'Afrikaander circa 1600': Reflections and Suggestions Regarding the Origins and Fate of Afrikaner Nationalism

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‘Afrikaander circa 1600’:
Reflections and Suggestions Regarding
the Origins and Fate of Afrikaner Nationalism

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Abstract:
This article compares two quite different portrayals of, and reflections on, the nature and fate of Afrikaner nationalism in its historical entanglement with the apartheid order. On the one hand, it considers the many and sustained publications of the historian Hermann Giliomee, culminating in *The Afrikaners* (2003). On the other hand, it provides an analysis and interpretation of a work of art, ‘Afrikaander circa 1600’ (2007), an installation by the visual artist and sculptor Andries Botha. While Giliomee’s ‘biography’ of the Afrikaners remains trapped in their struggle for ‘survival’, it fails to historicise fully the demise of Afrikaner nationalism as a political project. As against this, Botha’s installation, on the analogy of the “Bushman Diorama” in the South African Museum, presents a kind of Afrikaner Diorama in a post-apartheid perspective reducing Afrikaner nationalism and power to historical relics.

Keywords: Afrikaner nationalism, Afrikaner identity, Afrikaner history, Politics of history, Post-apartheid perspectives

As a historian Hermann Giliomee is justly renowned for his numerous publications about Afrikaner history and Afrikaner nationalism. These, over a period of years, testify both to close involvement and to a certain critical perspective. To begin with he was attracted to the idea of ‘contemporary history’, and in a sense his sustained work on Afrikaner history may indeed be seen as a kind of contemporary history – even when it delves into the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century origins of that history. This is not unconnected to the fact that Afrikaners and Afrikaner nationalism have themselves undergone striking changes during his own lifetime and in the course of his professional activities.

Hermann Giliomee was born (as I was myself) in the year of the symbolic Centennial Oxwagon Trek. He comes from a long-established Afrikaans family in Porterville, where his father held a respected position in the Broederbond. He was trained as a historian during the

1950s, in the History Department of the University of Stellenbosch, where formidable figures such as A.L. Geyer, H.B. Thom and P.J. van der Merwe laid the groundwork for the academic study of Afrikaner history. His professional career began in Pretoria during the 1960s, at the peak of the Verwoerd era, but also at the same time that F.A. van Jaarsveld initiated a revisionist contextualisation of the origins of modern Afrikaner nationalism around the First Anglo-Boer War and the First Language Movement of the 1870s.

Back in Stellenbosch, one of his earliest articles – published in the year when the Afrikaans language monument was inaugurated – dealt with the development of the Afrikaners’ self-conception. This was to become a sustained theme in his work over the following decades. In our joint source publication on the development of Afrikaner political thought,^3^ the definition of ‘Afrikaners’ proved both a contested political issue and a methodological challenge. Before any conclusions could be drawn about Afrikaner political thinking, one first had to decide who qualified as an ‘Afrikaner’ and who did not – no easy matter, especially when this concerned the period prior to the rise of Afrikaner nationalism and even before the use of the term ‘Afrikaner’ itself. We decided that for our purposes, Andries Stockenström (for example) was a Cape Afrikaner; but we did not even consider including Andries Botha, the leader of the Kat River rebels. Evidently it would be anachronistic to consider Jan van Riebeeck in 1652, or even Adam Tas in 1706, as ‘Afrikaners’. The emergence of ‘Afrikaners’ as a distinct, self-aware group in colonial society was, on the one hand, a historical process in its own right which, on the other hand, was retrospectively mythologised and politicised in various ways. Unlike myself, Hermann focused especially on the first of these two aspects of the historical and intellectual problem posed by the development of the Afrikaners’ self-conceptions.

Over a period of more than 30 years (which were also the critical years of Afrikaner power and the end of the apartheid order), Hermann Giliomee’s publications may be traced as a sustained project of research and reflection on Afrikaner history. Commencing with a series of articles about the origins of Afrikaner nationalism,^4^ it progressed by way of studies of key episodes and aspects of Afrikaner politics and apartheid in the twentieth century,^5^ and the economic rise of the Afrikaners,^6^ to reflections on the role of critical Afrikaner intellectuals,
verligtheid and liberalism, not to forget his more recent involvement in the new Afrikaans language movement. All this was then brought together and developed into a comprehensive account of Afrikaner history from its inception up to the present, first published in English as The Afrikaners: Biography of a People (2003) and subsequently in Afrikaans as Die Afrikaners: ’n Biografie (2004), undoubtedly Giliomee’s magnus opus. His vision of Afrikaners and their history is by no means without its critics, both within Afrikaner circles and beyond. The development, assumptions and implications of his impressive oeuvre will provide matter for critical study and interpretation for a long time to come, and I certainly cannot do justice to it in a brief contribution such as this.

Instead, in what follows I propose to compare a very different, unusual and indirect perspective on the Afrikaners with that of Giliomee. This, too, is a portrayal of and reflection on the nature and fate of Afrikaner nationalism in its historical entanglement with the apartheid order, but presented in this case as a work of art: ‘Afrikaander circa 1600’ by Andries Botha. On the face of it I may seem to be comparing apples with pears. Botha is not a historian but a visual artist. He does not work with historical documents and he presents his interpretations not as scholarly researched articles or books but as sculptures, portraits and other visual artworks and installations. A closer look does, however, reveal that Botha – in his own way and from a very different angle – also deals with the problem of Afrikaners and their history. It may be helpful to start by posing Botha’s alternative vision of the Afrikaner beside that of Giliomee. The similarities and, more particularly the differences, can then serve as a point of departure for further reflection.


8. This includes H. Giliomee, Kruispad. Die Toekoms van Afrikaans as Openbare Taal (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 2001).
‘Afrikaander circa 1600’

‘Afrikaander circa 1600’ is an installation by the sculptor Andries Botha – part of an exhibition entitled (dis)Appearance(s), in Durban at the end of 2007. Botha is an internationally recognised artist who has been engaging with potent themes from the violent legacies littering our (post-) apartheid landscape for over 20 years. (dis)Appearance(s) comprises a number of components. There is the ‘Monument’ series – 30 or so small pen sketches of the remnants of cemeteries and tombstones dating from the South African War, including scenes from the Aliwal North and Merebank concentration camps but also scenes from the more recent anti-apartheid struggle, including the ‘Rick Turner Assassination Site’, the ‘Magoo’s Bar Bombing Site’ and the ‘Toti Mall Bombing Site’. Then there is the ‘Boerekappie’ and ‘Hat’ series, with detailed pencil drawings of the traditional headgear of Voortrekker women and allusions to P.W. Botha’s sombre fedora. There are several studies of Andries Botha’s own recently deceased father, including a moving portrait entitled ‘My Father’ – not a conventional full face but a back view of his hatless head; and the ‘Bloodline’ series on themes inspired by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. There is also a second large-scale installation entitled ‘History Has an Aspect of Oversight in the Presence of Progressive Blindness’, an intriguing compilation of curios and figures from Natal and Zulu colonial history in a display cabinet facing rows of empty chairs on one side, and serried ranges of busts on the other. And then there is ‘Afrikaander circa 1600’.

Under this title (to which I shall return) the installation assembles a number of intriguing and suggestive elements in a space of 2.5 x 3 x 4 metres: a museum-like presentation that permits the viewer to look unobserved into an inhabited interior. The installation frames a distinctive cultural-historical terms: it is certainly not a Cape Dutch living room or a hartbeeshuisie, nor is it a modern living room or a township shack. If anything, it suggests a meagre early twentieth-century poor-white home with middle-class aspirations. On the walls there are paintings of traditional South African landscapes (one inserted into one of the three windows). It is sparsely and inappropriately furnished with a standard lamp, a bulky table halfway between a kitchen table and a writing desk and, behind the table, a rocking chair. On the table lies a sculpture of a man’s head – originally, perhaps, part of a statue or bust but now broken down or overturned and out of context, a relic from a more monumental stage. This head lies on the bare tabletop but is supported by a small woven cushion embroidered with beads, the negative forms between the beads forming letters that spell out words in Zulu and English associated with manliness. The central figure of this installation is a man-like, yet inhuman creature with no recognisable face. It is seated in the rocking chair, a steel construction covered with cowhide, rocking slowly back and forth in the chair. Although the swaying figure has no eyes to see with, there is a strong suggestion that its whole attention is on the table and on the sculpted head – which in turn faces towards the creature in the rocking chair. At the centre of all this there is indeed a pair of gleaming eyes belonging to a stuffed antelope head, held by the creature’s stump-like arms and resting on its lap.
The installation as a whole creates its own inner space in which the various elements interact without forming any definite new unity. While there is a connection between the rocking figure and the head on the table, they belong to different material realities: the texture of the cowhide covering the steel construction, like that of the woven cushion on the table, contrast sharply with the stark waxen sculpted head and bare tabletop. These divergent elements call for interpretation though probably not for an allegorical explanation assigning a particular symbolic value or intended ‘meaning’ to each. In his descriptive notes Botha calls the installation ‘essentially a biopsy into the heart of masculinity’, and stresses the significance of his relation to his father as the centre of a series of concentric circles of ever more inclusive cultural and social contexts. In the context of (dis)Appearance(s) the connection between the sculpted male head on the table and the portrait studies of the artist’s father is emphasised. But as such this generates further questions rather than providing potential answers. What can a displaced head on a table or a swaying figure in a rocking chair (with an antelope head on its lap), taken either separately or in conjunction, have to say about ‘masculinity’? Rather than seeking a definitive interpretation, we

would do better to follow up the divergent suggestions and evocations woven into this installation wherever these might lead.

One point of departure could certainly be Botha’s title, ‘Afrikaander circa 1600’. This is clearly an allusion to Afrikaners and to Afrikaner culture and history, though it also has an alienating effect. Rather than the customary ‘Afrikaner’ or even ‘Afrikaan’, the quasi-historical form ‘Afrikaander’ is used. It sounds antiquated, vaguely Dutch – though ‘Afrikaander’ is not and never has been the Dutch version of ‘Afrikaner’. The term has hardly ever been used or appropriated by Afrikaners themselves (I shall have more to say later about some exceptions). ‘Afrikaander’ was typically a somewhat pejorative term used by outsiders, especially in English colonial literature, to denote Afrikaners. Originally, starting from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, ‘Afrikaanders’ was a disparaging term for people of mixed race, but in the course of the nineteenth century it became an increasingly common term for locally born Afrikaans-speaking colonists. However, ‘Afrikaner’ – not ‘Afrikaander’ – was the term used for self-identification and mobilisation, especially in the Cape Colony, since the First Afrikaans Language Movement in the 1870s. The Revd S.J. du Toit’s Genootskap van Regte Afrikaners (Association of True Afrikaners) had its political differences with ‘Onze Jan’ Hofmeyr’s Afrikaner Bond, but this was a disagreement among Cape Afrikaners. At that stage the burghers of the Free State and Transvaal Republics thought of themselves as ‘Boere’ rather than ‘Afrikaners’, and the modern usage of the term ‘Afrikaner’ was not to become generally established until the twentieth century (at which time, too, the term ‘Afrikaander’ fell into disuse, even in English-speaking circles). Today the term ‘Afrikaander’ is an archaism and a curiosity – a museum piece, in fact.

This is of a piece with the rest of the title. ‘Afrikaander circa 1600’, with its learned Latin circa, sounds like a museum label – the explanatory caption of an exhibit. Botha’s installation may indeed be seen as a representative depiction, in an imaginary post-apartheid museum of the future, of a historical or even extinct cultural group in its ethnographic setting (the equivalent of the controversial “Bushman Diorama” in the South African Museum in Cape Town). The origins of the “Bushman Diorama” itself can be traced to nineteenth-century representations and displays of imperial power (which publicly exhibited living examples of conquered communities for their exotic appearance and customs) as well as to the more ‘progressive’ museum practices of early twentieth-century scientific racism which made indigenous ‘races’ and ethnic groups into systematic objects of research and classification.12 Significantly, the “Bushman Diorama” found its definitive format in the specific context of the Van Riebeeck Festival of 1952, giving it a particular place and function in the story of Afrikaner nationalism and South African nation-building in the apartheid context.13 No less significantly, the display is housed not in a cultural-historical collection (which might have been more appropriate) but in a museum of natural history, in close conjunction with taxidermic representations of diverse animal species. In the words of Annie Coombes:

That the exhibit existed and continues to exist in the context of a natural history museum, coupled with the emphatic attention to the fact that the figures are not merely imaginative renditions but actual casts from living people, makes it hard to avoid an association with the art of taxidermy, which after all was (and still is) the staple of most natural science galleries all over the world.14

Obviously there could have been no question of a parallel Afrikaner Diorama in the South African Museum during the apartheid era, when Afrikaners and Afrikaner nationalism were in the seats of power. From a post-apartheid perspective, however – in which Afrikaner power has been reduced to a historical relic – it may become possible to conceive of something like that. Significantly, the central figure in Botha’s ‘Afrikaander circa 1600’ – the man-like but inhuman cowhide creature in the rocking chair – involves a certain modification of the taxidermic practices used in the “Bushman Diorama”.

However, Botha’s installation is deliberately not presented as a representation of modern or even of historical Afrikaners. The title, enigmatically, is ‘Afrikaander circa 1600’ – a date when there could not have been Afrikaners in any sense. As F.A. van Jaarsveld had already argued, the roots of Afrikaner nationalism cannot be traced further back than the 1870s; the ancestors of the “Afrikaners” first became a distinct group in colonial society in the course of the eighteenth century, and in retrospect Jan van Riebeeck in 1652 and the first Free Burghers in 1657 came to be seen as founding fathers of the volk. In 1600, however, there was as yet no trace of any settlement or colonial establishment at the Cape, let alone of ‘Afrikaners’. This ‘Afrikaander’ is thus a non-historical or ahistorical representation, a kind of archetype. That is in line with the appearance of the man-like yet inhuman being in the rocking chair, devoid of a recognisable

visage, slowly rocking back and forth in some kind of private dream world. As an archetype, however, it does have a suggestive impact – difficult to pin down but nonetheless allusive in particular ways.

As a work of art it relates to thematically and/or artistically similar works. In a South African context it might be compared to Jane Alexander’s well-known ‘Butcher Boys’ in the South African National Art Gallery in Cape Town. This work also involves man-like but inhuman figures, archetypal portrayals of perverse and violent forces in apartheid society. In the wider context of modern art, it is particularly reminiscent of themes in the work of the British painter Francis Bacon: in particular, his series of paintings of Pope Innocent X – which in turn hark back to the classic portrait studies by Velasquez. The figure of Velasquez’s magnificently robed Pope, supremely confident on the papal throne yet also bearing in his stern features the unmistakable stigmata of guile and corruption, is an archetypal image of the subconscious forces at work in the public life of church and state. As with his obsessive images of carcases in abattoirs, Bacon’s variations on Velasquez’s images of the imperious papal figure (sometimes portraying the panic and fear of the same figure as a ‘Screaming Pope’) evoke a subconscious world of violence, repressed sexuality and paranoia. The rocking creature in Botha’s ‘Afrikaander circa 1600’, though, is no ‘Screaming Pope’: rather, it is trapped in a dream-world of its own.

At the same time, the figure in the rocking chair cannot be identified with the archetypal ‘Afrikaander’; it is only one of several components in the installation as a whole. There is also the sculpted male head on the table, which certainly does not represent a subconscious archetype or archaeological find from the precolonial era. It is a modern head – chill, matter-of-fact – devoid of hair, beard or headgear. In the context of (dis)Appearance(s) it is strongly associated with Botha’s recently deceased father and Botha’s portrait studies of him. Indeed, it is actually based on a death mask of his father and cast in wax, thus literally embodying the contradictory presence of the beloved but authoritarian father figure. In the context of the installation, though, it
is not actually a complete head; rather, it is suggested that it may have formed part of a sculpture or perhaps of a mounted bust on a pedestal. As such it must have been a portrayal of power and status designed to enforce public respect; ordinary people are not often immortalised in marble busts or statues – or if they are, such sculptures appear in special places on pedestals, in alcoves or as parts of monumental designs. But here the sculpted head lies abandoned on a table, detached from the impressive context to which it once belonged, a defenceless remnant of a more glorious past.

How might this sculpted male head relate to monumental representations of the ‘Afrikaander’? One possible allusion might be to the monumental Strijdom head in Pretoria which, along with the Voortrekker Monument, is probably the closest thing to a totalitarian or fascist representation of Afrikaner history. As a public space Strijdom Square, surrounded by the imposing skyscrapers of the Reserve Bank, Volkskas and State Theatre, may well have been the most potent representation of Afrikaner power at its peak. And the focal point of all this was the enormous Strijdom head, double the height of a man, embellished by its sculptor Danie de Jager with an imperial Roman fountain and equestrian figures. In 1984 Neville Dubow described it in these words: ‘Nowhere does the iconography of power emerge in a South African context with greater clarity than in the piazza of the State Theatre in Pretoria … [The] overscaled Strijdom head with its sundial shadow must surely be one of the most naked and banal expressions of political power to dominate any public place.’

The Strijdom Square and Strijdom head were to feature in two violent and destructive dramas. On 15 November 1988 it was the scene of a racist mass murder by Barend Strydom, leader of an ultraconservative Afrikaner movement, the Wit Wolwe. After pledging himself to the Blood River covenant at the Voortrekker Monument, Strydom deliberately selected Strijdom Square as the chosen place for the opening scene of his envisaged ‘Third War of Freedom’ – a massacre in which he shot eight black people and wounded sixteen more. This massacre took place on the eve of the end to the National Party’s (NP’s) rule and the apartheid regime. The second of the Strijdom Square events was less gory but equally bizarre. On 31 May 2001 – exactly 29 years after Mrs Susan Strijdom, widow of the former NP leader and prime minister, had inaugurated it on Republic Day – the Strijdom monument collapsed because of structural defects and was smashed to pieces in the parking garage below. As reported in the Johannesburg daily, The Star, ‘... the monument was virtually demolished. All that remained were sculptured horses on a plinth alongside the head. The sculpture’s head could not be seen from the side of the square, the centre of which had sunk several metres, as if in a sinkhole’. Another article in The Star described how ‘the bronze bust of Strijdom – the “Lion of the North” – crashed into a 10m-deep chasm. ... Split in two ... it lay unceremoniously dumped among piles of broken concrete and dust’. Rarely since the fall of Shelley’s Ozymandias (“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair.” Nothing beside remains ...) could a monumental display of power have been so spectacularly debunked.

But evidently the sculpted head on the table in Andries Botha’s ‘Afrikaander circa 1600’ is not literally the bronze Strijdom head. As we have seen, it refers rather to Botha’s recently deceased father. It doesn’t have the monumental dimensions of the Strijdom head, nor is it smashed to pieces. There is even something vulnerable about it; with a suggestion of an attempt at tender care. It lies partly on, partly beside the woven cushion, almost as if in a vain attempt to make it more comfortable. Indeed, in its design and placement the cushion functions as part of a ritual of mourning (a ‘rou-kussinkie’). The pertinent question would probably be: what is the function of this sculpted head in the ‘Afrikaander circa 1600’ installation? It is turned to face the swaying figure in the rocking chair, which in turn seems to have its full attention fixed on the table. But the creature has no eyes with which to see the marble head, and the eyes of the sculpted head (based on the waxy death mask) are closed. In the dream world of the rocking figure, the question cannot be ‘who is seeing whom?’, but rather ‘who is dreaming whom?’

One possibility is that the sculpted head is the source of the archetypal image: the rocking creature with its man-like yet inhuman appearance is a dreamt projection of the modern head on the table. On the other hand, the only eyes in the installation are those of the stuffed antelope head on the lap of the seated figure. These eyes are another possible source of the dream-world represented here. The buck is a well-known phallic symbol, and the glistening eyes could be viewed as representing the subconscious mind: unseeing eyes giving shape to subconscious forces and urges.

In the end the key question has to be: who, or where, is the ‘Afrikaander’ in this installation? At one level the answer might well be: not this or that component, not just the archetypal seated figure or only the sculpted head on the table, but the interaction between them, the reciprocal dream projections. At another level, however, the question remains: who or what does the archetypal creature on the rocking chair represent, and how does it relate to the modern head on the table? The antelope head on the lap of the swaying figure may also point in a different direction – the figure might be seen as a ‘kapater’, a castrated buck. If so, the ‘Afrikaander’ as kapater would indicate that the man-like but inhuman creature has been emasculated, just as the sculpted head has been removed from its monumental context. That brings us back to Andries Botha’s own diagnosis: ‘Afrikaander circa 1600’ is a reflection on the Afrikaner’s masculinity, its origins and consequences in a situation where the monuments have fallen and the archetype proves castrated.

Alternative Perspectives on Afrikaners and Afrikaner Nationalism

What does Andries Botha’s ‘Afrikaander circa 1600’ have to do with Hermann Giliomee’s “biography”18 of the Afrikaner? On the face of it, very little. Botha is a visual artist working in stone, wood, paint and woven fabrics to create representations that allude to other representations and giving shape to affective configurations as well as to subconscious themes. Giliomee, on the other hand, is an academic historian who bases his writings on archival and other research in the light of relevant secondary literature; he is also an Afrikaner public intellectual, well-known for his commentaries on current affairs and actively promoting the cause of preserving

and developing the Afrikaans language. Even if their work deals with the same topic (the historical fate of the Afrikaner in a post-apartheid perspective), the points of contact need not be conspicuous or significant. It may well be that they have little to say to each other about ‘the Afrikaner’. Yet such a fundamental difference in approach may yield its own insights: a comparison of the incomparable may bring to light aspects which a more conventional study of each in its own right might overlook. Botha’s ‘Afrikaander circa 1600’ may, after all, cast unexpected light on aspects of Giliomee’s history of the Afrikaners. In the nature of things any such comparison cannot be more than a hit-or-miss affair touching on the particular elements and concerns of the Botha installation.

The first point of comparison is the terminology, the use and meaning of the terms ‘Afrikaner’ or ‘Afrikaander’. Botha offers no explanation or motivation for the ‘Afrikaander’ in his title, and one should be careful not to read too much into it. However, it is evidently an alienating rather than a sympathetic use of the term, fitting the ‘unhistorical’ date of 1600, as label for the archetypal representation of the ‘Afrikaander’ analogous to the “Bushman Diorama”. The historian Giliomee, on the other hand, has long been concerned with the accurate documentation of the terminological development of ‘Afrikaner’ and related terms. Some 30 years after he first expounded this in an article entitled ‘The Development of the Afrikaner’s Self-Concept’ (1975), the relevant passages in Die Afrikaners (2004) once again present a careful summary of the documented uses of ‘Afrikaander’, ‘Afrikaner’ and other variants since the eighteenth century.19 Yet there may be a problem with his handling of the very first documented use of the term ‘Afrikaander’ by Hendrik Bibault (or Biebouw) in 1707, in the context of the burgher uprising against Governor W.A. van der Stel. (This is the major exception to my above statement that the pejorative term ‘Afrikaander’ was rarely used or appropriated by Afrikaners themselves.) In Afrikaner nationalist historiography, and in generations of textbooks and school books, the episode of Bibault’s protest to Landdrost Starrenburg: ‘… ik wil niet loopen, ik ben een Afrikaander al slaat die landdrost myn dood, of al setten hij mijn in den tronk, ik sal, nog wil niet swygen’ 20 (‘I won’t go, I am an Africaander, even if the landdrost beats me to death or throws me in jail, I won’t shut up’) – was presented as the founding moment documenting the birth of an Afrikaner identity. F.A. van Jaarsveld considered it historically comparable to De Crèveceur’s classical question in 1783 about American identity: ‘What, then, is the American, this new man?’21 As against this Giliomee in 1975 emphasised that eighteenth-century Cape colonists usually referred to themselves as ‘Christians’, though he did consider the Bibault incident relevant. In his later writings he repeatedly used the Bibault statement though recognising that it might be problematic. In fact there is a revealing history to the reception of the Bibault text. The record was originally discovered in the archives by Professor J.M.L. Franken, a Belgian by birth and professor of French at Stellenbosch University from the 1920s. In 1928 Franken published his notable finding on the original use of the term ‘Afrikaner’ in an article in Die Huisgenoot entitled ‘Hendrik Bibault of die Opkoms van ’n Volk’ (‘Hendrik Bibault or the Rise

of a Nation’). Franken’s article was the primary source of what soon became the standard version in Afrikaner nationalist literature of Bibault’s slogan ‘Ik ben een Afrikaander’. But that was not at all what Franken had intended. A critical rereading of the Huisgenoot article makes it clear that Franken was anything but a nationalist – on the contrary, he was subtly scornful of his Afrikaner nationalist colleagues at Stellenbosch and their pompous attempts at nation-building. Franken’s version emphasised that Bibault was by no means a gallant burgher standing up for his rights – he was one of the local riffraff and was a drunk to boot. Franken’s use of Bibault’s ‘Ik ben een Afrikaander’ text was very much meant to be a matter of irony. The fact that it was nonetheless appropriated as a prime exhibit of the Afrikaner nationalist corpus says a great deal about the hegemonic effect of emergent Afrikaner nationalism at the time. In his later work Giliomee recognises the problematic status of the Bibault statement:

For Biebouw to use the name Afrikaander for himself … was strange … Far from being an ethnic nationalist … Biebouw … was perhaps more confused than anyone else about his identity. He called himself an Afrikaner, but was the term more than merely descriptive? Did he only want to indicate that he was a native of Africa (in contrast with natives of Europe), or did he imply that Afrikaners of European descent had rights and enjoyed a status that Landdrost Starrenburg, an immigrant, ought not to ignore? Historians cannot answer these questions with any degree of precision.

In his latest work, the New History of South Africa, there is a special box inset on Bibault (or Biebouw) and his celebrated statement. Giliomee once again refers to the problematic meaning of the statement in its historical and social context, but then concludes: ‘It is significant that Hendrik Biebouw, with his tangled roots, did not use any of the existing identifications. He did not say – as one would expect – that he was a German, a Christian or a white. He said: I am from this continent, I am an African.’ With that we are back to an unproblematic, self-identifying use of the term ‘Afrikaner/Afrikaan’, albeit in the new post-apartheid context.

Comparing all this to Andries Botha’s ‘Afrikaander circa 1600’, two conclusions may be drawn. In the first place it is clear that, compared to Botha and his alienating use of the pejorative label ‘Afrikaander’, Giliomee is still in thrall to the Afrikaner nationalist discourse. Secondly, as a historian Giliomee is more interested in the primary history of the Afrikaners than in the secondary history of the construction and reception of the Afrikaner nationalist narrative. Whereas Botha primarily works with representations of Afrikaners, and with representations of representations, so that the term ‘Afrikaander’ connotes an archetype, Giliomee uses the terminological history as an instrument for unravelling the developmental history of the Afrikaners. Or, to put it differently, whereas Botha the visual artist knows that in the final analysis we are always dealing with representations of history, the historian Giliomee believes that a more direct access to the historical material is possible; but, as it turns out, he remains the unconscious captive of a particular historical discourse.

The second possible point of comparison relates to the significance of Botha’s installation, interpreted as an allusion to, or a post-apartheid analogy of, the “Bushman Diorama”. As far
as I have been able to ascertain, neither *The Afrikaners* nor any of Giliomee’s other writings contains any references to the “Bushman Diorama”. In itself this is of no consequence; there is no particular reason why there should be any such reference. In a more general sense, however, it tends to confirm the historian Giliomee’s lack of interest in reception and interpretation of history. The index of *Die Afrikaners* shows that with regard to the San, the book contains passages about cattle trading with the San, war against the San, the Christianisation of the San, the liberation of the San; but there is no indication of the nature and significance of representations of the San in the historical record of modern South Africa. Neither, interestingly, is there in this connection any reference to the Van Riebeeck Festival or to its formative role in the first decade of NP rule after 1948. The symbolic oxwagon trek and the centennial commemoration of the Great Trek in 1938 do receive some attention, first in the context of poor-white politics and then, more pertinent, as a milestone in the development of national awareness; but this too is dealt with rather cursorily and in party-political terms rather than as an interpretation of the symbolic politics involved.

A third point of comparison would be Strijdom and the Strijdom head, including Barend Strydom’s racist massacre. *The Afrikaners* contains not a single reference to the Strijdom sculpture or to the massacre of blacks on Strijdom Square. In itself, this does not necessarily mean anything; there is no particular reason why *The Afrikaners* should mention it. But it is noteworthy that there is only the most cursory reference to Strijdom as a historical figure and political leader in *The Afrikaners*. Strijdom receives far less attention than any other modern Afrikaner leader. By comparison, not only Dr Verwoerd but, for instance, Piet Cillié and N.P. van Wyk Louw are given much greater prominence. As far as I can see, there is no pertinent discussion of the implications of Strijdom’s policy of apartheid as ‘baasskap’. This certainly points to a particular interpretation of Afrikaner history and Afrikaner nationalism in which it is no coincidence that neither the Strijdom sculpture nor Barend Strydom receives a mention. Giliomee’s sympathetic biography of the Afrikaners cannot readily accommodate the totalitarian display of power represented by the Strijdom head or the racist terror of Barend Strydom and the Wit Wolwe. There may, of course, be a sound case for this more sympathetic interpretation of Afrikaner nationalism and history, and it might present a more representative overall account than one that highlights Strijdom (and the Wit Wolwe). But it would be a particular interpretation, and a radically different one, from that represented by Andries Botha’s ‘Afrikaander circa 1600’.

**A Pregnant Silence: The Demise of Afrikaner Nationalism**

The main question that can be raised with regard to Giliomee’s biography of the Afrikaners has to do with his historical account of the rise and fate of Afrikaner nationalism and Afrikaner power.

In the preface to the Afrikaans version of his book, *Die Afrikaners*, this collective biography is presented as the story of a small minority group crushed between ‘the twin boulders of the much more numerous blacks and the English-speakers with their cultural ascendancy’. His own selective summary of the rise and decline of Afrikaners in the course of the twentieth century runs like this: the Boers were the first freedom fighters of the new century; Afrikaners were relatively late in urbanising and at first seemed somewhat lost in the world of finance and the industrial economy, but they took the lead in establishing state corporations and in stimulating local industries so as to make South Africa economically independent. In quick time they developed Afrikaans into a fully-fledged cultural language that could be used in all areas of life; they made the manufacture of petrol from coal into a highly successful industry, built nuclear weapons and performed the first heart transplant. They also instituted apartheid and conducted destructive wars in southern Africa. Giliomee then concludes: ‘In the final analysis, it is the story of people who relinquished power in the 1990s before being compelled to do so, a thing that has happened all too seldom.’ His explanation is that, in the end, what mattered to Afrikaners was survival – a communal and cultural survival that was not equated to the retention of political power.

On closer scrutiny, it is interesting to note that while this compact summary stresses the significance of the Afrikaner relinquishment of political power in the 1990s, the importance of the NP’s ascendancy to power in 1948 is not even mentioned. Even more revealing, in this summary account, there is no direct reference to Afrikaner nationalism as a historical movement and political project. This points to an underlying tension in Giliomee’s approach to Afrikaner nationalism. He is concerned to show that the Afrikaner debate about survival (including heated disputes as to the very meaning of survival) goes back a long way in Afrikaner history. But surely the main, most sustained and most significant manifestation of that collective struggle for survival was the political project of modern Afrikaner nationalism, a project that ended in political catastrophe – so much so that, contrary to all expectations, Afrikaner nationalism as a political force effectively disappeared from the post-apartheid scene. One might have expected that the historian, in his biography of the Afrikaners written from a post 1994 perspective, would have a good deal to say on this subject. Instead, on this particular score we find, for the most part, elliptical omissions and pregnant silences.

Perspectives on the nature and significance of Afrikaner nationalism change in the course of time. Like myself, Giliomee belongs to the generation that came to political awareness in the 1950s: the first generation for whom Afrikaner power was not a ‘republican’ aspiration but a fact of life. During most of our lifetime, Afrikaner nationalism was the dominant political and cultural factor in South Africa to be reckoned with in any conceivable future. Andries Botha belongs to a later generation – the first which, coming of age politically around the 1980s, could anticipate a future on the far side of Afrikaner power. When, in the 1990s, Afrikaner nationalism unexpectedly

28. Giliomee, *Die Afrikaners*, xvi (translated – the new preface has been added to the Afrikaans version of The Afrikaners).
and obligingly disappeared from the South African scene, these different generations were bound to look back with quite different eyes on the fateful demise of that same Afrikaner nationalism in their own lifetimes.

To the historian of Afrikaners and Afrikaner nationalism, however, it must present a considerable challenge. How revealingly different Afrikaner politics since the 1950s now has to appear in the light of a post-apartheid future that was still unthinkable in those years! How are we to understand the Afrikaner nationalism of that era, not only in terms of its own contemporaneous assumptions and aspirations but now that everything has come to pass so entirely differently? The gutless demise of the NP only a few years after the 1994 election, and the failure of the much-dreaded reactionary white ultra-right factions to become any kind of political force, must evoke retrospective questions about the nature and historical substance of earlier Afrikaner nationalism as such. Was the Afrikaner nationalism of the 1970s and 1980s really such a politically and culturally dominant factor as we all thought at the time? Or can we now say, with the wisdom of hindsight, that even then the writing was already on the wall and that the NP regime had been propped up in its final decades by forces other than Afrikaner nationalism?

It is a great pity that *The Afrikaners* cannot or will not confront such issues to any effect. Giliomee’s *magnum opus* has rightly been welcomed on all sides as a standard text which, in many ways, does justice to its complex subject matter and will undoubtedly remain an essential reference work in time to come. Unfortunately, however, it shirks the challenge of a critical assessment of Afrikaner nationalism in the light of its demise. Large tracts of the final chapters, dealing with the political debates and ideological contestations from the 1950s and 1960s, merely recapitulate these in the same terms used by the insiders of the time – whether Piet Cillié, Hendrik Verwoerd, Beyers Naudé or Andries Treurnicht – without any serious attempt at a more critical appraisal from beyond the confines of Afrikanerdom or from a post-apartheid perspective.

To be fair, *The Afrikaners* actually does provide much of the material needed for a proper historicisation of Afrikaner nationalism. Step by step Giliomee discusses and analyses the demographic shifts, socio-economic developments and cultural endeavours that first laid the groundwork for the rise of Afrikaner nationalism and power and then, without anyone noticing, disappeared from the equation. He describes the shifts in the NP’s electoral base and the new political alliances internal to the state apparatus that arose during the 1970s and 1980s displacing the central roles of the party and its former ethnic constituency. But when it comes to the decisive question of the Afrikaner ‘struggle for survival’, he lapses into a quasi-nationalistic discourse, a discourse which in the meantime has lost its political power base and public platform but from which he is unable or unwilling to detach himself.

This is where the contrast with Andries Botha’s *Afrikaander circa 1600* is at its most marked. The installation, on the analogy of the “Bushman Diorama”, presents a kind of Afrikaner Diorama in a post-apartheid perspective reducing Afrikaner nationalism and power to historical relics. Botha is not without compassion for his ‘Afrikaander’; the sculpted head (which also represents his own recently deceased father) is tenderly supported by the woven cushion; but Botha has no illusions about ‘survival’ (of the ‘Afrikaander’ or of his nation). In so far as the once mighty and ruthless ‘Afrikaander’ still survives, it is only in the obsessive dream world of the swaying figure, the kapater in the rocking chair; and in the glistening dead eyes of the antelope head on its lap. Afrikaner nationalism, and the once mighty and pitiless ‘Afrikaander’ with whom it is associated, is irrecoverably dead, but the work of mourning and repentance must go on. That, according to Mitscherlich’s psychoanalytic political theory, is the condition for coming to terms
with a catastrophic history and for the possibility of a new beginning. Giliomee, on the other hand, remains trapped in the problem of Afrikaner ‘survival’ – as though, despite everything, there remains hope that the historical and political endeavour of Afrikaner nationalism might somehow live on. Furthermore, he sees no need, especially in his capacity as a historian, to give ceremonial burial to the corpse of the once powerful Afrikaner nationalism and to take on the bitter work of mourning and repentance. This might also explain his deeply-rooted resistance to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and to its implications for Afrikaners in the wake of apartheid; but that is a topic for another day.


References