



# NCOME AND BLOOD RIVER MONUMENTS

## Nquthu-Dundee, South Africa

-28.10542, 30.54392



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### Executive Summary

On the 16th of December 1838, the infamous Battle of Blood River on the banks of the Ncome River between Zulu warriors and Afrikaans Voortrekkers took place. Commemoration and mythologisation of the battle became a key focal point of the ethnonationalism of each group and remained heavily contested. In the transition to democracy, the site came under renewed scrutiny as a component of the 'Legacy Project'. The debate centred on ways to represent two sides of contested history, the Afrikaans on the Eastern Bank and the Zulu on the Western while achieving reconciliation. The resulting Blood River Monuments offer insight into how physical spaces can play a reconciliatory role in post-apartheid South Africa.

## Introduction

The Blood River Monuments were constructed in the Apartheid era, while the Ncome Monuments were one of seven legacy sites designed for development during South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy in 1994. Contestation and reconciliation are themes that dominate these spaces. Blood River commemorates a battle between Voortrekkers<sup>1</sup> and Zulu warriors in 1838 along the banks of the Ncome River in Kwa-Zulu-Natal, (KZN) South Africa. The site comprises of two museum-cum-monuments on opposite sides of the Ncome River, connected by a bridge.

Construction on the Voortrekker side dates back to the first half of the 20th century and contains a Voortrekker Monument, which celebrates the victory of the settlers in the 1838 Blood River battle. In contrast, the opposite side, constructed in the 1990s, is dedicated to the Zulu warriors who lost the battle. On December 16 2014, a footbridge linking the two banks was finally officially opened, following years of contestation.

The construction and commemoration of monuments on both banks are not without their controversies and criticisms. These contestations are attributed both to the complex legacy the site represents as well as the academic discussion brought about in the post-apartheid era. As a cohesive site, it is symbolic of expansion, oppression, and retaliation. Its later identification as a place of reconciliation is vital to exploring contested spaces within South Africa. This case study reviews the physical space, the contested legacy, and subsequent redress of the Ncome-Blood River Monument(s).

## Background

### *The Battle of Blood River*

Despite contestation between varying narratives, several facts are agreed upon by Afrikaner, Zulu, and academic stakeholders.<sup>2</sup> In the months leading up to December 16, 1838, relations between the encroaching Voortrekkers and the Zulu King Dingane broke down. The Voortrekkers, white Afrikaans speaking people of Dutch settler heritage who arrived in the Cape some 200 years prior, moved into the interior of South Africa in what is known as the *Voortrek* (Great Trek) in the hope of fainting independence from the British colony in 1835 - 1838 and establishing an independent Afrikaaner nation.<sup>3</sup>

Upon reaching the eastern region of what would become Natal Province (Later KwaZulu Natal), in February 1838, the Voortrekkers met with King Dingane, and the Voortrekker leader Piet Retief tried to secure a treaty with the King to 'obtain land for a white settlement.'<sup>4</sup> As part of this deal,

<sup>1</sup> Afrikaans term which refers to one of the original Afrikaner settlers of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State in South Africa who migrated from the Cape Colony in the 1830s in what was known as the 'Great Trek' or *Voortrek*.

<sup>2</sup> Jackie Grobler, "The Retief Massacre of 6 February 1838 Revisited," *Historia* 56, no. 2 (2011): 113–32.

<sup>3</sup> Paula Girshick, "Ncome Museum/Monument: From Reconciliation to Resistance," *Museum Anthropology* 27, no. 1–2 (2004): 25.

<sup>4</sup> Sabine Marschall, *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 278.

Retief was tasked with returning some stolen cattle, after which the party returned to King Dingane.<sup>5</sup> Piet Retief and 60-70 men were invited to present themselves to the Zulu King. During the encounter, Dingane reportedly ordered his men to 'Kill the Witches.'<sup>6</sup>

While the exact details of the murder of Retief and his party remain contested, it is accepted that he was killed under controversial circumstances at the royal residence in Mgungundlovu.<sup>7</sup> Following the murder of Retief, warfare broke out between the two groups, leading the Voortrekkers to approach seasoned Boer Commander Andries Pretorius (1798-1853) for assistance.<sup>8</sup> Pretorius arrived in Natal on November 22 and began planning a counter-attack against the Zulus who had been trying to push back the encroaching Voortrekkers.<sup>9</sup>

Pretorius considered it too dangerous to engage outright with the Zulus, deciding instead to advance with sixty-four trek wagons, carrying only ammunition and supplies in a fortified and defensive *laager*<sup>10</sup> formation.<sup>11</sup> Leading up to the impending battle, 'religious services were held twice a day to spiritually strengthen the commando and assert that the Voortrekkers were God's chosen people in a holy cause.'<sup>12</sup> On December 9th, the Voortrekkers settled on the Western side of Ncome River at Danskraal and undertook the famous vow (Figure 1) that if God were to assist them in the upcoming battle in exchange, they would build a church in his honour and consider the day forever sacred.<sup>13</sup>

On Sunday 16 December, the Zulu army of 12 000 to 16 000 men led by warriors Dambuza Ntombela and Ndlela Ntuli attacked the *laager*, which allegedly consisted of around 450



Figure 1: "English Translation of The Vow at the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria" Image by Flowcomm via Flickr CC BY 2.0

<sup>5</sup>Nsizwa Dlamini, "The Battle of Ncome Project: State Memorialism, Discomforting Spaces," *Southern African Humanities* 13, no.1 (2001): 125-38.

<sup>6</sup> Jackie Grobler, "The Retief Massacre of 6 February 1838 Revisited," *Historia* 56, no. 2 (2011): 113-32.

<sup>7</sup> Sabine Marschall, *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 278.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> This refers to when wagons are arranged in a circular or rectangular position and joined to each other, creating a defensive fortification/perimeter.

<sup>11</sup> Sabine Marschall, *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 278.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Nsizwa Dlamini, *Patterns and Shifts in Cultural Heritage in KwaZulu-Natal: Selected Case Studies, 1977-1999* (Durban: University of Kwazulu-Natal: Masters thesis, 2001)

Voortrekkers.<sup>14</sup> The Zulu attack formation consisted of the shape of a Buffalo horn with the young *amabutho*<sup>15</sup> warriors advancing on the wings to encircle the Voortrekkers, while the more experienced elder warriors engaged them head-on from the centre of the formation.<sup>16</sup> Despite the overwhelming manpower of the Zulu warriors, they were equipped with cowhide shields and spears, whereas the Voortrekkers had more advanced weaponry and firepower.<sup>17</sup> In the resulting battle, 3 000 to 4 000 Zulu warriors were killed while only 3-4 Voortrekkers were wounded, including Pretorius.<sup>18</sup> However, it is important to note that despite these estimates being widely cited within the literature, the actual numbers themselves have been heavily contested, especially by Zulu historians.<sup>19</sup>

The River was rechristened *Bloedrivier* or Blood River, by the Voortrekkers after the colour of the water ran red from the many warriors killed.<sup>20</sup> Historian Maphalala has challenged this terminology, claiming that the battle occurred too far away for the river to turn red.<sup>21</sup> Instead arguing that this terminology is in fact 'historical propaganda.'<sup>22</sup> The high death toll reported from the battle is further contested as archaeological reviews cannot confirm the high number of reported casualties, and no mass graves are known in the area.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the historical events escalating up to the battle, the precise details of the battle formations and the course of the battle have long been subject to vastly different interpretations and ideological viewpoints, as the officially endorsed historical accounts represented an exclusive Voortrekker perspective, whereas the Zulu perceptions of the battle stemming from oral history, were 'largely suppressed- a neglect the Ncome project' sought to redress.<sup>24</sup>

### *Physical and Political Memorialisation Pre-1994*

One of the key reasons for the site's inclusion as a legacy project was attributed to the dominance of an exclusive Afrikaaner narrative of the site. Following the Vow undertaken for the battle, in 1841, the Church of the Vow was constructed in Pietermaritzburg to commemorate and fulfil the Voortrekkers promise, the anniversary of the victory 'was held sacred' and the battle site of Blood River 'was considered hallowed ground.'<sup>25</sup> In 1866, Afrikaaners erected the site's first permanent

<sup>14</sup> Sabine Marschall, *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 278.

<sup>15</sup> A Zulu word which refers to a legion of young male warriors.

<sup>16</sup> Sabine Marschall, *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 278.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Scott M. Schönfeldt-Aultman, "Monument(al) Meaning-Making: The Ncome Monument & Its Representation of Zulu Identity," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2 (2006): 215–34.

<sup>19</sup> See; Jabulani Maphalala, "Impu [The War] of Ncome 16 December 1838," *Msunduzi Journal*, 5, (2015).

<sup>20</sup> Sabine Marschall, *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 278.

<sup>21</sup> Neo Motloung, "Real Truth about IMpi Yase Ncome: Historian," *SABC News*, December 16, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Nsizwa Dlamini, "The Battle of Ncome Project: State Memorialism, Discomforting Spaces," *Southern African Humanities* 13, no.1 (2001): 125–38.

<sup>24</sup> Sabine Marschall, *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 279.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

commemorative piece, a small decorative cairn, 'which was followed by a larger cemented, pyramidal cairn in 1938.'<sup>26</sup> The site of the battle was further owned and administered by the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa.<sup>27</sup> By the time this cairn was laid, December 16 had emerged as a 'holy day' for many Afrikaners and became a key element of conservative Afrikaner nationalism, known as Dingaan's Day, and declared as a public holiday in the Boer Republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State in 1894.<sup>28</sup> The terminology of Dingaan's Day, based on King Dingane name, also symbolically represented a popular Boer proverb of *het sy dag gehad* (had his day), which implies a day of reckoning.<sup>29</sup> President of the Transvaal Paul Kruger, when declaring the 16 of December 'Dingaan's Day' and a national public holiday, stated the 16 of December was 'a day of universal thanksgiving ... dedicated to the Lord ... to commemorate that by God's grace the Immigrants were freed from the yoke of Dingane.'<sup>30</sup> From 1952, it was renamed the 'Day of the Covenant' and from 1980 as the 'Day of the Vow'.<sup>31</sup>



**Figure 2:** "The Granite Jawbone Wagon" Image by Kleinz1 via Flickr CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

In the Union of South Africa (1910-1961), 16 December was a public holiday, and the covenant made with God became increasingly mythologised within the 20th century to 'explain the political, social and economic circumstances of Afrikaners and in the process fed the fire of Afrikaner nationalism.'<sup>32</sup> The covenant was seen to have 'bound all Afrikaners forever', it allowed the successful completion of the *Voortrek*, widely considered the 'birthplace of the Afrikaner people' and marked a decisive victory of 'Christianity over barbarism.'<sup>33</sup> The events of the Battle of Blood

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>28</sup> Scott M. Schönfeldt-Aultman, "Monument(al) Meaning-Making: The Ncome Monument & Its Representation of Zulu Identity," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2 (2006): 216.

<sup>29</sup> Sifiso Ndlovu, *African Perspectives of King Dingane KaSenzangakhona: The Second Monarch of the Zulu Kingdom* (Pretoria: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 13.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>31</sup> Scott M. Schönfeldt-Aultman, "Monument(al) Meaning-Making: The Ncome Monument & Its Representation of Zulu Identity," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2 (2006): 216.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

River were 'vigorously promoted as milestones in the historical consciousness of Afrikaners'<sup>34</sup> and the victory attributed to the covenant was perceived as 'divine intervention' indicating God siding with and demonstrating a commitment to both 'the Afrikaner nation' and by extension a 'white-led South Africa.'<sup>35</sup>

In reflection of this holy day, memorisation soon began at the site of the battle as it had become 'one of the Afrikanerdom's holiest shrines, closely allied - historically, ideologically and aesthetically - with the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria and the Church of the Vow.'<sup>36</sup> On December 16th 1947, a life-size granite jawbone ox-wagon (Figure 2), designed by Afrikaans sculptor Coert Steynberg was unveiled near the western bank of the Ncome river.<sup>37</sup> The monument was a stylised wagon, featuring a semi-circular relief of 'Pretorius and two other Boers' who are depicted 'galloping to opposite sides' as 'they overwhelm four Zulu's who are forced to the ground.'<sup>38</sup>

However, in 1971 this monument was moved in front of the museum in order to make a stylised larger, more ambitious memorialisation of the site that would be a more accurate replica of the defensive strategy employed at the battle, as opposed to Steynbergs more symbolic and stylized memorial.<sup>39</sup> The Afrikaans community raised around 800,000 ZAR in order to construct a monument that would accurately represent the *laager* of Andries Pretorius.<sup>40</sup> Battlefields of South Africa Limited, an NGO lead by Marius Jooste, were tasked with the creation of the memorial.<sup>41</sup> They appointed a panel of historians to reconstruct the *laager* and determine 'the shape and approximate position of the original *laager*, the number and type of wagons as well as the number, type, and position of cannons.'<sup>42</sup>

The resulting monument consisted of 64 life-size facsimile cast-iron wagons (Figure 3) arranged in a *laager* formation, designed by Cobus Esterhuizen.<sup>43</sup> The wagons encircled the original cairn and were modelled off the Johanna van der Merwe centenary wagon, a historical replica of the Voortrek wagons.<sup>44</sup> Each wagon was cast in bronze and weighed around 8 tonnes.<sup>45</sup> In order to further advance the aim of a realistic re-construction, each individual wagon was fitted with

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<sup>34</sup> Sabine Marschall, *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 280.

<sup>35</sup> Scott M. Schönfeldt-Aultman, "Monument(al) Meaning-Making: The Ncome Monument & Its Representation of Zulu Identity," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2 (2006): 216.

<sup>36</sup> Sabine Marschall, *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 280.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Rankin and Rolf Michael Schneider, *From Memory to Marble: The historical frieze of the Voortrekker Monument Part II: The Scenes* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 454.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 457.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Sabine Marschall, *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 279.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>44</sup> Elizabeth Rankin and Rolf Michael Schneider, *From Memory to Marble: The historical frieze of the Voortrekker Monument Part II: The Scenes* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 457.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

functional lanterns, which could be illuminated at night, and replicas of Pretorius's gun, *Ou Grietjie* (Old Greta) were cast in bronze and placed in the openings of the *laager*.<sup>46</sup>



**Figure 3:** "The Bronze Wagon Laager" Image by Szymanowski via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 3.0

## History of the Contestation

### *The Blood River Museum Upgrade 1994*

When F. W. De Klerk announced the unbanning of the African National Congress (ANC) in February 1990, redress of the physical, academic and spiritual memorialisation of the battle of *Bloedrivier* was recognised as having crucial importance for reconciliation, by 1994 South Africa was in the midst of the transition from Apartheid to democracy, under the new ANC led government of Nelson Mandela. During this transitional period, museum administration changed, and the state-funded Voortrekker Museum was temporarily installed as the owner and administrator of the Blood River monuments and decided immediately to upgrade the site by adding a museum. However, the KZN branch of the National Monuments Council (NMC) rejected this proposal.<sup>47</sup> This is as the proposed additions were designed to mimic a 'British-style medieval fortress with towers and battlements,' which was deemed by NMC Regional Manager, Andrew Hall to be 'entirely inappropriate for the site', given that he viewed that 'developments on battlefields and similar sites should be as unobtrusive and understated as possible.'<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup>Sabine Marschall, *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 280.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

Hall proposed instead that the funds for these upgrades instead be used to purchase the land on the opposite, eastern side, of the river in order to as Hall explained, attain the 'ability to portray the Zulu role in the battle' which would 'better' interpret the history of the site in light of what Hall termed, the 'spirit of the times'.<sup>49</sup> The opposite side of the river was owned by Natal Province and administered by the KwaZulu Monuments Council (KMC) under the directorship of Barry Marshall, who was 'highly supportive' of Hall's idea.<sup>50</sup>

These developments, as historian Marshall outlines, 'constituted the first concrete steps in building a Zulu counterpart to the Afrikaner Nationalist monument.'<sup>51</sup> Despite this idea of a counter monument, the NMC instead opted for an upgraded museum on the western bank with better tourist facilities. On February 1st 1995, members of the NMC considered a new proposal by architect Hannes Meiring of a museum building based on 'Northern African and Ndebele' architecture that would 'Africanise' the building and make it more appropriate, however, the NMC found this 'unsuitable' and instead opted for a basic one-story red-brick building, also designed by Meiring.<sup>52</sup>

However, these upgrades proved controversial and attracted widespread media attention, as a 'considerable amount of money, mostly financed by the Voortrekker Museum' has been spent on an 'emotionally and politically sensitive site' during a transitional period in South Africa in which public commemoration and memorialisation was coming under critical scrutiny.<sup>53</sup> In addition, during these renovations, controversially, 'no members of the Zulu community or historians representing the Zulu perspective on the battle were involved in the exhibition' leading to a result which 'predictably depicted the battle exclusively from the Afrikaner perspective.'<sup>54</sup>

### *The Legacy Project (1997-1998): Constructing the Ncome Museum as a Counter-Monument*

With the controversy over memorisation in public spaces coming under renewed focus in the transitional period, the new South African Government sought to redress 'apartheid versions of history and promote reconciliation' by looking at memorials and monuments as a means to promote nation-building.<sup>55</sup> In 1997 a list of proposed heritage sites called the 'Legacy Project' was drawn up by the Cabinet to be overseen by the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST).<sup>56</sup> A panel of six academics were appointed to oversee the Legacy Project, comprising of four historians (J Laband, J Maphalala,<sup>57</sup> J E H Grobler and C Hamilton) and two linguists (M Kunene and L Mathenjwa<sup>58</sup>).<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>55</sup> Paula Girshick, "Ncome Museum/Monument: From Reconciliation to Resistance," *Museum Anthropology* 27, no. 1–2 (2004): 25.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> It is important to note that J Maphalala is a member of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), a Zulu Nationalist political party.

<sup>58</sup> Mathenjwa was also tasked with conceptualising ceremonial repatriation within the project.

<sup>59</sup> Paula Girshick, "Ncome Museum/Monument: From Reconciliation to Resistance," *Museum Anthropology* 27, no. 1–2 (2004): 26.

Among these prioritised legacy sites was the Blood River monument, which was emotionally significant in terms of the reconciliatory project. The date was further symbolic not just from the Afrikaaner perspective, as the date had been celebrated previously and pronounced by the ANC as 'Heroes day' and used in 1961 as the founding date of the ANC's armed wing *uMkhonto we Sizwe*<sup>60</sup> which marked the start of armed resistance to the apartheid regime.<sup>61</sup> Heroes Day was seen as an 'important day in the struggle for national liberation.'<sup>62</sup>

In fact, the ANC-led government kept December 16 as a public holiday, renaming it as 'Reconciliation day'.<sup>63</sup> Speaking in 1995, following the dates renaming, despite its historical legacy as a 'day of bitter division between races' president Nelson Mandela commented:

There are few countries which dedicate a national public holiday to reconciliation. But then there are few nations with our history of enforced division, oppression and sustained conflict. And fewer still, which have undergone such a remarkable transition to reclaim their humanity ... We have, in real life, declared our shared allegiance to justice, non-racialism and democracy; our yearning for a peaceful and harmonious nation of equals ... Reconciliation, however, does not mean forgetting or trying to bury pain or conflict ... Reconciliation means working together to correct the legacy of past injustice. It means making a success of our plans for reconstruction and development. Therefore, on this 16 December, the National Day of Reconciliation, my appeal to you, fellow citizens, is: Let us join hands and build a truly great South African nation.<sup>64</sup>

The significance of this site and the 16th of December, associated with a historical war between Voortrekkers and Zulus, became a key site of reconciliation in the present, intended by the Legacy project to 'supersede or redress the divisive historical moments which that date had traditionally marked.'<sup>65</sup> The DACST who oversaw the Legacy Project was headed by the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), a Zulu Nationalist party, and originally the Blood River site was not included in the preliminary list of sites.<sup>66</sup> However, in September, Lionel Mtshali, 'a senior IFP member and Zulu nationalist' was placed in charge of the Department and prioritized the site, allocating 3,750,000 ZAR to the project, more than half of the project's seven million Rand budget.<sup>67</sup> The first major area of contestation to arise was over what form the new memorial should take.

Dolf Havemann, deputy director of the Heritage Section of DACST, supervised the Ncome planning process and proposed the idea of a 'Wall of Remembrance' which would commemorate those lost in the conflict and bear the Zulu name *eKukhumelaneni umlotha*, meaning place of

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<sup>60</sup> Translation: Spear of the Nation

<sup>61</sup> Dalifa Ngobese and Theophilus Mukhuba, "Re-Inventing the Battle of Ncome/ Blood River: Reflection on Its Contested Historical Consciousness and Commemorative Events," *Gender and Behaviour* 16, no. 2 (2018): 11751–61.

<sup>62</sup> Sifiso Ndlovu, *African Perspectives of King Dingane KaSenzangakhona: The Second Monarch of the Zulu Kingdom* (Pretoria: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 258.

<sup>63</sup> Sabine Marschall, *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 285.

<sup>64</sup> Sifiso Ndlovu, *African Perspectives of King Dingane KaSenzangakhona: The Second Monarch of the Zulu Kingdom* (Pretoria: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 265.

<sup>65</sup> Sabine Marschall, *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 285.

<sup>66</sup> Paula Girshick, "Ncome Museum/Monument: From Reconciliation to Resistance," *Museum Anthropology* 27, no. 1–2 (2004): 26.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

reconciliation. Promising that the memorial would mimic the form of many European memorials through listing the names of individuals obtained by an anthropological inquiry.<sup>68</sup> The academic committee hoped this would also assist in providing insight into the true number of fatalities, while simultaneously preserving oral history traditions that apartheid-era narratives attempted to suppress.<sup>69</sup> Despite no official victims list, the Committee considered that finding the names of the fallen warriors would be possible through advertising in the 'Zulu language newspaper *Ilanga*, and asking various local chiefs for their assistance.<sup>70</sup> This personalisation of the process was seen as a key factor influencing local reconciliation as it was believed to have the following effect:

Memorials typically refer to lives sacrificed and embody grief, loss and tribute. Their goal is the healing embrace of remembrance and reconciliation. Memorialisation is accomplished through the use of texts or lists of the dead.<sup>71</sup>

However, Committee member Jabulani Maphalala argued that such an approach was an inappropriate 'concession to westernising influence.'<sup>72</sup> Stating unequivocally that: 'Zulu traditionalists would not have built a monument on a battle site from which the spirits of the dead had long departed.'<sup>73</sup> In addition, the process of compiling victims names was deemed to be too time-consuming, and there existed a fear that this approach would lead to unwanted land claims, thus a new form for the monument was sought.<sup>74</sup>

Moving away from the Memorial Wall idea, Havermann proposed a new memorial, shaped in the Zulu Horn attack formation or *izimpondo zenyathi* (horns of the buffalo), popularised by the famous Zulu King Shaka kaSenzangakhona.<sup>75</sup> Based on this idea, the DACST put out a tender for an architectural competition to find a design based on this form.<sup>76</sup> This competition was ultimately won by Havermann's son, resulting in the construction of a monument-cum museum consisting of a one-story structure in a semi-circular horn shape (Figure 4).<sup>77</sup> The outside of this structure is adorned with metal shields with painted cowhide patterns, 'representing the different regiments that fought in the battle' and directly faces the *laager* on the opposite bank, replicating the 1838 battle formations.<sup>78</sup> As Marschall emphasises:

it was precisely the narrative quality and explicitness of the Afrikaner Nationalist *laager* monument on the other side of the battle that prompted the Ncome Steering Committee to favour a narrative structure over an abstract memorial marker or a plain Wall of Remembrance. If the Blood River monument literally depicts the Voor-trekker battle formation on the one side of the river, the shape of the Ncome monument likewise represents the Zulu fighting formation on the other side.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 28-9.

<sup>69</sup> Sabine Marschall, *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009)

<sup>70</sup> Paula Girshick, "Ncome Museum/Monument: From Reconciliation to Resistance," *Museum Anthropology* 27, no. 1-2 (2004): 29.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Steven Dubin, *Transforming Museums: Mounting Queen Victoria in a Democratic South Africa* (New York: Springer, 2016), 187.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Paula Girshick, "Ncome Museum/Monument: From Reconciliation to Resistance," *Museum Anthropology* 27, no. 1-2 (2004): 29.

<sup>75</sup> Sabine Marschall, *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 289.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 4:** "The Ncome Museum Exterior" Image by Splodgy Pig via Flickr CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

The site was unveiled on December 16, 1998, the 160th anniversary of the battle, and officially opened on November 26th 1999.<sup>80</sup> The opening ceremony in 1998 was attended by 'thousands of people' including most prominently, IFP leader Buthelezi, 'Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini, Minister of DACST Lionel Mtshali, Freedom Front<sup>81</sup> leader General Constand Viljoen and executive director of the *Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge* (Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Societies) Hennie de Wet.<sup>82</sup> Speakers at the event were quick to stress the reconciliatory nature of this new monument, with Buthelezi stating:

We have come here because, as the blood of our nations once merged into the waters of this river, today we can announce that the dreams which once stood in armed conflict on this battlefield can now finally merge in the creation of a new nation under a new covenant of harmony in diversity. Let us consider this the day of a new covenant that binds us to the shared commitment of building a new country through a shared struggle against poverty, inequality, corruption, crime and lack of discipline at all levels.<sup>83</sup>

While Mtshali opined that the:

Two monuments at the site of the battle, commemorating the participation of both sides will complete the symbolism. They will unite the protagonists of 160 years ago. In so doing, they will hopefully help reconcile conflicting historical interpretations. Today's event marks freedom from the yoke of many years of the divisive symbolism and dangerous stereotyping.<sup>84</sup>

However, despite the reconciliatory spirit espoused by the speakers, this was not universal, and there was 'sparse Afrikaner attendance' as well as a separate Afrikaner ceremony being held simultaneously at the Voortrekker *laager* monument on the opposite side of the river.<sup>85</sup> The newspaper Cape Argus described the ceremony as 'a small group of apartheid flag-waving Afrikaners conducting a prayer at the wagon site', while the Sowetan reported that 'flags of the old Boer republics, among them the *Vierkleur*,<sup>86</sup> flew ... one banner read *Apartheid is heilig*—

<sup>80</sup>Scott M. Schönfeldt-Aultman, "Monument(al) Meaning-Making: The Ncome Monument & Its Representation of Zulu Identity," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2 (2006): 217.

<sup>81</sup>Anton Ehlers, "Apartheid Mythology and Symbolism. Desegregated and Re-Invented in the Service of Nation Building in the New South Africa: the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome Ehlers," *Revue angliciste de La Réunion* (2004): 187

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>Scott M. Schönfeldt-Aultman, "Monument(al) Meaning-Making: The Ncome Monument & Its Representation of Zulu Identity," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2 (2006): 224.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> The Four Color flag refers to the official flag of the Boer majority Transvaal colony in South Africa (1903-1910)

Apartheid is holy... among those who attended the Afrikaner ceremony was convicted mass murderer and *Wit Wolwe*<sup>87</sup> member, Barend Strydom.<sup>88</sup>

### *Reconciliation: Constructing the Footbridge 2014*

One of the key recommendations of the Academic Committee in 1998 was the construction of a footbridge that would connect the two sides of the river as the 'ultimate symbol of reconciliation.'<sup>89</sup> Originally planned at the same time as the unveiling of Ncome, construction was started in 1998 with the erection of pylons in the river but then stopped indefinitely.<sup>90</sup> Differing reasons were given for this, Havemann contended that he 'was approached by local Afrikaners who convinced him that the time was not yet right to complete the bridge', whereas Curator of Ncome Bongani Ndhlovu stated that 'there were threats, apparently from conservative Afrikaners, to the effect that should the plans to construct the bridge go ahead, the new museum would be flooded with water.'<sup>91</sup>

However, fifteen years later, the project of reconciliation at Ncome/Blood River was once again renewed. An annual conference called 'Courageous Conversations' began at the Ncome Museum in 2013, these discussions stand in contrast to the continued tension at the site.<sup>92</sup> Themes have included 'Crossing the bridge through fostering social cohesion-my heritage, your heritage, our heritage,'<sup>93</sup> and 'Social Cohesion or Social Coercion- Bridging the Divide.'<sup>94</sup>

On December 16th 2014, the footbridge was finally opened. President Jacob Zuma addressed the audience while dressed in Zulu traditional attire at the unveiling of the finished bridge on the Ncome side of the River.<sup>95</sup> Zuma spoke of unity and King Dingane in a mixture of English and Zulu. Other speakers included Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini, who called for forgiveness and revision of the battle's narrative. As a representative of the Afrikaans community Gert Opperman, the retired Voortrekker Monument chairman, when asked for remarks, echoed those of the previous speakers: Commenting that:

I see the bridge in that spirit that it joins the two sides of the battlefields. I trust it will lead to reconciliation in our country. There are various challenges in reconciliation. We are grateful that that initiative has been taken and that all sides of that bridge will be owned by both sides.<sup>96</sup>

Since the 2014 launch of the Bridge, celebrations on the 16th of December continue to take place on opposite sides of the river but have remained mostly peaceful.<sup>97</sup> The bridge, however, remains

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<sup>87</sup> The White Wolves led by Barend Strydom perpetrated the Strijdom Square Massacre in 1988, a shooting spree that killed eight people and injured 16, undertaken during the Apartheid struggle. Strydom was initially sentenced to death, but later granted Amnesty by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

<sup>88</sup> Anton Ehlers, "Apartheid Mythology and Symbolism. Desegregated and Re-Invented in the Service of Nation Building in the New South Africa : the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome Ehlers," *Revue angliciste de La Réunion* (2004): 187.

<sup>89</sup> Paula Girshick, "Ncome Museum/Monument: From Reconciliation to Resistance," *Museum Anthropology* 27, no. 1-2 (2004): 33.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Northern Natal Courier, "Conversations Conference to Cross Bridges at Ncome/Blood River," *Northern KZN Courier*, November 7, 2017.

<sup>93</sup> Northern Natal Courier, "'Courageous Conversations' at Blood River Anniversary," *Northern KZN Courier*, October 8, 2013.

<sup>94</sup> Northern Natal Courier, "Ncome Conference to Address Social Cohesion," *Northern KZN Courier*, September 27, 2019.

<sup>95</sup> Siyabulela Dzanibe, "Division Marks Opening of Reconciliation Bridge," *IOL News*, December 17, 2014.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Northern KZN Courier, "Blood River Commemoration - Peaceful and Tranquil," *Northern KZN Courier*, December 17, 2015.

locked on the Voortrekker side throughout the year. When questioned about the gate, individuals at the site claim that there is disagreement with the Voortrekker monument management located in Pretoria. Cecilia Krugar, managing director of the Voortrekker monument, was 'shocked' to hear the gate was still locked and claimed that 'there were funding issues before, but those have since been resolved.'<sup>98</sup>

However, in terms of international perceptions of the monument, interviews with visitors revealed that they view the site as a symbol of unity and peace in South Africa. Regardless, the controversy surrounding the Blood River monument remains.<sup>99</sup> While for many South Africans, the monument represents anything but reconciliation, international travellers aren't always alerted to such contradictions. On tourism websites, little is made of the implications of contested memorialisation. Places.co.za states: 'The Voortrekkers fought under the skilful leadership of Andries Pretorius while King Dinganes impi was led by Ndlela kaSompisi.'<sup>100</sup>

It also states that the monument represents a 'focal point' in Afrikaner cultural heritage- though notes that the dual monuments present a more 'complete' view of events than the previously one-sided commemoration. From a transnational standpoint, therefore, the competing legacies of these memorials are seen as mostly a positive step towards reconciliation while remaining divisive on the national level.

## Decision-Making Processes

In 1994, the newly-elected ANC appointed a commission to explore sites deemed necessary for reconciliation, tourism and development. In 1996 Lionel Mtshali, an IFP member from the Ncome region, replaced Ben Ngubane, the first minister of DACST. Mtshali then appointed IFP loyalist Musa Xulu as deputy general of DACST. This gave Xulu oversight of the Legacy Project. Blood River was initially absent from heritage sites identified on this list. However, with the development of the Blood River Monument, after the 1994 proposal, Andrew Hall noted:

We are coming under increasing pressure from the Province, Zulu leadership, the IFP and the Kwazulu Monuments Council to use the NMC's powers to make those sponsoring the development re-evaluate it in light of the concerns of a community broader than that which they represent (Letter dated 14/2/95).<sup>101</sup>

With increasing pressure from Buthelezi, the IFP leader, and his own personal interest in the region, Mtshali made Ncome a key part of The Legacy Project. Despite the site's late inclusion, it quickly became the focal point of the seven legacy sites, being allocated more than half of the entire project's budget.<sup>102</sup> Mtshali worked with Dolf Havemann, the deputy director of the heritage section of DACST, in supervising the planning and new sub-committees of the Ncome project.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>98</sup>Chris Ndaliso, "Bad Blood: Unity Gate Padlocked at Battle of Blood River Site," *Daily News*, December 16, 2016.

<sup>99</sup>See; Dalifa Ngobese and Theophilus Mukhuba, "Re-Inventing the Battle of Ncome/ Blood River: Reflection on Its Contested Historical Consciousness and Commemorative Events," *Gender and Behaviour*, 16, no. 2 (2018): 11751–61.

<sup>100</sup> "Blood River Heritage Site," SA Places, 2020.

<sup>101</sup> Sabine Marschall, *Landscape of Memory: Commemorative Monuments, Memorials and Public Statuary in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 270.

<sup>102</sup> Paula Girshick, "Ncome Museum/Monument: From Reconciliation to Resistance," *Museum Anthropology* 27, no. 1–2 (2004): 32.

<sup>103</sup> Nsizwa Dlamini, *Patterns and Shifts in Cultural Heritage in KwaZulu-Natal: Selected Case Studies, 1977-1999* (Durban: University of Kwazulu-Natal: Masters thesis, 2001)

It should also be noted that no anthropological work or interviews took place, as was suggested by the academic council. The combination of nationalistic political players and exclusion of local and academic stakeholders manifested in a dangerous stereotype where: 'Zulu culture may derive either from these outsiders' stereotypes or from a convergence of Zulu and Afrikaner notions about how to visually represent the essence of culture or both.'<sup>104</sup>

The consequence of these stereotypes reinforces ideas of the Zulu warrior nation in a fixed cultural manifestation. This representation contravenes larger goals of reconciliation and national identity, veering instead to a politicised Zulu and Afrikaner identity based on division. The collision of these ideals brings to question whether: 'reconciliation and redress are always compatible goals and suggest that the attempt to achieve them simultaneously might equally result in a construction symbolic of conflict and resistance.'<sup>105</sup>

This sentiment was exemplified in 1996 when internal conflict within the academic panel and other political structures clashed on the interpretation of the site. Two months before the launch of the project, the academic panel gave a series of nuanced talks to redress the original conflict. Maphalala infamously gave a talk whereby the English text was in agreement with the broad-ranging nuanced academic interpretation while the Zulu speech was highly emotionally charged and nationalistic, including statements such as '*abelungu bafika lapha ezweni lethu balala nomama bethu*' or 'white people came to our land and raped our mothers.'<sup>106</sup>

After the 1998 launch, the academic committee was no longer consulted. It is further unclear who drove the further development of the bridge over the next decade. While local residents utilise the Ncome museum as a community centre, their larger involvement remains unclear.

In terms of future decision-making, it is important to open the bridge in order to show commitment to reconciliation and pay tribute towards both the Afrikaner and Zulu's historical legacies. The monument in the modern era very much still represents a culture 'that does not speak to an inclusive South African audience.'<sup>107</sup> In modern times, the monument is still a rallying point where prominent far-right Afrikaner figures - many of which openly embrace apartheid apologism - hold events and celebrations of Afrikaner culture.<sup>108</sup> Many note that even on 'Reconciliation Day', the 'celebration' is conducted separately on both the Blood River and Ncome sides, respectively, seemingly representing how the monument fails in its goal to foster reconciliation.<sup>109</sup>

## Summary and Conclusions

The Blood River Monuments, Bloedrivier Museum and Ncome Museum are synonymous for the same site. These different names still inform the perspective of the viewer. While a new name was proposed to encompass the entire site – *eKukhumelaneni umlotha* (place of reconciliation) –

<sup>104</sup> Paula Girshick, "Ncome Museum/Monument: From Reconciliation to Resistance," *Museum Anthropology* 27, no. 1–2 (2004): X

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Nsizwa Dlamini, *Patterns and Shifts in Cultural Heritage in KwaZulu-Natal: Selected Case Studies, 1977-1999* (Durban: University of Kwazulu-Natal: Masters thesis, 2001), 152.

<sup>107</sup> Marnell Kirsten, "Of Monuments and Men," *Mail & Guardian*, 24 September, 2020.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Reneva Fourie, "Reconciliation is possible despite deepening racial tension," *IOL News*, 16 December, 2019.

this never came into fruition. The Battle of Blood River and its subsequent manifestations became powerful imagery fuelling both apartheid mythology and black resistance. The nuanced interpretations from the 1990s serve a small part in rectifying the hurt stemming from this highly contested event.

With attempts of reconciliation, the symbolism of the day has changed within the post-apartheid era. These attempts, however, are not without their criticism. The Eastern Bank, still run by the Voortrekker monument, is not only a testament to the Great Trek, it is a place of nationalist pride: the Western Bank mirrors this. Rather than reconciling opposition, resistance and pain, as suggested by the Legacy Project's academic panel, it symbolises a troubling interpretation of Zulu culture created by both Afrikaner and Zulu nationalists. Neither side reconciles their own problematic past or the conflict between them. However, it is important to note that while historically the sites have been referred to separately as the Ncome Museum and Blood River Museum, this has changed over the ages to the Ncome-Blood River Heritage site. Nevertheless, The bridge, which should act as a physical representation of the monument, is often locked. It is, therefore clear, while the physical spaces may change, reconciliation at the site is an ongoing, slow moving process.

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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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