Chapter 20

Meat Marketing Dissonance: A South African Case Study

Erin Hill
University of Cape Town, South Africa

Talia Raphaely
Curtin University, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses a South African supermarket’s print advertisement promoting meat consumption for a national public holiday. Meat consumption is portrayed as symbolic of and necessary for cultural belonging, participation and celebration. It is used to maximise profits by maintaining the distance between consumers and the realities of the power and violence perpetrated against the sentient life from which the “culturally” commodified meat product is sourced. National Heritage Day celebrates the demise of South Africa’s history of domination, exploitation and discrimination and its bright present and future. The case study however illustrates that the marketing of meat as a cultural commodity reinforces hegemonic control and is contrary to what Heritage Day represents. It indicates a dangerous dissonance that encourages and endorses domination and violence against animals. Whilst the case study focuses on South Africa, hegemonic influence through visual commodification and marketing of meat is apparent in most western societies.

INTRODUCTION: HERITAGE DAY AND THE “BRAAI”

September 24th — Heritage Day in South Africa — is a national celebration of cultural diversity and democracy. It emphasises equality, hope, freedom and a bright future for all in light of the end of the country’s oppressive history of Apartheid. Heritage Day, referred to as “Braai Day”, is celebrated in a typically South African manner — outdoors with a big meal accompanied by alcohol and sport events. Meat consumption marketing for Heritage Day has ensured that the “Braai” and meat intake have become a prerequisite for participating in collective South African heritage and nationalism (Molefe, 2014). As such, Heritage Day has become interchangeable or synonymous with a certain hegemonic cultural
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ritual — the braai, which is historically and paradoxically the cultural food preparation practice of the Afrikaans people (the architects of the apartheid regime, the antithesis of what Heritage Day celebrates).

The word “braai” is Afrikaans for grill, roast or fry and is a social gathering activity that involves cooking meat outdoors over a fire. Like many western holidays all over the world (including Christmas, Easter, Australia Day and American Thanksgiving), celebrating Heritage Day in a conventional, acceptable and socially understood manner has come to require the production and consumption of vast quantities of animal body parts and by-products in the form of meat, dairy, and eggs.

Meat mass-produced from animals raised in factory farms (the case in most countries, including South Africa) can be compared to the human rights abuse that dominated Apartheid, and extends back to the trade of African people as slaves prevalent up until the 19th century: “Africans captured and forced into slavery were often compared to animals in an effort to justify their treatment. They were called ‘brutes’ and ‘beasts’. Their lives were considered expendable, and many died at the hands of their oppressors. The same oppressive mentality behind those actions leads to the slaughter of animals today” (PETA in Cooper, 2007).

Yet ironically, Heritage Day was established post-apartheid to celebrate the diversity of the South African nation and encourage respect, equality and unity. As Nelson Mandela (1994, p. 385) said: “The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. We have not taken the final step of our journey, but the first step on a longer and even more difficult road. For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others”. Marketing and consumption of meat, particularly meat produced from animals reared in factory farms, is by no explanation, living in a way that respects or enhances the freedom of others.

Historically, September 24th was a Zulu celebration commemorating its leader King Shaka. However, fears of promoting tribalism led to a compromise; the day was appropriated and merged into a bank holiday where all South Africans could respectfully celebrate the multiplicity of cultures, histories and heroes (Molefe, 2014). Although many cultures practice cooking meat outdoors over a fire in some form, the South African version of the braai has its roots in the Great Trek, an emigration of some 14,000 Afrikaans Boers (or farmers) in search of fresh pastures and in rebellion of British governance. The Great Trek is historically viewed as an important phase in the Western colonisation of South Africa, oppression of the indigenous peoples and the origin of Afrikaans nationhood and domination (de Klerk, 2009). While 1994 saw the dawn of democracy in South Africa, political decolonisation did not end the process of Western domination. The dominant political and economic system today remains mainly of Western origin. Despite its role in South Africa’s history of Apartheid and oppression, and seemingly without considering the oppressive past of a very specific white man’s ritual, Jan Scannell, otherwise known as Jan Braai, chose Heritage Day to spearhead a 2005 media campaign to promote and realise his ideal of unifying all South Africans around the braai (Molefe, 2014). Despite the fact that “the notion of a still-divided nation unifying around a shared love of grilled meat seemed both feeble and potentially offensive” (Mlambo in Moskin, 2016), the braai emerged as a tentative symbol of South African unity! Archbishop Desmond Tutu – patron of National Heritage Day, proclaimed the Braai as “one thing that can unite us irrespective of all the things that are trying to tear us apart” (Tutu in Moskin, 2016)

Language and visuals are used to maintain a dissonance between the braaivleis (grilled meat) and the fact that these ingredients are a by-product of a once living, sentient being, slaughtered for consumer gratification. The animal source and the experienced suffering are of little or no significance. Rather, the