

# Coming home

Chris McGreal

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**In 1810, Saartjie Baartman was brought to Europe from South Africa to be displayed as a sexual freak and example of the inferiority of the black race. Now the remains of the 'Hottentot Venus' are finally being returned to her homeland. Chris McGreal reports**

The first time Saartjie Baartman was dragged out to squat before the mob at 225 Piccadilly, the show's promoters billed her genitals as resembling the skin that hangs from a turkey's throat. For several years, working-class Londoners crowded in to shout vulgarities at the protruding buttocks and large vulva of the unfortunate woman made famous across Europe as the "Hottentot Venus". The aristocracy were no less fascinated at what they saw as a sexual freak, but they had private showings.

Death in Paris a few years later treated the young woman from South Africa's Eastern Cape little better than life. She was carved up by

Napoleon's surgeon, who made a cast of her body, pickled her genitals and brain, and put her skeleton on display in a museum.

But now, nearly two centuries after Baartman was lured on to a ship for England with the promise that she would make her fortune, the Hottentot Venus is to go home. The French senate has voted to release Baartman's remains from the Musée de L'Homme, where they were on public display until shame caught up with the administrators in 1976. The senate debate was an emotional affair, with the crucial question posed by the man who sponsored the bill, Nicolas About. "This young woman was treated as if she was something monstrous. But where in this affair is the true monstrosity?" he asked.

It is a question to which the Khoisan - the first people to inhabit the southern tip of Africa - have a ready answer, and the return of Baartman's remains is giving them the opportunity to make it heard.

"Saartjie Baartman became a symbol of our suffering, and all the misery she went through was a manifestation of how the Khoisan people were treated during that period and beyond," says Cecil Le Fleur, chairman of the National Khoisan Consultative Conference Council. "But the sad thing is that although we knew of Saartjie Baartman when we were growing up, we didn't really know what happened to her. We only found out a few years ago that her skeleton was in a museum in Paris. The French knew but we didn't, her own people. They never thought to tell us."

Baartman was born in 1789 in what is now the Eastern Cape - the year of the French revolution, with its ideals of equality and liberty. She was from a clan of Quena people who were among those derided by white settlers as "Hottentots". Today, the Quena fall under the collective label of Khoisan - grouping all the first peoples of southern Africa.

In her late teens, Baartman migrated to Cape Town. Colonial records show that in 1810 she was living in a small shack when a British ship's doctor, William Dunlop, took an interest in her. He was fascinated by her large backside and genitalia - common to Khoisan people. Dunlop persuaded her to sail with him to London by telling her that she would become rich by displaying her body. No doubt she saw the opportunity to

live like the white colonialists in the Cape. Her fate was to be much worse even than that of the Elephant Man.

Baartman was first displayed in Piccadilly. A contemporary account describes how she was paraded on a "stage two feet high, along which she was led by her keeper and exhibited like a wild beast, being obliged to walk, stand or sit as he ordered". The crowd viewed her as little different from an animal. From Piccadilly she was moved to Bartholomew Fair and Haymarket.

Slavery was a hot topic of the time. A young Jamaican, Robert Wedderburn, who founded the African Association to campaign against racism, pressured the government to end the daily spectacle on the grounds that it amounted to slavery. The attorney general backed him, but the courts ruled that Baartman had entered into a contract of her own free will and the show went on. It is doubtful the Hottentot Venus ever saw a contract.

Four years after her arrival in London, she was moved to Paris - probably sold - where she fell under the control of a "showman of wild animals" at a travelling circus. When she was not being paraded for the mob, Baartman was displayed at society functions. It was at a ball for France's new establishment - where she arrived dressed in nothing but a few feathers - that Napoleon's sur-

geon general, George Cuvier, spotted her and claimed a scientific interest. Over the following year she was repeatedly studied by doctors and anthropologists, who invariably concluded that she was evidence of the superiority of the white race.

The abuse took its toll on her, driving her into prostitution and alcoholism. She died in 1815, just five years after arriving in Europe. It's not certain what claimed her but the descriptions of her death point to syphilis and tuberculosis. Then Napoleon's surgeon got hold of her again.

After her remains were pulled from public display at the Musée de L'Homme 26 years ago, they were consigned to a shelf in a back room and largely forgotten until interest in her fate revived with the end of apartheid in South Africa and the Khoisan peoples attempts to reassert their identity.

Le Fleur sees Baartman's suffering as representative of the entire Khoisan people. "All through the colonial period and the decades of apartheid, our people were robbed of their lives and identity," he says. "It was one of the master plans of the colonial powers to alienate us from our culture, language and traditions so they could rob us of our land. In the apartheid era they reclassified us as being merely a so-called coloured (mixed-race) person so we

could not be distinguished from people with white or black blood."

Yet Baartman's return has a greater symbolism than acknowledging past atrocities. There is a sense among many of the estimated 100,000 or more people who claim Khoisan descent that even in the new, democratic South Africa, they are still marginalised. "The Khoisan definitely don't feel that they are accommodated in the broader South African society as a people," says Le Fleur. "According to the constitution, we enjoy the same individual rights, but as a group we are not yet recognised as a people. We are not recognised as the first indigenous peoples of South Africa." But that is changing, and not just because of Baartman's imminent return.

Many South Africans classified as "coloured" under apartheid feel that affirmative action for black people has once again left them behind, just as white "job reservation" and other apartheid measures did in the old days. To claim their place at the head of the queue, growing numbers of people in the Cape are identifying themselves as "Khoisan".

Baartman nearly did not come back at all. Nelson Mandela took up the cause when he became president in 1994, pressing François Mitterrand to release her remains. But the French were initially reluctant to open what they saw as a Pandora's

box that could lead to plundered artefacts from across the globe, and now filling museums, being returned. Besides which, there was an instinctive desire not to face up to Baartman's inhumane treatment.

French bureaucrats looked for reasons to shelve the issue. According to the senate's own report, officials at one point said that since South Africa had not raised the Baartman issue for a few months, there was no need to do anything. But the report brushed aside the doubts by describing the delays in returning her to South Africa as "grave management dysfunction" and "incompetence fighting with absurdity".

But what of Baartman's fate now? Who will claim her? Where will she be buried? Some want her interned in the Gamtoos Valley where she is believed to have been born. Others want a grander affair that evokes the national suffering of so many generations of all South Africans.

"That is the million-dollar question," says Le Fleur. "Irrespective of the fact that she is Khoisan descent, we don't want to create the impression that we claim her as Khoisan property. Mostly, we want her to have a decent burial and to treat her in death how she was never treated in life."