

{ CULTURE }



Bury my heart at salad valley

For real Native Americans, the fantasy portrayed by Spur's steakhouse decor leaves a bad taste, writes **Nick Mulgrew**

COME ANGRY: Few South Africans seem to mind the cultural stereotyping in Spur's branding

IMAGINE, in Estonia, a restaurant chain called Kraal. It says it gives homage to Zulu history, but something's not right. The paintings are more San; the textiles more Ndebele. The staff wear imitation-fur loincloths — more Tarzan than *imitsha* — and Technicolor Basotho blankets. The logo depicts someone with a spear and shield. Is it supposed to be Shaka? Dingaan?

It doesn't really matter. The point is: would you find this distasteful? Offensive, even?

Thankfully, Kraal doesn't exist. But it does have a South African analogue — an empire of restaurants built on stereotypical (and sometimes incorrect) depictions of faraway people. Spur Steak Ranches, founded in 1967 as a Western-themed restaurant in Cape Town, now numbers 275 outlets in South Africa and is one of the most recognisable brands in the country. And it's all fronted by a mascot of a Native American chief.

Most South Africans might not think that's a problem. But elsewhere, the kind of imagery in which Spur traffics is being furiously challenged.

"Spur has a really strange mascot," said Jacqueline Keeler, a disarmingly chipper Native American activist based in Portland, Oregon. "And it's really disturbing to think that this is how we're represented to South Africans."

Keeler is the founder of Eradicating Offensive Native Mascotry, a group that lobbies against misrepresentation of Native Americans in the US. Most recently, groups like hers have focused on offensive mascots attached to US sports teams like the Washington Redskins and the Cleveland Indians.

They argue that these constitute and encourage "redface": hokey and racist representations of Native Americans historically inculcated by Hollywood Westerns and adventure books. Think eagle-feather headdresses, war paint, teepees — all, interestingly enough, components of Spur's branding.

Mascotry is bad for many reasons, Keeler argues, but mostly because it gets in the way of actual knowledge about people. "We're

unlike how we're portrayed in the media, to the point that most people don't know anything about us." At best, mascotry and redface showcase a kind of culture that has little to do with modern Native American life; at worst, they reference narratives that depict and celebrate the triumph of settlers over Native Americans.

Keeler says mascotry not only "gives cover for all of the atrocious things that happened to Native American people" but also has immediate practical effects. "It affects how legislators see us when they write laws, how donors give money to programmes that affect us, and the outcome of judicial cases."

Anti-mascot activists have had their small victories, including the cancellation last year of the trademark of the Washington Redskins. That said, this will not on its own force a change in the team's name, and the decision is under appeal. "People feel entitled to use our im-

'It's really disturbing to think that this is how we're represented to South Africans'

ages in any way they want," Keeler said. "That's why it's so dangerous."

Surely Spur have cottoned onto this — especially seeing as their logo shares many similarities with that of the Washington Redskins. But Spur's convivial CEO Pierre van Tonder says the issue is not a huge worry. "We've had one or two guys write to us and ask if we're not being politically incorrect, but overall we really haven't had any real negative feedback."

The company would have noticed if it had: "In South Africa, the thing that's at the forefront of everyone's mind, from a business perspective, is that you don't want to offend anybody. It's like walking on eggshells."

And understandably so. But it's odd that in a society which broadly tries to expose racism, Spur's branding can be seen as apolitical. That's probably because there isn't a Native American presence in

South Africa — but there are obvious resonances between the historical treatment of Native Americans and what happened in South Africa during the era of colonialism and apartheid.

Keyan Tomaselli, professor emeritus in the centre for communication, media and society at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, says Spur's branding does a neat job of negotiating negative evocations.

Their advertisements and corporate identity were based on an image of "a non-racial, internationalist, unthreatening, fun-loving, mythical, all-inclusive, naturalised indigene", resulting in a brand in which "race, colour, national origin, ethnicity, and language are all erased".

In simpler terms: a rainbow-nation-friendly brand, which stands in place of knowledge between people of different cultures.

Van Tonder said the company was in the "fortunate position" that its consumer base was representative of all South Africans. "That's probably because we didn't get involved in political minefields."

Perhaps that's a good way to look at Spur's branding: as an attempt to draw upon ideas of community in a divided country. Look at old Spur menus and what you find — other than how expensive things have become over the decades — is that the restaurant's Native American turn came only in the late '80s, when it moved from, in Van Tonder's words, "cowboys and Indians", into something more "neutral and apolitical".

Spur's greatest strength lies in the creation of what Tomaselli calls "a contrived but welcome fantasyland". But is that dependent on its mascots? Spur itself seem cognisant of this: in its overseas restaurants — from the UK to Australia, Dubai to Mauritius — the Native American branding is toned down.

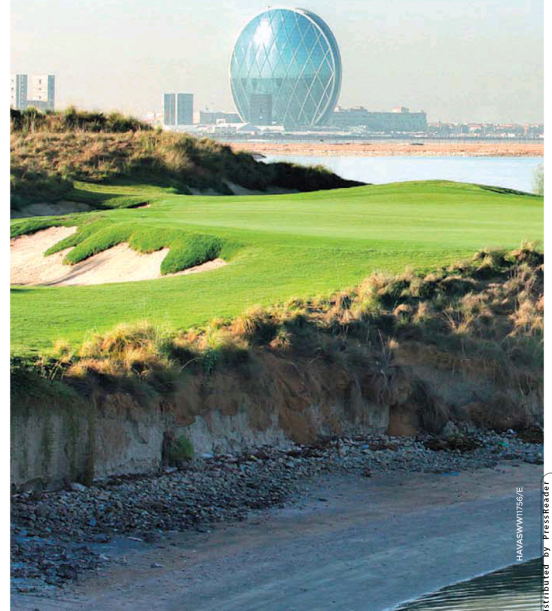
But Keeler says toning down isn't enough. "I was shocked when I saw that there are Spurs in the UK," she said. "They form people's ideas about us. This isn't what we want people to learn about us, as modern, sovereign people. But it's a funny thing, thinking about what your responsibilities are to people who are far away." **LS**

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