



HAL
open science

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

Anton Ehlers

► **To cite this version:**

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. *Alizés: Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 2004, Founding Myths of the New South Africa / Les mythes fondateurs de la nouvelle Afrique du Sud, 24, pp.173-197. hal-02344096

HAL Id: hal-02344096

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02344096v1>

Submitted on 3 Nov 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

*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*

*Anton EHLERS
University of Stellenbosch*

INTRODUCTION

Although the focus and emphasis changed over time, the Covenant, the Battle of Blood River/Ncome, its physical monumental manifestation and its annual commemoration on December 16 were key components in the mythological legitimisation of Afrikaner nationalism and its apartheid manifestation in the 20th century. This battle was an important element in the master narrative of the Afrikaners as God's holy chosen people with a mission to christianise and civilise a barbaric country given to them by God. Since the seventies historians started questioning the mythology surrounding these two events. This led to various corrections in the interpretation of the events and heated debate in Afrikaner circles and it also affected the emphasis of the annual December 16 Day of the Vow commemorations. By 1994 the hold that these myths and the accompanying master narrative had had on Afrikaner historical consciousness seemed largely broken, leaving a vacuum in Afrikaner historical thinking.

With the introduction of the new political dispensation in 1994 reconciliation and nation building became key objectives for the new South African government. In line with these objectives

the government decided to maintain December 16 as a national public holiday, but changed its name to the Day of Reconciliation reflecting the new role the state wished this holiday to play in the New South Africa. This paper will trace aspects of the pre-1994 role of the mythology of the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome in the development of Afrikaner nationalism and the legitimisation of apartheid up to its demise in 1994. It will then turn to investigate post-1994 attempts to desegregate and re-cast December 16 into a reconciliation mould in the service of nation building in South Africa and evaluate Afrikaner responses to the state's attempts at filling the mythology vacuum in Afrikaner ranks with content orientated towards reconciliation and nation building.

Historical Background of the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome

The history of the Covenant and the Battle of Blood /Ncome River forms part of a period of Afrikaner history referred to as the Great Trek (1836-1854) during which the Voortrekkers settled in the interior regions of South Africa.¹

The majority followed Retief into Natal with the hope of obtaining land from the Zulu king, Dingane. During his second visit to Dingane in February 1838 Retief and his expedition were killed by the Zulus² after they had signed an agreement with Dingane in which he granted the land between the Thukela and Umzimvubu Rivers to the Voortrekkers.³

Against this background Andries Pretorius arrived in Natal in November 1838 and immediately organised a punitive expedition against Dingane. Pretorius initiated the idea of a covenant with God. In the covenant, which took the form of a prayer by Sarel Cilliers (the spiritual leader of the Voortrekkers in Natal), the Voortrekkers asked God to grant them a victory over the Zulus. In return they would build a church in memory of His name and they

¹ HJ van Aswegen, *Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika tot 1854* (Academica, Pretoria, 1989), p. 261.

² *Ibid.*, p. 277.

³ FA van Jaarsveld, *Honderd basiese dokumente by die studie van die Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis 1648-1961* (Nasou, Goodwood, 1980), p. 61.

and their children and the generations coming after them would consecrate it to the Lord and celebrate the day with thanksgiving.⁴

The military encounter between the Voortrekker expedition and the Zulu army took place on 16 December 1838 during which the 14 000-strong Zulu army were defeated by 470 Voortrekkers under Pretorius. The defeated Zulu army lost 3 000 men, with no loss of life on the side of the Voortrekkers.⁵

The History of the Commemoration of the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome

Although a church was erected in Pietermaritzburg (the capital of the newly founded Voortrekker Republic of Natalia in Natal) in 1841, there is no surviving record to indicate whether it was specifically built by the Voortrekkers as a fulfilment of their vow. In the first quarter of a century after the battle only a handful of individuals like Sarel Cilliers celebrated the day and it is known that even the initiator of the idea of the Covenant, Andries Pretorius, did not uphold the promise of celebrating the day as a sacred day.⁶

According to the Afrikaner historian, FA van Jaarsveld, the development of Afrikaner nationalism in the Transvaal, which was generated by the attempts to regain their independence after the British annexation of the Transvaal in 1877, was decisive for the establishment of December 16 as a historical festive day. In 1880 the Transvaal revolted against Britain in an attempt to regain its independence. Before the start of hostilities the Transvaal burgers gathered at Paardekraal in December 1880 where, according to Van Jaarsveld, "the covenant was 'renewed'...by piling a cairn of stones, symbolizing both past and future: the past because the covenant had freed them from Black domination, and the future because they saw it as a sign that they would continue fighting until they regained their independence from the British impe-

⁴ FA van Jaarsveld, *Die Afrikaners se Groot Trek na die stede en ander opstelle* (Perskor, Johannesburg, 1982), p. 300-301.

⁵ C Venter, *Die Groot Trek* (Don Nelson, Kaapstad, 1985), p. 49, 52.

⁶ LM Thompson, *The Political Mythology of Apartheid* (Yale University Press, London, 1985), p. 154-156.

rialists.”⁷ After a successful military campaign the Transvaal regained its independence from Britain in 1881. In that year and every fifth year thereafter the Transvaal government organised a state festival on December 16 (then called “Dingaan’s Day”) to celebrate the Transvaal’s victory over Britain as well as the Voortrekker victory at Blood River/Ncome.⁸

In 1910 the Union government proclaimed Dingaan’s Day a public holiday for the whole of South Africa. In 1952 the National Party government changed the name from Dingaan’s Day to the Day of the Vow in an attempt to make the day less offensive to South African blacks and also to shift the focus from Dingaan to the Vow. The government also elevated the Day of the Vow to a “sabbath” by legally attaching the sabbath restrictions (no organised public sport, closed theatres and places of public entertainment, etc.) to the holiday.⁹

The Evolution of the Covenant and Battle of Blood River/Ncome Mythology in Afrikaner Nationalism in the 20th Century

According to Van Jaarsveld, the celebration of the Battle of Blood River/Ncome served as a reliable barometer of the historical, national and political thought of the Afrikaner. He described the Day of the Vow as an example of a type of civil religion. The significance of Blood River becomes clear from Day of the Vow celebrations in which religion and history were united. An example in this regard is the 16 December 1881 state festival, where the Battle of Blood River/Ncome and the regaining of the Transvaal’s independence were celebrated. Speaking at this occasion Paul Kruger, President of the Transvaal Republic, declared that the “volksleiers” (leaders of the people) were used by God to regain

⁷ LM Thompson, *The Political Mythology of Apartheid* (Yale University Press, London, 1985), p. 169; FA van Jaarsveld, *Die evolusie van apartheid en ander geskiedkundige opstelle* (Tafelberg-Uitgewers, Kaapstad, 1979), p. 49.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ FA van Jaarsveld, *Die evolusie van apartheid en ander geskiedkundige opstelle* (Tafelberg-Uitgewers, Kaapstad, 1979), p. 48-49; *Die Afrikaner*, 15-21 Desember 1995 (Woord en Wêreld), p. 4.

Transvaal's independence and that He gave them the victories at Blood River and Majuba (place of the final defeat of the British during the Transvaal's war of independence). God gave them their freedom and their country because they were "Gods volk" (God's people). In 1891 Kruger warned that Dingaan's Day should be celebrated as a religious and not a secular festival. Kruger was also of the opinion that the loss of the Transvaal's independence in 1877 and the war that followed in 1880 was a punishment by God because the promises made by the Voortrekkers in the Covenant of 1838 were not kept. There was a heavy reliance on history to strengthen the historical consciousness of the Transvaal Afrikaners, while the idea that they were God's people and that God treated them as he did the Israelites of the Old Testament was widely propagated.¹⁰

During the course of the 20th century the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome were used by Afrikaner political, religious and community leaders (nationalist culturalists, as Grundlingh and Sapire¹¹ refer to them) to explain the political, social and economic circumstances of Afrikaners and in the process fuelled the fires of Afrikaner nationalism.

During the 1938 centenary celebrations of the Great Trek the Battle of Blood River/Ncome and the Covenant were a central reference point in what Grundlingh and Sapire describe as "an important populist phase" in the development of Afrikaner nationalism with "all the rhetoric of populist movements: 'struggle', 'survival' and 'salvation'."¹² In a speech at the Battle of Blood River/Ncome site in December 1938 Dr DF Malan, leader of the National Party, referred to the difficulties of keeping South Africa a "white man's country": "At the Blood River battleground you stand on sacred soil. It is here that the future of South Africa as a civilized Christian country and the continued existence of the responsible authority of the white race was decided... You stand today in your own white laager at your own Blood River, seeing

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 65-67.

¹¹ A Grundlingh and H Sapire, "From Feverish Festival to Repetitive Ritual? The Changing Fortunes of Great Trek Mythology in an Industrializing South Africa, 1938-1988," *South African Historical Journal* 21, 1989, p. 26.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

the dark masses gathering around your isolated white race.” According to Malan, the site of the “new Blood River” was the city, where black and white confront each other in the field of labour. “If there is no salvation,” Malan declared, “the downfall of South Africa as a white man’s country” would be sealed. This could only be prevented through forceful intervention, without which the victory of faith at Blood River/Ncome would be transformed into one of despair and ruin.¹³

This pattern of use by Afrikaner politicians and community leaders (nationalist culturalists) of the Battle of Blood River/-Ncome and the Covenant continued in the decades after 1938, although the symbolism attached changed with the changing perspectives as dictated by the needs of the day. At the inauguration of the Voortrekker Monument in December 1949 Dingaan’s Day was used to celebrate the victory of Afrikaner nationalism and volk’s unity, as demonstrated by the election victory of the National Party in 1948. By the late 1960s and early 1970s the focus shifted to South Africa’s isolation and the battle against decolonisation.¹⁴ Van Jaarsveld described December 16 used in this way as providing an anchor to reflect on questions annually about Afrikaner identity and which often served the purpose of unifying Afrikaners politically against either the English or the blacks. In this sense it served as a “power-station” where nationalistic electricity was generated every year.¹⁵

The content of this nationalistic electricity changed profoundly in the 1970s and 1980s as meanings were attached to Great Trek mythology in general “that would have a greater resonance with an increasingly sophisticated and self-confident urban Afrikanerdom.”¹⁶ The economic and political crises of the late 1970s and early 1980s led to moves towards reforming the

¹³ FA van Jaarsveld, *Die evolusie van apartheid en ander geskiedkundige opstelle* (Tafelberg-Uitgewers, Kaapstad, 1979), p. 71.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 72-74.

¹⁵ FA van Jaarsveld, *Die Afrikaners se Groot Trek na die stede en ander opstelle* (Perskor, Johannesburg, 1982), p. 311.

¹⁶ A Grundlingh and H Sapire, “From Feverish Festival to Repetitive Ritual? The Changing Fortunes of Great Trek Mythology in an Industrializing South Africa, 1938-1988,” *South African Historical Journal* 21, 1989.

apartheid system—a move that needed wider support than just from Afrikaners. Because English and moderate black support were necessary, the ethnic exclusivity and divine mission of Afrikaners, two dominating themes in the Battle of Blood River/Ncome and the Covenant mythology, had to be played down. According to Grundlingh and Saphire, it was against this background “of Afrikaner doubt about the apartheid system in the 1980s that the call went out from the press, the pulpits, and cultural organizations for a reconsideration of the way in which the Great Trek was to be commemorated in the yearly Blood River/Ncome celebrations. Thus, for example, Afrikaner intellectuals appealed for the inclusion of non-Afrikaner groups in the Day of the Covenant celebrations and for the depoliticization of the day, while Afrikaner historians began to depict the Great Trek in a secular light and to subject the event to re-examination.”¹⁷

The Deconstruction / Demythologizing of the Battle of Blood River/Ncome and the Covenant by Afrikaner Historians

The mythology that developed around the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome since the last quarter of the 19th century and formed the traditional interpretation of these events consisted of a number of categories. There were myths on the significance of the Battle of Blood River/Ncome. It was believed that Blood River/Ncome saved the Great Trek, that it was the birthplace of the Afrikaner people and a symbol of the victory of Christianity over heathendom and barbarism. The myth of the Covenant was that all Afrikaners were irrevocably bound by the vow for all time. Lastly there was also the myth of the miracle of Blood River/Ncome. The victory at the Battle of Blood River/Ncome was a miracle in the sense that divine intervention gave the Voortrekkers their victory, that God’s intervention at Blood River to save the Voortrekkers proved that He was on the side of the Afrikaner people and would not abandon the Afrikaner nation and that the victory was also proof that God had

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 30-31.

commissioned the Afrikaner people to keep South Africa white or that God desired white supremacy in South Africa.¹⁸

The process of the deconstruction of these traditional interpretations of the Battle of Blood River/Ncome and the Covenant by Afrikaner historians was facilitated by the completion in 1975 and publication in 1977 of the doctoral study by BJ Liebenberg entitled *Andries Pretorius in Natal*. Liebenberg corrected the subjective and biased picture of Pretorius painted by Gustav Preller in his biography of Pretorius and in the process also rectified many factual mistakes with regard to the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome.¹⁹ In December 1977 Prof. Liebenberg wrote an article in *Die Huisgenoot (The House Companion)*, a popular Afrikaans periodical, in which he gave a rational explanation, according to the findings of his doctoral dissertation, of the reasons for the Voortrekker victory at Blood River without ascribing it to the divine intervention of God. Liebenberg's explanation and his viewpoint that it was not the task of the historian to indicate the hand of God in history were greeted with letters full of reproachful and shocked reactions from readers.²⁰

The academic debate on the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome was given further momentum when Prof. FA van Jaarsveld, the foremost Afrikaner historian of his time, became involved.²¹ In a paper entitled "*Historical mirror of Blood River*" (*Historiese spieël van Bloedrivier*), which he delivered at the 1979 Unisa Conference on the *Problems in the Interpretation of History with Possible Reference to Examples from South African History such as the Battle of Blood River*,²² he questioned and rejected the reliability of Sarel Cilliers's account of the Covenant with reference to both its content and form, and also indicated that the

¹⁸ BJ Liebenberg, "Mites Rondon Bloedrivier en die Gelofte," *South African Historical Journal* 20, November 1988.

¹⁹ BJ Liebenberg, *Andries Pretorius in Natal* (Academica, Pretoria, 1977), p. 7-8.

²⁰ FA van Jaarsveld, *Die evolusie van apartheid en ander geskiedkundige opstelle* (Tafelberg-Uitgewers, Kaapstad, 1979), p. 54-55.

²¹ BJ Liebenberg, "Mites Rondon Bloedrivier en die Gelofte," *South African Historical Journal* 20, November 1988, p. 18.

²² A Grundlingh and H Sapire, "From Feverish Festival to Repetitive Ritual? The Changing Fortunes of Great Trek Mythology in an Industrializing South Africa, 1938-1988," *South African Historical Journal* 21, 1989, p. 31.

addition of the sabbath stipulation to the Day of the Vow in 1952 was done on the strength of Cilliers's unreliable account.²³ The strength of emotion among certain Afrikaner groups on the issues he addressed was demonstrated by the fact that his presentation was interrupted when AWB (Afrikaner Weerstand Beweging/ Afrikaner Resistance Movement) members under the leadership of Eugene Terreblanche stormed into the conference hall and tarred and feathered Prof. Van Jaarsveld for attacking the holy symbols of the volk.²⁴

In 1988, the year of the 150th anniversary of the Great Trek, the Historical Society of South Africa organised a conference to stimulate debate on the Great Trek as historical event. In a paper entitled "*Myths on Blood River and the Covenant*" (Mites Rondon Bloedrivier en die Gelofte) Liebenberg took stock of Blood River and Covenant mythology, in the process also indicating less known and less prominent myths surrounding the events and coming to the conclusion that they were all myths "which have the common purpose of supporting Afrikaner Nationalism."²⁵ The conference confirmed that in Afrikaner academic circles the new perspectives on the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome that had emerged in the preceding decade were being generally accepted.²⁶

Some Public and Official Reactions to the Notion of a Desegregated Covenant and Blood River/Ncome in the Pre-1994 Era

It has already been mentioned that the National Party government changed the official name of December 16 as public holiday from Dingaan's Day to the Day of the Vow in 1952 in an attempt to make the day less offensive to South African blacks²⁷

²³ BJ Liebenberg, "Mites Rondon Bloedrivier en die Gelofte," *South African Historical Journal* 20, November 1988, p. 18.

²⁴ *Rapport*, 1.4.1979, "Geteer... en veer," p. 5.

²⁵ BJ Liebenberg, "Mites Rondon Bloedrivier en die Gelofte," *South African Historical Journal* 20 November 1988, p. 17.

²⁶ *Historia (Groot Trek – Gedenkuitgawe)* 33, November 1988, No 2.

²⁷ FA van Jaarsveld, *Die Afrikaners se Groot Trek na die stede en ander opstelle* (Perskor, Johannesburg, 1982), p. 311.

and also to shift the focus from Dingaan to the Vow²⁸ as the real focus of the day. The name change also had to curtail possible negative feelings and attitudes that could have been promoted by the old name.²⁹ This name change was, however, not accompanied by an attitudinal change in the way Afrikaners in general celebrated the day. The public debate on the character of the celebration of the Day of the Vow only started in earnest in the mid-1970s and coincided with the academic debate on the demythologising of the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome. In the sustained debate that raged throughout the 1970s and 1980s three broad approaches towards December 16 as a national public holiday crystallised. The more conservative elements within Afrikaner ranks called for the preservation of the Day of the Vow as an exclusive festival for Christian Afrikaners. For them the Day of the Vow was as exclusive to Afrikaners as the Passion Play was to Oberammergau. The second approach was that of Afrikaners and other South Africans who wanted to make the day more inclusive by incorporating English-speaking and black South Africans and changing the character of the day from that of confrontation to one of reconciliation between the peoples of South Africa. The third group, which included people like John Mavuzo of Inkatha and David Curry of the (Coloured) Labour Party, called for the abolition of December 16 as a public holiday on the grounds of its exclusivity.³⁰ Despite the lively debate December 16 remained on the South African calendar in the form that it was given in 1952.

²⁸ *Die Afrikaner* 15-21 Desember 1995 (Woord en Wêreld), p.4.

²⁹ *Die Burger*, 16.12.1952 Redaksioneel, p. 6.

³⁰ FA van Jaarsveld, *Die evolusie van apartheid en ander geskiedkundige opstelle* (Tafelberg-Uitgewers, Kaapstad, 1979), p. 74-80.

From Vow to Reconciliation: Recasting Apartheid Mythology in the New South Africa

The Mandela Era

Initial reactions

With the introduction of the new political dispensation in 1994 December 16 was retained as a national public holiday, but the name was changed to the Day of Reconciliation to symbolise the spirit in which the government expected the day to be celebrated in future. In the light of the role it played in Afrikaner and apartheid history the retention of the day as public holiday was in itself an act of reconciliation. In the context of the conciliatory “rainbow nation” spirit of the Mandela era and boosted by the general positive attitude towards the future success of the New South Africa³¹, events like the euphoria of the 1995 Rugby World Cup victory³² and the acceptance of the first democratic constitution³³ the Day of Reconciliation seemed to be embraced by Afrikaners in general. “Rainbow nation” mythology seemed to be winning its fight against a traditional counterpart in Blood River/Ncome. The notable exception was the Afrikaner right-wing which saw the name change as an attempt to change the true spirit of the day in the hope that the festival would eventually fall into disuse.³⁴

The changing attitude of the majority of Afrikaners towards December 16 was best demonstrated by the acceptance in 1997 of a motion during the annual congress of the ATKV (Afrikaanse Taal en Kultuur Vereniging / Afrikaans Language and Cultural Association), a traditionally more conservative Afrikaner cultural organisation, namely that the Day of the Vow should in future be celebrated as a day of thanksgiving similar to the American example. It should no longer be a day that served to remind Afrikaners of Blood River/Ncome and the Covenant. Expressing himself in favour of the proposal, one of the delegates was of the

³¹ *South African Yearbook* 1995, p. 1.

³² *Rapport*, 25.6.1995 Dis vonkelwyn-tyd vir die ganse land!, p. 1.

³³ *South African Yearbook*, 1997.

³⁴ *Die Afrikaner* 15-21 Desember 1995 (Woord en Wêreld), p. 4.

opinion that “Whether we want to admit it or not, the Day of the Vow was for many years just a public holiday to people” with only one percent of Afrikaans speakers actively commemorating the day. The aim of the proposal was “to give meaning to a day which normally does not have great significance to people.” According to the proposal, ATKV branches were requested to organise public meetings in co-operation with like-minded organisations on December 16. On these occasions special attention was to be given to “thanksgiving to God for his mercy and goodness in the past, present and future.” One of the delegates described the proposal as an attempt to create a culture of thanksgiving among all people in South Africa. He added that the day should be characterised by large meetings and street processions, as in the USA. The diversity of colours of the national flag could be displayed at these occasions. He saw this as a way of unifying people and of giving sense and meaning to the intention behind the Day of Reconciliation.³⁵

The Blood River/Ncome Project: a case study of an official reconciliation attempt – Mandela fashion

Official involvement in desegregating the historiography and the commemoration of the Battle of Blood River/Ncome took a tangible form when the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST) identified the re-interpretation of the Battle of Blood/Ncome River as a Legacy Project under its co-ordination for delivery in 1998. According to the Department, the project involved “a re-interpretation of some of the historically one-sided views of the 1838 Zulu-Boer war, and the erection of an appropriate memorial at the site of the Battle. Also, built around the project is the idea of building and effecting a spirit of reconciliation among the descendants of those involved in the Battle.”³⁶ After the Department briefed Cabinet early in 1998, it undertook consultations with all affected role players. The Minister also

³⁵ M Waldner, “Geloftedag kan soos ‘n ‘dankdag’ word,” *Rapport*, 24.8.1997, p. 2.

³⁶ Invitation Prof. MK Xulu-Prof. PH Kapp, 9.10.1998 and annexure entitled: Legacy project: Re-interpreting the Battle of Ncome/Blood River.

appointed a panel of English, Afrikaner and Zulu nationalist academics to work on the conceptual framework for the re-interpretation. In October 1998 the Department hosted a one-day seminar at the University of Zululand with the aim of “allowing the many academic views that still exist about this Battle to be synthesized and aligned with the conceptual framework” produced by the panel of academics appointed by the Minister.³⁷

The panel of academics appointed by the Minister of DACST and consisting of *inter alia* Professors JS Maphalala, M Kunene, J Laband, CA Hamilton and Dr JEH Grobler produced a conceptual framework for the intellectual correction and balancing of the understanding of the events of the historical battle of Blood River/Ncome.³⁸

In the body of the report the various issues were treated under the following headings: The Covenant, Afrikaner Nationalism and the Mythification of the Voortrekker victory at *Bloedrivier*; Zulu interpretations of *iMpi yase Ncome*; The Origins of the Battle; The Battle Itself; and The Battle: A Military Analysis. With regard to the significance of the battle and its commemoration in post-apartheid South Africa, the panel came to the conclusion that “The descendants of the original protagonists in the Battle of Blood River/Ncome, namely the Zulu and the Afrikaners of today, are no longer enemies. From a view some 160 years after the confrontation, the main lessons to be learned from it are no longer about the courage and the suffering of the participants, but rather an imperative not to prolong the conflicts of the past. That led the panel to propose that a further monument should be erected at the site that carries out a message of reconciliation for everybody. The name *eKukhumelaneni umlotha* (Place of Reconciliation) should be considered for this monument.

³⁷ Invitation Prof. MK Xulu-Prof. PH Kapp, 9.10.1998 and annexure entitled: Legacy project: Re-interpreting the Battle of Ncome/Blood River; N Dlamini: The Battle of Ncome project: state memorialism, discomforting spaces (*Southern African Humanities*, Vol 13, December 2001, p. 129).

³⁸ Report of the Panel of Historians appointed by the South African Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, “The Battle of Blood/Ncome River,” 1.9.1998, p. 1-2.

After a war it is often necessary for the protagonists to become reconciled with each other and also within themselves about what had taken place—the taking of human lives, the destruction, and the horror and tragedy which they helped to cause. By jointly participating in erecting a monument that would make noble the loss of Zulu life and extol Zulu bravery as much as the present monuments at the site do for the Voortrekkers; by moving beyond a mere valorisation of war; and by creating a spirit of reconciliation, the descendants of the original protagonists can play an immense part in the building of a united South Africa.”³⁹

The idea of a monument to give recognition to the role of the Zulu warriors in the Battle of Blood River/Ncome as proposed by the panel was actively pursued by the government. Both the monument and the commemoration were intended to play an important role in reconciliation, not only between Zulu and Voortrekker descendants, but also in a broader sense contribute towards nation building. Features at the site like a proposed bridge over the Ncome river to link the two monuments, old and new, and the acceptance of the name for the monument proposed by the academic panel were intended to symbolise strengthening reconciliation. The unveiling of the monument was also intended and planned to support reconciliation. A public ceremony attended by the top state, Zulu and Afrikaner leadership was planned, including a walk across the connecting bridge by Zulu and Voortrekker descendants to view the respective monuments.⁴⁰

The inauguration and unveiling of the new monument at the Blood River/Ncome battle site a kilometre away from the existing monument commemorating the Voortrekker victory took place on 16 December 1998, during the 160th commemoration of the battle. Present at the inauguration ceremony attended by “thousands of people”⁴¹ were also Deputy President Thabo Mbeki, Minister of Home Affairs and Inkatha Freedom Party leader Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, Zulu King Goodwill Zwelithini, Minister of DACST Mr

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9-10.

⁴⁰ N Dlamini: The Battle of Ncome project: state memorialism, discomfoting spaces (*Southern African Humanities* Vol 13, December 2001, p. 131-132).

⁴¹ *Cape Argus* 17.12.1998, “Afrikaner stay-away from Blood River ceremony,” p. 4.

Lionel Mtshali, Freedom Front leader General Constand Viljoen and executive director of the Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge (Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Societies) Hennie de Wet. Speakers like Mbeki and Buthelezi stressed the conciliatory character and potential of the occasion and the monument. Buthelezi even aired the idea of a new covenant: "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."⁴² Mtshali was of the opinion 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."⁴³

The speakers at the ceremony, however, also lamented the fact that the occasion's potential for reconciliation was not fully realised because of the sparse Afrikaner attendance and the existence of a separate ceremony by Afrikaners at the Voortrekker laager monument a kilometre away.⁴⁴ The *Cape Argus* described the Afrikaner ceremony as "a small group of apartheid flag-waving Afrikaners conducting a prayer at the wagon site."⁴⁵ The *Sowetan* reported as follows: "Flags of the old Boer republics, among them the Vierkleur, flew. One banner read *Apartheid is heilig*—Apartheid is holy... Among those who attended the Afrikaner ceremony was convicted mass murderer and Wit Wolwe member, Barend Strydom."⁴⁶ The uncompromising nature of the ceremony at the Voortrekker laager did not reflect the views of all the Afrikaners at the ceremony. In an eyewitness account Dutch

⁴² *Sowetan* 17.12.1998, "Peace on battlefield," p. 1.

⁴³ *Cape Argus* 17.12.1998, "Afrikaner stay-away from Blood River ceremony," p. 4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*; *Sowetan* 17.12.1998, "Peace on battlefield," p. 1; *Cape Argus* 19/20.12.1998, "No reconciliation at Blood River," p. 24.

⁴⁵ *Cape Argus* 19/20.12.1998, "No reconciliation at Blood River," p. 24.

⁴⁶ *Sowetan* 17.12.1998, "Peace on battlefield," p. 1.

Reformed Church pastor LG Schoeman of Ladysmith described the events and his reactions to it as follows:

I took my family to Blood River on 16 December 1998 full of enthusiasm: Today we as Afrikaners are going to hold a service on 'our' side and the Zulu on "their" side and then we are going to reconcile. I hear about joint commissions, a bridge joining the two monuments, and in ecumenical circles excitement over the occasion.

Alas, on our way back we were all ashamed that we attended: Ashamed because such an emotionally charged opportunity to testify for Christian-Afrikaners was again hijacked by a handful of extremists stumbling into the future ideologically blinded.

After the disappointing public worship, during which Afrikaner volk's theology was openly preached, the "Daughters of Zion" displayed banners unhindered with the message: "Apartheid is Holy" and pamphlets were distributed with the undertaking "from now on in our country to apply Your command to live separately strictly and purposefully." The rest of the programme did not show any sign of reconciliation.

Together with a friend we set off on our own to the Zulu meeting at the new Ncome monument. Here the atmosphere was different. We were a few white faces in the crowd of Zulu festival-goers. Hands of reconciliation and goodwill were extended to my nation (volk).

But Afrikaner representation was sparse and they were clearly more concerned about the Afrikaner's right to maintain their own than to talk about reconciliation.

During the Zulu evening news on the SABC Mangosuthu Buthelezi said that he was disappointed about the exclusivity in the Afrikaner laager, but that he believes that Rome was not built in one day.

Can we allow the hijacking of the Blood River festival by a minority of ideologically sick minds to continue, especially in the light of the Zulu monument on the opposite side which cries out for reconciliation? Was it not time for Blood River to acquire a reconciliatory Christian character?

For Heavens sake, do something. I try to raise my children to discover their identity as Christians and Afrikaners. Embarrassments like this do not make it easy.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ *Rapport* 27.12.1998, "Laat Bloedrivier versoen," p. 15.

The above examples demonstrate the lines along which the controversy and the lack of a consensus among Afrikaners on the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome were drawn by 1998. One just has to read *Die Afrikaner* (official organ of the right-wing Herstigte Nasionale Party) of December 1998 to realise that the traditional interpretations of the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome with its references to the miraculous nature of the victory and the Afrikaner as God's chosen people still had their adherents.⁴⁸ This minority of Afrikaners rejected the new approach to 16 December and also attributed the Afrikaners' loss of political and economic power after 1994 to the dishonouring of the Covenant to God.⁴⁹ In contrast are the views of people like Dr J. Grobler, provincial leader of the Transvaal Voortrekkers (an Afrikaner youth movement similar to the English Boy Scouts) and history lecturer at Pretoria University, who applauded the establishment of a Zulu monument and a reinterpretation of the events, and of Prof. P. Naude, Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Port Elizabeth, who rejects the binding nature of the Covenant on the Afrikaners of today.⁵⁰

Dr Grobler probably came closest to the 1998 pulse of thought among Afrikaners on the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome when, in reference to the traditional interpretation of the events and the differences of opinion, he came to the conclusion that:

That interpretation is no longer generally supported. Indeed, there are many Afrikaners today who seem to attach no importance whatsoever to the annual commemoration of the Blood River events... One is indeed tempted to conclude that it would be easier for open-minded Afrikaners to agree with the Zulus than with ultra-conservative Afrikaners on the message of Blood River.⁵¹

⁴⁸ *Die Afrikaner* 11-17.12.1998, "Hoofartikel (Twee Godswonders in een maand herdenk)," p. 2.

⁴⁹ *Die Afrikaner* 11-17.12.1998, Perspektief deur Gawie: Gelofte dag, p. 2.

⁵⁰ *Die Taalgenoot* 12.1998, "Gelofte dag vandag," p. 6-9.

⁵¹ JEH Grobler, "Afrikaner perspectives on Blood River: A never-ending debate?" (Paper delivered at one-day seminar on the Battle of Blood River/Ncome at University of Zululand, November 1998, p. 1, 7).

By 1998 it seemed that, with the exception of ultra-conservative mostly right-wing Afrikaners, the traditional interpretation of the Covenant and the Battle of Blood River/Ncome had indeed lost its grip on the historical consciousness of the majority of white Afrikaners and that they were prepared to give the reconciliation version a chance to compete for the “mythology vacuum” they were experiencing after 1994.

The Mbeki Era

A hardening of attitudes

The Mbeki era in the New South Africa created a new context in which the Day of Reconciliation had to play itself out. For Afrikaners and other whites this new context (in contrast to the more accommodating “rainbow nation” focused Mandela era) took the form of a more Africanist approach by the government, an acceleration in the pace of the Africanization of South African society and a more direct and personal impact of the implications of the transforming South African society on their practical day-to-day lives. For whites this manifested itself in the form of reverse racism such as farm murders, crime and affirmative action leading to job, economic and other forms of insecurity. Despite white complaints of reverse racism, blacks still felt aggrieved at the prevalence of racism in South African society as experienced by them daily in the form of cruelty, murder, torture, assault, lack of opportunity, lack of access to services and discrimination in the workplace towards blacks.⁵² These experiences created new dimensions of meaning, identification and reaction to the Day of Reconciliation, most visibly demonstrated in a series of events concentrated on the National Conference on Racism organised by the Human Rights Commission in September 2000.

⁵² *Rapport*, 3.9.2000 Woede, trane reën oor debat. Wit én swart veroordeel rassisme op MRK-konferensie, p. 8.

The National Conference on Racism: a case study of an official reconciliation attempt – Mbeki fashion

The conference took place against the backdrop of a year characterised by race prejudice, racism and racist violence. Even the week of the conference did not escape the trend. Some examples of racial incidents include the death of Mosoko Rampuru after he was dragged behind a truck for more than five kilometres by his employer, Pieter Odendaal; the arrest of a store manager, Thelma Strydom, and an employee, Julia Munyai, after they allegedly assaulted a 14-year-old African girl whom they accused of stealing (her blouse was removed before her chest, back, arms and head were painted white); and school violence between black and white pupils of a Pretoria West high school.⁵³

The recurring theme and epicentre of the conference was that there were hard truths that whites needed to come to terms with if South Africa was to move forward. Speeches by Thabo Mbeki and Pallo Jordan demanded that whites had to face up to the reality that they all reaped the fruits of apartheid, whether they supported the system or not. Another truth whites had to face was that throughout history they were most often the perpetrators of racism, while blacks were most often the victims.⁵⁴

White reactions varied. There were critical voices. Kallie Kriel, a young representative of the white Mineworkers' Union, although agreeing that it was important that racism in all its forms be eradicated, was disappointed in Jordan's speech, commenting that "You have turned this into a racist conference... Your speech came down to the bashing of whites; you blamed whites for the past. Even a young white like myself, has...been addressed."⁵⁵ The Group of 63 (a group of Afrikaner intellectuals) was of the opinion that the South African government, while professing its commitment to a struggle against racism, were doing exactly the opposite and that "The race-based Africanist ideology of the ruling party undoubtedly has much to do with the increasing racial

⁵³ *Sunday Times*, 3.9.2000 South Africa. The truth in black and white, p. 13.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Sunday Times*, 3.9.2000 Quotes from the conference, p. 13.

gaps.”⁵⁶ Dene Smuts, Democratic Party MP labelled the conference “an ANC ploy to further its own electoral ambitions.”⁵⁷

There were, however, other white voices too. Lance Bloch, a psychologist, made an emotional confession for being part of an inhuman system and asked for forgiveness.⁵⁸ The most important, however, was that of Antjie Krog, poet and director of the Institute for Reconciliation and Justice. She tied the National Conference on Racism to 16 December (Day of Reconciliation) by giving her vision of how the day should be celebrated in 2000. She begged white South Africans to use the day as an opportunity to visibly and publicly confess to blacks that they were sorry about the past and to do this in such a way that it would be acceptable to blacks. She called on white educational, cultural, religious and economic institutions to make an appropriate gesture on 16 December throughout the length and breadth of the country. It could take the form of church services, street processions and the signing of pledges of financial reparations for blacks that suffered under racism in the past. According to Krog, it was important that whites should have a precise reference point in history of which they can say that it was the point at which they turned the black/white debate in South Africa for the good. She envisaged 16 December 2000 to be that turning point.⁵⁹

Her passionate and emotional call found resonance with the conference spirit and was underscored by proposals and decisions of the conference in this regard. The conference proposed, among other things, that affluent South Africans and businesses who benefited during the apartheid era be asked to pay reparations to blacks for harm inflicted on them by the racist policies of the time.⁶⁰ On the final day of the conference a unanimous decision was taken to name 16 December 2000 as the National Day for Racial Reconciliation and that the decade starting on that day

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Rapport, 3.9.2000 Woede, trane reën oor debat. Wit én swart veroordeel rassisme op MRK-konferensie, p. 8.

⁵⁹ Rapport, 3.9.2000 Hupstoot vir stryd teen rassisme, p. 2.

⁶⁰ *Sunday Times*, 3.9.2000 Rich asked to ‘pay for apartheid’, p. 2.

would be called the Decade of the Movement against Racism⁶¹—in this way also heeding the call of Barney Pityana, Chairman of the Human Rights Commission, for “an anti-racism movement.”⁶²

Krog’s call on whites and the conference proposals and decisions were translated into a practical initiative, the Home for All campaign, which was launched on 16 December 2000. The campaign consisted of a document (Declaration of Commitment by White South Africans)⁶³ containing a confession of guilt on the wrongs of apartheid and a commitment to a Development and Reconciliation Fund for blacks that suffered under the racist policies of apartheid. Whites were asked to identify with the campaign by signing the declaration and making a contribution to the fund.⁶⁴

The reaction from the white and specifically Afrikaner public was immediate, widespread and, although diverse, displayed a strong undercurrent of negativity towards the campaign and its initiators⁶⁵ (prominent figures such as Carl Nieuhaus, former ambassador for South Africa in the Netherlands, and Mary Burton, TRC commissioner and ex-chairman of the Black Sash, were involved).⁶⁶ Although arguments varied, much of the white reaction displayed a defensive attitude and a denial mode.⁶⁷ The reaction amounting to a “beroering” (commotion)⁶⁸ in the country was typified by *Rapport* (Afrikaans Sunday newspaper with highest circulation figures) as “a model of a nation which is still deeply divided. On the burning question of racism, confession of guilt, forgiveness—and reconciliation—the colours of the rainbow

⁶¹ *Rapport*, 3.9.2000 Hupstoot vir stryd teen rassisme, p. 2.

⁶² *Sunday Times*, 3.9.2000 Rich asked to ‘pay for apartheid’, p. 2.

⁶³ *Sunday Times*, 17.12.2000 “Declaration of Commitment by White South Africans,” p. 17.

⁶⁴ *Rapport*, 17.12.2000 ‘Skuld-dokument’: Nuwe vrae op die drumpel van jou deur, p. 12.

⁶⁵ *Rapport* 17.12.2000 Verdeeld op 16 Des., p. 1; Staak nou die skuldgevoelens, p.7; ‘Bedenklike motiewe met versoening’, p. 7; Die ‘belydenis’ is waardeloos, p.7; Die Afrikaner, 8-15 Desember 2000 Afrikaner-vyande beoog groot biegtery op 16 Desember, p. 12.

⁶⁶ *Rapport*, 17.12.2000 Pityana hoop versoen-golf sal almal in SA meevoer, p. 2.

⁶⁷ *Rapport* 17.12.2000 Bely of betaal: jôu keuse, p. 10.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

still come apart/disintegrate”⁶⁹. In its editorial the newspaper hinted at the danger of the Day of Reconciliation becoming a mockery in the light of the 2000 track record of racist incidents and the disturbing intolerance showed up by the reaction to the Home for All campaign—a reaction “which left no uncertainty about the deep chasms dividing the nation.”⁷⁰

An audit of the state of reconciliation on 16 December 2000 demonstrated the above state of affairs. In St George Cathedral in Cape Town approximately 200 people, consisting of equal numbers of blacks and whites, attended the launching of the Home for All campaign. In Pretoria approximately 1500 people gathered at the Voortrekker monument for a traditional Day of the Vow celebration. Present among the dignitaries were Cassie Aucamp, MP and leader of the Afrikaner Unity Movement, Joseph Chiolé, member of the Freedom Front and Gauteng Provincial Legislator, and Kallie Kriel, mouthpiece of the Mineworkers Union. The Day of the Vow celebration organised by the FAK at the old Blood River/Ncome monument site was attended by approximately 400 people. In addition to the above there was the heated debate on the Home for All campaign with the already referred to divisions that it brought to the surface.

An unexpected tendency among the signatories of the Declaration was the absence (for a variety of reasons connected with the Declaration) of a number of Afrikaans speakers known for their positive approach to the new dispensation. Among these were names like Breyten Breytenbach, Max du Preez, Willie Esterhuysen and Pierre-Jeanne Gerber, an ANC MP.⁷¹ Gerber expressed a widely felt sentiment when he commented that “Such petitions only deepen the trenches of racism”⁷², that they serve no practical purpose and that one should rather live the testimony of the declaration than sign it. He also questioned the timing of the campaign, expecting it to impair race relations because it did not

⁶⁹ *Rapport*, 17.12.2000 Verdeeld op 16 Des., p. 1.

⁷⁰ *Rapport* 17.2.2000 Hoofberig (Versoening), p. 10.

⁷¹ *Rapport*, 17.12.2000 Verdeeld op 16 Des., p. 1.

⁷² *Rapport*, 17.12.2000 Afrikaner-ANC-lid wil nie só bely, p. 2.

respect the feeling of those Afrikaners for whom 16 December still had a special meaning as the Day of the Vow.⁷³

Covenant and Day of the Vow Apartheid Mythology: Still Master or Mastered?

The pre and post-1998 images of the Day of Reconciliation suggest varying degrees of acceptance / rejection by Afrikaners of the government's reconciliation overtures as symbolised by the Day of Reconciliation. In contrast to the seemingly more general acceptance of the idea of reconciliation in the Mandela era, it appears as if the Mbeki era has resurrected the ghost of the Day of the Vow (with all its mythological trappings) with regard to Afrikaner historical consciousness to invade the mythology vacuum of Afrikaners as and when circumstances demand. In that sense, the Day of Reconciliation has taken on a new meaning appearing in a guise quite unintended by those who initiated the project: that of a symbol of or rallying point for protest against developments in the New South Africa which they dislike or reject. This chimes closely with people's attitude to the New South Africa and in turn is largely determined by everyday grassroots experiences and the functionality of the new dispensation in their lives.

A current categorization of Afrikaners indicates the degree in which the government succeeded in filling the "mythology vacuum" in Afrikaner ranks with reconciliation and nation building content after 1994. On the one hand (and easily discernable) the die-hards of the conservative Afrikaner right-wing adhering to the traditional interpretations of the Day of the Vow are still a reality of South African society. They use their interpretation as a political statement through which they reject the New South Africa and the whole notion of reconciliation. For these individuals and groups the Day of Reconciliation, still commemorated in Day of the Vow style, has become a symbol of resistance and the commemoration an act of defiance (almost in the Umkhonto we Sizwe style of 1961)⁷⁴ over and above its traditional character of upholding the

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ N. Mandela: *Long Walk To Freedom*, p. 274-275.

Vow. In its most fundamentalist form this tendency recently manifested itself in a spate of bomb attacks in places like Soweto.⁷⁵ The government's reconciliation attempts had no impact on this group and no new symbolism or other reconciliatory gestures are going to change that.

In contrast to this Afrikaner fringe group stands the rest of white Afrikanerdom as an amorphous entity that is more difficult to label in terms of reconciliation. According to Albert Venter of Rand Afrikaans University this group has acted in a variety of ways since 1994 to try and fill the mythology vacuum left by the demise of the previous Afrikaner master narrative based on the mythology surrounding 16 December. In the process they have provided themselves with a number of new myths.

Some left the country to join the Afrikaner diaspora abroad, desperately trying to remain Afrikaners by creating Afrikaner or South African spaces in foreign countries, but almost always remaining homesick foreigners. Others withdrew from the reality of the New South Africa to find their salvation in religious pietism. They distance themselves from politics, which they experience as dirty and corrupt and turn to an inward-looking spirituality focusing on their families and intimate cell and care groups.

A substantial group of middle-class, economically successful Afrikaners also withdrew from politics to concentrate on their economic prosperity. Many became cosmopolitan citizens of the world, using South Africa only as a convenient base in their quest for material success.⁷⁶ They are more concerned about material survival than what appear as outdated cultural battles. They would prefer to go to the KKNK (Klein Karoo National Arts Festival) in Oudtshoorn for the entertainment rather than the cultural enrichment.

Then there is a substantial group (but probably not a majority) who fully identified with the New South Africa. They even joined political parties like the ANC and accepted the story of the struggle, liberation, black empowerment and the evil of apartheid.

⁷⁵ *Rapport*, 15.12.2002 Dis gevaarlike Afrikaner-mites dié, p. 35.

⁷⁶ *Rapport*, 29.12.2002 Almal moet aan 'n nuwe SA storie help skryf, p. 34.

And then there is also a substantial group (which I suspect might even be a majority) that is undecided. Broadly speaking, they have in common, in varying degrees, a commitment to South Africa and a conditional acceptance of reconciliation or at least of its necessity for the future success of the New South Africa. They are, however, still oscillating between acceptance and rejection of reconciliation, depending on the nature of their everyday experiences of the new dispensation and its functionality in their everyday lives.

The process of reinventing and recasting apartheid mythology in the service of nation building in South Africa seems to be a more problematic process than just the changing of a name, building of a new monument and initiating Home for All campaigns and restitution funds. Apartheid Day of the Vow mythology took time to become internalised and embedded in Afrikaner historical consciousness. The unpacked and recast version in its reconciliation format will also take time to become embedded and internalised. There is no instant method or shortcut. In the final analysis the success of reconciliation will not be decided by official or less official symbolic or other attempts at reconciliation, but will be decided by the everyday experiences of ordinary Afrikaners and other South Africans at grassroots level. Rubbing shoulders in school classrooms, on university campuses and church benches, in shopping malls, on sport fields and across suburban fences will supply the acid test.⁷⁷ It is at that level that the back of the ghost of the Day of the Vow mythology will eventually be broken and its unconciliatory past—real and mythological—will finally be laid to rest. Only then will Afrikaners together with other South Africans, in the words of Frank Ankersmit, “become what they are no longer.”

Anton EHLERS
University of Stellenbosch



⁷⁷ *Rapport*, 15.12.2002 Versoeningsdag begin op voetsoolvlak, p. 3; *Rapport*, 16.12.2001 Ons vorder... maar die pad na versoening is nog lank, p. 20.