

## **Transforming the Iziko Bo-Kaap Museum**

**Helene Vollgraaff<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

The Bo-Kaap Museum, managed by Iziko Museums of Cape Town<sup>2</sup>, was established in 1978 as a house museum showing the lifestyle of a typical “Cape Malay” family of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The well-known University of Cape Town Orientalist, Dr. I.D. du Plessis, was the driving force behind the establishment of the museum. From the start, the Bo-Kaap Museum was heavily criticized for its Orientalist approach. In true I.D. du Plessis style, Cape Muslims were depicted as a separate cultural group with an exotic and charming lifestyle that separated them from the rest of local society. The exhibitions and programmes of the museum tended to focus on Islam as an all-consuming identity and emphasized customs that distinguished Cape Muslims from other religious and cultural groups in Cape Town. The result was a skewed representation that did not do justice to the diversity within the Cape Muslim community and was silent about aspects of integration between the Muslim and broader Cape Town communities.<sup>3</sup>

In 2003, Iziko Museums launched a project to redevelop the Bo-Kaap Museum as a social history museum with Islam at the Cape and the history of the Bo-Kaap as its main themes. This approach allowed the museum to challenge its own Orientalist roots and to introduce exhibitions dealing with contemporary issues. As an interim measure, Iziko developed a series of small temporary exhibitions and public programmes that together signaled Iziko Museum’s intent to change the content and style of the museum. This article deals with the processes and objectives of two of these programmes.

### **Tatamkhulu Afrika<sup>4</sup>**

As part of the transformation process, Iziko Museums appealed to the public to submit proposals for exhibitions at the Bo-Kaap Museum. In response, Keith Gottschalk of the Western Cape Writers Guild proposed that the Wendy house with the belongings of the award-winning poet and novelist Tatamkhulu Afrika should be re-erected in the museum. Tatamkhulu lived in the Bo-Kaap in very modest circumstances for the last ten years of his life. He died in on 23 December 2002 from complications from a road accident.

Although Gottschalk’s proposal was impractical from a design and conservation perspective, the idea of commemorating Tatamkhulu Afrika was accepted. Iziko Museums teamed up with Gus Ferguson, Tatamkhulu’s friend and editor, and Isgaak Kamaar of Al Jihaad, to organize a commemoration on 7 December 2004. At the same time, a small poster display, a joint project between Iziko Museums and the National English Literary Museum (NELM),

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr Helene Vollgraaff is a curator/scientist in the Social History Collections Division of Iziko Museums of Cape Town and is responsible for curatorial projects at the Bo-Kaap Museum.

<sup>2</sup> Originally, the Bo-Kaap Museum was managed by the then South African Cultural History Museum (SACHM). In 1999, as part of the restructuring of national museums, the SACHM amalgamated with four other national museums in Cape Town to form Iziko Museums of Cape Town. The amalgamation was followed by an internal restructuring and transformation process.

<sup>3</sup> See S. Jeppie, Honours thesis.

<sup>4</sup> See his recently published autobiography.

opened at the Bo-Kaap Museum. Tatamkhulu's desk and typewriter, currently the property of Al-Jihaad, has since been added to this display.

Tatamkhulu Afrika was an enigmatic man, known by many names that reflect the complexities of his identity. Born in Egypt on 7 December 1920, he was named Mogamed Fu'ad Nasif by his Turkish mother and Arab father. Orphaned at two, he was raised as John Carlton by a Methodist couple. Later, while working in Namibia, he became Jozua Joubert. This changed to Ismail Joubert after his conversion to Islam in 1964. He also had himself reclassified from "European" to "Cape Malay" under the now-defunct Population Registration Act. Finally, he became known as Tatamkhulu Afrika, the name given to him by Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the ANC.

Afrika published his first novel, *Broken Earth*, in his late teens while serving in the Defence Force of the Union of South Africa, but did not write again until he was in his sixties. During the Second World War, and was taken prisoner at Tobruk. The novel, *Bitter Eden*, is based on his experiences as a prisoner of war. The original manuscript was torn up before his eyes by two SS guards. The published version was completed a half-century later.

After the war, Tatamkhulu worked as a copper-miner in Namibia. This was followed by stints as a barman, a shop assistant, an auditor's clerk and a jazz drummer. He started writing again in 1987, ironically while serving a banning order that prohibited him from public speaking and publishing for five years. In his poetry from this period, he reflects on his prison experience and the oppression of apartheid. He produced a series of fine poems and novels expressing his commitment to social justice and his sensitivity to the wonder of everyday things. Afrika won wide recognition from the South African literary establishment and won many major literary awards.

Tatamkhulu Afrika was a deeply spiritual man. As a Shi'ite Muslim, he interrogated his beliefs through his writing, and in his lectures pursued the search for truth and social justice. He lived his religion, donating generously to the less fortunate and living an ascetic life with few material possessions. Yusuf Mohammed of Al-Jihaad related how Afrika gave away large sums of money to aid people in need. In 1967, Afrika founded Al-Jihaad. Some of its members, including Tatamkhulu, joined Umkhonto we Sizwe. His involvement with Umkhonto resulted in his being banned in 1987.

The Tatamkhulu Afrika project provided the Iziko Bo-Kaap Museum with the opportunity to signal various messages. Afrika lived for a relatively short period in the Bo-Kaap and his life did not conform to the stereotypical notion of the "Cape Malay" identity. In addition, as a Shi'ite, he was part of a minority group within the Cape Muslim community. This project is therefore a signal of Iziko's intention to move the Bo-Kaap Museum beyond its roots as a "Cape Malay" museum in a way that goes further than just superficial changes such as using the alternative terminology of "Cape Muslim". It also shows Iziko's aim of depicting a more inclusive history of the Bo-Kaap that includes newcomers to the area and people who do not form part of the dominant social groups in the neighbourhood.

Furthermore, Tatamkhulu Afrika contributed to broader South African society through his involvement in the struggle and his literary legacy. Therefore, this project also indicates a departure from the previous approach of addressing the history of Islam and its adherents in an isolated manner. Afrika is celebrated not as a Muslim author, but as a philanthropist and

award-winning author who lived in the Bo-Kaap. This is also shown in the diverse backgrounds of those who contributed to the project.

### **Women's projects**

In 2004, a series highlighting women's issues was introduced and culminated in a Women's Day programme on 9 August 2005. The series consisted of three exhibitions, a workshop and a poetry-reading event. With these projects, Iziko Museums aimed to challenge Orientalist perspectives of Muslim women and to provide a space for Muslim women to take control of the way in which they are portrayed in public spaces.

The woman's position in Islamic societies is often used as a strong marker of Oriental difference from the Western perspective. Muslim women tend to be depicted as being subservient and disempowered. In South Africa, Orientalist stereotypes of Muslim women are reinforced with racial stereotypes. In heritage collections, such as the photographic collection of Iziko Museums, Muslim women are depicted in stereotypical economic roles such as the seamstress, cook, flower-seller and, especially in nineteenth-century images, the washerwoman. In the Bo-Kaap Museum, the Muslim woman as a bride has been one of the iconic images.

In 2002, Maheerah Gamielien read a paper on the way in which Muslim women are portrayed in the photographic collection of the National Library of South Africa, a collection with a similar history and approach as the collection of Iziko Museums. Gamielien argued that Muslim women are portrayed as stereotypical, exotic and subservient. In addition, the women are often not identified. Inviting Gamielien to curate a small poster exhibition based on her research for Women's Day 2004 at the Bo-Kaap Museum was a logical extension of earlier Women's Day events at other Iziko sites.

A more ambitious project followed in 2005. Iziko Museums initiated a programme aimed at drawing in multiple curatorial voices, providing a space for Muslim women to take control of how they are presented in a museum context. The aims of the programme involved active participation by Muslim women in developing the concept of the resulting exhibition and indeed, to control several aspects of the process.

The process began with a workshop on 5 March 2005 attended by 40 women. Roshieda Shabodien, a gender activist, and Seehaam Samaai, a human rights lawyer, were the main speakers. The workshop focused on what it means to be a Muslim woman in the Cape and how Muslim women should be portrayed in public spaces such as museums. Participants were invited to join a reference group that would develop the concept for an exhibition to open at the Bo-Kaap Museum on Women's Day. At the first meeting of the group, it was agreed that the exhibition should deal with current issues and not with past injustices or an historical overview. The reference group proposed the following guidelines to Iziko Museums for developing the exhibition content:

- Problems encountered by Muslim women should be contextualised within gender issues in general;
- The exhibition should include Muslim women who are not usually identified as Cape Muslim;
- The active role of women in all spheres of life should be acknowledged; and
- Focusing on women who can serve as role models should be considered.

On 9 August 2005 the exhibition, *Out and About Muslim Women*, opened at the Iziko Bo-Kaap Museum. The exhibition consists of ten panels, each focusing on a different woman who was interviewed and photographed specifically for this exhibition. In addition, another part of the exhibition includes a DVD that was produced by Munier Parker and highlights a further four women. *Out and About* challenges the ways in which stereotypes are formed, namely that the “other”, in this case Muslim women, is homogenous and differs from everyone else.

The exhibition cannot claim to be representative of Muslim women as the women were selected in an informal manner. They were either part of the reference group, or were known to a member of the group. However, the women were purposely selected to portray diversity amongst Muslim women and to show integration with the rest of Cape Town society. All the women were active in the public sphere. Some were career-focused while others were deeply involved in work in their communities. The interviews sought to highlight themes about identity and social issues, rather than providing detailed personal histories. The interviews were edited into personal statements that form the main text of the exhibition, and deal with everyday life, career and religious experiences. In addition to photographs taken during the interview, the women provided photographs from their personal albums. Each woman had control over the text and selection of photographs for her panel, but could not give input to the remaining panels. The reference group had input into the selection of women, but not in the way the selected women preferred to express themselves.

The challenge posed by both the curator and the exhibition designer not being Muslim was addressed by using the interaction between Muslim women and the curator as a guide to the intended interaction between the Muslim women and the museum audience. The intention was that the audience should be taken through the same process as the curator in dealing with these stereotypes.

An exhibition on female stereotypes by the Western Cape Museum Service was opened at the Iziko Bo-Kaap Museum on the same day to provide a broader gender context. The day itself was celebrated with readings by female poets from diverse cultural backgrounds.

### **Concluding remarks**

Iziko Museums has introduced an exhibition and public programme at the Bo-Kaap Museum that together aims to undermine its Orientalist roots. The emphasis of the past on the particular and the exotic has shifted towards an emphasis on inclusiveness, diversity and integration. This new approach has not been universally accepted. Although all the programmes have been well attended, the Bo-Kaap Museum has also been criticized for “ignoring our culture”. This reaction shows that many people are comfortable with the “Cape Malay” identity and that Iziko Museums will have to take cognisance of these opposing viewpoints.

### **Quotes:**

“The exhibitions and programmes of the museum tended to focus on Islam as an all-consuming identity and emphasized customs that distinguished Cape Muslims from other religious and cultural groups in Cape Town.”

“Iziko Museums initiated a programme aimed at drawing in multiple curatorial voices, providing a space for Muslim women to take control of how they are presented in a museum context.”