

Bulletin 378

Tropenmuseum

# South African family stories

Reflections on an experiment in exhibition making

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# Preface

On 3 October 2002 the Tropenmuseum (Royal Tropical Institute Museum) Amsterdam presented an exhibition called *Group Portrait South Africa: Nine Family Histories (Familieverhalen uit Zuid Afrika: Een Groepsportret)* (see ill. 1). Twelve months and over 100.000 visitors later the exhibition went to the National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria, South Africa, where it opened on 31 March 2003. The exhibition was extended twice before being dismantled in July 2007.

In many ways it was an experimental and risky exhibition and it is remarkable that the management team at the Tropenmuseum endorsed this project. Museum staff did not know the scope and had no insight into collection that would be shown, i.e., what type of objects, what type of new art works would be created during the process. Moreover, the large financial investment caused them to have occasional doubts about the entire process. In hindsight one can argue about the effective result, but the process itself was most enlightening.

I learned much during the process and find myself going over it again and again. Apart from being a fascinating work experience, it was a highly personal adventure, too. I met dozens of fantastic people, some of whom will stay friends forever.

The experience is worth sharing with others not directly involved in the project. For the following reasons, it is appropriate to produce a record of the entire experience for future use and to keep the experiment alive. Firstly, the Family Stories project touched on many issues that are relevant to contemporary discussions in museology: community, memories, immaterial heritage, interpretation of objects and images and ownership of objects. It is also an interesting example within the social and political debates on how to present national heritage and history, inter-culturality, identity, ethnicity, modern life and tradition, the collective and individual, the global and the local.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, it raises issues regarding interdisciplinary approaches in museums (combining high art, low art, documentary photography and family snapshots) and generated superb works of art and photographs from the best artists in South Africa.

The book accompanying the exhibition is also a valuable source of the factual content of the project. It gives detailed stories of the nine families and contains more than 250 reproductions of photographs, documents, objects and artworks.

I have already thanked a long list of participants who helped us realise the project in this publication.<sup>2</sup> My gratitude to these people remains undiminished.

This publication brings together a critical essay by Ciraj Rassool and Leslie Witz, reviews of the exhibition and the accompanying book, as well as my own reconstruction of the process.

I hope it will inspire or at least entertain the reader.

Paul Faber  
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# Making the *Family Stories* exhibition

Paul Faber

In 1999 the Management Team of the Tropenmuseum asked for my reactions to an exhibition proposal about South Africa that we had received from Paris. This proposal, which later developed into the *Ubuntu, Arts and Cultures of South Africa* exhibition in the Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens was, in my opinion, unsuitable for the Tropenmuseum.

The Paris plan, a perfectly valid approach, intended to show important ethnographic collections but bypassed the political reality of the Republic of South Africa (RSA) at that time and its more recent history. I thought the Tropenmuseum required a different approach, with its history of political and moral commitment and its location in a city that played an active role in the anti-apartheid struggle.

For those reasons, we felt it apt to mount an exhibition on South Africa. During the 1990s the political climate in South Africa changed radically. Nelson Mandela, was released and the ban on the African National Congress (ANC) was lifted. Democratic elections were held leading to the appointment of Nelson Mandela (b. 1918) as President of South Africa in 1994. After 5 years of new relations it seems interesting to look back, evaluate the impact of these changes, and present ideas for the future.

Holding an exhibition on South Africa, or South African art and culture, was not an original idea at the time. Prior to 1990 South Africa had been largely isolated. The first decade after the change of government was a time for reconnecting. This resulted in such an influx of curators and a flood of exhibitions, books and reports and other events that by the year 2000, the Tropenmuseum's publicity department was uncertain if South Africa could still garner public interest.

It was far from easy to catch the spirit of this new South Africa and the changes that had taken place there, using only art and culture. For the first few months after I was asked to write a proposal, I focused on researching ideas related to the overall concept of identity. I believe that identity is key to understanding some of South Africa's history, identity not as an immutable concept, but rather identities as weapons, identities that were forged, debated, imposed, ignored, broken, weakened and strengthened in a crucible of conflicts.

The result of this approach, insightful and supported by various advisors though it was, was too academic to translate into a public-oriented exhibition environment with practical requirements including appeal, accessibility, comprehensibility, visibility and emotional effectiveness.

I changed my mind because of three events that occurred during the transition from 1999 to 2000. The first was the publication of my 86-year-old father's first book dealing with his childhood in Leeuwarden. There was family pride in this accomplishment of course, but as I leafed through the pages I realised the difference between reading about a certain historical period (in this case the 1920s/30s) in a personal narrative and the general overviews taught in history lessons at school.

My second insight came when, through friends, I acquired an art video called 'My Lovely Day' by the South African artist Penny Siopis. The video consisted of old family film footage, and a voiceover by her grandmother, recounting her life. The setting was South Africa; the stories were about migration and loss that were compounded by associations. This combination gave a message quite different from those conveyed by shocking newspaper headlines and photographs.

Finally, I came across a collection of highly stimulating essays titled *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*.<sup>1</sup> The insights gained from these and other sources suddenly made me realise (awareness grows slowly, but insight comes suddenly) that we needed to drastically alter our approach. The idea of starting with large abstractions and slowly finding a route to more concrete manifestations (or rather illustrations) was replaced by a basic, tangible approach. Ten families would represent the complexities of South African society – the drama and hope, the extreme confrontations as well as daily life – in an impressionistic but compelling way. Real families we can see and meet, a group of individuals, like our museum visitors, people like us, but with one difference: their lives were and are determined by the long and complicated history of South Africa.

The family angle had, I felt, two other important advantages: it would enable exhibition visitors to identify with the people they would 'meet' and create common ground for the different cultural, economic, political backgrounds we would present. Universally we all grow up in some sort of family.<sup>2</sup> The thought carried me away completely. Not so my main advisor at the time. When I mailed him enthusiastically about my idea, he replied: 'Who on earth is interested in families!' and refused further co-operation.

## **The concept: staged realities**

The idea was simple enough, but refining it was complicated by all manner of unforeseen obstacles: How to choose the families? How can an exhibition portray the life of a family? Could the Tropenmuseum collection be incorporated? If not, what would we exhibit?

The answers were not immediately obvious. Solutions came slowly. It is impossible to precisely reconstruct the development, but in the first concept of 17 January 2000, the idea was described as follows:

*The South Africans of this day have complicated, torn lives behind them. In the succession of generations the history of the land lies hidden. The rainbow nation incorporates descendants of warriors and gold diggers, Zulu and English, kings and cattle drivers, praise singers and jazz musicians. Descendants of historical figures like Shaka and Dingaan, Kruger and Retief. Some families are rooted in the continent; others trace their ancestry back to India and China, England, France and the Netherlands.*

*The exhibition All the Colours of the Rainbow tells the story of a number of these families.*

and:

*We tell the story of the South Africans through a number (to be decided later, 10?) of families. These families will be followed over several generations, so that we can generate insights into the developments over time. The history will be told through the impact that it has had on the lives of individuals. It is not important to visualise the lives of the families in a 'complete' way – that is impossible anyway. We will highlight certain leading figures most suited to tell a part of the story.*

The working title of this first concept was 'All the Colours of the Rainbow', inspired by Desmond Tutu's phrase 'the rainbow nation'. However this concept was coming under increasing criticism in South Africa and was considered outdated by 2000. Moreover, the image of the rainbow, although graphically very attractive, suggested different ethnic, cultural and linguistic groups side by side. This did not match the 'family' concept or the individual approach, but rather a loose combination of individuals that could not easily be grouped together.

Finding a good alternative was difficult. We prepared a long list of possible titles, but in the end we settled on what we used as the practical day-to-day description, the *Family Stories* exhibition.<sup>3</sup>

In early 2000 we were working towards a more structural approach and decided to focus on one representative from each generation as the main vehicle for our family stories, covering the 20th century. An important element was added later. We decided to include a teenager to represent the youngest generation. Because these teenagers were born during apartheid, but had grown up in the post-apartheid era, they would, to an extent, represent the new South Africa. It would also be interesting to examine the lives of the older generations and hear their perspective on history. The teenagers' ideas on contemporary society and their hopes for the future would be revealing.

This idea had the potential to incorporate the future into the project as well, and eventually led to a separate installation comprising an interactive unit with cut out figures and monitor (see ill. 15). It also added an additional condition to our search for suitable families.

It should be emphasised here that our eventual core family was therefore *not* the nuclear family (parents and children), but a much more random group of 3 or 4 family members, each from a different generation, spanning the 20th century. In each family the last in the line was a teenager, and the first-generation representative was usually deceased. We represented this core family in a graphic way by mounting portraits on their family tree. It was usually impossible to do this in a photograph. The large group portraits (see ill. 14) therefore do not completely match the content of the exhibition.

As mentioned earlier, the first exhibition concept used specific terminology: 'stories' instead of 'histories', and 'leading players' instead of 'key figures'. This refers to an important factor that influenced our approach until the project was completed: should we try to reconstruct reality as much as possible, or construct an exhibition based on reality?



Spanning the 20th century: Kathy Ebersohn and her great-grandmother, Amy Louw, 2001.  
Photograph Cedric Nunn.

We were always aware of the limitations of the first option and were therefore inclined to the second. We had limited space to convey complex information, personal feelings and the emotional values of several individuals through exhibition methods (i.e., more visual than textual) in a way that would be comprehensible to visitors of different ages and backgrounds without prior knowledge of South African history or society.

As curators with different personal views, we had to be aware that we would be adopting an approach very similar to that used by a short story writer, or a film director working on an historically accurate project. One necessarily selects, omits, integrates and contextualises. We consciously combined literary quotes ('slices of reality') with poetic readings.

It was essential that our stories were constructed completely around and very close to those we wanted to present, i.e., the project would be biographic, not ethnographic. A consequence was that we could not use the Tropenmuseum collection at all. Normally it was a condition of our major exhibitions that a large part of the exhibited material would come from our own collections.

We therefore had to use other biographical material to visualise our stories, stories that we had yet to discover. We decided on two approaches. First, we would try to locate and borrow personal objects, family photographs, documents, etc., from the families themselves. Second, we would commission new objects and images from artists and photographers.

This approach led to the forming of multidisciplinary teams around each family (see ills. 2, 4). Besides the personal objects we could borrow from them, which would connect their personal history to the objects, and the personal family snapshots, which would form the visualisation of family histories by the families themselves, we would include works by photographers who would document the contemporary lives of family members who were still alive, and the visions of visual artists. Their work could uncover those layers of history that documents or objects cannot convey. We later expanded our team by including writers/historians who would conduct more content-based research and contribute essays to our publication, as well as designers who would help us conceptualise the exhibition space.

## **Organisational structure**

This seemed a sensible and logical approach, but starting with 10 families who still had to be identified, multiplying by 4 (members of each team) and considering the diverse geography and history, the mission became rather daunting.

A meeting in Amsterdam in May 2000 with Penny Siopis, an energetic and versatile artist who seemed to know everyone in South Africa, helped me confront my naïve underestimation of the complexity of the project.

After my first trip to South Africa in June 2000 we realised that this project would only work if we had planners *in situ*. We decided to appoint a co-ordinator in the three main locations, Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town. They would review, stimulate and co-ordinate the work in 'their' region and deal with practical issues. Considering the logistical complexities of the operation, the extremely resourceful co-ordinators, Bie Venter, Nicky du Plessis and Roger van Wyk, were all crucial to the projects' success. Each co-ordinator guided the organisational activities for the families and teams in his or her region. Bie Venter was also responsible for transporting all the objects and images to the Netherlands.

A large part of the work had to be done in South Africa, but it required integration into the context and overall plans of the Tropenmuseum. Good contact was vital between the Amsterdam team – Susan Legêne, the project leader; Jolande Bouman from the education department, who left the Tropenmuseum just before the opening; and myself – and the various participants throughout South Africa. This was tackled during five visits to South Africa between June 2000 and November 2001, and by thousands of e-mails (this project definitely could not have been realised without e-mail). Penny Siopis's trip to Amsterdam in December 2000 to develop the first spatial ideas for the overall design was funded by the Artist in Residence Programme of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. Basic contracts were agreed with all the co-ordinators, artists and photographers. We made loan agreements with families from whom we borrowed objects.

To monitor progress, we created a sounding board committee in the Netherlands of creative producers and people who knew South Africa well. We met four or five times at crucial moments in the development process.

This framework worked well, but did not prevent all kinds of disasters that are part of (South African) life.

I had to persuade Nicky du Plessis to join the project just after she was carjacked. She was in a foul mood, having lost her laptop and other valuables, but I had no other options and, to my great relief, convinced her to join the team.

Another dramatic event happened on November 2001. We gathered at 7 in the morning at my small and homely guesthouse in Melville, Johannesburg, to finally make that long anticipated trip to Mafeking to visit Tumi Plaatje, which had twice been cancelled. Penny Siopis, Ruth Motau, Steve Lebelo and I had a quick cup of coffee inside. Another guest who I knew by sight was awake. As we prepared to leave 10 minutes later, Penny could not find her car keys, which she had left on the table. A minute later we were outside: the car had disappeared, along with our cameras and other belongings. The other guest had disappeared as well, and his room was vacant. As this was our only chance to round up the Plaatje story, Steve and I hired a car and a driver and left, leaving Penny and Ruth behind, downbeat and sad, to deal with the police.

These were exceptions obviously, the extremes of endless trips, meetings and dealings that brought the puzzle together.

## Choosing the families

The first concept of 17 January 2000 included the following statement about the initial approach and process of selecting families:

*The families and main characters will be chosen on the grounds of available information (publications, diaries, oral histories, suitable intermediaries), the power and depth of their stories, the diversity of their origins and events that shaped their lives, visualisation by means of photographs (family albums), objects (primarily family possessions, possibly comparable objects), films, sound recordings and new interviews.*

This description sums up the practical considerations, as we knew we could not afford to start from scratch. Working with anonymous families only would be impossible, as it would require too much basic research. It was necessary to start with families – or at least individual family members – who had already been researched, where accessible pictorial and textual sources were available. It would be especially important to find ego documents. From the beginning we decided not to present people from a neutral museal perspective, but to let the people present themselves as much as possible. In other words, we wanted to incorporate texts written in the first person. It was therefore necessary to access diaries, letters, etc., to represent the older generations, sadly no longer alive. Obviously this approach would partly define the families we chose: we could find information on well-known and important families, but not about the anonymous families.

Although we had stressed our desire to present ‘ordinary people’, we realised that integrating more high-profile families would not harm the project, and could be effective in terms of publicity. We were always concerned whether our visitors would be interested in families that no one knew. We finally settled on a mixture of families that played a rather important role in history and people with a more modest place in society.

Several potential stories emerged during our preliminary research and meetings with historians and other South Africa experts in the Netherlands.

At an early stage, a Dutch historian proposed the **Le Fleur** family as an example of a family with a complicated history, with old roots and contemporary relevance. This family was included as an option in the first concept (January 2000) and was retained in the final selection.

Early in the process another of our Dutch advisors suggested Sol **Plaatje**. There was an excellent biography available, as well as early photographs and his Mafeking diaries, which are important ego documents. We were only able to construct a complete genealogy that included a teenager much later, however.

A compelling story that was served to us on a platter was that of Dolly **Rathebe**. The theatre at the Royal Tropical Institute organised a festival on South African film in September 2000. The program was compiled by the Canadian filmmaker Peter Davies and was based on his book *In Darkest Hollywood* focusing on early 'black' cinema.<sup>4</sup> The most appealing film in the program was *Jim comes to Jo'burg*,<sup>5</sup> the first South African film with an all-black cast. Dolly Rathebe starred in the film and was invited to the festival as a guest of honour. Dutch newspapers published details of her life story. I met her and was greatly inspired by her personality. We agreed that we would meet in her house in Mabupane when I visited South Africa to discuss the exhibition.

I also met Margriet Numan, who ran the *Drum* magazine archive in Johannesburg at that time, during her visit to the Netherlands. A large photographic exhibition in Rotterdam presented material from the magazine. The archive helped locate photographs of Dolly Rathebe during the 1950s.

Most of the later developments in this area were aided by visits to South Africa and endless discussions with South African contacts: writers, artists, historians, museum colleagues, photographers and anyone else I encountered. Most were enthusiast and helpful, others less so, especially in the project's formative stage.

A Dutch journalist working in South Africa suggested I contact the **Juggernath** family in Durban. She knew the family quite well, told interesting stories about their activist years, and knew that they had conducted some research into their family history.

Through staff at the District Six Museum and several historians in Cape Town we managed to contact Ebrahim **Manuel** (see ill. 8), who was trying to attract attention to his research into the early history of his family going back to Indonesia. However, as we had decided to focus more on the 20th century we asked for and found very different but equally compelling stories involving his grandfather Bakaar and his aunt Kobera (see ill. 5), who were forcibly relocated from Simonstown to a new township called Oceanview in the 1960s.

The process was thus more driven by coincidence and intuition than by statistics, a structural approach or encyclopaedic orientation. The unpredictability made me nervous at first. I presented my plans and the slowly developing group of families to anyone who would listen. I accepted the strange twists of fate, and tried to steer it to a point of balance. Being representative was crucial.

In our view the project could be seen as dealing with South Africa at large. On the other hand we thought it a bad idea if the exhibition was the result of statistics. It needed to have that unexpected, individual character that defines real people. Still we thought that crucial historical events and the most important population groups

should be represented. It would be strange if large chunks of history were omitted. Our consequent search for an interesting family with links to Zulu history led us to the **Mthethwa** family, originally suggested by a curator of the Kwamuhle Museum in Durban. Zizwezonke Mthethwa, a well-known *sangoma* (traditional healer) who danced with snakes seemed a bit of a cliché at first. However, meeting his son, who was a bus driver, and his grandson, who was hesitating between city life and a countryside position, helped us make up our minds. Such contrasts always make interesting stories.

I was especially eager to identify 'non-linear' families, families with internal contradictions, with different opinions between or within generations, mixed families, in contrast to 'typical, representative' families.

A good example was my meeting with Cedric **Nunn**. I had seen his sensitive photographs of his family in *Democracy's Images*, where he presented a series called 'Blood Relatives'.<sup>6</sup> I wanted to ask him to be one of the photographers of the project. Penny Siopis introduced us in a bar in Johannesburg. After I had outlined the project, he told me the incredible story of his family.

Back in my hotel, I realised I had to include his story in the exhibition. It clarified the potential of the exhibition completely. Cedric lived in Johannesburg. His teenage daughter aspired to be a writer and had independent ideas on her life in the new South Africa. His 100-year-old grandmother lived on a small farm surrounded by Zulu farmers. The race question played heavily in the lives of Cedric, his parents and grandparents. And the story goes back to John Dunn, an almost legendary character in 19th-century Natal.

As the project was a Dutch initiative, it seemed logical to include a family with Dutch roots. A journalist again identified the first candidate, but there were too many obstacles and as we drew nearer the family pulled back. Then Annari van der Merwe, an editor at Kwela Publishing, suggested the **Steyn** family. The current generation is descended from the last president of the Orange Free State, so there would be no lack of documentation. Some family members still live on the old family farm 'Onze Rust' near Bloemfontein.

During my second trip we paid them a visit. We were received by Mrs Yvonne Steyn, widow of the ex-president's grandson. The house was partly a museum. The atmosphere was steeped in the past and was so disturbing in some ways that we were inclined to abandon it as too monolithic. After a brief discussion we postponed the decision until after meeting the other branch of the family in Cape Town. That family showed another spirit and it was specifically this contrast within the family that made it an interesting and authentic story.

The **Galada** family was the last family chosen. We had really sought a family with certain characteristics. When we reviewed the group selected thus far, we realised that a few important historical issues were not represented: labour migration, for instance, and the relocation from the Transkei to the Cape. We were directed to the small community museum, the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum, in Lwandle township

near Cape Town. Through the museum we met Cynthia Galada. Cynthia is a remarkable woman. She had spearheaded several initiatives in her community: she ran a kindergarten and a bakery, and was active in her church and in the choir. She had bought a house for her parents in Barkeley East and planned to spend the forthcoming Christmas holidays with them. Cynthia was happy to participate, and our co-ordinator Roger van Wyk was flexible enough to hop on a bus with the family a few weeks later and travel 1500 kilometres to Barkley East.

That we finally agreed on nine families was a result of negotiation. We had arbitrarily started with ten, but at one point, the museum staff, concerned with rising costs, urged us to select only eight families. Dropping two of the prospective families meant losing too many nuances of the overall story, so we settled on nine of them: **Juggernath, Galada, Manuel, Le Fleur, Steyn, Plaatje, Rathebe, Nunn, and Mthethwa**. It was mainly the choice of families that sparked debate. A participating writer once cynically described the families as 'The Big Five'. I have described how the choice came about and up till now I feel that I can defend our decision.

### **Nine ideas on history**

At some point in the process and certainly now when reviewing the project, I realised that the idea of presenting the history of the nine families was not just *our* idea: all these families were often quite actively involved in making history themselves. We asked them if we could join them and observe their own processes for a while. That these families were actively concerned with keeping their histories alive was no accident. It had to do with the way we came into contact with them. If we had picked families at random, from the phone directory, for example, it would not have been the same.

When I realised this, I saw yet another dimension, another layer in the unusual process we were involved in. All these families had an active interest in history and were more or less shaping it. But they all did it in a different way. Apart from the specific experiences, this project was also about the various ways individuals use, interpret and make history.

We had a classic example of oral history in Zizwezonke Mthethwa, who had an uncanny knowledge of the past and who defined his present actions regarding the positions that his forefathers had taken – going back to the 18th and 19th centuries – in a way that directly connected these early events to the present day. He passes this knowledge on by telling stories to his children and grandchildren. His ancestors are around him physically, buried in the graveyard in his compound, testimony to his connection with ancient Mthethwa history.

Ebrahim Manuel's almost obsessive quest to connect himself to the past is an outstanding case. That several sources had told us about Ebrahim Manual was a



Zizwezonke Mthethwa at the graves of his forefathers, 15 November 2000.  
 Photograph Paul Faber.

consequence of this drive. His story had a magical dimension. He had lived an ordinary life as a sailor. After his father died, he appeared to Ebrahim in a dream and told him to research the family history. Ebrahim subsequently searched in old *kitaabs* (holy books) and archives, and found references to an 18th-century forebear who was banished by the Dutch from Sumbawa in Indonesia to Robben Island. Ebrahim went to Indonesia and, again guided magically, found the village and reconnected with his family. Ebrahim's story as he told it became part of the exhibition. Whether his research is 'beyond any doubt' was not much of an issue. Another family later contested his version. What was important to us was his enormous effort to reconnect with a respectable history, to connect himself with a brave independence fighter instead of a history marked by slavery.

This story is not that relevant to the exhibition: after all, we were focusing on the 20th century. That part provided us with his aunt Kobera's intense personal recollections and photographs and the amazing diary kept by her father (Ebrahim's grandfather) Bakaar Manuel, during his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1903, visiting London on the way.

(Family) history was also important for the Juggernaths. The move by the great-grandparents from India to South Africa seemed still recent. Especially after the death of Janey's father, the *pater familias*, the need was felt to document their history.

The family published a very neat and well-illustrated brochure which we found most helpful.

With the Nunns, history was kept alive in a very informal way. For many family members it centred on visits by Lily Nunn, Cedrics mother. On those occasions a box of photographs was taken out from under the bed, and the family would sit on the bed, and discuss the photographs. And the stories would come. This image was so appealing that we arranged to film one of these family occasions. The result, filmed by Markus Toerien, was shown on a television set in the Nunn unit, in a section representing Lily's life (see ill. 19).

More even than for the Manuals, history for the Le Fleurs means proving and founding their present position. The family line is an important link to the tradition of leadership, as it connects the present-day generations with the almost mythical founder, the prophet Andrew Abraham Stockenström Le Fleur. On a wider scale, historical research is used to connect Griqua history with the land itself. The writer of the Le Fleur story, Henry Bredekamp, was also involved in establishing new heritage sites, landmarks that connect the history of groups like the Griqua with certain parts of the country, indicating that their history is as meaningful as that of formerly dominant groups.

For the Steyn's, creating a record of the past, as happens in the house-museum 'Onze Rust', means documenting past glories. The past can become a place one can flee to for comfort or safety, and Onze Rust is a relic that should be cherished. The past here has no continuity, it is sealed off from the present. The museum is a reconstruction of what once was. As much as Mthethwa's history is an oral one, detailed but illusive, the Steyn history is a material one: the past is preserved in hundreds of objects, photographs and documents (see ill. 3). Some family members cherish this history; for others the past is a book that can be read and closed before moving into the future.

For the Plaatje descendants, history is also proof of past greatness, but for the Plaatje family, that greatness has now much more value than reality did then. Sol Plaatje was one of the founding members of the ANC. Now that the ANC has political power, Sol's name is seen in a different light. He is generally considered a predecessor of Nelson Mandela and schools are named after him and his portrait appeared on a stamp.

Demonstrating that you are a descendant of such a remarkable figure has actual relevance. Tumi Plaatje tried to honour that memory by founding a choir and naming it after her illustrious ancestor. The National Museum in Bloemfontein exhibits their family tree, linking Tumi and Popo Molefe, her husband at that time, with Sol Plaatje.

All these family histories were related to the 'history of the nation'. For all families, their perceptions of their own histories changed radically and intensified by the end of the apartheid era. In the beginning we thought we would leave out the big picture

altogether, but we later decided to integrate it for educational reasons. This was done by literally making 'stepping stones'. We drew up a list of a few dozen meaningful, history-shaping events that were connected to a date or period. We made large red stickers naming each event and pasted them on the floor of the oval-shaped open square in the centre of the exhibition. They served as a reminder to the public. A touch-screen computer in the centre enabled them to connect specific historical events with specific moments in the lives of various family members (see ill. 10, 14).

### **Nine ideas on family**

Our simple concept of 'nine south African family stories' implied a relatively clear idea of what a 'family' is. While we were engaged in the selection process and, later, when translating personal events into an exhibition unit and a book text, we discovered that the concept of 'family' differed in each case. The 'family' is a favourite subject for an anthropological survey. I am not an anthropologist, and the project was not born from that orientation at all, but while working with the chosen 'families' it became clear that the question of what comprises a family is far from consistent. In all cases the chosen families are primarily connected by bloodlines. However, it is much more complex in social and cultural terms. The basic (Western) family unit – father, mother, children and so on to the next generation – had several variations. Cedric Nunn and Ebersohn divorced a long time ago; the Plaatje-Molefe marriage ended before the opening of the exhibition; and several families included children from previous relationships. Ebrahim Manuel did not have any children so the generation line was created with his aunt and nephew; Zizwezonke Mthethwa had and has many wives and children. Cynthia Galada ran away from home when her parents forced her to marry an old man, and she was reconciled to them only many years later.

The different ideas on history were often linked to ideas on families. Zizwezonke Mthethwa divided history into family generations, mostly through the line of male elders, like the Steyn family. For the Steyn's, naming children after their male grandparents was a way in which this attitude to family history was expressed.

The history of apartheid was also reflected in the actual family lives and perceptions, for example, in the disruptive influence of labour migration, homelands, and pass laws. The Nunn story is very much about how the colour issue affected the way people interacted, how they perceived themselves and others. Even the much younger Kathy suffered because of it, being the result of a relationship across the colour line.

Dolly Rathebe, a talented singer who came to prominence during the early days of apartheid, became a victim of this political change as well as of her career. After several failed relationships, she left her children with family members, spent years in Cape Town, and tried to shield her children from the harsh realities of life in a segregated country. In the 1990s, when her career picked up again, she became the

*mater familias* who tried to keep her family afloat, acting as both 'father and mother' to her children and grandchildren.

The Juggernaths on the contrary are a very close-knit family, which organises many activities in the context of the extended family, with gatherings of uncles and aunts, nephews and nieces, birthday parties and weddings.

Looking at the visual side of it, we realised that a family as a social unit is very temporal. Individual family members get on with his or her own life, but at specific moments they gather and reinforce their familial bonds. These moments were particularly important for our photographers. In almost every case we discussed with the photographers possible opportunities to photograph family gatherings. The Juggernaths had their annual family cricket tournament (missed it), the Galadas had their Christmas holidays back home (got it), the Manuels had their Islamic Id festival (got it), the Le Fleurs the Griqua National Conference, the Mthethwa's an ancestors' day, etc. Besides these regular annual festivities, there were also some unique opportunities such as Yuri Juggernath's 21st birthday party and the funeral of Tumi Plaatje's father Johannes.

These images did not convey everything about the real value of family relationships. But that was not the essence of the exhibition. In spite of the differences, the family was a workable concept enabling us to group several individuals with related backgrounds together so that we could compare a view on history from the perspectives of different generations.

## **Stressing the personal**

Right from the outset the individual, biographical approach was essential. We wanted to create an environment where exhibition visitors could 'meet' a number of South African contemporaries, of real life, as if they could sit down with them and have a heart-to-heart talk. We had to achieve this without the people actually being here. Many presentational elements were used to achieve this goal.

Having large group portraits was a powerful aid to achieving this. The life-size portraits presented people who looked at you from close by. Their personal objects enforced the idea of reality and authenticity. On the next level we decided that all texts inside the units should be words actually said or written down by the protagonists: not third-person museum texts, but first person texts commenting on objects or clarifying moments in their lives. We managed to organise this in an acceptable way. We frequently asked family members to say something about specific objects and photographs. We often took quotes from the texts written for the publication that accompanied the exhibition. We had briefed the authors to pay close attention to the actual words used by those they interviewed. As the texts were quotations, we decided that a small portrait photo beside the text would be the best way to clarify who had said what.



Kathy's corner in the Nunn unit. A handwritten diary (copied from a real texts) a notice board with photographs and handwritten comments and a painting by Kathy. Visitors could see Kathy's photographs of her school and friends in the viewfinder of the camera. Photograph Irene de Groot.



All texts inside the units were quotations. Small portraits with captions indicated authors of the texts, in this case Dolly Rathebe commenting on her visit to her mother's grave, with her son Smilo. Photograph Irene de Groot.

In some cases we used handwritten texts to stress the personal character of the information. The texts were real, but the handwriting was fake: we used our colleagues' handwriting for variation.

I asked my daughter to write the Dutch translations of the diary texts that Kathie Nunn gave us. In one instance we actually recorded spoken texts. Sonja Loots brought a sound recorder and asked Mrs Yvonne Steyn to comment on a number of old photographs. Her comments could be heard by pressing a button next to the photographs.

To deal with the fact that it was rather complicated to present the overall context with quotations only, we made the separation between the 'inside' and the 'outside'. Only quotes were used inside the nine units, and a brief description of the structure and history of the families and a relevant map were mounted on the outside of each unit.

The most direct way to interact personally with the texts was via the interactive installation with cut outs and a monitor that formed the teenager unit. We asked all the teenagers the same three questions (In ten years, where will you live, what will you do, how will South Africa have changed?). We filmed them answering in their homes. Exhibition visitors could 'ask' the same questions of any of the teenagers and watch them answering on a mobile monitor.

We introduced a birthday calendar as the final tool. Birthday calendars are quite specific to Dutch culture: most families use one to help them remember important dates. They are usually found in the toilet! We placed the calendar inside a small corridor connecting the central square with a aisle housing Penny Siopis's installation 'The Archive'. We recorded many relevant dates on the calendar: births, marriages and deaths. It would connect the exhibition characters in time (Eric and Sarah Le Fleur were married on the same day as my parents), but it also personalised the experience of each visitor ('Look, today is Nomakaya's birthday!').

To top it off, we placed a real Dutch mailbox beside the calendar (see ill. 28). Visitors could write postcards to family members and post them in this box, and thanks to the NIZA (Dutch Institute for Southern Africa), these were actually sent to the addressees. Although public reaction to this was disappointing, the idea of the calendar appealed to many.

I found out through this process that the day of the opening of the exhibition, 3 October, was not only my mother's birthday, but also the birthday of Mrs Yvonne Steyn and Herbert Nunn. Naturally I used this information in my opening speech.

## **Big brother**

One ethical issue became apparent during the process, that of privacy. It was a direct result of presenting our theme through very personal, identifiable real-life people. I thought and still think that approach was absolutely sound: we wanted to bring the

whole of South Africa closer to our audience, we wanted our visitors to be able to identify completely with our families, to make them develop an affective relationship based on understanding, compassion and appreciation.

However, the other side of the coin was that we offered thousands of people a glimpse into their private lives. Did they realise clearly enough the type of process they were about to participate in? It is difficult to say. I always had my documentation with me and explained the idea behind the project and what we hoped the final result would be. Of course, that result was the product of a long and complex process and we often only knew quite late ourselves how it would be. I saw the families for the last time in November 2001, 11 months before the opening. I believe we were sensitive to the vulnerability of the families and did not present them in a way that would invoke unfair judgements.

One can ask what motivated the visitors to attend the exhibition. Was it an unhealthy interest, the kind of ambivalent curiosity or voyeurism that drives people to watch television series such as the dreadful reality show *Big Brother* (of Dutch origin)? Personally I think that people are interested in people, this is why they read biographies and appreciate stories with convincing personalities. This is a positive and human trait.

One book review, published on the Internet by the American professor Nesbitt,<sup>7</sup> consisted of long, detailed and elegant summary of the nine family stories. In his closing paragraph he wondered if this represented a present-day version of the colonial 'Völkerschau' of the 19th century. In my opinion, this observation misses the point of the project but indicates at least how sensitive issues of representation are.

## **The poetry of personal objects**

Our ideal was that the exhibition would present South African families who would tell their own stories. The essence of the family histories lay in experiences and recollections, which meant it would be idea-based and text-based. But we needed tangible ingredients to make an exhibition. Personal objects were part of the solution. We cannot reconstruct history as such, but people often have mementos that serve as tools to reconstruct the past.

I encountered the prototype of this at the start of the project when I met Janey Juggernath in July 2000. She showed me a pair of gold earrings; they had charm, but were not spectacular. I imagined the usual museum caption: 'Gold earrings. Indian design, early 20th century. Private collection'. Then Janey told me her story. Her grandmother bought the earrings in 1918. They were destined for her son's future wife. When, years later, this son (Janey's father) married, the earrings were given to his young fiancé. She wore them on her wedding day and never took them out until the day she died. Now the earrings would go to Janey's eldest daughter Yuri.



Personal objects: Janey Juggernath holding her mother's earrings. Her mother put them in on her wedding day and wore them until the day she died.

Photograph Sean Laurenz.

After this story I could not look at the earrings with the same eyes again. They were loaded with history, transformed forever, symbolising '*le temps perdu*'. This started an ongoing quest to find personal objects that captured moments in history. We found wonderful examples: the passbook of Cynthia's father Petelele Sobayi and the small trivial objects he had kept from his time as farm hand (see ill. 17); the beautiful vest that had belonged to auntie Kobera's father, Hadji Bakaar Manuel. He had bought it in Mecca during his Hadj in 1903 and worn it on the day he arrived back in Simonstown. There was also the walking stick carved by Amy's second husband, Dandy Louw; Eric Le Fleur's typewriter; the Steyn's rugby caps (see ill. 22); and Dolly Rathebe's handbag.

It became clear that these objects usually related to everyday family history. They were meaningful but very personal mementos (see ills. 8, 24). They were objects of nostalgia, harking back to a time that seemed special, for either negative or positive reasons. Personal objects occasionally became political as well. A spectacular example was the wedding gown Tumi Platje wore when she married Popo Molefe just after the political change in 1990. Instead of classical white, they chose fabrics with West-African wax-print designs and ANC colours!

As expected, the existence and the personal relevance of material possessions varied greatly among the families because of differences in wealth and culturally defined values. Not much was found in the Mthethwa family home, the rooms were bare.

Their strong and vivid memories were kept alive by a living oral tradition. On the other hand, there was the old Steyn farm 'Onze Rust', literally a museum, full of objects preserving the past.

We realised that it would not be a problem if this difference was evident in the exhibition. The presence or absence of material from the past is a message in itself and this aspect was accentuated by the design: the Steyn unit became an abstract collection of boxes, some open, some closed, as a huge storehouse of objects (see ill. 13, 21). The Mthethwa unit showed mainly bare white walls (see ill. 11).

That cherished, personally meaningful objects would be central to the exhibition obviously had an inbuilt risk: why would people loan these important objects to an exhibition in a country thousands of miles away and maybe for years?

Some refused and their most precious possessions often stayed behind. Most families were prepared to loan objects, trusting us enough to risk loss or damage, and I am sure there was an element of pride in having their personal histories on show, even though they could not completely grasp the context in which they would be seen and interpreted.

Sometimes we encountered problems we could solve. Qondokuhle is a keen guitar player. A beautiful photograph by Paul Weinberg shows him delicately handling his



Personal objects in the Mthethwa unit: Qondokuhle's guitar between photographs by Paul Weinberg of the Mthethwa house in Inanda New Town. By pressing the button next to the guitar one could hear him play.

Photograph Irene de Groot.



Staged realities: Sol Plaatje's desk. Period furniture, not belonging to Plaatje. Wallpaper made of copies of the Tswana newspaper Plaatje edited. On the left a picture frame with changing photographs of the Boer War, connected to diary pages projected on the desk, front left. Photograph Irene de Groot.

instrument. It was one of the few objects that were really important to him, and for that very reason we really wanted to exhibit it. But we could not possibly take away his treasured guitar. It was very old and battered and he usually borrowed someone else's guitar to play. So we offered to buy him a new guitar if we could borrow the old one. He was very happy with the solution. The whole family cheered when we brought him his new guitar. Visitors to the exhibition could hear a recording of him playing the guitar by pressing a button beside the display case containing the instrument.

Although this idea of 'authenticity' had a strong attraction, we were very inconsistent about it, and visitors must have been greatly confused at times. Eric Le Fleur's typewriter was the real thing, but the period typewriter on Plaatje's desk was bought for the exhibition, and the period desk was not his either. This was a staged reality, a theatrical impression or an art installation, with the first half-page of his book *Native Life in South Africa* (1916) in the typewriter, copies of the *Tswana* newspaper he edited pasted on the wall, and slides of pages of his Mafeking war diary projected on a transparent book connected to changing images in the 'photo frame' on the wall .

## Family pictures and related documents

Then there were the personal photographs, the snapshots pasted into family albums or kept in a box under a bed. This area of research produced wonderful results. Family pictures often capture an intimacy and directness of great poetry. Cynthia Galada showed us some beautiful photographs of herself taken by a travelling photographer. Tumi Plaatje uncovered photographs of her childhood and youth, showing her as a Miss Hot Pants contestant, and as a young nurse in training. There is the sweet uncertain look of Lily Louw, aged 20, captured in a photograph taken on 16 November 1944, with the text on the back: 'To dearest Mum & Dad, with all my love, from their loving daughter Lily'.

At first the Mthethwa's appeared to be a family without home pictures, but then, to my surprise, one of Qondokuhle's brothers showed me an album with photographs of his family on different occasions. The snapshots of schoolboys in white shirts and black ties, of dancing lessons and bouncing babies provided such a vivid and unexpected insight into daily life that we decided to reproduce the complete album page by page, and put it on a small stool in the unit so that visitors could leaf through it.



Personal photographs: Amy Louw's bedroom, 2001.  
Photograph Cedric Nunn.



Personal photographs: Dolly Rathebe with her firstborn Zola, aged 3 months, 1952.

The combination of photographs in the Rathebe unit was intriguing. As Dolly Rathebe was quite a star in the 1950s, she was often portrayed by professional photographers, especially Jurgen Schadeberg who worked for *Drum* magazine at the time. They are fantastic photographs, well composed, but obviously intended for publicity purposes. After much pleading, Dolly finally took out her private snapshots from the suitcase beneath her bed. We then see a smiling young girl at the beginning of her career, photographed at her home in Sophiatown with her first-born Zola. And the small crumpled photo of her two children that she kept in her purse for years.

There was a clear difference between photographs of Dolly taken by professionals and snapshots taken by family members. There are some wonderful photographs of Sol Plaatje in the early 20th century, obviously taken in a studio. The photograph of Abraham Stockenström Le Fleur in prison, which we found in the archives in Cape Town, is obviously official. For most families, snapshots are a recent introduction.

In one case we organised the 'production' of family portraits. When we met the Galadas and heard that they were about to leave to spend the Christmas holidays with their family in Berkeley East, Roger van Wyk and his friend, film-maker Vaughan Giose, joined them on their homeward journey. They filmed the trip and edited it into a road movie and took photographs as well (see ill. 2). Both were used to document the route that was drawn on a map on one of the walls of the unit.

When they returned to Cape Town they left the Galadas a camera and films so that they could take photographs of their holidays. The family did this with great enthusiasm and with very worthwhile results. The prints were compiled as a holiday photo album; a set went to the family.

There were always questions regarding authenticity or manipulation. In the end we were guided by moral integrity and the effectiveness of the result.

A related form of documentation was the filming of the Lwandle Adult Choir where Cynthia Galada and her daughter Nomakaya both participated. For me it was one of the most rewarding moments of the whole process. Cynthia was active in the choir and liked the idea of documenting a performance. A large concert scheduled for 10 November 2001 would feature many different regional choirs. I accompanied Roger and his camera to the event, which was held in the local Community Centre. It was a large hall packed with about 500 people. The programme started at around 11.30 pm and over the next four hours choir after choir sang their hearts out. It was fantastic. The variety was huge. The largest choirs comprised about 30 people, usually dressed neatly in uniform dress but there were also small groups of five or six young people wearing jeans and T-shirts. The organisation was flawless. A big surprise came when Cynthia's choir appeared for the second time. The first time they were dressed in simple outfits. The second time they appeared in new outfits, black with a golden-yellow lining. It was a spectacular performance. The audience went wild. Roger and I were the only white people present and I remember thinking how bizarre it was that hardly anyone in Cape Town knew about this incredible event. The resulting film was shown on a television in a small section of the Galada unit (see ill. 16). The music turned on when people sat on the couch.

Besides the almost universally available family photographs, one family – the Juggernaths – had been filming themselves for several years and had no problem sharing the footage with visitors to the exhibition. The oldest footage showed Janey's parents celebrating their wedding anniversary. To make the compilation up-to-date we arranged the filming of Yuri's 21st birthday party. This short compilation revealed much about cultural change and modernisation.

We had other examples of moving images, which again underscores how difficult it was to classify the kind of documentation we encountered. While visiting the Killy Campbell Museum, we chanced upon a drawing of Zizwezonke Mthethwa made by Barbara Tyrrel in the early 1950s. We discovered that Barbara and her husband had also been filming in those days and that they had made a short film of Zizwezonke

at the same time. It was fascinating to watch: not so much because of the spectacle of him handling snakes, but because I was watching footage of the man I had met not long before, filmed 50 years earlier! During one of my later visits I came across an article about Barbara Tyrrel, who apparently lived near Cape Town in good health. We contacted her a good week later. Barbara and Zizwezonke were practically contemporaries, both now in their early eighties and still energetic, productive people. We had an opportunity to meet both of them and ask them if they could remember meeting 50 years earlier. Both did and gave more details about their encounter. This indirect 'meeting' of two octogenarians re-balanced the relationship between 'ethnographer and subject' and made the film more a personal document than an ethnographic document. In the exhibition, this short film alternated with a contemporary film by Paul Weinberg showing Zizwezonke in a very similar role on ancestor's day, an amazing way to mark the passage of time.

### **Multidisciplinary approach**

Working with all these contributors was an exciting challenge. We were recording history with artists, photographers, writers, graphic artists, historians and designers, all with a very different view on what they were doing. It also forced everyone to work beyond their usual boundaries. In my view the South African professionals were less bothered about this than their Dutch counterparts. In the South African art scene, for example, it is much more natural to be involved in discussions and projects with social relevance. They are less influenced by the classical, outmoded concept of the autonomous artist.

It was not easy (see ills. 2, 4) for everyone to find a common language. The best moments for me were the sessions where artists, photographers and writers all came together, shared information and inspired each other. I think there were too few of these occasions for practical reasons, and from some personal convictions that things work better when you do them on your own.

The results of this multi-disciplinary approach excited me enormously. The various messages conveyed by the different media and coloured by different perceptions were all open invitations to explore the many facets of life and history. Blending 'found objects', innovative presentation techniques, design choices, artworks (which were never designated as artworks!) and different audiovisual media always resulted in new surprises and stimulated us to delve deeper into the life histories.

Some visitors found it disturbing that not everything was neatly labelled, that it was never clear whether an object was an art object or a real artefact. Was a photograph discovered in the family trunk or made for the occasion? Was it really Sol Plaatje's desk or was it taken from the attic of the Tropenmuseum (it was the last by the way).



Researcher Elsabe Brink with two nephews of Cedric Nunn and filmmaker Marcus Toerien, 2001.  
Photograph Cedric Nunn.

Found photographs and objects evoke the past but they cannot represent the present. To document the lives of 'our' families while we were preparing the exhibition, we asked a photographer to work with each family. We brought together an impressive group of photographers: Cedric Nunn, Ruth Motau, David Goldblatt, Paul Grendon, Mothlalefi Mahlabe, Paul Weinberg, Sean Laurenz, Roger van Wyk and George Hallett. We also approached an artist and a writer/researcher. Slowly but steadily we built a team of people around each family.

The writers/researchers were responsible for working out the main lines of history, guiding the others where necessary and developing texts for the publication that would accompany the exhibition. The photographers and artists were intended to reach certain fields and depths that could not otherwise be accessed. The commissions were rather loosely defined, but we had identified the main characters in each family, and always had discussions with the photographers and artists beforehand. Ideally it was meant to be teamwork – including the family members themselves – leading to synergy and mutual inspiration. In reality, it was very much a matter of individual disposition and practicalities.

Identifying the producers, convincing them to participate, and agreeing on a workable arrangement was a project in itself. Penny Siopis was invaluable in starting up this process, quickly followed by the co-ordinators, Bie Venter, Nicky du Plessis

and Roger van Wyk, who were equally well connected and effective. It gave me a great opportunity to meet and collaborate with top South African artists working in different disciplines. Of course things did not always work as planned, so we had to make choices, adapt to circumstances, see how involved everyone was and cope with all types of problems.

### **Artistic re-creations**

After many setbacks we brought together a group of superb artists. Some, like Manga Lagwa, were young starting artists; others, like Willy Bester, Sam Nhlengethwa (see ill. 26), Penny Siopis and Andrew Verster, had been active for a long time. We made a point of approaching artists with different working styles, including a mix of what could be described as 'high' and 'low' art, that seemed to work with the families and subjects involved. In this way the artistic contributions to this exhibition are a varied display of contemporary South African art.

It would be unfair to single out a specific work, as they all had great merit, but it is tempting to mention a few. Willy Bester produced a large and important sculpture referring to the migrant-labour experiences of Cynthia and Elliot Galada, experiences with which Bester could identify.

Penny Siopis (see ill. 26 and cover) made a brilliant panorama of the Plaatje saga set in a Mafeking landscape. She also produced what could be the first singing painting in history. She included a portrait of Sol Plaatje high up on the painting onto which we projected an animation of his singing mouth. We mounted a loud-speaker on the reverse that transmitted Sol Plaatje's version of the present-day national anthem that he recorded in the early 1930s. This incredible find, translated into a moving work of art, worked as a backdrop to the lives of later Plaatjes.

The two men behind *Bitterkomix*, Conrad Botes and Anton Kannemeyer, worked in a different medium, but their large drawings depicting the story of the Le Fleur family had an epic effect. I was quite eager to get them involved. I knew their work through a comprehensive article in a Dutch newspaper on *Bitterkomix* by the Dutch author and artist Henk van Woerden. Comics are obviously a very suitable medium for telling stories and Botes and Kannemeyer were free and independent spirits with a fresh and critical approach. Our discussion started with the idea of a three-dimensional comic book: a story that could be stuck on a round wall that contained openings which enabled viewers to look beyond the drawing into spaces where objects would be shown (see ill. 25). We realised this idea, but did not really solve the technical problems sufficiently.

The same peephole idea was used in Bearnie Searle's video work. Almost invisible, but for those who found it, it offered a surprising 360 degree panorama of Simonstown and Oceanview, referring to the displacement of the Manuels in the 1960s. Claudette Schreuders carved a beautiful wooden bust of Tibbie Stein wearing

a medallion with a portrait of her husband, inspired by their love for each another (see ill. 7). Langa Magwa's monumental sculpture for the Mthethwa family (see ill. 11) incorporated subtle symbolism to powerful effect, with light shining through a python skin in the central shield-like form (this python skin almost prevented the temporary export to the Netherlands because of the law against trade in endangered species).

We obviously did not always succeed in assembling the teams, but these setbacks were more than compensated for by our achievements. There is one exception, however, one lingering disappointment. The world is now one spectacular artwork shorter.

At the beginning of the project I was introduced to the work of the puppet makers Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones of the Handsprung Puppet Theatre. When Roger van Wyk and I met them in Cape Town in March 2001 we discussed a plan for a grand artistic opening statement that would immediately attract attention. We thought of choosing one representative from each family. These nine characters would be portrayed as large, life-size wooden figures, dressed in clothing of the time and assembled as a large group sculpture. When our imagination ran wild we decided the whole group should move, turning in slow circles. And in the centre, above all others, would be Dolly Rathebe, wearing a wide skirt. We calculated that this amazing piece would take almost six months to complete and be expensive to make. As it was beyond our budget, we decided to approach South African art funds or better, company art collections. They could sponsor it and after the exhibition the piece could revolve in a large hall in their offices, celebrating South Africa. We spent a lot of time writing proposals and making speeches, but in the end it was politely turned down. It would have been an astonishing piece of art for generations to come.

## **Contemporary history**

We tried to find a photographer who could relate to each family. We succeeded wonderfully. In an integrated way, the exhibition included works by some of the best South African photographers. We also had to select one of them to make a group portrait of each family. We thought it relevant that one photographer using the same camera made these portraits. This was a logical choice in the design. All units were gathered around an oval central area. The display, objects, art works and so on inside the units varied widely. To mark that repeating surprise for the visitor we wanted a clear view of the square executed in one overall vision. We wanted to photograph the families in front of their homes. In the final enlargements (3 metres high) all characters would stand eye-to-eye with the visitors. This would strengthen the idea of actually meeting the family members 'face to face' and the process of identification.

We asked the grand old man of South African photography, David Goldblatt, to undertake this task. As none of them could be left out, he would have to visit the different locations when all the relevant family members were gathered (see ill. 9). This was a difficult task to achieve. As mentioned earlier, the core families comprised individuals from different generations, but the older generations had often passed away. Sometimes different generations lived too far apart to bring them together (Steyn, Nunn). Thus the photographs often show the usual nuclear family, rather than multiple generations. The portraits worked very well in their other objectives, i.e., a strong feeling of identification, as if the people could step out of the wall any moment. But it was slightly confusing that they sometimes showed just a nuclear family and lacked other generations. Goldblatt also photographed all the teenagers individually. These photographs were printed life size, cut out and pasted on panels. The nine cut-outs were presented together as a group at the end of the exhibition, combined with an interactive programme that enabled visitors to ask the same three questions of the teenagers (see ill. 15).

Apart from the group portraits, David Goldblatt also took colour photographs of the Steyn family. He decided to make formal portraits of the main characters. These powerful portraits define the individuals as well as record the differences between the two worlds (Cape Town and Bloemfontein). They also superbly complemented the many formal portraits of earlier generations.

Most of the other photographers chose a more documentary approach, focusing on the main characters in each family. Like David Goldblatt, Mothlalefi Mahlabe, Ruth Motau, Roger van Wyk and George Hallett decided to work in colour. That choice was left to the photographers although we always discussed the options and the consequences. Colour was not an illogical choice. Many of the old family pictures were black and white, so apart from style and content this aspect stressed the time difference. It also had the effect that the images were seen and interpreted as documents, while contemporary black and white photography often has an 'artistic' aura.

In spite of the possible choices there were also specific restrictions resulting from the available space, the other material present in the unit, the storyline, and the designers' ideas. Series of smaller images were frequently used to illustrate a story (Roger van Wyk in the Galada unit, Ruth Motau in the Plaatje unit).

In one case the design of the unit and size of the photographs were adapted just before the opening after comments by the photographer (George Hallett in the Manuel unit). Enlarging some photographs of the main characters (Ebrahim and Kobera) improved the balance between content and form.

Paul Grendon, Cedric Nunn, Sean Laurenz and Paul Weinberg worked in black and white. Paul Grendon was completely dedicated to his quest of documenting the Le Fleur family and their activities, the private ones as well as the more formal ones they perform within the Griqua community. I remember Grendon showing Roger

and me 40 contact sheets (1440 negatives) after his first session. His doggedness paid off: he created a large series of superb images (see ill. 25).

As mentioned before, Cedric Nunn was a special case. He was photographer but also a protagonist. He already had many photographs in his archive we could use. This meant that not much new work had to be made, and it had the additional advantage that we could go back years in time within the same photographic quality. It blurred the theoretical division between family photographs and professional photographs, but blurring borders was never one of our concerns. Borderlines exist to be blurred.

In the Mthethwa unit the borderline was not blurred at all: here the contrast was striking. As mentioned earlier we included a 1:1 copy of a family picture album in the exhibition. These intimate colour snapshots were very different from the photographs Paul Weinberg took of the Mthethwa family, beautiful images printed in rich black and white, offering a completely different interpretation.

Technically different ways of presentation were chosen. Most photographers supplied colour negatives that were printed in the Netherlands, but Paul Weinberg, Paul Grendon and Cedric Nunn printed their own photographs and Goldblatt and Laurenz delivered digital prints.

We experimented with the presentation in the Nunn unit. As Cedric Nunn was also part of the story, we integrated his job as photographer in the exhibition by building a small dark room. A milky glass plate was installed in the plate below the enlarger and another was placed inside the developing basin, with slide projectors below them projecting a negative image, followed by the positive version a few seconds later (see ill. 18).

We also rebuilt a camera and connected it to a slide projector. Pressing the button produced new images in the viewfinder, in this case photographs taken by Kathy at her high school at our request.

### **Designing the exhibition: Nine ways to tell a story**

The concept of the exhibition complicated its design. It contained nine more or less autonomous family stories, which were also connected in a non-hierarchical way. Thus, there was no specific end or beginning. This resulted in spacing identical or similar rooms or 'units' around a central square (see ill. 10).

Firstly, there was always the idea that the exhibition would travel. This led to an initial proposal of great simplicity, one wall for the 'artwork', and mainly two-dimensional images combined digitally as large wall-covering prints. Simple, but uninviting. We later dropped the idea of a travelling exhibition and constructed more complex and inviting environments (see ills. 10, 16, 18).

As with everything else we wanted strong South African participation in the design process. We requested ideas for specific units from a small team of South African

designers, and we asked the Dutch design bureau Platvorm to integrate all these suggestions into one grand gesture, and incorporate certain common elements, for instance, in the graphics.

It was very important to maintain the balance between the two groups of designers, but also to maintain the balance between the formal and the informal, between high-tech and low-tech, between 'design' and daily life.

This last issue was especially relevant to the details. We developed a system for the texts inside the units. These texts were always direct quotations. Most of these would be presented as printed text panels of the same design, combined with a small portrait of the person 'speaking'. To stress the personal dimension, we presented handwritten quotations from photo albums, Post Its, or cards within the same unit (see ill. 24, 27).

Taco de Bie of Platvorm was responsible for the overall design. We asked Penny Siopis (Plaatje and Rathebe), Catherine Henegan (Nunn and Mthethwa), Andrew Verster (Juggernath), Roger van Wyk (Galada, Manuel, Le Fleur) and Lien Botha (Steyn) to take care of the unit designs.

We ended up with nine different ways of telling a story. This resulted not only from the design process, but also from the aspects described earlier: the different perceptions of history, the different material collections of the families, the different interpretations and media of the artists, and the different approaches of the photographers. Each unit became a unique experience, varying from a theatrical assemblage of 'slices of reality' (Nunn, ill. 20), to an overall abstract metaphor (the box-like structure of the Steyn unit, ill. 21).

The Manuel unit formed a clear-cut design in space, with symmetrically arranged display cases and photographs. Green-blue was used as a metaphor for the sea, the connecting element in this family story. The unit was covered by an open cupola, a reference to Islam, and had a Kibla-wall, facing Mecca (see ill. 23).

Sometimes we used a poetic interpretation, as in the Plaatje unit, where four generations were represented by a piece of furniture (three cupboards and a desk, see ill. 13, 27). The Juggernath unit was conceived and executed as a three-dimensional painting where the walls and floor interacted with Andrew Verster's paintings (see ill. 12). The Mthethwa unit combined a round shape (referring to the *rondavels* in Gilubuhle) and a square shape (referring to their house in Inanda New Town) (see ill. 11).

Besides incorporating all the objects, images, texts, videos, props, etc., the units were also enlivened by individual sound designs. Sound was incorporated into most units, for example, Sol Plaatje singing. On opening the door of the cupboard representing Johannes Plaatje, music from his funeral service could be heard. Dolly sang in her film, as well as from the customised radio we had ordered. Visitors could hear Qondokuhle playing his guitar, from the Galada unit came a song from Brenda Fassie, and when someone sat on the sofa in Cynthia's unit the recording of the choir started playing. There were several other sources as well, and even with eyes closed one could distinguish between the families.

Our early discussions about the internal relations between the units were vital to the design process. The basic scheme was clear. The facades of the units were identical, while the atmosphere inside each of them was completely different. The underlying structure was the same, however: we always started at left front with the youngest generation, then, clockwise, the older generations were represented one by one. Sometimes, as in the Manuel unit, this division is crystal clear. In other units (Le Fleur) it was resolved in different ways.

The question of whether the units would be closed off completely or be transparent was more of an issue. This aspect seemed to be a metaphor for the relationships between the different families or groups. Should we close off the relationships in between too? Could we make connections between the families?

In some cases we had thought of relevant links. The Steyn and the Plaatje families shared a specific memory from the Boer War of 1899-1902, but from different perspectives. Sol Plaatje was in Mafeking while it was besieged by the Boers and wrote in his diary about it. Martinus Steyn fought in the guerrilla war against British troops and became seriously ill. A physical opening between the units would enable visitors to see the Steyns from the Plaatje unit and vice versa, representing two versions of the same event. There were more of these overlaps.

We finally decided to skip the perforation of the units, as they would be too difficult to construct and too confusing in an already complex exhibition. The overlaps did indicate the order of the units, however. Seen in a circle each unit 'touches' its two neighbours at some point in history.

Balancing the wishes and ideas of all participants, keeping the story clear, meeting the museum's demands regarding objects, respecting the families and consolidating the overall vision presented enormous challenges. Platvorm's overall design solution – the 'cookie cutter' – helped unify the project: the exhibition was designed like a large solid cake, from which the negative spaces were cut out (see ill. 10).

## **Digital extensions**

Using the World Wide Web for exhibition projects was still a new concept in 2002. A general Royal Tropical Institute and Tropenmuseum website went online at the end of 1996. We thought that this new platform could also be used to promote special exhibitions.

We launched an experimental website several months before the opening of the exhibition. It presented information on the people involved to potential visitors and kept our partners in South Africa abreast of our progress by including, for example, draft designs. We underestimated the amount of work involved and never managed to translate the information into English. It was a fine source of data and images and through it we discovered other possibilities (see ill. 31).

The two most important categories were 'Exhibition' and 'Makers'. The first category 'Exhibition' offered access to four sections: The Nine families, Future visions, The Archive, and Design. Each family was represented by objects and images, an interactive family tree and background information on the main characters. There was also a link to the page detailing the concept, development and building of 'their' unit. 'Future visions' introduced the group of teenagers, 'The Archive' provided background information on Penny Siopis' installation of the same name, and the 'Design' section included a few ground plans in several stages of the overall plan.

The category 'Makers' presented the list of participants with their family stories. There was much inter-linkage, the navigation was easy and it was quite exciting to see behind the screen. All this information is still posted on the Tropenmuseum's website: <http://www2.kit.nl/tropenmuseum/tentoonstellingen/zuidafrika/>

The emphasis on personal connections and personal involvement, and the development and building of the project (most photographs are dated to mark each moment as unique) naturally invited the question: How would the lives of all these people unfold? We decided to stop adding details to the lives of 'our' families in early spring 2002. From then on their lives were frozen in time. The result was seen in October of that year – and that was the moment described in the book. But it was exactly our emphasis on the presentation of living contemporaries that aroused the curiosity of what would happen next, especially to the teenagers.

As part of a separate journalistic project, *Seeing/Being Seen*, the NIZA (Dutch Institute of Southern Africa) published a special issue of their magazine *Zuidelijk Afrika* (see ill. 29) and developed a website with the same name, where sequels could be published. They set up a small network of journalists who conducted interviews with families to keep abreast of their lives. This was difficult to do in a structured way, both on the part of the writers as well as the families, who eventually had a surfeit of attention. But the contributions were interesting and the idea itself was another new phase in the relationship between the exhibition and reality.

## **The book**

'I didn't like the exhibition but the book was fantastic', a former colleague remarked. I was annoyed by the first part of his remark, but could relate to the second part, and maybe there is a lesson to be learned from the contrast.

The major difference between the two is the balance of the visual and textual information. The complex family and individual stories spanning more than a century were not easily translated into images with limited captions. After all, textual information is vital to this project. The book provides many more details by including many more quotations, their contexts, as well as the most important images.

As in real life, when you know people better, you develop a relationship with them, your interest is awakened, and you become more intimate.

I often thought that the best way to appreciate the exhibition was after reading the book. In a similar way I noticed that when I accompanied people through the exhibition I provided them with a lot of background information. Then the stories came to life much more vividly than by the exhibition texts alone. I do not know how we could have solved it. Possibly with an audio tour?

The production of the book was problematic too. The quality and viewpoints of the various texts were inconsistent and the writers' experience and willingness to delve deeper into interviews or conduct archival research varied widely. In one case an insurmountable conflict arose between a writer and a family. It was often necessary to steer the different contributions in a specific direction: after all, we wanted a similar autobiographical theme.

The images worked in the book differently from the exhibition. In the book they served mainly as illustrations accompanying the text. The captions to the illustrations in the book were more detailed and artwork and photographs were finally accredited. The more textual contributions were included as descriptive texts in the third person. The images in the exhibition were arranged as a three-dimensional installation and all the texts were quotes, written from the perspective of one family member.

To make clear that selection of the nine family histories was arbitrary and to stress again the personal dimension of the project, we asked all participants, including organisers, artists, photographers and writers, to write a short family story themselves, instead of the usual curriculum vitae. These appear at the end of the book, along with their portraits. These 39 stories underscore the fact that the selection of the nine family histories was arbitrary and stresses again the personal dimension of the project.

The final product was a co-publication: the Dutch-language edition was published by KIT Publishers, the English-language edition by Kwela Publishers. Editor Annari van der Merwe of Kwela had already been involved as an advisor to the project, playing an active role in suggesting writers and so forth.

### **External partnership: NIZA**

The NIZA (Dutch Institute for Southern Africa) is an expertise centre and network organisation comprising several action groups focusing on anti-apartheid and solidarity and it was therefore logical that they would try to connect to the Family story exhibition. We decided to combine forces with NIZA at an early stage in the

project. Both organisations made their own products but where possible we tried to make connections.

An important NIZA project in this respect was *Seeing/Being Seen*, a project that invited eight South African journalists to the Netherlands (a few months before the opening of the exhibition) in order to change roles so to speak: 'They watched Dutchmen and observed how the Dutch watch South Africans. They commented on subjects that touch the Dutch as well as South Africans'. The contributions were compiled in a special issue of the NIZA magazine *Zuidelijk Afrika* (vol. 6, no. 3, Autumn 2002), published on the opening of the exhibition (see ill. 29). A website with the same title (*Seeing/Being Seen*) was launched by NIZA in South Africa.

The NIZA also supported the idea of sending postcards from visitors to the different family members. They collected the postcards, screened them and sent them on by regular mail.

The annual manifestation of the NIZA, *Levend jaarboek* (Living Annual Report), was held in the Tropenmuseum two days after the opening of the exhibition, on 5 October 2002.

Finally, NIZA organised their own exhibition, or rather, they made it possible that a South African exhibition *Kwere Kwere/Journeys into Strangeness: A Multi-media Project on Migration and Identity in South Africa*, curated by Rory Bester, could travel to Amsterdam. It was shown in Amicitia in November 2002.

## **The opening**

We decided to open the exhibition on 3 October 2002. As the project was a joint effort we wanted to celebrate it with a delegation of our South African partners, although it was financially impossible to invite all of them. Penny Siopis came earlier, as she had to create 'The Archive', a separate but linked installation in the wing adjacent to the exhibition. It was an improvised installation in the sense that she constructed it on the spot from found materials. We mainly used old office furniture such as desks, cupboards, files and technical equipment from the vast attics of the Royal Tropical Institute, posters and photographs from the South African Embassy, books from libraries and publishing houses, and films from NIZA. It was created as a metaphor for the memory of the country, a seemingly unending source of material, from which we had selected just nine stories. It was intended to remind visitors that there was so much more.

Just before 3 October Penny was joined by others, some financed by us, and some using their own resources to make the trip. From the families we had Dolly Rathebe and Tumi Plaatje, Cedric Nunn with his mother, and three Le Fleurs. All the co-ordinators and George Hallett were in attendance.

Their first visit, one day before the opening, was the moment of truth for the Tropenmuseum team. Did we pass the test? There was serious criticism from George Hallet who thought his photographs did not have the place they deserved, but their placement resulted from a general design choice for the unit based on its integral design. However we understood his objections and modified the photographic display.



Dolly Rathebe singing on opening night in Amsterdam,  
3 October 2002.  
Photograph Paul Romijn.

Apart from that there was pride and enthusiasm. Dolly Rathebe was overwhelmed by emotion when she entered 'her' unit. After the opening she danced for a long time beside her 50-year younger self who was singing her heart out in the film *Jim comes to Jo'burg*, an incredible sight. Lily Nunn, who had never left South Africa before, sat for a while completely happy and at ease in 'her' living room.

Four South African women opened the exhibition. Tumi Plaatje spoke on the importance of family history in the new South Africa and the role of Sol Plaatje, Dolly Rathebe sang (two days later she performed for a much larger audience in the large hall of the Tropentheater). The South African ambassador to the Netherlands, Priscilla Jana, gave a speech, and the exhibition was formally opened by the current Deputy Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Bridgette Mabandla. Just prior to the opening, the personal dimension of the project was emphasised once more when I learned that Priscilla Jana was in fact directly linked to one of the families: she was a foster mother to one of Popo Molefe's daughters.

## Theatre and music

At an early stage we realised that the theme of this exhibition was ideally suited to connect it to a program in our theatre, the KIT Tropentheater. The Tropentheater, founded in the early 1970s, is an organisation within the Royal Tropical Institute, but usually programs independently. The museum and theatre work together occasionally and the *Family story* exhibition provided an excellent opportunity for co-operation.

It was decided that the theatre would programme around the exhibition for the duration of the exhibition period, excluding the summer when the theatre closes. Theatre performances would dominate the programming. Choices were made independently but we had regular meetings to see if we could find synergy.

The connection was especially close in the performance of Dolly Rathebe in the large music hall of the KIT Tropentheater on 5 October. She had already performed briefly as part of the opening program.

Another remarkably close link was the solo performance *Dear Mrs Steyn* on 27 and 28 February 2003, by the South African actress Wilna Snyman. The play was based on letters written by the English activist Emily Hobhouse to her friend Rachel (Tibbie) Steyn, the wife of President Steyn. The exhibition included a baptismal dress given by Emily to the Steyn family (see ill. 21).

On a more general level there were many intriguing relationships between the performances and the exhibited stories. These included the comedian Coco Merkel in *No Room for Squares* (15-16 November 2002); Duma Kumalo with *He Left Quietly* (5-7 December 2002), telling of his life and incarceration in Pretoria Central Prison; the tragicomedy *Womb Tide* by Lara Foot (10-11 January 2003); *Out of Bounds*, a

humorous solo performance by Rajesh Gopie set in an extended South African family of Indian descent (28-29 March 2003); the documentary *Amandla! A Revolution in Four-part Harmony* by Lee Hirsch; *Mehlomancane* a storytelling/theatre performance for children specially developed for this occasion, together with educational material (May 2003); a concert by Sibongile Khumalo on 25 June 2003; and finally *Baby Tshepang*, a raw, intense theatre performance, again by theatre producer Lara Foot (26-28 June 2003).

As a finale, a special South African film programme was presented in the Tropentheater in September as part of the African film festival *Africa in the Picture*.

## **Back home**

The second opening of the exhibition took place in the National Cultural History Museum (NCHM) in Pretoria. On 31 March, the Deputy Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Ms Buyelwa Sonjica, and the Netherlands Ambassador for Cultural Co-operation, Jan Hoekema, opened the *Group Portrait, South African Family Stories* exhibition.

The exhibition was assembled with the assistance of two Dutch builders, who were involved in constructing the exhibition in Amsterdam; Eric Teffer, the Tropenmuseum's audiovisual technician; curator P. Faber for the instalment, and M. Reijmers representing the directors of the museum.

A symposium on cultural sponsorship was organised the day before the opening, where I presented the ideas behind the 'Family project'. On the morning 31 March, an agreement on cultural co-operation between South Africa and the Netherlands was signed in the centre of the exhibition.

The official opening occurred in the evening (see ill. 33). The NCHM had the gracious insight to invite at least one representative from each of the families and they all attended. It was the first time since the project began that members of all the families met. Press photographers documented this happy occasion. Television was present. For me it was an incredibly emotional moment. Later, Dolly Rathebe performed in the front hall of the museum, the family stories had come home.

We were aware that the reception in South Africa would differ from that in Amsterdam. South Africans would naturally know more about their own culture. But perhaps it was not so different after all. Ordinary people were and are not as well informed about each other as one would expect. For comments on the reception in South Africa, see the reviews on p. 81 and following and the statement by the director of the National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria, Neo Malao (p. 79-80).

There is however one aspect that we did take into account, namely that the exhibition lived on in time – as it was the exhibition ran for over 3 years in Pretoria – and that real people's lives continued as well, but that the people as represented in the exhibition stayed the same.



Opening night in Pretoria with representatives of all the families, 31 March 2003.

## **Implications of afterlife**

The situation became rather awkward when we learned of new events, sometimes in public life. The Plaatje-Molefe marriage ended unpleasantly, for example. We realised these had to be taken into account for the South African visitors. I suggested a new introductory text:

*To the visitors,*

*The exhibition you are about to visit was created between 1999 and 2002. During that period, many researchers, photographers and artists worked closely with members of the nine families whose history they were recounting in the exhibition and the accompanying book.*

*The exhibition was first displayed at the museum of the Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, the Netherlands, where it opened on 3 October 2002. But the research as such ended in early 2002 or late 2001. The time in between was needed to write the texts for the book and the exhibition, print the photographs, and design and construct the exhibition.*

*Now the exhibition is in South Africa, where it belongs. The stories are closer to home. But more time has passed since they were written. The stories that are told in the exhibition are frozen in time. The life of the real people continued, with all those things that happen in real lives. Great-grandmother Idah Nosimiti Neinane, great-grandmother Amy Louw and her neighbour MaGwabe Khumalo all passed away. Tumi Plaatje and Popo Molefe divorced. Nicki and Martine are*

*still studying. Kathy graduated but has not yet decided what to do. Audrey is in grade 10 now. Nomakaya quit school. Dolly Rathebe is still going strong, as is her granddaughter Mmatanki and all the others.*

*These are all names you might not know yet. But you will get to know them in this exhibition on nine families.*

*Your story could have been one of them.*

Dolly Rathebe passed away on 16 September 2004. The exhibition gradually turned into a historical document: like a photograph it has preserved a certain situation in a very lively way, with sound, images, colour and movement, but nonetheless, frozen in time, a relic of the past, a three-dimensional group portrait, finally 'printed' in early 2002. It is therefore appropriate that the exhibition was dismantled in 2007.

However, as is planned from the start, parts of the exhibition will live on. Certain elements will be donated to several smaller South African museums and institutions.

## **Education**

The Public and Presentation Department of the Tropenmuseum lacked the resources to develop personal tours. Instead they produced educational booklets that could be purchased by visitors or used in school programs. For practical reasons six families were selected, and three small brochures were made, each featuring two families (see ill. 30). The educational dimension was also strongly integrated in the exhibition where we developed a variety of ways to make the content accessible to general visitors and children.

- In South Africa a much more extensive educational program was developed around the exhibition, with financial support from the Dutch Embassy. The programme, put together by the NGO Imbali, focused on the meaning of family history and heritage for children on three levels of schooling. Workshops were organised for teachers, of whom 450 participated. The exhibition's message that anybody's history is worthwhile was transmitted effectively. The educational program ran for a long time. Two years after opening, on 6 April 2006, Imbali created two posters to more effectively bring the educational content to schools. The posters were featured Sol Plaatje and Dolly Rathebe (see ill. 34). Imbali announced the launch with the following text:

*These beautiful posters come out of the education programme accompanying the exhibition Group Portrait South Africa at the National Cultural History Museum. They are the first two in a series, designed to make the process of discovering our heritage exciting, fun and meaningful.*

## **Conclusion: Lost in translation?**

I was very satisfied to see that many visitors left the exhibition confused. If visitors immersed themselves in the individual stories, after a few units it became very hard to grasp that all these events were set in the same country. The accumulation of stories, which were themselves multi-layered, raised people's awareness of the complex nature of South African society. In early 2003 we escorted the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Dr Ben Ngubane, through the exhibition and his reaction was similar: 'Now you understand how difficult my job is!'

Apparently, we had managed to translate the complexity of the society into an exhibition, but this was also the potential weakness of the project. It was not an easy exhibition. Visitors had to make an effort to get into it. They had to read the texts, look at the photographs and audiovisual material and had to be open to the different experiences to allow it to sink in. Only then would they be able to build a relationship with the individuals, and then it really became interesting. But this had to be done with nine different families representing nine different worlds: a lot of information to digest. The same applied to the visual element. It was not an exhibition of highlights, but a strange amalgam of very different objects, from a simple pair of spectacles to an artwork a few metres long. What to make of all of it? All these elements were linked by an underlying story, but again, visitors had to work to find it. If you had only half an hour, the exhibition did not work at all. If time was not an issue, people could discover rich and impressive human stories and fantastic images. Still, as some reviewers noted, visitors were not provided with any overview of national issues, such as apartheid or AIDS.

This dilemma explains at least partly why the exhibition was not a huge success in terms of visitor numbers. The 101.000 visitors were below average compared to previous years. Visitor numbers are not the only yardstick by which to measure success, of course, more important is the quality of the impact, something that is very hard to evaluate. The reviews that follow here provide an idea of this, but not much more than an idea. Professional reviewers do not reflect the opinions of average visitors.

Still it is very important that such reviews are written. Professional exhibition criticism is still underrated. Most newspaper reviews retell the stories they like best and ignore the exhibition as a whole. But an exhibition is a medium with great possibilities. Our desire to translate real lives into three-dimensional designs using different media, to create the illusion of an actual 'meeting' and engender a truly affective relationship between visitors and the people portrayed required an experimental approach to the *Family Stories* exhibition. Would it cause a visitor to say 'This could have been my life'. We tried very hard to help our visitors better

understand a complex society and, at the very least, our efforts inspired the Tropenmuseum into thinking about what exhibitions can or should do. Maybe this experience can play a similar role elsewhere.

The following article is part of a wider project that analyses the poetry and politics of representations of history about post-apartheid South Africa in the public domain. It also emerged from work we were doing with the office of the Netherlands cultural attaché in South Africa, assisting them in thinking through how one frames and evaluates shared histories between the Netherlands and South Africa. The article examines the making and content of the exhibition *Group Portrait South Africa: Nine Family Histories (Familieverhalen uit Zuid Afrika: Een Groepsportret)* that was first installed at the Tropenmuseum, part of the Royal Tropical Institute (*Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen*, KIT) in Amsterdam in 2002-2003 and later at the African Window of the National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria, South Africa. It does so in the context of collecting and exhibitionary histories at the Tropenmuseum, and its recent attempts to reframe its ethnographic legacies. *Family Histories* is analysed through its team-based processes of production, the social discourses it was embedded in and its efforts to construct museum publics.

# Making South Africa in the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>

Leslie Witz and Ciraj Rassool (History Department, University of the Western Cape)

For over a century, Africa has been a field site for research and collecting by scholars and museums from Europe and North America. Clifford has pointed out how in conventional ethnographic research the field site has been constituted by localising the non-Western as 'native'.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, the technologies of travel involved in setting up the field have been written out of the site and signs of connectivity to wider networks marginalised in the search for localised cultures. When, in July 2003, we travelled from South Africa to the Netherlands to carry out research on an exhibition, *Group Portrait South Africa: Nine Family Histories (Familieverhalen uit Zuid Afrika: Een Groepsportret)*, at the Tropenmuseum (Museum of the Royal Tropical Institute, KIT) in Amsterdam, we attempted to challenge some of these conventions of the field site. We were explicitly, in one sense, attempting to reverse the ethnographic gaze, and make the 'West' native. This involved a comprehensive examination of the politics of representation in the making of the exhibition in the Netherlands as well as a detailed analysis of the exhibition's aesthetics and meanings. Our research was about the 'museum message' and the 'institutional life' through which these messages were created.<sup>3</sup> But our intention was to go further. We were interested in establishing the associations between a specific display in the museum, the much wider discussions around the representation of society in the Netherlands, and the networks through which the subjects of display came to be constituted. This would incorporate an approach to audiences that moved away from the empirical conventions of visitor studies. Instead, we argue, processes of exhibition-making are the domain in which publics are conceived of and produced.<sup>4</sup>

Two factors complicated our objectives. The first was that displays at the Tropenmuseum, like many other museums, could be characterised as being 'surrogates for travel'.<sup>5</sup> They create imagined scenes that seek to provide the visitor with the opportunity to view the interior lives of people in a range of settings around the world. The exhibition we examined in some ways fitted into this paradigm. Explicitly it did not deal with the Netherlands, but was about South Africa. *Family Histories* was promoted as offering a description of 'the country's origins through ordinary

people's experiences'. The exhibition viewer was cast as a visitor to the homes of nine South African families. 'In their own words: Members of nine families speak openly about their lives. Their tales transport us through time. Stories, personal items and family photos are arranged in nine rooms, each with its own ambience and character'.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, the Tropenmuseum is attempting to move away from extractive modes of appropriation and seeking to develop more equitable partnerships with sites of research, collection and display. The originating moment of the objects on display, prior to their journey to the ethnographic museum,<sup>7</sup> were described in a flyer for the exhibition as emanating from an internal process of collection and production: 'Leading South African photographers, artists, designers and researchers have helped to bring these stories to life'.<sup>8</sup> This assertion of an intensive collaborative project meant that the exhibition sought to counter the notion of the ethnographic field-site that Clifford had described. The implications for our study of the exhibition was that we could not merely be 'homebodies abroad',<sup>9</sup> but that our own 'homes' needed to be part of our investigation.

Our concern was to examine a realignment that the exhibition, *Family Histories*, attempted to invoke. It explicitly presented itself as a challenge to the ethnic and racial classificatory systems of representation that were prescribed by the apartheid state, as well as enabling the creation and demonstration of new identities that were outside these bounds. Arranging the exhibition around the category of 'the family' was the mechanism used to meet this challenge. Individuals were presented as choosing and pursuing their own identities, creating their own histories and constituting their own shifting and complex families, with the only prescription appearing to be the need for a gender and generational spread in each family over a period of 100 years.

Were these aspirations to present complex histories about South African families and their shifting identities, on their own terms, fulfilled? As we entered the Tropenmuseum to conduct our research in July 2003 it became clear that answering this question directly would prove difficult, as the exhibition appeared ambivalent about its own direction. It had two different titles. One, in Dutch, is *Familieverhalen uit Zuid-Afrika: Een groepsportret*, translated literally as 'Family Stories from South Africa: A Group Portrait'. The other, in English, reverses the title so that it reads *Group Portrait of South Africa: Nine Family Histories*. This divergence is also reflected in the different titles given to the book accompanying the exhibition. Putting aside for the moment the reason for this discrepancy, the meanings of these titles were markedly different. With the former, the expectation might be of a selection of family stories on display; or of stories that have a South African context, being told for family audiences; or, as some visitors thought was most likely, of South Africans being personally on hand to tell about their families.<sup>10</sup> The sub-title '*een groepsportret*' (a group portrait) evoked the visual, with the individual represented as part of a larger group. So, the exhibition might have given one a broader sense of South Africa through the portraits collected together. In the English title it was the notion of 'Group Portrait' that took precedence over the nine family stories. Here again the

notion of a visual collectivity might be intended. But for South Africans the invocation of 'group' for the main part of the English title might have a particular resonance. The word 'group' was used, during the apartheid era as an alibi for policies of racial and ethnic exclusions, with various National Party governments claiming that they were merely upholding the cause and self-determination of various population 'groups' in the country. Related to this was the association of the word 'group' with the Group Areas Act, the legislation that facilitated the removal of people into racially and ethnically designated living and working spaces. The implementers of Group Areas Act proclamations were the contradictorily named Department of Community Development, which became known in Cape Town as the 'Group'. Recipients of removal notices declared on the walls of the suburb of Claremont, '*Die Group moer ons*' (literally, 'The Group is fucking us up'). *Group Portrait South Africa* might therefore reflect a contradiction in the exhibition. It may be reproducing the very same racial and ethnic categories it explicitly sought to undermine and make complex. To complicate matters further, the English sub-title used the word 'histories' rather than contemporary 'stories' or '*verhalen*', thereby conveying more of a sense of the 'real' and pertaining to 'the past' rather than the present.

Family / Group, Stories / Histories: These were the tensions that the temporary exhibition in the Light Hall at the Tropenmuseum from 6 October 2002 to 21 September 2003 mediated in its conception, production and final presentation. Were *Familieverhalen uit Zuid-Afrika: Een Groepsportret* or *Group Portrait South Africa: Nine Family Histories* on display? Through locating the exhibition in museological changes that were (and are) taking place in the Netherlands, and at the Tropenmuseum in particular, and reflecting upon the intentions of those involved in its production and promotion, part one of this article reflects on how the tension between these differing modes of representation were constantly negotiated. Part two will present a close reading of the exhibition itself.

In the production of the exhibition and its audiences, we argue that while the stated intention was to select and displayed nine unique and complex South African families, the use of ethnic categories, at times, enabled retention of the boundaries that the exhibition explicitly sought to transgress. The latter was particularly apparent in some of the ways the exhibition was marketed. This use of ethnic categorisations, we suggest, might be part of a wider discourse of representation in post-apartheid South Africa where ethnicity is being re-framed as cultural diversity. Importantly, it also coalesced with the museum's search and desire for visitor diversity and representivity within Dutch society.

## **Changes at the Tropenmuseum**

*Family Histories* was presented in the central temporary exhibition space of the Tropenmuseum, the Light Hall (Lichthal). Situated on the ground floor of the museum it is a vast hall adjacent to the Children's Museum, the Ekeko Restaurant,

the museum library and a permanent exhibition entitled *Man and Environment*. Surrounding the Light Hall is a series of upper balconies at different levels where the permanent exhibitions on Africa, Latin America, Dutch New Guinea, South East Asia and Dutch colonialism are displayed (and also some smaller, temporary ones). Almost exactly 50 years before *Family Histories* opened, another exhibition on South Africa was on show in the very same museum space. Entitled *Zuid-Afrika 300 Jaar*, it formed part of the tercentenary festival sponsored by the National Party government in South Africa, which had recently come to power with the promise to implement apartheid. The festival promulgated the arrival of a commander of the Dutch India Company's (VOC) insignificant revictualling station at the Cape of Good Hope, Jan van Riebeeck, and his wife Maria de la Quellerie, 300 years previously, as the beginning of 'civilisation', the (white) South African nation and its history. Although most of the festival's activities took place in South Africa, particularly Cape Town, it gave apartheid South Africa the opportunity to project its political project in the setting of the supposed site of its civilised origins. Most of these activities took place in the town of Van Riebeeck's birth, Culemborg, where a series of Jan van Riebeeck commemorative events, including an historical exhibition, *Jan van Riebeeck and his Times*, were held.<sup>11</sup> In Amsterdam, the Netherlands/South Africa Association, together with the South African embassy and the KIT, organised an exhibition for the tercentenary as well. Opened by the South African ambassador on 27 March 1952 – with Dutch cabinet ministers, representatives of the Dutch monarchy, the mayor of Amsterdam and ambassadors from England, Canada and Australia all in attendance – the exhibition used maps, diagrams and photographs to present a story of the development of 'modern South Africa'. A series of manufactured products were on display and photographs showed modern buildings and factories. In line with the emerging policy of apartheid there were photographs of people as representatives of racial and ethnic groups.<sup>12</sup>

*Zuid-Afrika 300 Jaar* took place at a time when the Tropenmuseum was undergoing a major shift in emphasis. Originally started in Haarlem in 1871 as the Colonial Museum, its initial collection consisted mostly of products of the Dutch colonial world in the East Indies, including a section on 'native objects and crafts'. In 1926 the museum was moved and subsumed into the work of the Colonial Institute in Amsterdam, the 'bulwark of colonial knowledge' in the Netherlands.<sup>13</sup> The museum was given a large exhibition space with two distinct components, colonial trade and ethnology.<sup>14</sup> The latter incorporated a substantial collection from the Amsterdam zoo (Artis), which included 'very good pieces from Africa, China, Korea and Japan'.<sup>15</sup> After the Second World War the Dutch started losing control of their colonies in the East Indies and the Institute could no longer present itself as the centre for collection and research of Dutch colonial possessions. In an attempt to establish an alignment with these new political trends, the Colonial Institute became the *Indisch Instituut*, with a similar name change to the museum section. A few years later, when a new Indonesian nation emerged, the name was again altered

to reflect a broader focus on collecting, researching and exhibiting the 'third world' in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. In 1950 the Tropical Museum (Tropenmuseum) of the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) was formally constituted.<sup>16</sup>

The commitment by the KIT to the South African exhibition in 1952 reflected Dutch foreign policy towards apartheid South Africa as a place of European (and specifically Dutch) settlement and the forging of cultural and economic ties based upon the assertion of these associations.<sup>17</sup> Simultaneously Dutch governments, in the 1950s and early 1960s, were displaying a great deal of circumspection towards collaborative cultural projects with newly independent nations, especially when the latter asserted the primacy of the preservation of a distinct indigeneity.<sup>18</sup> By the 1970s this pattern had begun to shift dramatically. Increasing repression in South Africa and the rise of the anti-apartheid movement in the Netherlands led the Dutch government to adopt a more isolationist stance towards the South African government and its cultural products. Meanwhile, former colonial nations increasingly sought to establish development relationships with ex-colonies that were to be based upon notions of people, not as inferior, but as equals with 'their own histories and cultures'.<sup>19</sup> This was articulated in the Netherlands under the title of 'development cooperation'. An association between the collection and representation of the existing culture of Third World countries and successive Dutch governments' policies of providing development aid, was designed to form the basis of much more amenable cooperative arrangements.

In the schema of 'development cooperation' the role envisaged for the KIT was to carry out research on 'up-to-date development practices in the agricultural and health sectors'. The function of the museum would be to become a 'presentation centre for the Third World in which the Dutch public could learn about the tropics and the Netherlands' relationship with these'.<sup>20</sup> No longer was the colonial official or the ethnologist the source of the museum's collections; they had been replaced by the development officer.<sup>21</sup> Colonial collections were placed in storage and history, particularly history associated with the Dutch colonial period, 'vanished from the museum'. New exhibitions, making extensive use of text and photographs, presented contemporary life in the tropics, how problems were arising and the possibility of developmental solutions that could emerge through international cooperation.

Re-created scenes of urban and rural life replaced history, with the emphasis on cultural diversity, more often than not represented by an 'ordinary' family unit, sited in an archetypal household, as the basis of development.<sup>22</sup> Amongst these were displays, in the West Asia and North Africa sections on the second floor of the museum, of the interior of a house in the Swat valley in Pakistan filled with personal artefacts, a nomad tent of the Central Steppes, and a room showing the life of family in Marrakesh.

When the initial thoughts for what later became the *Family Histories* exhibition were placed on the table, development cooperation in 'a world of difference' was seemingly firmly entrenched in Dutch foreign policy and the Tropenmuseum. With the formal demise of apartheid in 1994, South Africa had been incorporated into this

arena of development cooperation, where the buzzwords were 'cooperation' and 'interaction'. The government of the Netherlands, through its embassy in Pretoria, had since 1994 been funding a 'Culture and Development Programme' to 'strengthen South Africa's cultural identity and to promote understanding between its diverse communities'.<sup>23</sup> *Family Histories*, with its emphasis on the family as the unit of diverse, mobile cultural identities seemed to fit the bill both of the Dutch government's objectives and the collecting and display policies of the Tropenmuseum.

But, as was the case with the South African exhibition in 1952, *Family Histories* was planned at a time when there was major ferment in the museum sector in the Netherlands in general and particularly in the halls and balconies of the Tropenmuseum. Some of this upheaval coalesced with the thoughts behind *Family Histories* while other aspects sat less easily with the envisaged exhibition. There was firstly a flurry of exhibitions planned for 2002, the 400th anniversary of the Dutch East India Company (the VOC). It was also, incidentally, the 350th year since the establishment of the VOC's revictualling station at the Cape, but apart from a small exhibition at the Museum Elizabeth Weeshuis in Culemborg entitled *Held of Hufter?: Beeldvorming over Jan van Riebeeck (Hero or Lout?: Perceptions of Jan van Riebeeck)*, the commemoration of a insignificant figure in Dutch history passed by almost unnoticed. The emphasis in the Dutch museum world was on VOC 400, exalting the company's maritime and trading achievements, proclaiming it as 'the biggest trading organisation in the world' at the time.<sup>24</sup> *The Viering 400 jaar VOC* museum calendar for 2002 included *The Colourful World of the VOC* at the Maritime Museum in Rotterdam, *Amsterdam-Asia-Amsterdam: 400 Years of the VOC in Amsterdam* at the Amsterdam Historical Museum and an exhibition for the youth entitled *Joost goes East* at the Historical Ships Centre in Lelystad.<sup>25</sup> These exhibitions and other events around VOC 400 took on a 'festive mood', celebrated the VOC 'as a precursor of innovative entrepreneurship' with very little mention of the 'darker side' of the company, particularly its involvement in the Indian Ocean slave trade. The VOC's past was aligned with the present and the future of the nation-state. The historical trajectory of modern-day Netherlands was presented as an almost predetermined outcome of the VOC's history of 'international co-operation, entrepreneurs, craftsmanship and innovation' and projected into the future along an historical path of continuing development.<sup>26</sup> It is notable that the Tropenmuseum, by and large, ignored these commemorations. It was, after all, a museum that was concerned with the colonial and post-colonial world, not mercantile capital. In addition, the museum had far more ambitious plans for its exhibition spaces. Yet, there was one way in which the Tropenmuseum did respond, if only obliquely. During the early planning stages of *Family Histories*, the curator suggested that the coincidence of the 400th anniversary of the VOC and the 350th anniversary of Van Riebeeck's landing would generate interest in the exhibition. Although these events were not to be directly represented in the exhibition they could be used as a marketing tool.<sup>27</sup>

Museums in the Netherlands at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century had embarked upon far more elaborate plans than merely responding to once-off commemorative events. National museums were turned into private foundations, new buildings were constructed, major renovations undertaken and categories of collection and exhibition were re-conceptualised. One major shift was that museums became primarily institutions of display and major architectural firms were called in to re-design and refurbish interiors. Probably the most telling indication of this change is the description in the book that details the process of how the design company Opera gave the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden a complete overhaul:

*The museum building has been completely renovated at a cost of 36 million Euros and has been completely refurbished. In the new permanent exhibition the original regional divisions have been retained: there are galleries from Japan and Korea, China, Oceania, Africa, Central and South America, North America and the Arctic regions – eight in total. The curators selected the artefacts. But the number of items, or in how many themes they were brought together, or what the display cases would look like – these decisions were no longer in the hands of the curator. The design of the floor plan had been relinquished into the hands of the professional.<sup>28</sup>*

The changes were so extensive that the education director, who had spent 35 years working for the museum, was unable to locate the office where he used to work.<sup>29</sup> In Rotterdam, the Museum of Ethnology underwent similar structural changes. Re-named the Wereldmuseum (World Arts Museum) in 2000, it is divided into two distinct sections. On the one side of the museum, where there is warmth and bright colours, the main attraction is the *Hotel 'Het Reispaleis'*. This is an extension of the previous *Het Reispaleis (Enchanted Worlds)* exhibition.<sup>30</sup> Directed mainly at children, the hotel is presented as a multicultural learning experience. By 'reproducing the protocols of travel'<sup>31</sup> – children are issued with a passport when they check-in to the hotel – the visit to a room is turned into a didactic experience about the culture of the guests from 'Brazil to Uzbekistan, from the Netherlands to Singapore'.<sup>32</sup> The other side of the museum, which houses the museum's vast ethnology collection of over 200.000 items, has been turned into a 'treasure house'. In a dark and cold environment, 600 of these items, largely located in geographical categories indicating the place of origin – Oceania, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, India, Indonesia, China, Tibet, Japan, South America and North America – are displayed as objects of value and beauty.<sup>33</sup> As in Leiden, the aesthetics of presentation are paramount.

This aestheticisation of culture in the Netherlands is presented by these museums of ethnology as challenging the taxonomic division between the art and the ethnographic museum. This division refers to an 'art-culture' system, whereby, in an art

museum the item on display is commonly identified as a work by a particular artist and remarked upon for its beauty and originality. In a space defined as ethnographic the item is classified by its cultural associations and placed together with similar objects in order to generate information, interest and, more recently, understanding.<sup>34</sup> Through the refurbishment and reconstitution of museums of ethnology, it is claimed that the objects have journeyed into the category of art. 'The design of the displays is such', states the architectural firm Opera, 'that it enhances whatever formal qualities an object might have and reduces the interference of the display apparatus'. Moreover, they maintain, there is a mixture of contemporary and the historical, and an 'aesthetic autonomy judiciously accorded the various objects'.<sup>35</sup> Yet, despite these assertions, the museums of ethnology in both Leiden and Rotterdam utilise regional categories that are often derived from the colonial divisions and locate objects in the museums as representative of this regional culture (although there are examples included of cultural interaction). Moreover a visit to the National Museum of Ethnology is marketed as a 'voyage of discovery' to 'distant and unfamiliar places',<sup>36</sup> almost inadvertently rehearsing the tropes of colonial conquest and an 'anthropology of primitivism'<sup>37</sup> that it claims to be working against.

The Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam has embarked upon a very different route to those taken by the museums of ethnology in Rotterdam and Leiden. The changes at the Tropenmuseum were driven by practical considerations – to change from a pastiche to a more coherent exhibitionary arrangement – and a political commitment – to become an 'inclusive multicultural museum'. The latter entailed a radical re-thinking of the relationship between audiences and the displays in the museum:

*We have to answer the question: whose cultural heritage is it we keep in our stores, who are the experts and for whom do we display it? We do not want to lose our traditional Dutch visitors, rooted in Dutch culture, who have grown up with the images and views that the museum produced. And we want to win the new Dutchmen with a non-western background who have an uneasy relationship with this essentialising tradition and not easily feel at home in a museum of which they know that it used to inform about them without really involving them.<sup>38</sup>*

This introspection informed the decision to re-conceptualise the first floor of the museum (on the balconies overlooking Family Histories) into an exhibition space that dealt broadly with the theme of Dutch colonialism. Central to the new exhibitions was that instead of suppressing the 'historical, economic, and political processes' of collecting it would make 'the history of its collection and display ... visible'.<sup>39</sup> In this framework multiculturalism did not mean the display of other cultures, as had been the strategy in both the colonial and development cooperation phases of the museum. Instead, interrogating the workings of various layers of Dutch society in the Netherlands and in the East Indies, 'historicising the Tropenmuseum

collections' and incorporating the existing colonial building into the new reflexive exhibition structure were key elements in the strategy 'to turn the museum into an inclusive multicultural institution within Dutch society'.<sup>40</sup>

The first phase of this radical reorientation away from development cooperation towards displaying the colonial past was with the exhibition *Eastward Bound! Art, Culture and Colonialism (Oostwaarts! Kunst, Cultuur en Kolonialisme)*. Opened a little over four months after *Family Histories, Eastward Bound!*, like the exhibitions at the museums of ethnology in Rotterdam and Leiden, placed much emphasis on the aesthetic nature of displaying their collections. But it went much further than 'beauty placed behind glass'<sup>41</sup> by focusing on the colonial culture, the collectors of culture, their modes of appropriation and the relations of colonial power that dominated almost all spheres of political and social life in the Dutch East Indies. How Dutchness was created in the colonial encounter was a key part of the exhibition:

*In our exhibition we demonstrate that the concept of Dutch citizenship, about which so much is being said nowadays within the context of the integration policy, in the first instance was formed in the colonial context. It was overseas in the East Indies, in relation to the culture that surrounded them, that Dutch people started to feel Dutch; as people who did not belong to one or other ideological group, but who did belong to a nation that encompassed all these ideological or religious groups. Their contentment and their discontentment about their lot in Indonesian society was an integral part of that concept.*<sup>42</sup>

A central part of the exhibition was the casts of archetypal colonial characters in cylindrical time capsules. These colonial figures – such as the administrator, the soldier, and the missionary – not only narrated their stories but also were intended as a reflection upon the use of casts of indigenous people in ethnology museums.<sup>43</sup> The exhibitionary strategy on the first floor balcony signalled that the Tropenmuseum was no longer primarily considering itself as a 'window on the south'. Instead, what it means to be Dutch in the contemporary multicultural Netherlands was now the first item on the agenda.<sup>44</sup>

At the same time, in the Light Hall below, a temporary exhibition was intended to give a visitor a personal and in-depth, nuanced vision of contemporary and past South Africa through the stories of nine families.<sup>45</sup> Yet *Family Histories* was much more than the Tropenmuseum representing South Africa today. The exhibition dealt explicitly with how history is narrated in the present. 'It's not about the past. It's not reconstructing how it was, but how people look back at it. In that sense it is about contemporary society'.<sup>46</sup> In addition, and most importantly, from the exhibition's inception through to its design and research stage and the construction of the final product, the constant assertion was that this was made by South Africans, in South Africa. The exhibition was presented as South Africa representing itself to audiences in the Netherlands.

## Made in South Africa?

Was *Family Histories* made in South Africa? An examination of the exhibition's website would seem to confirm that it was. In the category 'Makers',<sup>47</sup> the only names are the South African contributors: the artists, researchers, photographers, unit designers and organisers. Under the Credits<sup>48</sup> the list is expanded to include conception and realisation, technical installation, the provision of audio-visual facilities, translation, the funders, general assistance and the names of the advisory board in the Netherlands. Once again it is the South Africans who dominate the credits. Their names are mentioned individually while most of the involvement from the Dutch side is represented through naming the institution, KIT Tropenmuseum, and the companies involved, such as Platvorm and Kloosterboer Decor BV and Tibbion Translations. The only time that the curator of the exhibition, Paul Faber, is mentioned on the website is as the compiler of the book that accompanies the exhibition.<sup>49</sup> This appears to be co-operation taken as far as it possibly can.

This image of co-operation is derived from the series of South African-based research teams that were constituted by the curator for the exhibition. The Tropenmuseum had decided during 2000 to develop a temporary exhibition about South Africa using family stories. Through Paul Faber's research in South Africa, nine South African families were designated and a research team was set up around each family. Each team consisted of one or two historical researchers, an artist who would produce a work of art in relation to the family, a photographer who would document the family, and a unit designer who would bring all the material together and develop a unit that would then be combined, in Amsterdam, with the eight others to form the basis of the exhibition. The families, which were in place by May 2001, were Plaatje, Nunn, Rathebe, Manuel, Le Fleur, Steyn, Galada, Juggernath and Mthetwa.

Early on in the planning process it was envisaged that a great deal of the coordination would be through institutional cooperation, particularly with museums in South Africa.<sup>50</sup> This, by and large, did not occur; instead regional coordinators were appointed in 3 major centres in South Africa, Durban, Cape Town and Johannesburg. Their responsibilities were considerable. They were given professional salaries to ensure that work schedules were adhered to, the collection and transportation of material to the Netherlands was organised and that communication with Amsterdam was as regular and effective as possible.<sup>51</sup> Roles were, at times, duplicated with co-ordinators also taking on the responsibility for unit-design and photography.

South Africans carried out two other major components of the exhibition. David Goldblatt was commissioned to take '*stoep*' photographs, large portraits of each family that would be placed at the entrance to each unit. The sometime South African artist-in-residence in Amsterdam, Penny Siopis, undertook the design and construction of an archive which would be placed alongside the exhibition and where additional material on South Africa would be available. Siopis was also a unit designer, artist and played a major role in establishing contacts and facilitating the

South African side of the exhibition. The roles of Goldblatt and Siopis were crucial to the exhibition and separate funding applications were submitted for each of their projects. These extensive contributions by South Africans in the making of the exhibition formed the basis of the assertion by a member of the advisory board for the exhibition in the Netherlands that, 'the scene is South Africa, the stories are South African, the families are South African, the artists are South Africans, the book is written by South Africans, it is a completely South African story. The initiative is Dutch, the rest is a South African story'.<sup>52</sup>

In presenting the making of the exhibition in this way the process seems almost passive. The crucial decision-making, conceptualisation and construction of the exhibition in Amsterdam are left out of the picture. By placing these back into the production process we not only want assert the importance of these elements for the way that the exhibition finally emerged, but also to argue that the exhibition was as much, and maybe even more, one that was about the Netherlands. Indeed, the director of the Tropenmuseum was insistent that the exhibition be designed less exclusively from a South African perspective.<sup>53</sup>

This should not be surprising. Even though the idea was that the exhibition would later travel to South Africa, its primary display environment was a museum in Amsterdam that needed to attract paying customers. The key question for the museum was whether South Africa would sell and, most importantly, what sort of South Africa would be marketable in Amsterdam. The curator of *Family Histories*, Paul Faber, narrated the way that the idea for a South African exhibition at the Tropenmuseum emerged through engagements with other exhibitions. He told the story of how he was asked to comment, at the end of 1999, upon a proposal from the Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in Paris for the Tropenmuseum to take over an exhibition it was planning entitled *Ubuntu, Arts and Cultures of South Africa*.<sup>54</sup> 'I was asked to write a reaction to that', maintained Faber, 'and it became quite clear that that exhibition was only ethnographic. It had beautiful beadwork and objects from European and African collections on display, but there was no contextualisation'.<sup>55</sup> *Ubuntu*, as it appeared to Paul Faber was orientated towards displaying objects 'behind glass' and was 'very devoid of life, reality and society'. His recommendation was that *Ubuntu* was inappropriate for the Tropenmuseum, but that, given the substantial interest in South Africa in the Netherlands, through historical connections and the anti-apartheid movement, a very different exhibition should be considered which would 'show South African society, not the quality of the beadwork'.<sup>56</sup>

Although Faber recalled that it was relatively easy to convince the Tropenmuseum to agree to an exhibition on South Africa, others remember it as a much more even-sided contest.<sup>57</sup> The museum's management team expressed two major reservations. The first was the lack of interest in South Africa in the Netherlands.<sup>58</sup> Whereas at the height of the struggle against apartheid, information about South Africa was commonplace in the Netherlands, by 2000 it was notable by its absence in the Dutch

media. The only South African who was easily identifiable was Mandela, but only as a 'historical figure' who was not associated with contemporary South Africa.<sup>59</sup> Secondly, the proposal that Faber was placing on the table would, in all likelihood, not make extensive use of the small South African collection in the Tropenmuseum. The objects in this collection were largely of an ethnographic nature, and classified under ethnic categories such as Zulu, Pedi, Swazi and Ndebele.<sup>60</sup> For a South African exhibition that wanted to move away from the ethnographic, such objects were seen by the curator as inappropriate. Not using these objects would constitute a departure from the conventional Tropenmuseum practice of making use of objects from its permanent collection. And there would inevitably be practical and cost implications as well. Faber's proposal for a South African exhibition was accepted, but the director of the museum maintained that it was essential to search for a focus that would attract a Dutch audience.<sup>61</sup>

This focus emerged from the discussion on how to represent South Africa. The ethnographic model had already been rejected. There was the possibility of what was called a 'country exhibition' where the idea is to portray images about the country that often run counter to dominant media expressions. Faber, upon taking up permanent employment as Africa curator at the Tropenmuseum, had been involved in such an exhibition on Ethiopia. This re-worked a display from the Royal Museum for Central Africa (*Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika*), Tervuren, in Belgium, to create an empathetic image of Ethiopia as a land of cultural creativity.<sup>62</sup> While Faber recognised the importance of this type of exhibition, his concern was that it could easily slip into a 'three dimensional tourist guide'. What Faber was much more interested in was working with ways that identities shifted, changed and formed.

He felt a much greater affinity with another exhibition that was held at the Tropenmuseum, in 1989-90, entitled *Wit over Zwart: Beelden van Afrika en Zwarten in de Westerse Populaire Cultuur* (*White On Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*). Curated by Jan Nederveen Pieterse, this exhibition used a collection of 'Negrophilia' – 'popular representations of Africa and blacks in the West' – to show how racial stereotypes had been created and perpetuated in the West through slavery and colonialism.<sup>63</sup> Faber was enthused by Pieterse's use of the term 'identification' as an active process, involving choices from various sides,<sup>64</sup> but was worried that the concept was too textual and he did not want to make a 'discourse orientated exhibition' as Pieterse had done. He wanted an exhibition that would 'reach a large audience', be 'accessible' and that would 'translate this complex structure into a way that is easily identifiable'. To accomplish such an 'accessible' approach to identification, Faber drew upon the paradigm of social history. He related this to his personal experiences:

*My father published a book about his youth. Reading the proofs I suddenly realised that he was writing about the period I had been learning about in school. His story was completely personal. It showed the effects of high politics and made history meaningful.*<sup>65</sup>

Family narratives became a vehicle of translation of social experience into an 'easily recognisable format', a narrative medium to represent what the curator referred to as stories of 'ordinary people'.<sup>66</sup> As an exhibitionary apparatus, the family provided an accessible meeting point for Dutch museum audiences, from different social backgrounds, who themselves were constituted as families.

Perhaps more importantly, the idea of the family resonated strongly in the Tropenmuseum and in Dutch society more broadly. The use of the family as an exhibitionary category has already been referred to in the discussion around the 'development cooperation' phase in the museum. Even though the Dutch ministry of foreign affairs did not interfere with the content of exhibitions, as an important sponsor of *Family Histories*, its main concern was to express international cooperation and mutual respect between cultures. 'It is something we desperately want to seek all the time,' maintained the director of the Tropenmuseum.<sup>67</sup> The category of the family in *Family Histories* was thus consistent with the broader aims of Dutch foreign policy.

The emphasis on the family in Dutch society had re-emerged in the 1990s as a reaction to the individualism that had been the feature of the previous decades. To some extent this was a conservative movement expressed in the discourse of 'returning to family values'. But it went much further than this in the Netherlands and became a debate on how families might be constituted beyond the nuclear family unit, especially in a multicultural society. Rather than the individual, it was the family that became a means to reflect upon the past and make future projections about society.<sup>68</sup> Popular books were written using the family as its central theme. One of the best selling books in Holland in 2002 was the prize winning *Het zwijgen van Maria Zachea: Een ware familiegeschiedenis (The Silence of Maria Zachea: A True Family History)* by Judith Kollemeijer. Based upon oral history research she tells the story of a family through the testimonies of twelve brothers and sisters.<sup>69</sup> Exhibitions were also using the family to reflect upon society in the Netherlands. One of the most notable is Rotterdammers at the World Arts Museum. It is marketed in almost the same language as *Family Histories*.

*Ten Rotterdam families who came to Rotterdam from various parts of the world tell about their lives and give an idea of multi-cultural Rotterdam today. The exhibition shows that the first generation migrant groups took their culture with them and that the second and third generations, the youth of Rotterdam, have created a mix of cultures in their music, language, dress and even relationships... Visitors are also introduced interactively to the ten families. The parents tell about the steps they took in coming here, the young people about their steps in the future.<sup>70</sup>*

Families therefore not only provided a personal entry point for prospective visitors to *Family Histories*. They also enabled a reflection upon Dutch society. So, while the main target audience were people in the Netherlands who had an interest in South

Africa (historical, family, business or travel), a subgroup were those defined as being interested in the 'human interest' angle. The purposes of the exhibition included recounting how people with complex life histories live together, how families and other identities are constituted and reconstituted in changing historical circumstances, and that personal choices are made about associations with these identities, particularly in multicultural societies.<sup>71</sup> The educational programme for the exhibition, which contained a series of booklets on six of the families, was specifically designed around the issues of the family, with school pupils being asked to draw up their own family trees and their visions of the future.<sup>72</sup> South Africa was used as a lesson in multiculturalism and as an example of how people make choices in their lives by drawing upon family histories. An early proposal, circulated by Paul Faber for comment, claimed that 'the story of the exhibition relates to migration and to co-existence of different cultures,' and that therefore 'opportunities should be offered for recognising Dutch situations in a South African context'.<sup>73</sup>

In order to accomplish this a great deal depended upon the families selected for the exhibition. One of the desired outcomes of *Family Histories* was to show that communities are composed of different individuals with complex life histories, not a composite of ethnic groups.<sup>74</sup> There was a conscious attempt to select 'individuals and not cultural groups, even though culture and ethnicity naturally play a role in any narrative about South Africa'.<sup>75</sup> The constitution of families was framed as a process of selection, almost as if they were already coherent and collectable. The initial idea was for families to be identified for their difficulty, complexity and not easily fitting into ethnic stereotypes. Choosing families in this manner would enable ethnic identities to appear as relative, moveable and flexible, dependent upon 'persons, generations, experiences, circumstances, actions and reactions to the environment, and personal choices'.<sup>76</sup> In the initial proposal for the exhibition in January 2000, when the working title was 'All Colours of the Rainbow: People's Lives in South Africa', some of the possible families were identified along these lines. A family labelled Le Fleur was identified as having its origins in Mauritius, together with Boer and Khoisan ancestry. The figure of Billy King, a Christian convert, who had been crowned as king of the Pedi, was another possibility of designating a family, as were the Verwoerds, where descent from the Netherlands and different political trajectories were of interest.<sup>77</sup> Of these three families only the Le Fleurs made it on to the final list.

The idea of complexity was largely conveyed through the selection of the family of the photographer Cedric Nunn. It was in many senses absolutely ideal for the exhibition. Here was a family that was not a conventional family. 'I am not a family man and I don't have a family to speak of', maintained Nunn. 'But, that's the irony. I have strong ties to my extended family and I have invested a lot of time and effort in holding that together'.<sup>78</sup> And members of that extended family had been classified as 'coloured' under apartheid, with descendants stretching back to the 'white' Zulu chief, John Dunn. Not only did Nunn 'have a family that is a great curiosity'<sup>79</sup> but

it also fitted into another criterion that the Africa curator at the Tropenmuseum had established. There needed to a significant amount of documentation available for exhibition and the existence of family narratives stretching back at least 100 years. One needed families around whom stories were already being told. Cedric Nunn had over the years been doing a great deal of collection and documentation around his family for his photographic essay, 'Blood Relatives'. This had been on show at the exhibition, *Democracy's Images*, co-curated by Rory Bester and Katarina Pierre, at the BildMuseet in Umea, Sweden, in 1998. When Paul Faber first came to know Nunn's photography and then his family, it not only offered an opportunity to present a 'coloured family of mixed European-Zulu descent' which had a background in 'Dutch, English and Zulu history in Kwazulu-Natal' but also one that appeared to have a substantial documented history.<sup>80</sup>

The description of the Nunn family above, as contained in a funding proposal for the exhibition, alerts us to another criterion which was used to make the families: the need for diversity – geographic, social and cultural, and representivity – covering themes and events in South African history (Faber, 2003: 8). When diversity and representivity were understood as ethnic identity, this inadvertently ran counter to the curator's objectives of destabilising culture. After the naming of three possible families, in the initial proposal referred to above, the other possibilities were listed as ethnic categories: a Cape Malay family, a family with Indian roots, a family with a prominent Zulu background, a family with a Ndebele background and a Xhosa family.<sup>81</sup> Other than an Ndebele family, all made it to the final selection and it does appear that ethnic identities were an important criterion.

The selection of the Galada family demonstrated this tension. There appeared to be none the necessary documentation available for exhibition purposes. Such documentation would almost all have to be created from scratch. But 'we realised we did not have one family of the Xhosa people', Faber related to us.

*It was never an intention to move through statistics but on the other hand there was a kind of check that there should not be large gaps somehow. Major events should be able to come across and migrant labour was an aspect. And we talked to people about that and they referred us to the Migrant Labour Museum in Lwandle. So I went there and met Bongani [Mgijima] and we came up with Cynthia [Galada].<sup>82</sup>*

In fitting into a narrative of migrant labour routes between Cape Town and the Eastern Cape, the Galadas also allowed for stories of rural cultural expression and associated artefacts to be depicted in part as Xhosa ethnicity.

At the same time though, one should not over-emphasise ethnic categories as a selection criterion. When the categories were mentioned in the initial proposal they were largely discussed in terms of how identities were constructed.<sup>83</sup> There are also different recollections of how the families came to be selected. At the launch of the

book *Group Portrait South Africa*, in Cape Town, Henry Bredekamp, the Chief Executive Officer of Iziko Museums of Cape Town, told how he had been approached to locate a Khoisan family and that there had been some conflict, as the director of the Genadendal Museum had assumed that his family was to be chosen in this category. Bredekamp maintains that the Le Fleurs were the family selected on his advice.<sup>84</sup> From our discussions with Paul Faber it appears that the initial idea came from consultation with the historian at Leiden University, Robert Ross.<sup>85</sup> Evidence from the proposals for the exhibition also indicates that the Le Fleur family were mentioned very early on in the process as a family that could depict issues of resistance to early Dutch settlement as well as how Khoisan identities came to be constructed.<sup>86</sup>

The sometimes use of ethnic categories for *Family Histories* (in spite of the conscious attempt to display the malleability of identities) needs to be explained in both the Netherlands and South African contexts. In the Netherlands, it was diversity that was always key and not with the same connotations that these ethnic groups may have in South Africa. Discussions took the form of people saying, 'one cannot ignore the coloured community, or we cannot ignore the Indian community.' There were similar debates about the 'Jewish community' and the 'white English community', with the ultimate conclusion that 'it was impossible to have the whole of South Africa represented in eight families, whatever you choose'.<sup>87</sup> Yet, it was also considered to be essential to have a white Afrikaner family (the Steyns were chosen) because of supposed associations and affiliations with the Netherlands.<sup>88</sup> Visitor patterns at the exhibition seem to confirm that the family selections resonated with specific cultural groupings in Dutch society. A guard at the exhibition observed, 'European people go immediately to the Steyn family, Indian people to the Juggernaths, and Moroccans go to the Manuels'.<sup>89</sup>

Marketing the exhibition and its various associated programmes in the Netherlands also presented a huge challenge, and, at times it was the stereotypical images (some of them located in ethnic categories) that were used to attract audiences. The Dutch Department store, Bijenkorf, for instance, promoted the exhibition as part of its Africa month in 2003. In one corner of a two page spread in its shoppers' magazine, which advertised an exclusive 17 day '*ontdekkingsreis*' (a voyage of discovery) for Bij card holders to South Africa and Botswana, imaged as a place of wild animals and dancing 'natives' in ethnic dress, the *Familieverhalen* exhibition was advertised using a black and white photograph (incorrectly attributed to David Goldblatt) of the Galada family with a corrugated iron backdrop and weeds and tufts of grass in the foreground.<sup>90</sup> The exhibition almost appeared as part of the tourist image of South Africa 'as a world in country', 'known through its animal wildlife, primitive tribalism and modern society'.<sup>91</sup> When the publicity was more directly in the hands of KIT's Corporate Communication division it also had to establish affinities with Dutch society. The Tropentheater, for example, whose mission is to show the Dutch public 'non-Western culture', so that 'people in the Netherlands gain more respect and

understanding of other cultures', developed a programme alongside the exhibition. With some South African performers not well-known in the Netherlands, the publicity at times had 'to tell a story about the people and the context. The name was not enough'.<sup>92</sup> So, Sibongile Khumalo was promoted as the 'The Queen of African song', who would sing traditional African music with jazz influences.<sup>93</sup> For Coco Merkel the theatre offered a comical look 'behind the scenes of a 'coloured community' in Johannesburg'.<sup>94</sup> With Rajesh Gopje an attempt was made to connect with 'Hindustan society and the Indian community in Holland'.<sup>95</sup> The focus was on 'the daily lives of a large Indian family in South Africa during the apartheid era'.<sup>96</sup> For the play, 'Dear Mrs Steyn', which is based upon the correspondence of Emily Hobhouse, it was difficult to make similar types of associations. The play was presented as 'good traditional theatre'<sup>97</sup> and Wilna Snyman, who acted in it was described as 'one of South Africa's best actresses'.<sup>98</sup>

It would be inaccurate to merely portray this almost inadvertent tendency to fall back upon ethnic categories as relating to the ways that the exhibition drew upon Dutch notions of identity and culture. In South Africa, as well, the discourse of multiculturalism, constructed as the rainbow nation, has become a way of recasting ethnicities, quite easily, as culture. Although, Paul Faber found during his first visit to South Africa in June 2000 that 'the expression of the Rainbow Nation has lost its shine',<sup>99</sup> the search for pre-colonial indigenities in the post-colonial context has ended up locating the same categories that were fixed by colonialism and apartheid. South Africans, perhaps more than ever, continue to narrate their identities in these ethnic and racial terms.

The most explicit example of this is the story of the Manuel family, where the category of Malay has acquired renewed life and, in the work of the exhibition research team, seems to have been taken largely as a given, unproblematic entity. The work of I.D. du Plessis, who, through his ethnographies, largely re-invented the Malay,<sup>100</sup> was taken as empirical fact.<sup>101</sup> South Africans were being allowed to tell their stories, and those stories, at times, held on to the ethnic images and categories. Indeed, the use of the title 'Group Portrait South Africa' for the exhibition and the accompanying book, with all its apartheid connotations, was at the insistence of the South African publisher Kwela books.<sup>102</sup>

This discourse of multiculturalism and the recasting of ethnicity is not unchallenged in South Africa. Yet, while there were intonations of these contests, they appear not to have come to the fore in the making of *Family Histories*. We want to suggest that the reason for the subdued nature of these contests possibly lies in the way that contacts and networks were established in South Africa for the exhibition. From very early on in the planning process and in the funding documents, the emphasis was placed on institutional links with museums in South Africa. But, as Paul Faber started visiting South Africa in the second half of 2000, these institutional links proved difficult to achieve and the family research team and regional coordinators became the driving force for developing the exhibition.<sup>103</sup> The only institutions that

came on board were the Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum and the Simonstown Heritage Museum, which were in effect one or two person operations. By working through salaried co-ordinators and the family teams, the exhibition did not become bogged down by cumbersome institutional bureaucracies. On the positive side this enabled the research and collection to be done as quickly and effectively as possible, taking a little over two years from the initial planning stages to the opening. What it did not facilitate was intense discussion about the politics of representation, the 'debates about how particular topics, perspectives, and images became prominent, how their depictions are formed and interpreted, and the social relations and inequalities reproduced through representational practices'.<sup>104</sup> Of course, there is no assurance that the involvement of institutions would have facilitated such discussions but, in a transforming South Africa, how museums re-present themselves has been a matter of considerable debate in and around the museum world. These debates do not seem to have featured greatly in the making of *Family Histories* because individuals replaced institutions.

The teams attached to each family do not seem to have been places that could have encouraged such reflection either. The term 'team' is something of a misnomer as each person seems to have performed a set of individual tasks. Indeed, South African participation in the aesthetic and curatorial process was dispersed and atomised, with individuals each assigned a specific brief.<sup>105</sup> As a result, some team members were entirely aware of the process of production and were able to contribute to the development of the family unit. Others had no sense whatsoever and merely saw themselves as providing information, objects, artworks and photographs for the exhibition.<sup>106</sup> The website was intended to provide South Africans with the opportunity to follow the process by which the exhibition was being constructed in Amsterdam.<sup>107</sup> But the site remained in the Dutch language (largely for financial reasons) and the overwhelming numbers of visitors were from Europe.<sup>108</sup>

The story of one of the photographers involved in the exhibition reflects some of the difficulties of operation, transaction and expectation involved in transcontinental team work. This photographer came to Amsterdam a few days before the opening and when he saw the show he was extremely disappointed. He had expected a photographic exhibition inside the exhibition but instead his pride was dented when he found his photographs were quite small and fragmented in the space of the family unit. With the main objective being to make an exhibition on families, the art, photography and objects were meant to work together. Following the design from a sketch that emanated from the South African unit designer, the photographs had been incorporated into the specific family display, but had seemingly almost disappeared among the other items. This was in comparison to the work of other photographers, such as David Goldblatt, who had contributed the large 'stoep' photographs, and Paul Weinberg, whose photographs made up almost the entire Mthetwa family unit. An urgent meeting was called and after some discussion it was decided to enlarge three of the photographs.<sup>109</sup> In this case the photographer – admittedly one

with a strong personality – was on hand to ensure that his ideas would be reflected in the exhibition. Most other members of research teams were not able to make it to Amsterdam for the exhibition's opening by South Africa's Deputy Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, Bridget Mabandla on 6 October 2002. The exhibition may have been made in South Africa, with South Africans contributing to all its parts, but it was difficult to contribute to its whole.

The exhibition that finally emerged was a very different one than had first appeared on paper in January 2000 under the title 'All Colours of the Rainbow'. Through attempting to track the exhibition from those initial stages through to its completion, a complex series of curatorial engagements becomes apparent. There is no doubt that the exhibition was driven by the ideas of the Africa curator at the Tropenmuseum, Paul Faber, who held on to an independent position as he drew selectively from South African cultural institutions and debates. At the same time, the turns it took were shaped by interactions with exhibitions, managers, designers and ideas about society in the Tropenmuseum and the Netherlands more broadly. Similarly in South Africa, members of the various research teams, particularly the unit designers and the regional co-ordinators, took the exhibition in the direction that they thought was most appropriate. In the end though, each family had to be fitted into a space that was six metres by nine metres. Within that unit at the Tropenmuseum, the flow was from left to right, going back in time as one progressed, with the structure of space following the generations.<sup>110</sup>

But the coming together in Amsterdam was much more than a spatial arrangement. For, what was emerging, through a coincidence of interests in South Africa and the Netherlands, was an exhibition that continually aspired to present complex histories about South African families and their shifting identities, but in constructing its audience as a culturally diverse Dutch citizenry, drew upon the very racial and ethnic categories it sought to complicate. The discourse of multiculturalism in the Netherlands and South Africa, the need to sell the exhibition to Dutch audiences who had little knowledge of South Africa and the independent operations of the research units and their members in South Africa all contributed towards a much greater emphasis on the ethnic than might have been originally intended. The exhibition appeared to be more a *Group Portrait* than *Family Histories*.

## **Viewing the exhibition in Amsterdam**

Adjacent to the entrance of *Group Portrait South Africa: Nine Family Histories* exhibition at the Tropenmuseum stood a large stone cylindrical structure with a round cover. Set below eye level, it enabled older viewers (for children it may have been difficult, unless assisted, to see above the rim) to gaze on an outline of South Africa, indicated through a luminous orange stencil type cut-out. This was one of the directly didactic moments in an exhibition that, in contrast to its introductory

display of the country as a defined spatially mapped location, deliberately sought to present an image of South Africa and its history that was 'incomplete, arbitrary and fragmented'.<sup>111</sup> Through what was referred to by the curator as a 'crazy mixture of texts, objects and images',<sup>112</sup> individuals were constituted, for the purposes of the exhibition, as nine South African families. Through these nine 'families' viewers were not being offered a comprehensive account of contemporary South Africa and its history, but rather selected glances into people's lives through their own narratives. The curator had little doubt, at the time the exhibition opened, that 'these partial views will fascinate "viewers" and bring them closer to the past, and most of all, to the people of South Africa'.<sup>113</sup>

How does an exhibition that intends to make the multiple, inchoate voices of its subjects at the heart of its display, at the same time convey a defined, and deliberate sense of place and history? This is a key issue confronting many contemporary curators as they seek to steer clear of grand narratives and also avoid becoming a seemingly arbitrary pastiche. During the Australian bicentenary commemorations in 1988, for instance, a travelling exhibition presented itself as celebrating 'multiple perspectives, polarities and diversities, while at the same time seeking inclusion and participation, by emphasising "experience", "discovery: and "interaction"'.<sup>114</sup> The curatorial intentions of the *Australian Bicentennial Exhibition* parallel those of *Family Histories*, some 14 years later: 'the aim became ... evocative and expressive, rather than a documentary style of presentation. Curiosity was to be answered not with words, but with compilations of artefacts'.<sup>115</sup> The problem often expressed by curators is that this type of exhibition becomes open-ended, with its audiences expected to have a certain amount of prior knowledge.<sup>116</sup> During our research at the Tropenmuseum in July 2004 we became aware of how *Family Histories* continually vacillated between allowing 'selected glances', and at the same time the need to inform, especially Dutch audiences, about South Africa. It is this apparent ambiguity and its implications that we will reflect upon as we undertake a critical reading of the exhibition.

Slightly beyond the map, on either side of the entrance to *Family Histories*, two large boards, one in Dutch, the other in English, introduced the viewers to the exhibition. The board in English read as an invitation to enter the South African backstage, to encounter – from the inside – 'authentic' images of a place, constituted not merely as a country to visit, but as a nation to know.

*Nine South African families are introduced in this exhibition, ordinary people, like you and me. A people who happen to live in an extraordinary country. Their lives differ profoundly. Each family, each generation, each individual. All of them, however, bear the stamp of a country they call home, South Africa. Here nine families present their history over five generations. For each generation one person takes centre stage and in each family it is a teenager who starts. Each presenter shows a selection of photographs and objects that recall special memories*

*and tell about their life. These stories start in the present and gradually reach back further into the past. Besides the families' own pictures and objects the show also features photos and artworks about the families. Nine teams of South African photographers and artists spent time with each of the families and got together to portray their lives. Getting to know these nine families is a unique way, personal and from the inside, of getting to know South Africa, a country with people from a whole range of backgrounds and histories being one nation. Burdened by the heavy heritage of Apartheid and with hope in the future they invite you to be their guests.*

Going through the entranceway, framed by this description in English and in Dutch, *Family Histories* was organised along the sides of an elongated ellipse. In the Light Hall, on the ground floor of the Tropenmuseum, the visitor encountered four family units on the left hand side: the family Juggernath, closest to the entrance, followed by the families Galada, Manuel and Le Fleur. On the right hand side, the Mthethwas were placed nearest the entrance, followed, in sequence, by the Nunn, Rathebe, Plaatje and Steyn families. On the central aisle of the exhibition, between the two sequences of family units, two computer terminals presented sets of information, in Dutch, about South Africa and its history, and about the exhibition and its production team. On the wooden floor of the aisle a zigzag timeline selected dates, almost arbitrarily, as significant in South African history. These dates corresponded with the history provided on the computer terminals. While each inscription on the floor gave a very brief description of the events, the marking of chronology gave the exhibition a sense of being grounded in a history that did not begin with European settlement, and which largely characterised the South African past as a narrative of oppression and resistance. At the back of the aisle, on an elevated platform, a row of life-size cut-outs of nine teenagers – one from each of the families – faced the exhibition. A mobile television monitor enabled exhibition-goers to elicit the voices of these teenagers on their hopes and aspirations for themselves and South Africa over the next ten years. 'People would all come together and unite and understand each other's differences', says Gavin Mauritz (who is located in the Manuel family unit). 'We have a wide variety of cultures here in South Africa. Everyone is, like, for themselves. They're not working together. Try to make South Africa a better country. Ok, things can't change overnight but with hard work things can change.'

On the left hand side, between the Galada and Manuel family units, a narrow side-aisle took the viewer seemingly behind the scenes. Along the walls of this aisle the credits and acknowledgements, and a calendar indicating the birthdays of those on display, added to the impression that one was exiting the exhibition. Now apparently back stage, the viewer happened upon a large structure labelled 'The Archive'. A notice indicated that this was an art installation that was meant to combine 'the shape of a *rondavel* (a traditional African building) ... with the "tower of Babel" (as imaged in art history)'. In this archive, books, pamphlets and videos projected

a wealth of scattered documentation about South Africa, in particular about resistance to apartheid. Like the exhibition as a whole 'The Archive', the notice told us, was not intended to be comprehensive but rather to provide 'fragments of experience'. Filing boxes, computer monitors, projectors and other forms of audio-visual equipment veritably filled the archive, giving an impression of unlimited research possibilities. The walls and the ceiling were decorated with posters of Nelson Mandela, the South African coat of arms, and, most prominently, tourist images of South Africa. The tourist posters contained depictions of individuals in ethnic dress, each taken to represent a fragment of South African diversity. The fragments of resistance and tourist ethnicity were brought together in 'The Archive' of *Family Histories*, and came to stand for the archive on which the South African family was constituted.

While 'The Archive' may not have been an indispensable feature of the exhibition – in fact it was dismantled well before the rest of the exhibition closed – the core was the individual family units whose entrances along the sides of the central ellipse followed a consistent pattern. If the viewer was able to spend only a limited amount of time at *Familieverhalen*, and not enter the interior spaces of these units, the visual and textual images in the exhibition's inner loop provided essential markers about each family. The exterior of each family unit consisted of an arrangement of enlarged family portraits, maps of South Africa, which plotted the geographic reach of each family story, family trees, which stretched back about 100 years, and a brief introduction to each family.

The enlarged family portraits need to be understood as an integral aspect of multiple photographic strategies of the exhibition. Specially commissioned from celebrated portraitist and landscape photographer, David Goldblatt, they were life-size photographs of assembled individuals arranged as families gathered on their verandas. These 'stoep portraits', approximately 3 x 4 metres in scale, simulated the exterior of each family home, and constituted the first encounter that exhibition-goers had with each family. In most cases, the entrance to each family unit was adjacent to the *stoep* portrait, creating an impression of entering the family home. Whereas these images appeared in sharp colour in the accompanying exhibition book, here they were printed in muted blue-pink tones, almost as if they had lost their colour due to ageing.

Each family tree contained photographs of some family members. They were not comprehensive, nor uniform, but constructed a sense of generation and cohesiveness. Each family tree connected a chosen teenager in the present with a selected central character of each family, creating an ancestry and a family narrative. Similarly the maps constituted each family story within the bounds of a place spatially mapped as South Africa. For two of the families, Manuel and Mthethwa, an additional much more detailed map was provided, indicating a specific region within South Africa associated with the family story.

If the exteriors of the family units were uniform the interiors showed great variation. Each unit was profoundly different in shape, colour and design. Indeed, each constituted a separate installation – an exhibition within an exhibition – replete with its own architecture, assembled artefacts, artworks, and photographs. Circular shapes were affixed to quadrangles, as South African families were accorded distinctive spaces in a replication of domesticity along the ellipse. Photographs, both specially commissioned and those derived from family collections adorned the walls of each unit. Sometimes, the commissioned photographs formed the core of the family exhibition, while at other times they were incorporated as an element of a wider display.

The arrangement and quantity of these elements in each installation depended upon the extent to which the construction of each family was premised upon prior histories of collecting and documentation. The artefacts varied from a passbook and beadwork, to clothing and books of religious or special cultural significance, items of personal adornment, pilgrimage and travel memorabilia, and gifts and objects exchanged across generations. These were often accompanied by old family photographs, which ranged from images of ceremonial occasions to bodies of intimate images drawn from family albums. Family units undersupplied with such artefacts and images, such as the Galadas, Mthethwas and Le Fleurs, tended to rely much more heavily on commissioned photographs, produced during a defined period of documentation of the designated family and their rituals.

The work of artists was incorporated into the design of each unit. For each family an artist was selected, who produced a work that expressed or was derived from the family's story. These took the form of wooden sculptures and found metal objects, decorated pottery, mixed media collages, enlarged, colourised photographs, oil paintings, comic strips and an animated video installation. Varying in scale and impact they were sometimes discrete exhibits, while in other instances they came to almost stand for the unit. Art works were installed within the family units that in themselves were specially designed exhibition rooms as well as spaces for the representation of culture and history. The effect was to complicate and question the boundary between art and artefact.

This was an exhibition not only to be seen. Tactile and technical features enabled exhibition goers to enter the life worlds of the family characters. Pages of Sol Plaatje's diary could be turned, images created by Cedric Nunn's camera could be viewed by operating an enlarger, video images could be watched in simulated domestic spaces, and peepholes were deployed as viewing devices. However, the overriding impression created by the exhibition was an aural one, in a cacophony of voices, sounds and music. Most memorably, art, image and sound were brought together in a multi-media installation as Sol Plaatje's face was animated to the accompaniment of a recording of his voice singing the stanzas and refrains of *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika* as performed in London at the turn of the 20th century. For almost a year, the voice of Sol Plaatje reverberated from room to room throughout the Tropenmuseum.

## Exhibitionary reflections

The analysis of how artefacts, artworks, aesthetics and history come together in the constitution of meaning in the exhibition is at the same time an examination of the exhibition's relations of authority. The curatorial paradox of enabling openness and establishing limits to interpretation emerges out of the hierarchies and multiple centres of authorship in relation to each family unit and *Family Histories* as a whole. Telling the story of a family brought together aesthetic acts, documentary research and spatial design in a display system that gave image and voice to contemporary South African identities and cultures. The place of history in this narration was uneven and even ambiguous. In some spaces, displays drew on longer genealogies of historical narration, while in others a deep sense of the past was avoided in a quest to create the family. The category of history as narration was only utilised on the inner loop of the exhibition. The interiors disavowed this type of overarching account, in claiming to give voice to the cast of family characters in a first-person narration of history. This was at the heart of the exhibition's paradox.

Consider two family units, Manuel and Steyn. In the Manuel family the information board on the ellipse told about Ebrahim Manuel, the uncle of the teenager, Gavin Maurtiz, who spent 'all his spare time researching the family history. By doing this, he discovered that a distant forebear came from the Indonesian island Sumbawa. He was captured as a rebel by the Dutch East India Company and exiled to South Africa.' Inside the family unit, a television monitor lured visitors into Ebrahim's tales about his travels to Indonesia to solve the mystery of his family origins. A seemingly miraculous account by Manuel imitated Alex Haley's apocryphal story of his West African roots. An enlarged photograph of Ebrahim Manuel consulting a *kitaab* (religious book) as a primary source lent authenticity to his claims to have traced the common ancestors of the Manuel and Kaharuddin Anthony families, the exiles Sultan Deo Koasa and his son, Ismael Dea Malela. Ebrahim's account of his research also formed a substantial section of a chapter in the book which accompanied the exhibition, and which was available for visitors to consult, if they desired more information about the respective families.

Visitors would have been completely unaware that Ebrahim's story, which was prominently displayed, was deeply a contested one. The Kaharuddin Anthony family asserted that they were not related to the Manuel family. They maintained that their ancestor was instead Sultan Mohammed Abdul Kaharuddin, a spiritual leader from Sumbawa exiled to the Cape, who had escaped and sought refuge in a cave near Simonstown. According to a letter circulated by Simonstown Museum officials, it seemed that 'Dea Koasa and Dea Malela never existed, or if they did, they were not the ancestors of the Kaharuddin family'. The letter went on to say that even members of the Manuel family 'oppose Mr Manuel's version of the history of the Sumbawanese exile' and are absolutely insistent that 'they are *not related* to the Anthony family and are completely supportive of the Anthony's own account of their family history'.<sup>117</sup>

*Family Histories*, at the Tropenmuseum, in contrast, gave the claims of Ebrahim Manuel a substantial, uncontested voice.

A similar disputed history was also notable in the Steyn family. A wooden sculpted Kavango casket was presented with the following handwritten label through the voice of Theuns Steyn:

*The wooden Ovambo [sic] cask was given to me by my mother when Elise and I visited them in Windhoek, Namibia, in 1988. My father was then the first Administrator General of the territory of South-West Africa, which later became Namibia. His job was to prepare that country for elections leading to independence.*

The role of the South African appointed Administrator-General in the period of Namibia's transition to independence is one that is a matter of considerable historical debate. A common view, articulated by a group of researchers, was that in spite of the South Africans maintaining that the Administrator-General and his staff were just an 'administering and arbitrating authority', their 'supposed neutrality was always open to question'. They cited evidence of the South African state having resorted to 'systematic intimidation ... manipulation of political events, and ... control of reporting in the media to shape the election and the whole transition process'. This, according to Lionel Cliffe, *et al.*,<sup>118</sup> was what preparing Namibia for 'elections leading to independence' entailed. The office of the Administrator-General was thus one that, according to these researchers, implemented South African colonial interests.

In the instances of both the Manuel and Steyn exhibition units, the point is not so much whether these accounts were correct or not, but rather that through the media of video and handwritten text, these were presented as authentic family voices emanating from within. They appeared as part of the family narrative rather than one of many conflicting and contested versions, thereby confirming and spreading their authority and legitimacy. In opting not to interrogate the terms of these stories a dilemma was created for the integrity of the exhibition. While seeming to create an open framework of interpretation, from which the visitor could infer multiple meanings, the very possibilities for this were denied by not allowing for multiple centres of conflicting interpretations. Everything had to be fitted into a family unit, and each individual's story was accepted on its own terms and merits. A methodology of openness became one that allowed for an uncritical methodology that gave certain members of the family the power of a seemingly unmediated voice to trace their genealogy in a family history.

The families themselves appeared as complex structures with multiple points of access, thereby not taking on any of the attributes associated with the conventional nuclear family. Friends, estranged partners and extended family members all became parts of respective family units. Desires for closer lines of consanguinity were deliberately overlooked in favour of a much more elastic and dynamic approach.

Family Histories made a bold effort to reconstitute South African families in imaginative terms out of the fragmentation and disruption wrought by colonialism and apartheid. It built upon longer usages of the family metaphor outside of biology, particularly the imputed family structure of movements of political mobilisation in the struggle against apartheid. And as we have seen, the family as movement was both a system of identity-formation and loyalty-creation as much it imposed systems of authority and hierarchy.<sup>119</sup>

Fundamentally though, the family became a narrative medium to represent what the curator referred to as stories of 'ordinary people'. In South African social history in the 1980s and 1990s, the stories of ordinary people, gathered through oral history research, had largely stood 'for collective social and economic experience, particularly as it relates to class'.<sup>120</sup> In Family Histories, social history became family legacy and a sense of the collective was depicted through the family. Each family was constituted by a story associated with a prominent individual or theme from the nation's history connecting an ancestral line to an individuated story. The Nunn unit constructed John Dunn and his descendents as the ancestors of Cedric Nunn in a tale of multiple hybridities. Tumi Plaatje was linked to her great grandfather's brother, and thus to a story of the founding of the African National Congress (ANC). The Steyn family was connected to Martinus Steyn, the last president of the Orange Free State in a narrative of Afrikaner history and Dutch ancestry. The Le Fleurs were linked to the 'charismatic' Griqua leader, Andries Stockenstrom le Fleur, in a story of Khoisan nationalism.

This then was the paradox of the exhibition. It set out to create a complex and varied sense of South African society. At the same time it tried to construct a sense of coherence through the designation of a single family surname, which in most of the families referred to a male ancestor. Thus bounded by name, the unified category of the family had little space for discord and division, and the numerous and deeply disputed stories about origins and inclusion. These disruptions are usually the hallmark of the making and remaking of families as fictitious entities. In *Familieverhalen*, it was the curatorial process that constructed the bounds of family. Ancestry and generationality became the marks of family. And this familification of South Africa at times drew on different categories, of ethnicity, regionality and experience in order that the arranged, classified and curated persons be accommodated in the rooms that comprised the family units. This was how family became the unit that established for the viewer the possibility of familiarity with South African society.

Further cohesion was established through the display and arrangements of photographs. David Goldblatt's large, posed *stoep* portraits put in place key members of the contemporary families and assigned them to a place of home. Inside the respective family units, and exhibited on a much smaller scale, were the commissioned photographs, taken by the different photographers who were part of the research teams that also included writers and artists. They depicted scenes of individuals involved in a variety of daily, cultural and ceremonial affairs. In addition to giving a sense of

movement and activity that may have been lacking in the *stoep* portraits, these images in the interior also established membership and family ties through participation in the photographed activities. Finally, the selections from family albums that were displayed brought together this sense of cohesiveness. It established a sense of collecting that supposedly emanated from a pre-existing desire from within to assert and maintain the family that had been curated for the exhibition.

Yet it was difficult in several of the units for the families to appear as self-constructed. With many of the families not having their own well-formed collection of photographs and artefacts or a visual record of self-documentation, it was the commissioned photographs and artworks that dominated the visual terrain and came to represent the family stories. There was an implicit ordering of family units. Those that were able to display collections from within the family, such as the Nunns and the Steyns, appeared as complex stories, with a great deal of depth to them. In contrast there were units such as those of the Mthethwas and the Galadas that appeared to be sparse and that almost showed a sense of needing to be filled. These units became, by and large, exhibition spaces for the respective photographers and artists.

### **Family stories in Pretoria**

On 31 March 2004 *Family Histories* opened at the African Window of the National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria, South Africa. This was a national museum that had been fundamentally restructured since the demise of apartheid, becoming part of the Northern Flagship Institution, a rearrangement of the old colonial collections, sites and national museum structures in the north of the country. *Family Histories* was transplanted to the African Window with similar features as it had appeared at the Tropenmuseum. But there were significant differences. For one, there was a new title that brought together selected elements of the Dutch and English titles from the original exhibition. *Familieverhalen uit Zuid-Afrika: Een groepsportret*, translated in Amsterdam as *Group Portrait of South Africa: Nine Family Histories*, became *Family Stories of South Africa: Nine Family Histories*, in Pretoria. Signifying its new residence status as part of South Africa, the 'Group Portrait' had been dropped, and the subtitle emphasised the historical nature of the family stories.

It was also important that an exhibition, which had originally been conceived primarily for Dutch audiences, had to be shown as being appropriate for South Africans. The introductory board gave a brief background to the exhibition, and started by emphasising that this was fundamentally a South African project:

*The exhibition you are about to visit was created between 1999 and 2002. During that period many South African researchers, photographers and artists worked closely with members of the nine families whose histories they were recounting in the exhibition and the accompanying book.*

*The exhibition was first displayed at the museum of the Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, where it opened on 3 October 2002. The exhibition focuses on nine South African families, presenting their histories over five generations. For each generation one person takes centre-stage, and in each family it starts with a teenager. Each presenter shows a selection of photographs and objects that recall special memories, and give an account of their life. These stories are in the present and gradually reach back into the past. Now the exhibition is in South Africa where the stories are closer to home.*

What had also happened in the interim, between the opening in Amsterdam in 2002 and the move to Pretoria in 2004 was that the families, as they had been curated and constructed for exhibitionary purposes, were out of synch with changes that had actually occurred in the some of the family structures. Most notably, an acrimonious rift had occurred within Plaatje the unit. In Amsterdam this family was depicted in a *stoep* portrait outside the official residence of the premier of the North-West province of South Africa. Tumi Plaatje appeared with her husband Popo Molefe, then the premier of the North-West province, the latter embracing their only daughter, Tsholo, who stood between the couple. In the background, through the glass doors, a smiling, tinted portrait of Nelson Mandela was visible, hanging above the mantel-piece. However, since the photograph had been taken and displayed in Amsterdam, Tumi Plaatje had begun divorce proceedings and allegations of child abuse were widely reported in the press. Dramatic changes such as these obviously presented a challenge for the exhibition as it moved to Pretoria. Was it going to change the display fundamentally? Was it going to include what had happened to the families? Was it going to ignore what had happened in the intervening two years? The decision made was reflected in a paragraph that was added to the introductory board for the exhibition:

*However, some time has elapsed since they [the stories] were first written, and the stories that are told in the exhibition are frozen in time. But the real lives of the people presented in the exhibition continued, with all the things that happen in real life. Some people died, others got divorced, teenagers grew up, moving on in life. By visiting this exhibition you will get to know these nine families in a unique way, personally and from the inside. As a South African, your story could have been one of theirs.*

So, instead of representing recent changes in the lives of the families the exhibition was presented as a moment in time, almost as if the exhibition itself was a photograph that had been placed in a different album.

The difference in album was significant. As Rassool and Minkley have shown in another context, 'the differences between the sets of photographs are not to be found in their images, their commission, their content or their visual codes, but rather in

the ways they have been archived, catalogued and represented'.<sup>121</sup> Apart from the change in title and the new introductory board, there were no computer terminals, the large round table with the map at the entrance was missing and no place was found for 'The Archive' in the Pretoria museum. The exhibition room had a substantially lower ceiling than at the Tropenmuseum. As a result the exhibition seemed more compact. Even the teenage cut-outs at the end were no longer on a raised platform but appeared to be far more integrated into the exhibition space. There was also much greater use of unnatural lighting, giving an overwhelming brightness and sharpness not evident at the Tropenmuseum.

The effects of these changes were contradictory. The exhibition appeared less fragmented, and enabled the different accounts of ordinary family 'histories' to be brought together with seemingly much greater coherence and visual impact. The physical appearance and consequent power of the exhibition moved one writer to comment on the impact of its display in the 'low ceilinged and cavernous space ... broken up into nine parts, each for the family selected': to see the exhibition 'is to move into what was the private space of families and their lives and meet them at the intersection of private and public life'.<sup>122</sup>

The absence of some of the didactic exhibitionary devices that had characterised *Family Histories* also allowed visitors to Family Stories of South Africa to associate more freely with the displays. One reviewer, Kresta Tyler Johnson claimed that the integration of artwork and artefact was unburdened by the categories of South African history and its exhibition conventions.<sup>123</sup> For this reviewer, this enabled visitors to think their own frameworks for South African history along the axis of the exhibition's emphasis on ordinariness. Tyler Johnson maintained that 'the use of the everyday objects to translate the history, and the avoidance of iconic images that people expect to see, demand[ed] that viewers dig deeper to truly comprehend. Objects accompany their owners on journeys and carry stories of their own'. For Robert Greig these were no longer family stories *from (uit)* South Africa.<sup>124</sup> They were stories in an exhibition which returned 'the documenting of history to the humble hands that made it', where they were transformed into stories *of* and *by* South Africans.

Yet, despite these claims of interpretative openness, enhanced clarity and ordinariness, the spatial arrangements in Pretoria, and the use of powerful electric lighting gave the exhibition a more uniform overarching character of the single installation in which the meanings were highly centralised. In the bounds of a transforming national museum, *Family Stories of South Africa* came to speak more singularly for the South African nation. It became much more a display about affirming South African national identity rather than the disparate family stories that came to form it. In *Family Stories of South Africa*, the visitor was confirmed as South African and not one who was invited to explore multiple spaces of ordinariness.

Moreover, the exhibition in Pretoria reproduced and reinforced the defining paradox of *Family Histories*. On offer was always the promise of divergent meanings

and associations. Constituting knowledge through the family category was seen as a way to access ordinariness and social complexity. According to Tyler Johnson, the 'model of the family' enabled the exhibition to uncover 'a means to transcribe a complicated story in a simple way', thus making it familiar and knowable. However, as *Family Histories* began to show, the family cannot be taken for granted as a uniform category. Its shape and form are mobile, shifting, contestable and contradictory. It should not be understood as a category of ordinariness, but as a site of memory mobilisation and of knowledge representation. There were intonations of this in the manner that the category was utilised in the exhibition in Amsterdam and, to a lesser extent, Pretoria. Yet in subsuming the family to the recovery of ordinariness the analytical potential to interrogate the processes of identity formation in South African society were reduced. Ordinariness can become a catch-all category that replaces an investigation of the dynamic relationship between individuation and collective identity formation.

The major achievements of *Group Portrait South Africa: Nine Family Histories* and *Family Stories of South Africa: Nine Family Histories* thus lie in the critical questions that they have posed about exhibiting and understanding South Africa. The complex process of this successful exhibition's production took a form that attempted to give substantial space for South African authorship. By wanting to move away from the canon of history through the device of the family the exhibition also made bold strides to transcend the conventions of exhibiting South Africa. Yet, Dutch production methods and introspection around the family necessarily drove the making of the exhibition. In limiting the family to a quest for ordinariness the exhibition's ability to re-imagine and reconstitute South Africa in cultural terms was restricted to a cosmopolitan-native binary.

While our research began with a desire to 'invert the strategies of cultural localization',<sup>125</sup> we came to understand that such binaries of representation belied more complex and ongoing transactions and movements of objects, identities, practices and entanglements. Claims of a South African origin for the exhibition both in Amsterdam and Pretoria represented a missed opportunity to engage with the simultaneity and inseparability of 'dwelling and travelling'.<sup>126</sup> The power of *Family Histories*, in its production processes and exhibitionary categories, lay precisely in its potential to disrupt the binary between native home and cosmopolitan displacement, as was opened up in *Eastwards Bound!* Instead, family, marked by stability and rootedness, came to stand for a home called South Africa that could travel with comparative ease between Amsterdam and Pretoria.

# Family stories

The *Family Stories* exhibition has been one of the most outstanding exhibitions at the National Cultural History Museum.

The exhibit was very special in many ways:

- The uniqueness of its considered approach insofar as history has been reflected in the lives of South Africans in many different ways, and the interactive nature of the exhibition made it a memorable experience for local and foreign museum visitors;
- The exhibit had an international reputation. It was first displayed at the Tropenmuseum, the Netherlands, and then shipped to South Africa where it officially opened in early 2003 – the year that coincided with the International Year of the Family. Much as the exhibit depicted many aspects such as history, art, family genealogy, different cultural backgrounds, family and social values, etc., it also conveyed a powerful message of the concept of the family as an important 'social unit';
- The opening of the exhibition was attended by a large audience, which included senior officials from the Tropenmuseum and the Netherlands embassy in South Africa. Of utmost importance was the presence of the members of families featured in the exhibit, which made the occasion and the exhibition very special;
- Financial support from the Netherlands embassy enabled the museum to develop educational material for students. A service provider (Imbali) led by Ms Ruth Sack developed user-friendly educational material for all three phases: foundation, intermediate and high-school phase.

Prior to implementing the educational material, it was tested and work-shopped with teachers and other educators, especially in the Gauteng Province.

## **Educators' workshops**

About 450 educators from the Gauteng Education Department attended workshops on the exhibition. Imbali Visual Literacy brought an additional 100 educators.

Statistically the museum educational visitation numbers increased as follows:

April 2003 – March 2004	9185
April 2004 – March 2005	14.211 (Plus 35%)
April 2005 – March 2006	13.894 (Minus 2%)
April 2006 – March 2007	14.543 (Plus 5%)

The generic approach per family node/display enabled the museum's Education Department to accommodate larger groups in the exhibition area.

## **Outreach programme**

After the *Family Stories* exhibition opened, the museum management proposed and budgeted for outreach programmes – whereby instead of reaching out to schools using a small museum vehicle with a travelling exhibit – the museum identified poor schools, especially in rural areas (Limpopo, North West and Mpumalanga Provinces), informal settlements and farm schools (Gauteng Province). Students from these schools were brought to the museum from 2003, but only in June, given that the month of June focuses on the youth of South Africa as a result of the 1976 student uprisings.

It is worth mentioning that the museum has also developed a 15-minute video of the opening function, which is also used for educational purposes.

## **Marketing**

A marketing company (BUZZ) was appointed by the NFI and the Department of Arts and Culture to publicise the exhibition. Numerous interviews were conducted with several museum officials on radio and television. Members of the nine families, the Nunn family, for example, have frequently appeared on South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) television talk shows.

TV channels that featured the family stories include SABC 2 (Morning Live Programme), Channel Africa (SABC) and M-Net Journal Programme. Carte Blanche also broadcast a feature.

Different radio channels aired talks about the exhibit, including Radio 702, Radio 2000, SA FM, Radio Tuks, etc. A number of articles were published in the *Tshwane Beeld*, *The Sowetan*, *Pretoria News*, *City Press* and *The Sunday Independence*.

Due to its popularity, the museum management had to ask the families for an extension of the exhibition on more than one occasion.

# Reviews of the exhibition

**Geraldine Fröhling, A family affair: SA's diversity reflected in families, *Pretoria News*, 2 April 2004, *Interval*, p. 5**

South Africa's rich cultural and historical diversity can never be captured in one room. But Dutch art curator Paul Faber has come pretty close to doing so.

Walking into the space at the National Cultural History Museum where the *Family Stories of South Africa: Nine Family Histories* exhibition has been housed, one is immediately struck by the personal and the familiar.

Strains of traditional, township and Indian music blend together as one meanders down the central space, overshadowed on each side by life-size portraits of nine different South African families.

Behind the walls of the nine units lie the rich family histories of ordinary South Africans like you and me, some better known than others, but all with the most fascinating stories to tell of our country's transformation over the past century.

Faber, who works for the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, came up with the idea about five years ago when asked to curate a massive exhibition on South Africa.

'Holland has a complex and diversified past with South Africa, from the days of the Dutch East India Company and Jan van Riebeeck, to the Boer War and, more recently, the anti-apartheid movement. We felt that Dutch society should be informed about present-day South Africa. We wanted to catch the movement of the nation, but at the same time, look back at its history'.

[...]

One can spend hours wandering through the exhibition, reading the life stories of families, looking at the fascinating photos and artefacts, watching videos and leafing through albums.

It is a truly interactive show, with unusual features like the video of Cynthia Galada singing in a choir (as you sit on the sofa, the township music in the unit stops and the choir singing in the video comes on), the cardboard cut outs of the teenagers at the one end of the hall (if you press the button in front of a particular teen they will

answer three specific questions on a video), and the peepholes in-between the Bitterkomix cartoons showing personal items belonging to the Le Fleurs.

And if the exhibition isn't enough, Faber also created a book containing more details on each family and over 200 pictures and artworks from the exhibition. It's available from all leading bookstores.

Faber said the exhibition was brought out 'to the centimetre' from the Tropenmuseum where it was seen by thousands of enthusiastic Europeans between its opening in 2002 and September last year.

It will now be on at the NCHM for the next year. Do yourself a favour and set aside time to explore the rich nuggets of history and wonderful artistic contributions in this extraordinary exhibition.

**Brenton Maart, Family Stories of South Africa: Nine Family Histories. In: *Art South Africa*, issue 04, Winter 2004, pp. 70-71**

*Perhaps the mistake lies in establishing that at the beginning I and a telephone are in a finite space such as my house would be, whereas what I must communicate is my situation with regard to numerous telephones that ring: these telephones are perhaps not calling me, have no relation to me, but the mere fact that I can be called to a telephone suffices to make it possible or at least conceivable that I may be called by all telephones. – Italo Calvino<sup>1</sup>*

Calvino's text is taken from his book *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. The title – hinting at the relation of one concept to another – seems to set the stage for a continuous tale. But each chapter is discrete – different in character and narrative from the one before and the one that follows. It is only when the characters in different chapters start demonstrating commonalities, or when the effect of relationships between characters in different stories can be seen, that the interplay between chapters becomes legible. A dynamic crossing is established between all players in a complex game of interrelationships.

Calvino's words – taken from the chapter titled 'In a Network of Lines that Enlace' – provide a metaphor for the concept behind *Family Stories of South Africa: Nine Family Histories*. Curated by Paul Faber in association with the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, the exhibition is on show at the National Cultural History Museum in Pretoria until March 2005.

At its most basic level, the curatorial task is to recount nine South African family histories using a montage of photographs, film and video, objects, memorabilia, installations, maps and artwork. In effect, the individual items become micro-historical quotations that collectively work to paint the 'bigger picture'. The text in the book that accompanies the exhibition (titled *Group Portrait South Africa: Nine Family Histories*) assists in that aim.

Through a series of nine multimedia installations depicting the interiors of family homes, the viewer gets glimpses of the individuals, families and their relationships with each other. Fake flowers in vases, display cases of souvenirs, closets with clothes, handwritten text on Post-it notes, wallpaper and wood panelling, beds and bottles, along with a vast array of objects, furnish the nine installations.

Ordinary items once belonging to the families become, in the museum, archaeological items, sequentially transformed first into simple narrative aids and then into complex signs. Initially utilitarian objects – and family photographs are also utilitarian objects in their function in memory – later become words and chapters in stories.

In various ways family items find their way into the exhibition, this consciously or inadvertently addressing institutionalised attribution. Drawing on Hal Foster's writings on the 'theoretical elaboration of museological temporality and cultural temporality', Okwui Enwezor writes that 'like institutions dedicated to collecting, categories of meaning accrue and are built up over time and reframed according to institutional ideology'.<sup>2</sup> Enwezor's writings on 'representations of representation' engaging 'new modalities of engagement' may be used to describe the objects on show. Phrased differently, the show highlights its epistemology of self-criticality, where institutions themselves – in this case a Dutch curator and museum – interrogates their activities and roles in the fields within which they operate.

Does any of this lead us to see the dogmas that may influence the construction of family histories in South Africa?

As with Calvino's text, Faber and his team define a discrete space and establish fluid possibilities of movements into and from space. The evidence of cause and effect between families finds an analogy in a socio-cultural theory of Pierre Bourdieu. In *The Logic of Practice* Bourdieu writes: 'The *habitus*, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history'.<sup>3</sup> These conditional freedoms, manifest in dispositions, imply that 'the *habitus* makes possible the free production of all the thoughts, perceptions and actions inherent in the particular conditions of its production'. Initially used to explain cultural production by artists, Bourdieu's theories may be transposed to both archaic sociology and the postmodern method of writing biography.

Empirical evidence on show seems to demonstrate Bourdieu's theory that 'a change in agent's position necessary entails a change in the field's structure'. The installations show how agents change position, and cross between fields, to enact constantly changing relationships. Bourdieu postulates that fields are a range of 'structured spaces', each 'with its own laws of functioning and its own relations of force independent of those of politics and the economy'. The dichotomy established by the relationship between economic and political fields, and the social fields they relate to, is shown to be false. The power relationship in this position is balanced by the agency exerted by social and cultural fields.

It is this fluidity, demonstrated in the exhibition by radical changes and differences in even one generation of the same family that breaks down the notion of the grand

narrative, the master plan, the dogma, the one-way flow. The cause and effect implies that it is the situational and the specific that are the tools against the violence of the preconceived conclusions of the research process. In other words, the dogma prevailing during the lifetimes of individual family members may not be as strong as we originally assumed.

With each viewing of the show, the linearity of the research process and the mode of storytelling (and story-reading) become increasingly fragmented. Sequences become splintered. Instead of generating a bigger picture as many historical exhibitions lean towards, *Family Stories of South Africa's* greatest strength is in laying bare provisional change.

Challenging the traditional approach to researching, recording, analysing and presenting historical information, Faber's approach is one of self-representation in situational contingency.

This, in effect, subverts the arrogance of the modernist method of writing history: one ideology, one writer, one story that – through its prescription – becomes the prevailing dogma. Instead, Faber used a decentralised, postmodern approach to researching his African modernist subjects. This freedom of self-expression and self-representation leads to nine sets of data, each characterised by their modernist traits of (as defined by Mary Klages) 'Impressionism and subjectivity; multiple narrations; blurring of distinction between genres; emphasis on fragmented forms and discontinuous narratives; self-consciousness; rejection of elaborate formal aesthetics in favour of spontaneity and discovery; and a rejection of the distinction between high and low (or popular) culture'.<sup>4</sup>

Faber's curatorial approach attempts to decentralise power, allowing for (according to the definitions of Klages), an 'increased focus on fragmentation and discontinuity, ambiguity, simultaneity, and an emphasis on the de-structured, de-centred, de-humanized subject'. Instead of lamenting the loss of 'unity, coherence and meaning', this new approach to creating an artwork from a life story that celebrates the reality of fragmentation, provisionality and incoherence within the still-prevailing landscape of a postcolonial arena.

In addition to the historical evidence on show, Faber commissioned contemporary South African artists to interpret aspects of each story. A large-format group portrait by David Goldblatt introduces each family. Shot on the front veranda in its various manifestations, the prints here serve as a current context; walking past them takes the viewer into worlds of historical evidence.

Interspersed within these artefacts are new (uncredited) works by artists of the calibre of Penny Siopis, Langa Magwa, Sam Nhlengethwa, Claudette Schreuders, Anton Kannemeyer and Conrad Botes, Berni Searle, Willie Bester and Andrew Verster.

The most important ramification of the decision to commission new work is drawing attention to the subjectivity of interpretation. In the same way that different viewers read the same archive in different ways, the contemporary artworks are just

that: interpretations. It is the new work by these artists that underlines the show's remarkable contribution both to the collapse of dogma and to the construction of the method of open-ended conclusion.

Brenton Maart is a Johannesburg-based artist and writer.

**Riet de Leeuw, Living history (translation of 'Levende geschiedenis'), *Museumtijdschrift Vitrine*, Mei 2003**

As an ethnological museum the Tropenmuseum is aware of its role in a post-colonial world, enabling visitors to view a reconstruction of the past by presenting peoples and reconstructing their memories.

It normally takes a while before people get to know each other. A visit to the exhibition *Group Portrait South Africa: Nine Family Histories (Familieverhalen uit Zuid Afrika: Een Groepsportret)* is much the same. A visitor becomes acquainted with nine families and before he or she knows who the cousin of grandmother is, an hour has passed. But much as when looking at family photograph albums, a treasure trove of information is revealed by gradually immersing oneself in the past as manifested in snapshots and dignified portraits, objects and stories.

Three years ago the Tropenmuseum conceived the plan for the exhibition. It had to tell the history of the twentieth century and provide a picture of present-day, post-apartheid South Africa. Writers and photographers from South Africa set about reconstructing personal histories and capturing the lives of the families today. Well-known South African representative artists were commissioned to create a work of art based on each family's history, which represented the unique atmosphere and revealed unexpected links to events or other parts of a story.

The traditional task of ethnological museums is to provide the public with insights into non-Western cultures by collecting objects and documents and by exhibiting and providing information about them. The Tropenmuseum adopted a different and unusual approach in this exhibition on South Africa. The underlying idea was to show the cultural wealth of South Africa, but not in the form of an ethnographic exhibition with exotic strings of beads or neck rests displayed in display cabinets, timeless, aesthetic and anonymous objects referring to a lost authenticity or hinting at the next holiday abroad. Rejecting hackneyed stories and images of colonial domination, the abhorrence of apartheid, the struggle of the African National Congress (ANC) and the release of Nelson Mandela. Paul Faber, the curator of the exhibition, wanted to avoid such clichés by following and relating the stories of families from different economic, cultural and geographic backgrounds. And perhaps reconstructing the past from stories is what makes this exhibition so 'African'. 'Describing the history of ordinary people enables us to develop a better sense of

what lurks behind the official versions of history', suggests Nelson Mandela in his foreword to the richly illustrated book accompanying the exhibition.

At the exhibition, each family has their own 'unit' or 'house'. These houses are arranged along both sides of a 'street'. The families are represented life-size on the fronts of the units along with their genealogical tree and a summary of the family's history. They were photographed in front of their homes in South Africa. We meet the rest of the family from the perspective of the youngest family member. Each house, some with additional spaces in the form of side rooms, has its own atmosphere, a consequence of the different arrangements, the old black and white photographs, well-thumbed snapshots, everyday objects, colours and sometimes music. It is a theatre of memory, of living histories.

The first house belongs to the Mthethwa family, comprising ten people. We become acquainted with them through the eyes of the 23-year-old Qondokuhle. The family lives in KwaZulu Natal, in the countryside in a village 100 kilometres from Durban. Grandfather is a famous and much consulted traditional herbal doctor. The son who moved away became a bus driver and lives in Inanda New Town, a suburb of Durban. He lives with his six oldest sons in a 'matchbox' as he calls it, without a refrigerator, stove or television. Qondokuhle is one of these sons. He has deep respect for his grandfather and gladly and frequently returns to the village. He thinks it important that he learns his grandfather's version of history and that his grandfather preserves the family name and 'old' Africa. Qondokuhle already knows some of the herbs and their applications. He is currently attending a multi-racial school and hopes to study further. Marriage, polygamy and dependence on family ties are for him no longer a matter of course. He wants something different from life; nonetheless, the countryside attracts him even if only because he can play his guitar there without complaints from his neighbours. He composes songs in the popular lyrical Maskanda style from the townships about the search for identity, about alternating between traditional family life in the countryside and life in the new world of the city.

The first thing you see when you enter the Mthethwa house is a guitar hanging on the wall. By pressing a button visitors could hear the wistful guitar music expressing the inner conflicts of youth. The battered guitar certainly provides an impression of the owner. As a visitor you share Qondokuhle's love for his instrument, how he takes the instrument with him everywhere he goes and you ask yourself if he can still sing and compose songs now that he has loaned his instrument to the Tropenmuseum.

Many of the other objects in the exhibition invoke this feeling. They are personal objects that belong with the families, and like the photographs, tell their own stories. Thus the old pass-book of Cynthia Galada's father Petelele Sobayi, is an important document. The well-thumbed pass contains a photograph of Petelele. His stories, told in snippets by photographs, his own short texts and objects, are of someone who first worked in the dangerous gold mines – 'If you haven't worked in the mines, you don't know anything' – and thereafter moved from farm to farm in the Eastern Cape as an

itinerant labourer. Not having his pass, the much-despised identity card, could land him in jail at any moment. The display include other mementos Petelele kept from his life as a farm labourer, such as string, leather, a tobacco pouch as well as colourful beads he used to adorn his horse for special occasions like weddings.

The beads are unmistakably African. But incorporating these objects in an exhibition about family histories has more an anti-ethnographic effect, precisely because they have not been dissociated from their context. They are not objects from a museum of art but objects from daily life that are imbued with powerful memories.

## **Boer War**

Although the families are not related and are not each other's geographical neighbours, their stories are contiguous, for example, the Steyn and Plaatje families. They are neighbours in the exhibition, though. Their stories briefly overlap in 1899. In that year Martinus Theunis Steyn, president of the Orange Free State, decided to join forces with President Kruger of the Transvaal and defend the Boer Republic from the British. Sol Plaatje grew up at the Pniel mission station and was thus well educated. He joined the besieging of the British-held town of Mafeking and kept a diary about his exploits in the Boer War that was later published. It is a story of suffering and starvation. Steyn is on one side of the fence, Plaatje, an innocent victim, is on the other side. Their stories mirror each other. Steyn bought 'Onze Rust', a farm that has now been in the family for over a century. The property has been turned into a private museum where layers of history have been piled on top of each other. Great-grandson Colin and his son re-enact the Boer War in a reconstructed camp at the back of the farm, dressed in period clothing, but armed with modern weapons. Plaatje is one of the founders of the ANC. A photograph from 1900 portrays a self-assured Solomon, wearing a white shirt, bow-tie and a jacket. His newspaper became the mouthpiece for the growing African political awareness in the midst of the deteriorating position of the Afrikaner farmers.

No attempt has been made at the exhibition to make visible connections between the histories and thereby, the families. The families remain separate; they have their own spaces, and no contact between them. I was curious if (and how) the lives of the people would overlap more in post-apartheid South Africa, or if there would be windows through which they could see each other? In reality, these people do not live side by side. In the group portrait at the end of the exhibition, the youngest members of the families do stand together as a group, but this scene was posed. The rainbow nation lives side by side but do they live together? Can multicultural Holland learn anything from this? This is the main question that lingers after visiting the exhibition and reading the book. The design of the exhibition indicates the great affection the museum has for these families, as do its attempts to convey this to the public (visitors can send a birthday card to compensate for the absence of family members at the

exhibition). It seems logical to me that in ten years the same families re-appear in the museum so that we can share in their experiences of the intervening period and see whether their hopes for the future have been fulfilled. Living heritage and living history require continuity and topicality. Besides, a bit of soap opera in a museum never does any harm.

What is it that people consider sufficiently important to preserve for future generations? What does our communal heritage consist of? Is it objects displayed in museums or stored in their depots, or the vast array of continually expanding archives? We cherish material remnants of the past, but the remainder are only brought to life when we become aware of their histories that explain why they look as they do, indicate why they were brought into the museum, who collected them and why they should be appreciated now. These aspects are not always apparent when viewing objects in a museum. The art is in displaying them in such a way that their multiple meanings can be conveyed. It then becomes clear that objects rarely tell only one story, but are open to multiple interpretations when viewed from different perspectives.

Museums acknowledge that it is precisely the stories, values and meanings attached to objects, places or buildings by individuals or groups that are the most important criteria when constructing future exhibitions. Besides focusing on world heritage, UNESCO is attuned to safeguarding and protecting this intangible heritage. UNESCO draws attention to the negative effect of globalisation on the diversity of cultural practises such as representations of stories, rituals, dances, ceremonies and knowledge of nature. It concerns dynamic culture and living heritage and is therefore also about the people and communities transmitting it. Museums are increasingly aware that relating stories captivate people worldwide and that, by displaying history in this way, their exhibitions have much wider appeal.

# Reviews of the book

*Group Portrait South Africa: Nine Family Stories*

Paul Faber, compiler; Annari van der Merwe and Paul Faber, editors

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**Matthew Krouse, Welcome to the Family. Review of *Group Portrait South Africa: Nine Family Histories*, compiled by Paul Faber (Kwela Books). Mail & Guardian, March 28 to April 3, 2003**

There are enough important historical figures in *Group Portrait South Africa* to contradict the claim – in the foreword by Nelson Mandela – that the exhibition is about ‘ordinary people’.

There are, to be sure, ordinary people in the nine family histories summarised by researchers and organisers linked to Amsterdam’s Tropenmuseum. But these are found in the lineages of recognisable names like Sol T. Plaatje, Dolly Rathebe and one-time president of the Orange Free State, Martinus Theunis Steyn.

The book, edited by the Africa curator of the museum, Paul Faber, with Annari van der Merwe, is the result of an exhibition held last year that would ‘explore a territory normally inaccessible to outsiders’. Local researchers teamed up with their Dutch counterparts to explore families that displayed ‘diversity in terms of cultural, economic, social and geographical backgrounds’.

So we have a glossy tribute – full of mementos, commissioned artworks and images by the country’s top photographers – to more than a century of the South African family. And what twisted tales they are!

The album begins with Robert Papini and Sibongiseni's story of the Mthethwa family led by a staunch polygamist (14 wives, half no longer there) and rural elder Zizwezonke 'Khekhekhe' Mthethwa.

Here the pace is set for the prehistory of the living: rich historical narratives that read like fireside tales of historic wars, religious visions, significant burials and personal traumas. Then come the tribulations of the apartheid era – forced removals, hidden romances and colour classifications. Finally we meet the new generation of South African teenagers preoccupied with university studies and wondering if it wouldn't be better to settle in Australia.

Such is the case of Audrey Le Fleur, inheritor of the legacy of the Griqua leadership told in the chapter 'The Dead Bones of Adam Kok' by Henry Bredekamp. Audrey's lineage is traced back five generations to Andrew Abraham Stockenström le Fleur whose grave has become a sacred site because of major events he predicted (he prophesied World War II and a British Royal Tour).

Le Fleur didn't prophesy the apartheid-era tricameral parliament where his grandson Eric would become a leader, or the release of Mandela that would lead to his great-grandson Andrew's promotion to state prosecutor in 1990. But what is striking about families with examples of leadership is that the environment inevitably spawns leadership.

In *Group Portrait South Africa* we have stories of achievers who've become chips off the old block, such as advocate Colin Steyn who still lives in the former presidential home of 'Onze Rust' in Bloemfontein. And those who went in search of their forebears, such as Ebrahim Manuel whose father appeared to him in a dream, encouraging him to travel to Indonesia where he found long-lost relatives of one Imam Ismail banished to Cape Town in the 1700s.

Like soap operas or epic stories, each story sweeps across generations and provides just enough family dirt to be classified as healthy voyeurism. There are ample examples of British traders who procreated with African locals in Elsabe Brink's look at the Nunn family in 'Beyond the Borders'. And here, this reviewer found himself confronting a disturbing South African syndrome.

In this multi-ethnic story of men and women, with English surnames, who assimilated into and out of the Zulu nation, I found myself continually trying to fathom the skin colour of the dramatis personae. Eventually, in what could be considered a therapeutic turnaround I gave up and read the story as a narrative of people and not of colour.

Ultimately, there is Steve Lebelo's 'Completing the Circle', the story of the Plaatje family that culminates in what is apparently the fulfilled marriage between North-West Premier Popo Molefe and Tumi Plaatje.

However, subsequent to the book's publication this marriage, very much in the public eye, has broken down amid accusations that Molefe sexually molested a pre-teen relative. This tragic turn of events is testimony to the fact that, while the rainbow nation often glorifies family values, the institution may not always be as sacred as the work would have us believe.

**Phylicia Oppelt in *Sunday's Paper*, Book of the Week,  
6 April 2003**

[...]

Ultimately though, *Group Portrait* does not contain the very ordinary South Africans marginalised in our story telling; those who comprise the great collective of unknown and unsung heroes and villains of our past.

The lack of these stories is perhaps a function of the fact that as South Africans we are rewriting our history and that it will take significant resources and energy for historians and biographers to begin excavating the memories and accounts that are slightly off the beaten track.

**André P. Brink, 'Because We Are Stories', *Insig* May 2003,  
pp. 68-69**

One of the most exhilarating aspects of the changing South Africa (and in this case it is something that started well before the political changes) is the shift in historiography from a white, male, Afrikaner-centred approach to the representation of a whole spectrum of experiences of 'ordinary' people, in which all the old distinctions of race, class, gender and whatever else are breached. In the process, as historiographers start acknowledging their debt to fictional procedures, and as fiction writers start realising more and more how their work is rooted in the historical, the traditional boundaries between historiography and fiction become more permeable, in a process resembling osmosis.

In our historiography this interplay is manifest in particular in the work of Charles van Onselen, Nigel Penn and others; in fiction we find it in Zoe Wicomb (*David's Story*), in Zakes Mda (*The Heart of Redness*, *The Madonna of Excelsior*), in Christoffel Coetzee (*Op Soek na Generaal Mannetjies Mentz*) and in Dan Sleight's magisterial *Eilande (Islands)*.

An historical process that in itself generated the telling of stories was of course the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In many ways this process brought home to 'ordinary people' that in our contemporary world we can't get by without storytelling – and even that we ourselves exist by the grace of stories. One of my favourite quotations from Russell Hoban runs: 'We make fiction because we are fiction'.

It is against this background that one looks at the remarkable Group Portrait South Africa recently compiled by Paul Faber (assisted by Annari van der Merwe) and jointly published by Kwela in Cape Town and KIT Amsterdam..

[...]

The reader is at times almost overwhelmed by the variety and diversity of stories interwoven here (and there are some contributions that unfortunately somewhat overdo the motley effect), but it is exactly in this that the value of the collection ultimately resides. The idea is after all not to impose labels from the outside, but to celebrate the variety that makes the South Africa of today what it is. And willy-nilly, there are nevertheless, gradually, symmetries and similarities that strike one: the way the most intimate, personal history is in some way or other coloured by the larger public history – above all by the sombre years of apartheid. Nobody could escape unscathed. (But what illuminates anew is the rediscovery of just how strongly the apartheid mentality in South Africa was already established long before 1948.)

What strikes one here, too, is the converse: how private experience eventually filters through to influence the surrounding socio-political world. If something like apartheid crumbled, then that is because bloodlines like these nine, over a period of decades and even centuries, gradually made it thinkable. There is, for instance, a world of difference between the ‘role’ of a man like President Steyn and that of his youngest descendant, Martine (‘I’m just living from day to day, I don’t have an end goal, I don’t plan ahead’), or between the eldest Manuel (or Mthethwa, or Le Fleur, or Juggernath), and the youngest.

But place, nevertheless, that ‘first’ and that ‘youngest’ against his or her contemporaries, and it becomes remarkable to see how genes make themselves felt! And how each family, and each generation, in its own way, creates space for good and evil, for hope and despair, retrospection and anticipation, and how they all, individually and collectively, help to define and redefine that exceptionally motley concept: South African.

The contributions are not all on the same level. Some are more ‘academically’ (and at times really rather drearily) focused on a conventional concept of ‘historiography’ and less on the personal or the familial; some are too loosely or divergently assembled,

There are bothersome typesetting and writing errors that one doesn’t expect in a luxury edition like this; the general lay-out, with its multitude of engrossing illustrations, is beautiful, but to squash three columns onto a single page and thus having to resort to an impossibly tiny font really does not render the book reader-friendly; and there are inexplicable omissions, like the absence of English translations of long quotations from Afrikaans sources (for instance in the Le Fleur part).

A few cardinal questions remain unanswered. If it was the intention to offer a more or less ‘representative’ group portrait, how come the British family (apart from the Nunns, who lived completely ‘beyond the boundaries’) was neglected, or a Jewish, or a more heterogeneous Afrikaans family? And if the intention was not to be

representative, what prevents the collection from remaining merely random? In other words: How can it be a group portrait and not just a chance selection from a mass photograph?

But, shortcomings and all, *Group Portrait South Africa* is an exceptional publication (with an excellent and insightful foreword by Nelson Mandela thrown in for good measure), which deserves an enthusiastic reading public here and overseas.

**Anonymous, March Books of the Week,  
10 June 2003**

[...]

*Group Portrait* has tried to capture the complicated origins and personal histories of a microcosm. We are all part of a larger social context, and this book attempts to reconstruct some family histories that go as far back as the fifteenth century. In order to give voice to the stories from preceding generations, much emphasis was placed on source documents such as transcribed interviews and diaries. The detailed descriptions on the people's lives make generalisations impossible. Instead there is a focus on one or two individuals from each generation. As a coffee table book, *Group Portrait* succeeds tremendously, with an enormous amount of visual accompaniments to satisfy a thirsty eye. However, discursively it exceeds even that, with superb insights of social significance and subtle overview of the South African situation.

**Paul H. Thomas, Stanford University, in the  
*African Book Publishing Record*, vol. 30, no. 3 (2004), p. 254**

This book is part of a project sponsored by the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, which had as its goal an exhibition and a book that would reflect South African history over the past century. Instead of attempting to write a traditional straightforward history, and in an attempt to draw in people who would not normally find such a history of interest, it was decided to prepare the histories of several families whose stories could be said to represent the South African experience. Needless to say, selecting nine 'representative' families is easier said than done, especially in a nation such as South Africa whose diversity may only be exceeded by that found in the United States. It was that very diversity that the authors of this volume wanted to show. It was their hope that the very fabric of the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic society that makes up contemporary South Africa would be displayed in such a way as to allow the reader to see just how fascinating a nation South Africa is.

Each family has shared its own story, photographs, documents and special objects with myriad authors, artists and other members of the project. The results are nine fascinating historical texts, and a wealth of beautiful pictures of people, places and objects that in themselves tell the story of today's South Africa. Both urban and rural

families are portrayed. Zulus, Xhosas, Afrikaners, Coloured (mixed race in the South African lexicon), and peoples of Malay and Indian descent fill the pages. Some are famous (e.g., Dolly Rathebe, a jazz singer; Sol Plaatje, the first secretary of the African National Congress; and Marthinus Steyn, President of the Orange Free State), while most are quite unknown.

Those who came up with the idea for this volume (and exhibition) and the way in which it was to be presented should congratulate themselves on having produced an outstanding work. With a foreword by Nelson Mandela that sets the tone, this volume constitutes a warm, human look at South Africa. It is not a list of battles, apartheid policies and political parties; instead it presents the everyday experiences of the peoples who constitute this beautiful land. Its words and pictures should appeal to anyone who picks up this book. Recommended for academic and public libraries.

# Notes

## Preface

- 1 The *Family Stories* project was one of the examples discussed in: Judith Lutge Coullie, Stephan Meyer, Thangani H. Ngwenya and Thomas Olver (ed.), *Selves in Question. Interviews on Southern African Auto/biography*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006, in chapter XI, 'Recollecting the New Nation: Group Portrait: Self, Family, and Nation on Exhibit'. Paul Faber, Rayda Jacobs and David Goldblatt interviewed by Stephan Meyer, pp. 409-35.
- 2 P. Faber (ed.), *Group Portrait South Africa. Nine Family Histories*. Amsterdam: KIT Publishers / Cape Town: Kwela, 2002. Also published in Dutch: P. Faber (ed.), *Familieverhalen uit Zuid-Afrika. Een groepsportret*. Amsterdam: KIT Publishers / Cape Town: Kwela, 2002.

## Making the *Family Stories* exhibition

- 1 Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (ed.), *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- 2 This idea has been used more often; see, for instance, Uwe Ommer, *1000 Families. The Family Album of Planet Earth*. Cologne: Taschen, 2000.
- 3 The English title presented a new complication. At one time the title (originally in Dutch) *Groepsportret* (*Group*

*portrait*) was suggested. It came up as a reference to 17th-century Dutch group portraits. David Goldblatt's large photographs could be regarded as such, as could the group of teenagers, but it was suggested primarily as a reflection of the entire exhibition. One or two South African advisers pointed out that this approach could be criticised because of the use of the concept of 'Groups' in apartheid South Africa (as in 'Group Areas Act'). The original idea was intended to convey the opposite: formerly separated individuals were now consciously gathered together as a single entity: South Africans. As the South African editor of the book was rather charmed by the concept of 'Group Portrait', it was adopted in the end as the main English title of the project. She also suggested replacing 'Stories' by 'Histories' to stress the fact the texts described were true events, not fiction.

- 4 Peter Davies, *In Darkest Hollywood: Exploring the Jungles of Cinema's South Africa*. Randburg: Ravan Press, 1996.
- 5 *Jim comes to Jo'burg* was directed by Donald Swanson and produced by Eric Rutherford. It was shot partly on location in South Africa with an all black cast. It was released in 1949 in Johannesburg.
- 6 *Democracy's Images. Photography and Visual Art after Apartheid*, catalogue published by the Bildmuseet, Umeå: Bildmuseet, 1998.

7 Francis Njubi Nesbitt, Department of Africana Studies, San Diego State University. Published by: H-SAfrica (November, 2005), *Seeing/Being Seen in Contemporary South Africa*, <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=11231139852982>

### **Making South Africa in the Netherlands**

1 This paper is based on research for the NRF-funded Project on Public Pasts, based in the History Department at the University of the Western Cape, and the Mandela Chair in Humanities Grant of the Royal Netherlands Embassy, Pretoria. The financial support of the NRF and the Royal Netherlands Embassy towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this paper and conclusions arrived at are those of the authors and are not necessarily to be attributed to either the NRF or the Royal Netherlands Embassy. We would also like to thank the staff at the KIT Tropenmuseum, particularly Paul Faber and Susan Legêne, for facilitating this research, providing us access to office space and facilities at the museum, helping us to make contact with staff at the Tropenmuseum and offering critiques of earlier drafts of our research. Most importantly we want to thank the Tropenmuseum for creating a critical space for debate and engagement about its exhibitionary practices. This paper draws upon and substantially extends our article, 'Family stories or a group portrait? South Africa on display at the KIT Tropenmuseum, 2002-2003: The making of an exhibition'. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 32, 4 (December 2006), pp. 737-56.

2 Clifford, 1997, pp. 21-22.

3 Handler and Gable, 1997, p. 10. This method is derived from the study by Richard Handler and Eric Gable at Colonial Williamsburg. It must be mentioned that our research project was much more limited than the one they carried out. In their study an entire range of museum workers over an extended period

were interviewed, the museum observed on an ongoing basis and a broad range of documents examined.

4 Kratz, 2002.

5 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 132; Faber, Interview 1, July 2003.

6 KIT Tropenmuseum, 2002b.

7 Clifford, 1988, p. 190.

8 KIT Tropenmuseum, 2002a.

9 Clifford, 1997, p. 22.

10 Weemhuis, Interview, July 2003.

11 Programma Herdenking, 1952; Veerman, 2002, pp. 29-40; Witz, 2003, pp. 2-3.

12 Wijs, 2000, pp. 11-12; Letter to the secretary of the Nederlands-Zuidafrikaanse Vereeniging from W.A.P.C. Pennink, General Section, Information, Royal Tropical Institute, 7 March 1952. NZAV Collection, South Africa House, Amsterdam, NZAV VI/1018. We are particularly grateful to Susanne Legêne, Head of the Curatorial Department of the KIT Tropenmuseum, for supplying information and photographs of the 1952 exhibition.

13 Van Duuren, 2001, p. 29.

14 Jans and Van den Brink, p. 78.

15 Van Duuren, 2001, p. 29.

16 Ibid., 2001, pp. 29-30; Jans and Van den Brink, pp. 92-96.

17 De Boer, 1999, pp. 65-81.

18 Legêne and Postel-Coster, pp. 277-79.

19 Cited in Legêne and Postel-Coster, p. 281.

20 Legêne and Postel-Coster, p. 281.

21 Legêne, 2001, p. 31.

22 Legêne and Postel-Coster, p. 281; Legêne, Interview, July 2003.

23 Van den Assum, 2004, p. 5.

24 Verschuren, 2001.

25 Verschuren, 2001.

26 Oostindie, 2003, pp. 136; 150; 144; Bennett, 1995, pp. 130-53.

27 Faber, October 2001.

28 Staal and de Rijk, 2003a, p. 40.

29 Van Wengen, 2002, p. 194.

30 Wartna, 1998.

31 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 135.

32 Wereldmuseum, 2004a.

33 Povée, 2000, pp. 3-5.

34 Clifford, 1988, pp. 222-27.

- 35 Staal and de Rijk, 2003a, p. 144.
- 36 Staal and de Rijk, 2003b.
- 37 Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 136.
- 38 Legêne, 2001b, p. 26.
- 39 Clifford, 1988, p. 229.
- 40 Legêne, 2001b, p. 28.
- 41 Legêne, 2003.
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 KIT Tropenmuseum, 2003.
- 44 Legêne, 2003. The methodological power of this strategy of transforming a colonial museum contrasts significantly with efforts at the nearby Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, where a flagship new exhibition on 'The Memory of Congo' seeking to depict Congo's colonial era from a new perspective has drawn sharp criticism for its 'sense of denial', evasiveness and compromise over issues of violence and brutality (Hochschild, 2005, pp. 39-42).
- 45 Bouman *et al.*, May 2001.
- 46 Legêne, Interview, 2003.
- 47 [www.kit.nl/tropenmuseum/tentoonstellingen/zuidafrika/makers/makers.htm](http://www.kit.nl/tropenmuseum/tentoonstellingen/zuidafrika/makers/makers.htm), accessed 26 May 2004. The website was live before and for the duration of the exhibition in Amsterdam. These references are to the location where the site is archived.
- 48 [www.kit.nl/tropenmuseum/tentoonstellingen/zuidafrika/overig/colofon.htm](http://www.kit.nl/tropenmuseum/tentoonstellingen/zuidafrika/overig/colofon.htm), accessed 26 May 2004.
- 49 See [www.kit.nl/tropenmuseum/tentoonstellingen/zuidafrika/producten/producten.htm](http://www.kit.nl/tropenmuseum/tentoonstellingen/zuidafrika/producten/producten.htm), accessed 26 May 2004.
- 50 Faber, January, 2000; KIT Tropenmuseum, September 2000.
- 51 Bouman *et al.*, 2001, p. 9.
- 52 Van Den Berg, Interview, 2003.
- 53 Internal memorandum from Lejo Schenk, Director of the Tropenmuseum to Paul Faber, 11 January 2001. Reference: TM/00/LS/JR/.
- 54 Paris Insights, February 2003.
- 55 Thamm, 2000.
- 56 Faber, Interview 1, July 2003.
- 57 Legêne, Interview, 2003; Schenk, Interview, July 2003.
- 58 Schenk, Interview, July 2003.
- 59 Van den Bergh, Interview, July 2003.
- 60 Wijs, 2000, p. 4.
- 61 Internal memorandum from Lejo Schenk, Director of the Tropenmuseum to Paul Faber, 11 January 2001. Reference: TM/00/LS/JR/.
- 62 Legêne, 1998, p. 4.
- 63 Pieterse, 1992, p. 15.
- 64 Faber, 2000.
- 65 Faber, Interview 1, July 2003.
- 66 Faber, Interview 1, July 2003.
- 67 Schenk, Interview, July 2003.
- 68 Van den Bergh, Interview, July 2003.
- 69 Kollemeijer, 2001.
- 70 Wereldmuseum, 2004 b.
- 71 Bouman *et al.*, 2000; 2001.
- 72 Van Dijk, Interview, July 2003; KIT Tropenmuseum, 2003 a, b, c.
- 73 Faber, October 2000.
- 74 Bouman *et al.*, 2000; 2001.
- 75 Faber, 2003, p. 8.
- 76 Bouman *et al.*, 2000.
- 77 Faber, 2000.
- 78 Nunn, Interview, 2004.
- 79 Nunn, Interview, 2004.
- 80 KIT Tropenmuseum, September 2000; September 2001.
- 81 Faber, 2000.
- 82 Faber, Interview 1, July 2004.
- 83 Faber, 2000.
- 84 Bredekamp, 2003.
- 85 Faber, Interview 1, July 2003.
- 86 Faber, 2000.
- 87 Van den Bergh interview, July 2003.
- 88 Faber, Interview 1, July 2003.
- 89 Weemhuis, Interview, July 2003.
- 90 Bij, April 2003, pp. 66-67. The photographer was in fact Roger van Wyk.
- 91 Rassool and Witz, 1996.
- 92 Rosmolen and Van der Schaar, Interview, July 2003.
- 93 Tropenmuseum/Tropentheater, *Agenda*, Summer, 2003, pp. 8-9.
- 94 KIT Tropentheater, 28 October 2002.
- 95 Rosmolen and Van der Schaar interview, July 2003.
- 96 Tropenmuseum/Tropentheater, *Agenda*, March 2003, p. 7.
- 97 Rosmolen and Van der Schaar interview, July 2003.

- 98 Tropenmuseum/Tropentheater, *Agenda*, February 2003, p. 7.
- 99 Faber, July 2000.
- 100 Jeppie, 1987, pp. 17-28.
- 101 Jacobs, 2003.
- 102 Faber, Interview 2, July 2003.
- 103 Faber, 2004.
- 104 Kratz, 2002, p. 220.
- 105 Mgjijima, Interview, July 2004.
- 106 Galada, Interview, May 2004.
- 107 Ton, Interview, July 2003.
- 108 Livestats, 14 July 2003.
- 109 Faber, Interview 2, July 2003.
- 110 Ibid.
- 111 Faber, 2003, p. 9.
- 112 Faber, 2003, p. 9. This seems to be a free translation from the Dutch, which referred to '*brokstukken teksten en beelden*'. Thanks to Paul Faber for pointing this out to us.
- 113 Faber, 2003, p. 9.
- 114 Cochrane and Goodman, 1988, p. 23.
- 115 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- 116 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- 117 C.M. Salter-Jansen, Manager Simonstown Museum, and Ald. L.H.M. Dilley, Chairman Board of Trustees, Simonstown Museum, to Prof Leslie Witz, University of the Western Cape, 8 March 2004. The emphasis is in the original letter. For the account of Ebrahim's claim see Rayda Jacobs, 'The Manuel family: Near the mountain, near the sea'. In: Paul Faber (compiler), *Group Portrait South Africa: Nine Family Histories*. Amsterdam: KIT

Publishers /Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2003), pp. 156-79. In spite of these contests, Ebrahim's narrative continues to be propagated in national tourism and heritage forums in South Africa. See for example, Shellee-Kim Gold, 'Paying homage to slavery'. In: *Sawubona* (South African Airways in-flight magazine), June 2005, pp. 98-102.

- 118 Cliffe *et al.*, 1994, pp. 82-83.
- 119 Rassool, 2004.
- 120 Minkley and Rassool, 1998, p. 91.
- 121 Minkley and Rassool, 2005, p. 206.
- 122 Greig, 2004, p. 10.
- 123 Kresta Tyler Johnson, 2004.
- 124 Robert Greig, 2004.
- 125 Clifford, 1997, p. 36.
- 126 Clifford, 1997, p. 36.

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- 1 Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. New York: Vintage, 1988, p. 133.
- 2 Okwui Enwezor, 'Mirror's Edge'. In: Enwezor, *Mirror's Edge*. Umeå: Bildmuseet, 1999, pp. 13-24.
- 3 Pierre Bourdieu, 'Structures, habitus, practices'. In: *The Logic of Practice*, translated by Richard Nice, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990, pp. 52-65.
- 4 Marie Klages, 'Postmodernism'. <http://www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/pomo.html>

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## Interviews

Unless otherwise stated all interviews were conducted by Ciraj Rassool and Leslie Witz at the KIT Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam in July 2003. Copies of the tapes are in possession of the authors.

**Paul Faber** (1) Africa Curator KIT Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, 9 July 2003.

**Paul Faber** (2) Africa Curator KIT Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, 15 July 2003.

**Cynthia Galada** Member of family on display in *Familieverhalen*, interviewed by Leslie Witz at her home in Lwandle, 26 May 2004.

**Susan Legêne** Head Curatorial Department KIT Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam 8 July 2003.

**Zen Marie and Marjan van Gerwen** Discussion over dismantling of 'The Archive', KIT Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, 14 July 2003.

**Bongani Mjijima** Member of family research team, interviewed by Leslie Witz, Vusi Buthelezi and Noeleen Murray, Livingstone, Zambia, 8 July 2004.

**Cedric Nunn** Member of family on display in *Familieverhalen*, interviewed by Leslie Witz at the Boekhuis, Melville, Johannesburg, 1 April 2004.

**Leo Schenk** Director of the KIT Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam 9 July 2003.

**Suzanne Ton** Designer website *Familieverhalen*, KIT Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, 10 July 2003.

**Erik van den Berg** Member of the sounding board for *Familieverhalen*, Utrecht, 11 July 2003.

**Frank van der Schaar and Anita Rosmolin** Publicity Department, Tropenmuseum/Tropentheater, Amsterdam, 15 July 2003.

**Gundy van Dijk** Education Officer, KIT Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam 14 July 2003.

**Jorma Weemhuis** Museum Guard, KIT Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, 14 July 2003.

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