric hordes that 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.

When she died, Sarah Bartmann had indeed been enlightened about the ways and the barbarism of "man par excellence". But she was not tamed.

Though they did not end up in the Europe "called by destiny to run the empire of the globe", her people too, became enlightened about the ways and the barbarism of "man par excellence". Like her, they too were never tamed.

Today we celebrate our National Women's Day. We therefore convey our congratulations and best wishes to all the women of our country. We also mark this day fully conscious of the responsibility that falls on us to ensure that we move with greater speed towards the accomplishment of the goal of the creation of a non-sexist society.

Our work in this regard must be driven by the knowledge that the women of our country have borne the brunt of the oppressive and exploitative system of colonial and apartheid domination. Even today, the women of our country carry the burden of poverty and continue to be exposed to unacceptable violence and abuse. It will never be possible for us to claim that we are making significant progress to create a new South Africa if we do not make significant progress towards gender equality and the emancipation of women.

The gravity and urgency of this task is emphasised by the particular place attributed to African women by those who gave themselves the responsibility of a civilising mission as "man par excellence". They, more than the African male, were presented as the very representation of what was savage and barbaric about all our people.

The eminent French thinker Montesquieu had written:

"You will find in the climates of the north, peoples with few vices, many virtues, sincerity and truthfulness, Approach the south, you are leaving morality itself, the passions become more vivacious and multiply crimes..."

An American theologian, Scott David Foutz says that with the Europeans having convinced themselves of the immorality of Africans in general:

"The bored, yet excitable European imagination soon enthusiastically entertained and proliferated stories of African women carried off by sexually/excited male apes as mates and the alleged promiscuity of the African women who, it was claimed, invited either man or ape."

Sarah Bartmann was taken to Europe to tell this lie in the most dramatic way possible. She was ferried to Europe as an example of the sexual depravity and the incapacity to think of the African woman in the first instance and the African in general.

Another eminent French thinker, Voltaire, had written:

"(Africans) are not capable of any great application or association of ideas, and seem formed neither in the advantages nor the abuses of our philosophy."

For his part, the Baron Cuvier made it a point to pay particular attention to Sarah Bartmann's private parts as he dissected her body, proceeding to present her genitalia to the Academy of Medicine.

The story of Sarah Bartmann is the story of the African people of our country in all their echelons. It is a story of the loss of our ancient freedom. It is a story of our dispossession of the land and the means that gave us and independent livelihood.

It is a story of our reduction to the status of objects that could be owned, used and disposed of by others, who claimed for themselves a manifest destiny "to run the empire of the globe."

It is an account of how it came about that we ended up being defined as a people without a past, except a past of barbarism, who had no capacity to think, who had no culture, no value system to speak of, and nothing to contribute to human civilisation - people with no names and no identity, who had to be defined by he who was "man par excellence", and described by another French thinker, Diderot, as "always vicious ... mostly inclined to lasciviousness, vengeance, theft and lies".

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. We need to cast our eyes back to a period less than ten years ago. Then the state ideology, whatever the garments in which it was clothed, was firmly 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.

The legacy of those centuries remains with us, both in the way in which our society is structured and in the ideas that many in our country continue to carry in their heads, which inform their reaction their action on important matters.

This means that we still have an important task ahead of us - to carry out the historic mission of restoring the human dignity of Sarah Bartmann, of transforming our into a truly non-racial, non-sexist and prosperous country, providing a better life for all our people.

A troubled and painful history has presented us with the challenge and possibility to translate into reality the noble vision that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white. When that is done, that will it be possible for us to say that Sarah Bartmann has truly come home.

The changing times tell us that she did not suffer and die in vain. Our presence at her graveside demands that we act to ensure that what happened to her should never be repeated.

This means that we must act to restore the dignity and identity of the Khoi and San people as a valued part of our diverse nation.

It means that we must act firmly and consistently to eradicate the legacy of apartheid and colonialism in all its manifestations.

It means that we must not relent in the struggle to build a truly non-racial society in which black and white shall be brother and sister.

Our presence at this grave demands that we join in a determined and sustained effort to ensure respect for the dignity of the women of our country, gender equality and women's emancipation.

It demands that we defend our democratic order and our regime of human rights with all necessary means.

It requires that everything we do should focus on advancing the interests of the ordinary people of our country.

It says we must continue to pay tribute to and honour the women patriots who marched on the Union Buildings in 1956, the heroines who came before them, the heroines who continue to serve today in the struggle for the reconstruction and development of our country.

It also says that all of us must heed and act on the words of the French parliamentarian who said: "Saartje Bartmann's fate does not solicit our repentance. This would be too easy. It must be viewed as an incentive to continue the critical re-examination of our own history. This work is necessary if we want to eradicate racism, xenophobia and the contempt of some people for other people."

I am honoured to announce that this place of final rest for Sarah Bartmann has been designated as a national heritage site.

Similarly, a fitting monument will be built in Cape Town from where Sarah Bartmann began her voyage of misery and death.

On behalf of the Government, the Parliament and the people of South Africa, I am privileged to convey our heartfelt and profound thanks to the Government, the Parliament and the people of France for agreeing to return our Sarah to us, and for living up to the noble objectives of the French Revolution of liberty, equality and fraternity!

On behalf of our Government and people I also extend our gratitude to the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, to the delegation that received the remains of Sarah Bartmann in Paris, including our Ambassador, the Reference Group, the National Khoi-San Consultative Conference, our National Defence Force and others who have contributed to the success of this occasion.

I would also like to thank the Premier of the Eastern Cape, MEC Balindlela, the rest of the government of the province and the Mayor and Council of Hankey for everything they have done for this solemn ceremony to succeed.

Fellow South Africans, thank you for coming to this important day and occasion in our national life.

The mortal remains of Sarah Bartmann lie beside the Gamtoos River.

Another African who lived in the Diaspora, this time in the United States of America, for forebears having been transported out of Africa as slaves, sang of rivers. This is the great African-American poet, Langston Hughes, who sang:

"I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow  
of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went  
down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers."

May the soul of Sarah Bartmann grow deep like the rivers.