



VAN RIEBEECK'S HEDGE

Cape Town, South Africa

-33.991, 18.43143



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Executive Summary

Jan van Riebeeck arrived at Cape of Good Hope in 1652. His mission was to create a station for the Dutch East India Company's ships. This meant colonising the lands inhabited by the Khoikhoi. To keep them from accessing his land, van Riebeeck planted a wild almond hedge. The hedge was declared in 1936 a National Monument, but since 2001 it has been the object of vandalism. For some, it means a physical and metaphorical segregation border in South Africa. This case offers an overview and analysis of the different processes and decision-making around van Riebeeck's hedge.

Introduction

History in the present is not about burden or mourning; it is about accounting for the population of the dead. But this dead population is not dead, because their actions leave traces that work to configure the world. In this sense, our present historical actions are dialogues between the living and the dead...To engage in this dialogue we remember wounds, but more importantly, we hear the cries produced by wounds.¹

van Riebeeck's hedge was declared a National Monument in 1936, however, over the last decades, it has been subject to contestation. In 2001 the plaque marking the hedge was vandalised. Some South African academics, such as Professor Siona O'Connell, argue that the hedge is 'both a physical and metaphorical barrier signalling the beginning of forced removals and segregation in South Africa, dividing white and non-white people.'² Whereas others have argued that the hedge remains an important part of South African history and must be preserved.

This case study provides an overview of the background of van Riebeeck's hedge, including perceptions and framings of the monument over time. This is followed by a discussion on the contestations over this monument and the key national and international stakeholders involved. Finally, this study discusses the decision-making process surrounding the contestation and its implications for future policymaking.

Background

Jan van Riebeeck arrived in the Cape of Good Hope on April 6, 1652. He was assigned to create a refreshment station for Dutch East India Company's (VOC) ships travelling between the Netherlands and India.³ While the initial intention was not to colonise the land, the demand for agricultural supplies increased over time, expanding the settlement into lands inhabited by the local Khoikhoi people.⁴ The Dutch justified their expansion in Western property law terms, arguing that there was no written evidence of Khoikhoi land ownership.⁵ According to Hogan: 'the Dutch outpost was not merely a site of international exchange, but also a structure of

¹ Anthony Bogues, *Empire of Liberty: Power, Desire, & Freedom*, University Press of New England, Hanover, New Hampshire, 2010: 116.

² Siona O'Connell. "Apartheid Afterlives," *Third Text* 32, no. 1(2018): 35.

³ Johan Anthoniszoon, "Jan Van Riebeeck," *South African History Online*.

⁴ South African History Online, "Establishment of the Cape and its impact on Khoikhoi and Dutch," *South African History Online*, September 8, 2020.

⁵ South African History Online, "The Arrival of Jan Van Riebeeck in the Cape – 6 April 1652," *South African History Online*, September 8, 2020.

hierarchy, differentiation, and, ultimately, division, intended to preserve favourable trade relations for the company.⁶

To prevent the Khoikhoi from accessing 'Dutch land,' van Riebeeck ordered the construction of a wooden gate around the settlement. However, this gate was never completed because of high costs. Instead, a wild almond hedge (*Brabejum stellatifolium*) was planted around the Dutch settlement.⁷ This hedge became known as 'Van Riebeeck's Hedge,' which became a kind of natural barrier between Dutch settlements in the Cape of Good Hope and the land occupied by the Khoikhoi.⁸

The belt will be so densely overgrown that it will be impossible for cattle and sheep to be driven through and it will take the form of a protective fence...⁹

The Khoikhoi became further enraged when the VOC granted land to free burghers in Saldanha Bay, Swartland and Table Bay: lands used as grazing pastures for Khoikhoi cattle. Growing tensions around land ownership led to the first Khoi-Dutch War in 1654-1660. However, by the late 18th century, both the war and an outbreak of smallpox crushed Khoikhoi's resistance to Dutch domination.

While some honour van Riebeeck for bringing Western order to Africa, others stress his role as an early precursor to white minority rule.¹⁰ According to Essop:

That hedge still exists today, both physically and metaphorically. Almost 300 years later, the architects of Apartheid continued van Riebeeck's act of separation by legislating the hedge into existence through the *Group Areas Act*.¹¹

The *Group Areas Act*, was an Apartheid era law, which allocated separate residential areas according to race and forcibly removed black people who resided in 'white areas.'¹² For this reason, it is argued that the Dutch settlement in the Cape eventually led to the evolution of the culturally similar but in many ways distinct white settler identity- the 'Afrikaners.' In the future, the codification and strengthening of Afrikaner heritage and identity formed much of the

⁶ Sarah Hogan. "Of Islands and bridges: Figures of Uneven Development in Bacon's New Atlantis." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 12, No. 3 (2012): 28.

⁷ Andrea Durbach, "Cultural Heritage as Transformation: A Study of Four Sites from Post- Apartheid South Africa." In *Heritage, Culture and Rights: Challenging Legal Discourses*. Ed. Andrea Durbach and Lucas Lixinski. Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2017: 214

⁸ Simon Pooley, "Jan Van Riebeeck as Pioneering Explorer and Conservator of Natural Resources at the Cape of Good Hope (1652-62)," *Environment and History* 15, no. 1 (2009): 3-33.

⁹ South African History Online, "Cape Town the segregated city." *South African History Online*.

¹⁰ Ciraj Rassool & Leslie Witz, "The 1952 Jan Van Riebeeck Tercentenary Festival: Constructing and Contesting Public National History in South Africa," *Journal of African History* 34 (1993) : 447.

¹¹ Policy, " Budget speech 2004/2005: Department of environmental affairs and development planning. Polity Archive."

¹² Ibid.

justification for the later construction of Apartheid, which began in 1948 and was a 'rhetorical reordering of the physical space of colonial South Africa'.¹³



Figure 1: 'van Riebeeck's Hedge in Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens' Image by Rainer Halama via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 4.0

Today, van Riebeeck's hedge is divided into two sections, part is the national Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens, and part in the adjacent suburb of Bishopscourt. In 1935, Professor RH Compton, then head of Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens, lobbied to the National Monuments Commission (NMC) for the inclusion of the portion of the hedge laying within Kirstenbosch to be designated a national monument.¹⁴ The portion was declared a national monument, one year later on April 6, 1936, however, interestingly Compton's written motivation in the application, did not contain any Archival references to the historical importance of the hedge, which was considered a standard part of the procedure in designating national monuments.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the designation was approved and a plaque installed. The second section is in Bishopscourt and was declared a National Monument in 1945 by Government Notice 529. Bishopscourt is one of the most affluent neighbourhoods in Cape Town, and was commonly referred to as one of 'the most desirable address in South Africa', many of the sprawling mansion on Klaassens Road, where the Bishopscourt section of the hedge is, make direct reference to this, with names such

¹³ Richard Marback, "A Tale of Two Plaques: Rhetoric in Cape Town," *Rhetoric Review*, 23(3) (2004): 254.

¹⁴ Dan Sleight, "The separation of societies from their past: An under-appreciated tragedy: Sa Society for History Teaching: Annual Congress, Keynote Lecture," *Yesterday&Today*, no. 8 (2012): 164.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

as ‘Wild Almond, *Wilde Amandel*,¹⁶ Van Riebeeck House, etc.’¹⁷ The initial plaque marking the monument read:

This hedge of wild almonds was planted in the year 1660 AD by order of Commander Jan van Riebeeck to mark the southern frontier of the Cape Colony, from Kirstenbosch along Wynberg Hill, to a point below the Hen and Chickens Rocks. Thence, the hedge was continued by a fence of poles across the camp ground to the mouth of the Salt River.¹⁸

History of the Contestation

Former President Thabo Mbeki mentioned the hedge in a 1999 article about race and reconciliation in South Africa, claiming that the hedge represents the ‘enslavement of the people to the law, the whip and the gallows.’¹⁹ He claimed that in order to build a new national identity based on inclusion ‘we must join together to remove the almond hedges that deform the face of our country and to defend our freedom, advancing the cause of human dignity.’²⁰ The hedge, thus, could be interpreted to symbolise institutionalised racism, apartness and the illusion that South Africa is a white country.²¹

In 2001 contestations arose over van Riebeeck’s hedge, when the Bishopscourt plaque was vandalised.²² Around the same time, the heavy bronze plaque in Kirstenbosch was stolen and allegedly sold for scrap metal.²³ The South African Heritage Resource Agency (SAHRA), formed in 1999 (as the successor of the NMC), replaced the plaque with one made of synthetic material.²⁴ These acts, while small, shifted focus to the symbolism surrounding the hedge.²⁵ Sparks, for example, pointed to the symbolism of division inherent in the hedge, contending:

Stand there beside the strip of hedge in the Kirstenbosch Garden and look north—in the middle distance are the twin cooling towers of Athlone Power station ... to the left and west of that line lie the white suburbs of Claremont, Kenilworth, Rondebosch, Newlands, Mowbray, Wynberg and Pinelands. On the sandy flats to the right and east of it lie the “coloured” townships— Athlone, Hazendal, Bonteheuvel, Heideveld, Bellville, Elsie’s River, Lavender Hill and Mitchells Plain—and

¹⁶ The Afrikaans translation of Wild Almond.

¹⁷ Dan Sleight, “The separation of societies from their past: An under-appreciated tragedy: Sa Society for History Teaching: Annual Congress, Keynote Lecture,” *Yesterday&Today*, no. 8 (2012): 164.

¹⁸ Andrea Durbach, “Cultural Heritage as Transformation: A Study of Four Sites from Post- Apartheid South Africa,” In *Heritage, Culture and Rights: Challenging Legal Discourses*. Ed. Andrea Durbach and Lucas Lixinski. Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2017.

¹⁹ Thabo Mbeki. “Haunted by History.” *Harvard International Review* 21, no. 3 (1999): 96,95.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Marc Koscijew. *Documenting Race and Ethnicity : The Documentary Construction of Racial and Ethnic Identities in Apartheid South Africa*. PhD Dissertation, 2010: 66.

²² Andrea Durbach, “Cultural Heritage as Transformation: A Study of Four Sites from Post- Apartheid South Africa.” In *Heritage, Culture and Rights: Challenging Legal Discourses*. Ed. Andrea Durbach and Lucas Lixinski. Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2017.

²³ Dan Sleight, “The separation of societies from their past: An under-appreciated tragedy: Sa Society for History Teaching: Annual Congress, Keynote Lecture,” *Yesterday&Today*, no. 8 (2012): 164.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ A.J. Barnard-Naudé, “At the Walls of Athens: What Remains?” *Law Critique*, 20 (2009): 185.

beyond them, in a descending order of social status, the black townships and squatter camps of Langa, Nyanga, Gugulethu, Crossroads and Khayelitsha. There before you lies Apartheid in all its obscenity.²⁶

However, others argued that it marks an important historical moment: the beginning of Western civilisation in South Africa.²⁷ Following the vandalism and theft, SAHRA removed the old plaque and replaced it with a new one after consulting with the public. The question posed was how to create an empowering cultural heritage and identity based on human rights, democracy and peaceful co-existence from a past of racial discrimination.²⁸

The question of choosing words to inscribe a new plaque invokes the broader question of truth and reconciliation faced by South Africans since the end of apartheid rule. Truth and reconciliation require reinterpretation of the separation of self and other across boundaries of difference built into the landscape, memorialized in monuments, and expressed in words.²⁹

The new plaque reads:

This wild almond hedge was planted in 1660 by order of Commander Jan van Riebeeck as a barrier protecting the expanding European population against the Indigenous Khoisan inhabitants of the Cape. The barrier stretched from Kirstenbosch along Wynberg Hill to a point below the Hen and Chickens rocks. Beyond this the barrier continued as a pole fence to the mouth of the Salt River. The hedge has come to be a symbol of exclusion.³⁰

The reframing of the plaque marks an important turn towards redefining South Africa's cultural heritage, by acknowledging past discrimination. The space between the old and new plaque illustrates the two separate moments in the narrative of the hedge: from commemorating Dutch colonialism to denouncing Dutch exclusion of the local Khoikhoi.³¹ The monument recognises South Africa's efforts to eradicate racism and facilitate reconciliation, in line with the principles of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was introduced to promote reconciliation and make reparations for Apartheid. Emeritus Professor and activist Andrea Durbach argues that 'the simple but significant act of reinterpreting the history of the almond tree hedge is now built into the landscape, memorialized in monuments, and expressed in words.'³² The reframing of the plaque is consistent with the goals of the National Heritage Resources Act and the World Heritage Convention Act. These two laws were implemented post-Apartheid to ensure that

²⁶ Sparks, Allister Sparks. *The Mind of South Africa: The Story of the Rise and Fall of Apartheid*. Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball Publisher, 2003.

²⁷ Zubeida Jaffer, 'Van Riebeeck's Hedge', 2019.

²⁸ Andrea Durbach, "Cultural Heritage as Transformation: A Study of Four Sites from Post- Apartheid South Africa," In *Heritage, Culture and Rights: Challenging Legal Discourses*. Ed. Andrea Durbach and Lucas Lixinski. Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2017.

²⁹ Richard Marback, "A Tale of Two Plaques: Rhetoric in Cape Town," *Rhetoric Review*, 23(3) (2004): 257-258.

³⁰ Plaque Van Riebeeck's hedge', text taken from photograph by Richard Fisher ; See also Newsletter of the Johannesburg Branch of the Genealogical Society of South Africa, July 2015.

³¹ Lucas Lixinski, "Cultural Heritage Law and Transitional Justice: Lessons from South Africa,"288.

³² Andrea Durbach, "Cultural Heritage as Transformation: A Study of Four Sites from Post- Apartheid South Africa," In *Heritage, Culture and Rights: Challenging Legal Discourses*. Ed. Andrea Durbach and Lucas Lixinski. Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2017.

South Africa addresses its heritage in a socially sensitive way. The preamble of the National Heritage Resources Act 25, 1999 states that:

Our heritage celebrates our achievements and contributes to redressing past inequities. It educates, it deepens our understanding of society and encourages us to empathise with the experience of others. It facilitates healing and material and symbolic restitution and it promotes new and previously neglected research into our rich oral traditions and customs.³³

Similarly, the Fundamental Principles of the World Heritage Convention Act (which governs the protection of world heritage sites in South Africa) maintains that:

Cultural and natural heritage management must be sensitive to the people and their needs and must equitably serve their physical, psychological, developmental, cultural and social interests, that participation of all interested and affected parties in the governance of cultural and natural heritage must be promoted and participation by vulnerable and historically disadvantaged persons must be ensured.³⁴

This indicates that there is a commitment to reconciliation and cultural sensitivity among national heritage organisations. Moreover, the official Kirstenbosch garden website now acknowledges that the hedge 'marks the first step on the road to Apartheid and symbolises how white South Africa cut itself off from the rest of Africa, dispossessed the indigenous people and kept the best of the resources for itself.'³⁵

However, unlike local heritage organisations, international heritage organisations have not focused on remedying past oppression in South Africa. After the democratic elections in 1994, South Africa became part of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) treaties on cultural heritage protection, including the World Heritage Convention (WHC). UNESCO largely ignores the contested nature of the hedge by placing it into the much broader context of the Cape Floral Region Protected Areas (CFRPA), overshadowing past discrimination by recognising only the biological objective features of the monument and aiming to bolster tourism rather than transform social relations in South Africa.³⁶ Colonial heritage often alienates local populations from their heritage, masking the influence of colonialism on Apartheid. Moreover, when indigenous culture is protected, it is often done so with a 'token of primitivism:' a past way of living which evolved into civilisation through colonialism.³⁷ Lixinski likens the hedge to one of the layers in a matryoshka doll, comprised of the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens and the Cape Floral Region Protected Areas and argues that these layers must be reassessed, taking

³³ Preamble, National Heritage Resources Act, 1999 (Act No 25 of 1999) (NHRA).

³⁴ Fundamental Principles, World Heritage Convention Act 49 of 1999, art 4 (1) (a), (d) and (f).

³⁵ South African National Biodiversity Institute. "Kirstenbosch NBG: Van Riebeeck's Hedge."

³⁶ Lucas Lixinski, "Cultural Heritage Law and Transitional Justice: Lessons from South Africa," *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 9(2015).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 282

into account their connection to the legacies of colonialism and Apartheid, rather than solely valuing them for their natural beauty.³⁸

Decision-Making Processes

SAHRA's decision to remove the old plaque was made in consultation with local communities, asking for their suggestions on framing the new plaque, thereby giving previously silenced communities a voice.³⁹ Heritage has moved beyond the mere 'memorialisation of sites.'⁴⁰ Instead, it has become a potential agent of transformation, 'a form of therapy, as the past labouring in the form of a better future, a progressive and productive benefit for all, but specifically for the disempowered, dislocated, and disadvantaged.'⁴¹

In terms of future policymaking surrounding statues and heritage sites in South Africa, it is important to facilitate dialogue about the different meanings of these sites and their implications for the future of human rights and justice in South Africa. Moreover, international heritage organisations, such as UNESCO, might consider reflecting on the social ramifications of the hedge, rather than merely its biological value, as the contestation lay primarily with the framing of the plaque rather than the hedge itself.

Summary and Conclusions

Van Riebeeck's hedge marked the division between Dutch settlement and Khoikhoi land and has been associated with the beginnings of what would later become known as Apartheid: a system of institutionalised racism and segregation which plagued South Africa from 1948 to 1994 and continues to bear its mark on the social landscape today. There have been numerous media debates regarding the contestation over statues of colonialists, including that of Cecil John Rhodes and van Riebeeck in South Africa. *The Mail* and *Guardian* argue that 'symbols are not inanimate objects, they are powerful devices that must be removed if they pay homage to a dark and oppressive past.' However, Vusi Kweyama from News24 believes in preserving history to learn from it: 'We must teach our children how to remember in a way that is empowering and

³⁸ Ibid., 295.

³⁹ Andrea Durbach. "Cultural Heritage as Transformation: A Study of Four Sites from Post- Apartheid South Africa." In *Heritage, Culture and Rights: Challenging Legal Discourses*. Ed. Andrea Durbach and Lucas Lixinski. Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2017.

⁴⁰ Andrew Hall, CEO Heritage Western Cape (second respondent) in *Kothuis (Pty) Ltd v MEC for Cultural Affairs and Sport, Western Cape and Others* (22784/12) [2013] ZAWCHC 144 at para 30: 'We are no longer dealing with memorialisation of sites and we live now in a dynamic world where heritage is part of dynamism of society and the Act makes provision for that and we're required to take that into consideration.

⁴¹ Lynn Meskell and Colette Scheermeyer, "Heritage as Therapy: Set Pieces from the New South Africa," *Journal of Material Culture* 13(2) (2008): 156.

educational.¹ The *Daily Maverick* argues that the statues symbolise all that remains to be done, of real transformation.⁴²

While a relatively peaceful solution was reached, it is important to underscore that the debates surrounding the plaques have been a minor matter that has not captured the public attention in South Africa, to the extent of other more significant memory politics contestations, such as the Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town,⁴³ or the Blood River monuments, did.⁴⁴ Its confinement to academic debates perhaps influenced this. The original plaque marking the hedge was defaced in 2001, an era where disputes over commemoration were mainly undertaken in the political and academic arenas, as opposed to within the public domain.

However, today, a new plaque aims to come to terms with South Africa's racially oppressive past. The contestation over van Riebeeck's hedge has largely been resolved, by consulting with the public to reframe how the monument is remembered, namely as a means of exclusion

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⁴² BBC, "Cape Town university votes for removal of colonial statue," *BBC NEWS*, April 9, 2015.

⁴³ See; The Contested Histories Initiative, "Cecil John Rhodes Statue in Cape Town," *Contested Histories Case Study #140* (September 2021)

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Figures

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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