

## **The Provenance of the term ‘Kafir’ in South Africa and the notion of Beginning**

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‘Africa was not a new world’ (Coetzee 1988: 2). J. M. Coetzee’s formulation of European settlers’ view of the South African landscape ascribes its unsettling quality to a refusal to be blank and inscribable, therefore denying a settler fantasy of a new Eden. Instead, for the settlers, the landscape persistently conveyed history and anteriority, and thus evoked a sense of themselves as temporary(8). Yet, by the end of the nineteenth century, history textbooks in the South African colonial territories articulated a different vision of the land: that its history began in 1652 with the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck, the Dutch commander of the provisioning outpost established at the Cape (Witz 2000: 324). This idea profoundly declared the settler’s right to belong, to the extent that nothing existed before. How was it achieved? I argue that, along with the brute power of war, displacement and genocide, it was also realized through a discursive mechanism that named the details of the landscape and people who preceded European settlement as the insignificant other. This Adamic project of naming, I contend, is recounted in the nine pages in the Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles (1996) that delineate the meanings and usage of the most notorious word in South African history, known most pointedly for its license of violence towards Blacks during apartheid, but first used and elaborated during the colonial period.<sup>1</sup> The word is ‘kaffir’.

‘kaffir’ noun and adjective. Offensive in all senses and combinations. Also with initial capital, and (formerly) *cafar*, *caffer*, *caf(f)ir*, *caffre(e)*, *cafre*, *kaffer*, *kaffre*. [ad. Arabic kafir infidel. The form kaffer is influenced by Dutch (and subsequently Afrikaans).], The Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles 1996:342.

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<sup>1</sup> Because of the legacy of colonialism and apartheid, the sensitive matter of racial terminology still compels attention in South Africa. Which terms to use is a political choice. Racial categories that had been deployed to discriminate against people under Apartheid, such as ‘coloured’, ‘Indian’, ‘Malay’ and ‘African’, are used today with varying meanings and tones. The word ‘coloured’, for instance, has been retheorized and claimed for a nuanced and progressive use (see Erasmus 2001). In the thesis I use the term ‘Black’, with an upper case ‘b’, to refer to people previously classified as ‘African’, ‘coloured’, and ‘Indian’. I reject the factuality of ‘race’ and see the term ‘Black’ as a resistant political identity claimed by people who were the subjects of oppression under apartheid. I use the term ‘white’ with a lower case ‘w’.

As the Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles (henceforth DSAE) conveys, ‘kaffir’ is a comprehensively abusive word used to denote Black people in South Africa, exemplary of the violent disavowal of Black people’s humanity during apartheid.<sup>2</sup> **Offensive to the extent of being unspeakable today (in fact, its use constitutes a hate crime in South Africa),<sup>3</sup> entries in the DSAE show that even during the colonial period there was an awareness of resistance to the use of the term (1b and 2a: 342).** The word is unpardonably painful and violent and I wish to give it neither currency nor recuperation here. However, because of the language from which it is derived (and, as I show below, from whose usage it has widely departed), the provenance of the word is relevant to this thesis.

The word ‘kaffir’ is derived from the Arabic word for non-believer or infidel, often rendered in English as ‘kafir’ (all transliterated words of Arabic origin in English are approximations, due to the non-congruence of English and Arabic script).<sup>4</sup> In Islam, the root word of kafir means closed, denoting someone who has closed his or her heart from the truth constituted by Islam (Qibtiyah 2004: interview).<sup>5</sup> Derived from this root, the general meaning of ‘kafir’ is ‘non-Muslim’, those who are seen to deny the truth of Islam.<sup>6</sup> With a Muslim presence dating from 1658 when the Dutch

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<sup>2</sup> Selected instances of the use of ‘kaffir’ in South Africa can be seen in the holdings of the Mayibuye Photographic Centre at the University of the Western Cape which contains a press photograph of a sign saying ‘Any kaffir caught trespassing will be shot’. The kwaito singer Arthur Mafokate’s ‘Kaffir’, released in 1995, mocks white South Africans’ use of derogatory names for blacks: ‘Boss don’t call me a kaffir. Can’t you see that I’m trying?/Can’t you see that I’m rushing around (busy)?/When I wash myself he calls me a kaffir/I don’t come from the devil/Don’t call me a kaffir/That lazy kaffir/You won’t like it if I call you baboon’.

<sup>3</sup> The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act of 2000 declares the use of words such as ‘kaffir’, ‘hotnot’ and ‘coolie’ as hate speech. See BBC News, (2000) ‘South Africa bans discrimination’.

<sup>4</sup> My name, Gabeba Baderoon, is an example of the varied ways Arabic words can be spelled in English. The name is spelled Habiba or Habeebah in other parts of South Africa (and other parts of the Muslim world, as people from North Africa, Indonesia and Europe have pointed out to me). The specificity of the Cape spelling is due to the appearance of the soft ‘g’ sound in Afrikaans, the language which developed as a slave Creole in the Cape, which impacted the pronunciation of Arabic spoken there. The soft ‘g’ comes from Khoisan languages. (My first name means ‘Beloved’ or ‘Friend’ and my surname means ‘Full moon’.)

<sup>5</sup> Alimatul Qibtiyah is an Indonesian Islamic scholar who provided an exegesis of the Islamic use of the word ‘kaffir’.

<sup>6</sup> Examples of verses in the Qur’an that refer to kafir in the sense of ‘Kufr (denier of the truth, ingrate)’ are:

2:108. Or would ye question your messenger as Moses was questioned aforetime? He who chooseth disbelief instead of faith, verily he hath gone astray from a plain road.

brought Muslims to the Cape as slaves and servants, it is reasonable to assume that Islam in South Africa delivered the word to the colonial lexicon.<sup>7</sup> However, the use of the word to describe people in South Africa predates the arrival of Muslims in the colonial territories. According to the DSAE, the first recorded use of 'kafir' applied to southern Africa (in the form 'caffre') appeared in Richard Hakluyt's The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation, the first volume of which was published in 1589. G. Theal indicates that European settlers in South Africa adopted the word from its use by East African Muslims for 'infidels' in the southern part of Africa (quoted in DSAE: 347). Henry Lichtenstein writes in his Travels in Southern Africa, '[b]eing Mahommedans, they gave the general name of Cafer (Liar, Infidel) to all the inhabitants of the coasts of Southern Africa' (1812: 241).

What are the implications of the provenance of the word 'kaffir' in South Africa?

**One is that developments in the colonial period were essential to the terminology and ethos of apartheid South Africa.** Secondly, that looking at Islam in South Africa is not an arcane or exotic topic, but can be detected at the heart of the colonial racial order. Thirdly, that before European settlement, southern Africa was part of a geography (and cosmology) created by the connecting tissue of the Indian Ocean. Before the word became associated with Dutch and British relations with Nguni polities in the Eastern Cape, the use of 'kaffir' applied to South Africa carried with it a history of relations with East Africa and the Indian Ocean, with Swahili- and Arabic-speaking traders, and Portuguese explorers.<sup>8</sup> These were the primary

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3:52. But when Jesus became conscious of their disbelief, he cried: Who will be my helpers in the cause of Allah? The disciples said: We will be Allah's helpers. We believe in Allah, and bear thou witness that we have surrendered (unto Him).

3:81. When Allah made (His) covenant with the prophets, (He said): Behold that which I have given you of the Scripture and knowledge. And afterward there will come unto you a messenger, confirming that which ye possess. Ye shall believe in him and ye shall help him. He said: Do ye agree, and will ye take up My burden (which I lay upon you) in this (matter)? They answered: We agree. He said: Then bear ye witness. I will be a witness with you.' Other examples can be found in following chapters and verses: 2:108, 3:52, 3:80, 3:167, 3:177, 5:41, 5:61, 9:12, 9:17, 9:23, 9:37, 9:74, 16:106, 49:7.

Quotations are courtesy of Alimatul Qibtiyah, personal communication, 2 August 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Abdulkader Tayob 1999: 23; Yusuf da Costa and Achmat Davids 1994: 3.

<sup>8</sup> I show the meanings of the word 'kafir' in Swahili and Portuguese, two important languages in the Indian Ocean region. Two Swahili dictionaries, Standard Swahili-English Dictionary (1963 [1939]) and The Swahili-English Dictionary (1967) both identify the word as drawn from Islam. The Standard Swahili-English Dictionary contains the word 'kafiri' meaning 'unbeliever, non-Moslem'. The Swahili-English Dictionary includes Kufuru: 1. to offend, 2. to abandon a religion, turn apostate. 3. sacrilege, atheism. The dictionary also refers the reader to two other words: makufuru 'unbelief, atheism' and ukafiri: 'unbelief, infidelity, sacrilege, blasphemy'. In Portuguese the Novo dicionario

languages in the Indian Ocean trade in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. **The history of the word ‘kaffir’ thus alludes to the broader pre-colonial traffic in goods, slaves, and ideas around the Indian Ocean of which the southern part of Africa was a component.** Thomas Ingsoll states that there is archaeological evidence that Muslim merchants had an impact and presence in the interior of East Africa by the sixteenth century, and possibly in southern Africa from the eleventh century (2003: 363). The dimension of a relation with pre-colonial dynamics associated with Islam is significant to this thesis. One reason is that a proportions of the slaves brought to the Cape were captured in the slave trade in East Africa. The later career of the word ‘kaffir’ in the South African colonies is also illuminating. Demonstrating its divergence from an original Islamic meaning, in South Africa the word would also come to be applied to Muslims, as the name of slaves who performed the duties of policemen during the Dutch period (Worden, Van Heyningen and Bickford-Smith 1998: 61). A second instance of Muslims as ‘kaffirs’ occurs with the appearance of ‘the Malays of Cape Town’<sup>9</sup> in The Kafirs Illustrated (1849) by George French Angas.

While its starkly declamatory use during apartheid was as a noun, my attention here is with the use of ‘kaffir’ as an adjective. During the colonial period (particularly the nineteenth century, as indicated in citations in the DSAE) settler society used this modifier to name indigenous fruit, birds, trees, paths, food, tools, what they perceived to be the behaviour, mentality and sense of time of indigenous people - everything anterior to them.<sup>10</sup> Both Dutch and British settlers used the term with a range of

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da lingua portuguesa (1939) dictionary has two definitions of cafre. The first is an inhabitant of Cafraria, or the language of Cafraria, with the additional figurative meaning of ‘an uncivilized man’. The Dicionario da lingua portuguese contemporanea de Academia das Ciencias de Lisboa, (2001) defines the word Cafraria as ‘the former designation of a large part of southern Africa, inhabited by non Muslim peoples, and that today corresponds to two regions of South Africa’. This dictionary offers three definitions of ‘cafre’ (1). (from the Arabic kafr infidel) That which belongs to Cafraria... (continues with definition of Cafraria given above. (2) The same Arabic derivation. A black person from the western coast of Africa, not Muslim, who used to live in the so-called Cafraria... (2) A barbarous, crude or ignorant person. (3) A greedy or miserly person. (3) Same derivation from Arabic. Ling. Language belonging to a group of southern Bantu languages, spoken in Cafaria. I conclude from these dictionaries that the difference between the use of the derivations of ‘kafir’ in Swahili and Portuguese is that in Portuguese the word included denigratory connotations of ‘race’, whereas the Swahili connotations referred to religious designation, as believer or non-believer. According to Mark Rosenberg, PhD, Swahili derivations of ‘kafir’ do include derogatory meanings, but these appear to be associated with ‘ignorance’, rather than ‘race’ (2004: personal communication).

<sup>9</sup> I explore the meaning of ‘Malay’ in relation to ‘Muslim’ later in this chapter.

<sup>10</sup> Examples include ‘kaffir almanac’, ‘kaffir appointment’, ‘kaffirboom’ [tree], ‘kaffirbread’, ‘kaffir buck’, ‘kaffir cabbage’, ‘kaffir cat’, ‘kaffir cherry’, ‘kaffir coffee’, ‘kaffircorn’ ‘kaffir plum’, ‘kaffir

connotations, not all necessarily derogatory according to the DSAE, though that sense hovered near every use of the word.<sup>11</sup> Crucially, whether or not the use of the word during the colonial era posed as a neutral designation, the adjective performed the function of disarticulating the naturalness of fit between those concepts and the place in which they occurred.

The nine pages of the DSAE listing the uses and elaboration of the word thus constitute an immense catalogue of the process of renaming and re-placing 'nativeness' into 'otherness'. The use of the word 'kaffir' to name South African flora and fauna denotes 'indigenous' and 'wild' (DSAE 1996: 343). Tied to the increasingly common derogatory meanings of 'kaffir', indigeneity itself, rather than conveying a sense of belonging and anteriority, became a derogatory concept. With the landscape designated 'barren' and 'wild', it could also be deemed 'empty' (Witz 2000: 324). Gayatri Spivak asserts that this process of emptying the land that imperialism assumes as its territory and remaking it into an object for the imperialist gaze is central to the imperialist project. She argues that:

the notion of textuality should be related to the notion of the worlding of a world on a supposedly unscribed territory. When I say this, I am thinking basically about the imperialist project which had to assume that the earth that it territorialised was in fact previously unscribed. So then a world, on a simple level of cartography inscribed what was presumed to be unscribed. Now this worlding actually is also a texting, textualising, a making into art, making into an object to be understood (quoted in Mutman, 1994: 35).

Spivak shows here that the imperialist project required the world to be remade as empty or 'previously unscribed' in order that it could be 'inscribed' by European occupation. She contends that such remaking is crucially linked to writing and art which inscribe the land with new meanings. Art rendered the occupied territory into an object that could be understood, and therefore naturalized imperialism's assertion of ownership over what it proclaimed to be an 'unscribed' land. The notion that events that occurred 'previously' had no meaning or were 'unscribed', I argue, occurred discursively in South Africa through the operation of the word 'kaffir'.

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fever', 'kaffir finch', 'kaffir fowl', 'kaffir hoe', 'kaffir honeysuckle', 'kaffir horse', 'kaffir hut', 'kaffir manna', 'kaffir mushroom', 'kaffir path' and 'kaffir pot'.

<sup>11</sup> The title of R. Godlonton's A narrative of the irruption of the kaffir hordes, into the Eastern Province of the Cape of Good Hope 1834-1835 (1835) shows the fear that inhered in the term during the nineteenth century.

Witz points out how thoroughly the word colluded with other elements of the imperial project to deny humanity to Blacks. **In school textbooks the local inhabitants were not even designated as human.** Van Riebeeck was called ‘the first human’ to live in South Africa (Witz 2000: 324). This confirms the extent of the imperial ‘reinscription’ of South Africa. The Oxford Universal Dictionary (1944) shows the similar impact of colonialism on the meaning of the word ‘native’. In 1535 ‘native’ meant ‘one born in a place; or, legally, one whose parents have their domicile in a place’. In 1603 after the consolidation of European exploration and settlement, ‘native’ meant ‘one of the original or indigenous inhabitants of a country; now esp. one belonging to a non-European or uncivilized race’ (added emphasis). Denigratory connotations in this vein can be seen in the use of the word ‘native’ under Apartheid.<sup>12</sup> In Australia in 1861, ‘native’ meant ‘a white person born in the country.’

In the course of the colonial period the use of ‘kaffir’ as an adjective proliferated into a multitude of terms, so much so that ‘the word became strongly associated with South Africa’ itself (DSAE 1996:347). The meanings and uses of the word ‘kaffir’ listed in the DSAE have no prevalence outside of southern Africa (Pechey 2004: 14). If one tracks the divisions that the usage calls into existence, there are three main outcomes, each intimately linked with one another. Firstly, there is an ontological function. Settlers appear to name as ‘kaffir’ what must remain separate from them, clearing a space for a selfhood that is defined against the other. As Edward Said argues in *Orientalism*, the creation of Otherness is a formula for the creation of the self (1978: 60).<sup>13</sup> The alternative appears to be that indigeneity threatens to consume them, suggested by an insidious sense of time, such as a ‘kaffir appointment’, for which one need not be punctual, or becoming a ‘kaffirboetie’ [little brother] by feeling a contaminating sympathy for the despised group, or ‘to go to the kaffirs’, which means to deteriorate.

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<sup>12</sup> See J. Sharp and E. Boonzaaier South African Keywords: Uses and Abuses of Political Concepts (1988), and S. Dubow, *Ethnic Euphemisms and Racial Echoes* (1994). In addition, I discuss J. M. Coetzee’s formulation of the ‘idleness’ of the ‘native’ in Chapter Three.

<sup>13</sup> I discuss Orientalism, its critics and later elaborations in Chapter One.

Secondly, 'kaffir' also functions to remake the landscape. In colonial South Africa this denigratory modifier metastasises into a vast naming that forces newness on a world that was not new. The landscape was named in a way that enabled it to be claimed. 'Kaffir' labelled as unnatural the relationship between indigenous people and their rightful claim to the land. Instead, this was portrayed as a distorted, corrupt and unfitting connection. Such a vision enabled the settlers to proclaim their own more fitting relationship with the land. Paul Carter theorizes this use of naming to erase prior meanings and create the space for new, imperial ones as 'the theatricalization of the ground – its transformation into the tabula rasa of space which, by virtue of its emptiness, licenses the colonist's usurpation of it' (1996: 24). Blanketed by the adjective 'kaffir', the South African landscape was 'saturated with meaning' and turned into a 'stage' for the events in which Europeans would be the centre and indigenous people would be acted upon (Said 1978: 84).

The third, and crucial, function of 'kaffir' was that it also signalled a boundary of time. The extraordinary fecundity of the word is tempered in the colonial setting into a formula for the creation of a beginning. If 'kafir' marks corrupt indigenous meanings, then the settler relationship with the land institutes a new beginning. By marking the landscape, 'kaffir' actually marks a new beginning of history with settler arrival. At first the word looks mainly like a spatial gesture but, I argue, it is also a temporal one. Symbolically 'kaffir' thus announces not only a claim to land, but to a beginning.

### Beginnings in South Africa

This is a 'beginning' in the sense theorized by Edward Said (1976). For Said, beginnings are made, not discovered, whether of texts, academic disciplines or 'certain moments in the life of the mind and of general consciousness' (2001: 165). The concepts explored in his book Beginnings (1976) had their origin in the 1967 war and, therefore, his conception of points of initiation is infused with both possibility and tension. Said writes that such points are:

dogged by anxiety, a beginning also constitutes the site of profound reflection on anteriority, a slippery yet deliberately stabilized site where the authority of silenced Origins is registered, scrutinized, pondered, dismantled, de-defined, recovered, projected, and refined in various ways for purposes of self-legitimation (Hussein 2002: 55).

As an 'intellectual enactment', a beginning can be analysed: how their elements fit together, what is placed before them, and what goes into the natural trajectory afterward (Hussein 2002: 55). It is in this mode as a symbolic beginning that I have explored the elaboration of the word 'kaffir' in South Africa.

I have discussed this construction of a beginning in the colonial era through the word 'kaffir' to suggest the necessity of looking differently at the familiar for the ways in which Islam is present in South Africa. 'Kaffir' indicates encounters with Islam during a long history, remade in the context of South Africa into a word almost unrecognisable from its original, religious use. This is an indication of the particularity of South Africa's history and its forming and deforming impact on culture.

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Pull Quotes:

**When he embraced Islam, Dawood felt he had come to “the end of my search, the end of my destiny. I accepted Islam for Islam, not for other Muslims. I did not expect any position with Muslims.”**

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**The history of the word ‘kaffir’ thus alludes to the broader pre-colonial traffic in goods, slaves, and ideas around the Indian Ocean of which the southern part of Africa was a component.**

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