

The Dutch Captain Jan van Riebeeck in South Africa

An Icon of White Europeanness from the North

◇ Barbara Henkes

Like many countries in Europe, the Netherlands and Scandinavia have a history of colonial expansion and occupation. After they had to give up their colonies, the question remains: how does the colonial past shape the self-image of the nations involved, including both (former) colonisers and colonised? A colonial past of occupation, domination and exploitation requires a historiography that takes into account the cultural and political transfer between the former colonial powers and their former colonies. To contextualise this kind of history, reference is often made to the Global North and the Global South. Although “global” would make it clear that I want to avoid a strict geographical categorization of the world, I will refrain from using these terms in response to the objections of Olaf Kaltmeier (2015) and Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2015). They both stressed that

it evokes imaginations of a geographical North-South divide, which does not correspond to the complex entanglements and uneven developments in the real world.

It thereby obscures wealth differences within the countries that are classified as part of the Global South or Global North.

The impact of the Dutch colonial past in South Africa as well as in the Netherlands in the 1950s is central to this article. At that time, South

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Africa had ceased to be a Dutch colony a century and a half earlier, after the Cape was ‘handed over’ to the British in 1806. Nevertheless, around the end of the nineteenth century and again after the Second World War, a process of identification of Dutch people with settlers of European origin in South Africa was activated, communicated and reinforced for the benefit of mutual migration policies in both countries. To analyse the racialised impact of this transnational process, the celebration of the Van Riebeeck tricentennial offers a telling case.

The 1952 celebrations of the 300th anniversary of the arrival of the Dutch captain Jan van Riebeeck (1619-1677) at the southernmost tip of the African continent provide an opportunity to explore how this historical figure became an icon of White, European civilisation in both South Africa and the Netherlands. Besides, the celebratory repertoires in both countries functioned as a means of storing and transmitting narratives and images of a shared past connecting European modernity with that of South Africa. This kind of national celebration with its specific performances functions as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated behaviour, or what the performance theorist Richard Schechner (2020: 29) has called “twice-behaved” behaviour. These celebrations also constitute a lens that enables us to analyse public events as performances of inclusion and exclusion from the history of nations and thereby from the history of a global community.

There have been previous publications on the Van Riebeeck celebrations, which took place simultaneously in South Africa and the Netherlands. In South Africa, the historians Ciraj Rassool and Lesly Witz gave insight into the contribution of these celebrations to the development of a White South Africa through the—also symbolic—marginalisation and exclusion of Black, Coloured and Asian South Africans from this national celebration. (Rassool and Witz, 1993, 2017; Witz, 2003). Their analysis was limited to the South African context. In the Netherlands, the historian Willem-Pieter van Lellen paid attention to shifting perceptions of Jan van Riebeeck during the 20th century in the Netherlands as well as in South Africa. (Van Lellen, 2005). Focussing on Dutch and South African literature, newspapers and scholarly publications, Van Lellen shows how the image of Van Riebeeck was greatly determined by the political developments

within and between the two countries. In earlier articles, I related the simultaneous celebration of the 1952 Van Riebeeck celebration in both countries in order to analyse cross-border agents within a transnational network connecting the Netherlands and White South Africa. (Henkes, 2008, 2016, 2018) In this contribution, I want to show how a “global” North-South divide is counter-productive if we want to make sense of how race is done in the relations between “the metropolis” in Europe and its former colonies elsewhere in the world.

The Netherlands Entering South Africa

Until the first South African free democratic elections in 1994, the Dutchman Jan van Riebeeck occupied a prominent place in the historiography of South Africa as well as in the Netherlands. Historians in both countries emphasised that with his arrival in 1652 civilization was introduced on the African continent. His arrival was—and sometimes still is—presented as the “beginning” of the history of South Africa. However, Van Riebeeck and his crew did not arrive in empty land. The first Europeans who settled at the Cape did so in cooperation and confrontation with the local population, the Khoisan.¹ Crewmembers, foremost of Dutch, German and Scandinavian descent, had relationships and offspring with local Khoi women. At the end of the seventeenth century, they were followed by French Huguenot refugees, Scottish Protestant ministers, and other migrants from all over Europe. Also, enslaved men, women and children from the coasts of Africa, the island of Madagascar, the Dutch Indies and other places from Southeast Asia were brought to South Africa on ships of the Dutch East India Company, the VOC (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*).

After the Cape Colony was taken over by the British in 1806, in the context of the Napoleonic Wars, substantial groups of settlers (so-called *Voortrekkers*) turned their backs on the Cape to escape British rule. After wanderings and clashes with both the British and local Africans,

¹ Robert Ross in his contribution to the *Cambridge History of South Africa* stresses how for a long time “the historiography of this period celebrated European colonization and was concerned with the details of colonial rule and settlement”. The revitalization of the historiography came in the first instance through discussions of the Khoesan, of slave society, and of the historical geography of colonial farming and pastoralism, started by R. Elphick and H. Giliomee (1979, 1989).

they founded the Boer Republics Transvaal (1852) and Orange Free State (1854). In the Netherlands the news of these developments was noticed without any further action. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that the Dutch regained interest in their former colony, after the discovery of diamonds and gold contributed to a violent confrontation between the independent Boer Republics and the British colonial authorities. In line with the international solidarity with the Boers fighting against overwhelming British imperial power, the Dutch rediscovered their “distant cousins” in South Africa (Henkes 2016).² Although the Dutch government and the governments of other European countries remained neutral to not upset the powerful British Empire, volunteers from several countries formed Foreign Volunteer Units to fight the British in what is now referred to as the South African War (1899-1902). The volunteers mainly came from the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and Scandinavia. Nevertheless, the British won the war and the Boer Republics, together with the British colonies of Natal and the Cape, merged in 1910 into the Union of South Africa.

Subsequently, Dutch engagement with their distant “family” in South Africa waned. Yet, a fond identification with the Boers, who were known thereafter as Afrikaners, remained dormant until it was brought back to life in the 1950s (Henkes 2016). While in the postwar Netherlands, the government wanted to reduce unemployment and the alleged overpopulation through an active emigration policy, the nationalist government in South Africa was—after initial reluctance—ready to promote immigration, especially from the Netherlands. This was expressed by Prime Minister D. F. Malan in his 1950 New Year’s speech when he referred to the Netherlands as “the country which was the motherland of our settlement”.³ A few months later, the Minister of Agriculture J. G. Strydom followed in Malan’s footsteps with a statement that immigrants from Europe were needed for “the advancement and strengthening of the white population”. This could best be realised by

² Several Dutch authors pointed to this intense identification of the Dutch across a broad political spectrum with their *stamverwanten* (kinsmen) in South Africa. I criticised the—in Dutch historiography—unrecognised racial characterisation of this specific concept of kinship in Henkes 2018 versus De Graaff 1993, Kuitenbrouwer 2012 and Schutte 1986 and 2011.

³ “die land wat die moederland van ons volksplanting was,” *Maandblad Zuid-Afrika* (from now on *MZA*) vol. 27 (Feb. 1950), p. 21.

bringing immigrants “out of our homeland, the Netherlands”. The Dutch were supposed to “easily identify with us and become one of us.”⁴ The ‘us’ in his case being Nationalist, Afrikaans-speaking, orthodox-Protestant, White South Africans. And indeed: they came! In the year 1952, more than 4,5 thousand Dutch migrants arrived after they had passed as “White” through the South African Immigrant Selection Committee in The Hague (Peberdy 2009: 270).

Upon their arrival, they were confronted with a highly divided society. The violent struggle between ‘Brit’ and ‘Boer,’ including South Africans of colour, fighting on each side or living in their immediate surroundings, was still tangible half a century later. The opposition between two groups of White European settlers was transformed into a strong animosity along cultural and political lines. On the one hand, the South African Party (SAP) was convinced that the future of a ‘civilised’ and modern South Africa was best guaranteed within the British Commonwealth. The Nasionale Party (NAT), on the other hand, believed that a White South Africa could play a prominent role in ‘civilising’ the African continent by becoming independent from the British Empire.

These opposing political perspectives featured alongside a different conception of the position of people of colour within the Union of South Africa. Both parties had a shared axiom of White, European supremacy, which necessitated the leadership of the White minority in South Africa. The Nationalists, however, were convinced that they needed the pursuit of an absolute separation between Whites and South Africans of colour. After the Nationalists with their Apartheid policies had come to power in 1948, priority was given to the implementation of absolute dividing lines between those who appeared to be of European descent and were supposed to strengthen the nation—and those who, because of their African and/or Asian descent, lacked that ability. South Africa had to become an exclusive “white man’s world,” while the Black population was to be forcibly reallocated to barren and divided patches of land referred to as their “home countries” (*thuislanden*). From there, they

⁴ “immigrante uit Europa [is] hier nodig vir die vooruitgang en verstewiging van ons blanke bevolking [met name] uit ons stamland, Nederland.[...]Daar is vanselfsprekend geen ander volk wat as immigrante hier so maklik met ons vereenselwig en met ons een word as Nederlanders nie.” From Strydom’s speech on the occasion of the celebration of Van Riebeeck Day in Cape Town, on April 6, 1950, *MZA* vol. 27 (June 1950), p. 95.

could apply for a limited stay in the Union as cheap temporary workers without civil rights, excluded in their hostels, separate locations, or townships.⁵

Building a White Men's World

These uncompromising Apartheid policies were in full swing during the Van Riebeeck celebrations of 1952. The success of these policies depended on unity among the White population of European descent. A national commemoration of the arrival of Jan van Riebeeck and his crew provided an opportunity to celebrate the beginning of 'European civilization' in South Africa, and hence unite all Whites, leaving the animosities of the past behind. Moreover, through the figure of Van Riebeeck, South Africa could be framed as a European nation and as part of the (global) North on the southern point of the African continent. At the same time, the celebrations served to further exclude South Africans of colour from the nation and its history. It is therefore not surprising that the festivities sparked resistance against this celebration of "unity and exclusion" around "an icon of whiteness". The historians Cyril Rassool and Leslie Witz gave careful consideration to the "counter-histories," which accompanied the Van Riebeeck festivities in South Africa. (Rassool and Witz, 1993; republished in 2017); Witz, 2003: 84).

The Dutch VOC commander Van Riebeeck could indeed be seen as an 'icon of Whiteness' since he was represented as a European pioneer who introduced a Christian civilization in South Africa. It made him a suitable symbol at the centre of local and national festivities to unify different sections of the White, European-South African population. Under the bilingual motto "Ons bou 'n nasie/ We build a nation" a tribute was organised to "our first settlers," disregarding the population that lived there before the Europeans occupied their land. The Europeans who had arrived later were also mentioned by Prime Minister Malan in the run-up to the festivities. They all were invited to participate in the re-enactment of Van Riebeeck's landing on a replica ship in a bay near Cape Town, to face the commemoration "with an unshakable

⁵ For an elaboration on this brief, simplified characterisation of racial social engineering by apartheid policies, see a.o.: Possel 2011.

determination to [...] secure the European civilisation” and with it “our national existence for the future.”⁶

The 300th anniversary of the arrival of Van Riebeeck in South Africa ran parallel to the celebration in the Netherlands. A broad-based Van Riebeeck Committee was established in 1949 to launch the Dutch festivities. This Committee consisted of seventeen men, who represented non-governmental institutions and companies that had direct relations with South Africa. Following the former administration of the VOC these gentlemen called themselves the “Lords Seventeen” (*Heeren XVII*) (Veerman 1999: 39). Despite all the regional, religious, and political diversity, most Dutch people at the time felt united as one nation and one (White) race, even more so since they had recently been liberated from Nazi German occupation. Yet, there was a strong urge to leave the country because of the housing shortage, unemployment and increasing fear of a Third World War in Europe. Many Dutch people exchanged their homes and the European continent for a new life overseas in one of the settler societies like Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United States and South Africa – besides the newly founded state of Israel that attracted many of the few Jewish survivors. Since 1950, this global migration movement had been actively supported by a national population policy.

The historical figure of Van Riebeeck offered an excellent opportunity to promote Dutch emigration to South Africa. The country was explicitly presented as a similar, Dutch-speaking, White man’s world that resulted from the knowledge, culture, and capacities that accompanied European migration to the ‘dark’ continent. In brochures and during information meetings for aspiring emigrants, Van Riebeeck was introduced as “the first migrant” from the Netherlands who settled in South Africa. The Van Riebeeck festivities offered a point of reference for Dutch migrants in South Africa as well as for those who stayed behind in the Netherlands, to celebrate their commitment to both nations. Thus, a transnational community was cultivated, albeit a White transnational community supported by the idea of a superior, European civilisation.

⁶ “met ’n onwrikbare vasberadenheid om [...] die Westerse beskawing en saam daarmee ons volksbestaan vir die toekoms te beveilig.” Radiospeech by D.F. Malan on April 6 1951, referred to in *MZA* 28 (June 1951), p.85.

Cultural and Political Transfer: Doing Inclusion and Exclusion

The Dutch government also became involved in the celebrations of Van Riebeeck's arrival in South Africa. The Ministry of Education called upon the school boards to use the Van Riebeeck tercentenary to draw the attention of the schoolchildren to the history and the emergence of South Africa "where more than in any other country, the Dutch origin is kept and consciously cultivated".⁷ Besides, special Jan van Riebeeck stamps were issued with an additional charge, embodying the communication between them. Part of the extra revenue was intended as a gift from "the Dutch people" to South Africa: a statue of Maria de la Quellerie (1629-1664), the wife of Van Riebeeck who had accompanied him to the Cape.⁸ Van Riebeeck himself was already immortalised in 1895 with a statue in Cape Town that was paid for by Cecil Rhodes, the Prime Minister of the Cape Colony. This may well imply that the British imperialist also considered Van Riebeeck at the time to be a potential unifying figure between the successive settler communities in South Africa. Indeed, the historian Anna Böeseken (1961:14) refers to a statement by Rhodes that Cape Town would soon be the capital of a united South Africa and that he wanted to contribute to making it a beautiful city.

In South Africa the government created a similar source of additional income for the festivities in their country by issuing special stamps. They decided to spend part of the proceeds on a gift to the Netherlands: a bronze bust of Jan van Riebeeck for the church square in his birthplace Culemborg. This small town was chosen as the centre for the Dutch celebrations. Just like in Cape Town, the port of Culemborg would accommodate a re-enactment of the landing of Jan van Riebeeck with his family and his crew.⁹ Ships and seaports stood for mobility and

⁷ "waar nog meer dan enig ander land, de Nederlandse herkomst bewust voortleeft". See 'Van Riebeeckherdenking op scholen' in various newspapers like *De Tijd*, 15 Jan. 1952. For this article I used *Delpher*, the website providing a broad selection of full-text Dutch-language digitised historical newspapers. I focused on reports concerning the Van Riebeeck festivities in the Netherlands and South Africa from Jan. 1950 to Jan. 1953.

⁸ MZA, Febr 1952, p. 24-25 and MZA March 1952, p. 30.

⁹ MZA, Feb. 1952, p. 23-24; MZA, Jan. 1952, p. 8-9 and reports of the opening ceremony by the South African ambassador in Dutch newspapers of 2 March 1952.

symbolised the interconnectedness between Europe and Africa, more specifically between the Netherlands and South Africa. These were recurring themes in the commemoration rituals around Van Riebeeck in both countries that testify to an immediate transfer of celebratory repertoires.

The communication, if not propaganda around the Van Riebeeck's celebrations, reinforced the idea of civilisation and modernity that would have been transferred from the Netherlands to South Africa. An important element was added in the South African context: the great achievements of the population of European descent in the "building of a nation" were placed next to the modest contribution of population groups who were of Asian or African descent. They were also represented at the festival site in Cape Town, albeit in a separate procession for the participating floats with "traditionally-costumed" Cape Malay and Griqua, next to the floats and groups "showing modern developments in the life of the nation". A group of Africans were assigned to a special corner on the festival grounds. Following the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century's world fairs in Europe, there was a group of twelve so-called "Bushmen" (San) who, under the supervision of a professor of anthropology, served as a human showcase. Their performance was, as the historian Leslie Witz (2003: 19) noticed, 'in vivid contrast to the "triumphs" of "civilisation" and "industrial progress" exhibited by the European-South African participants. Despite or precisely because of this contrast, they proved to be "an immense attraction," according to the record of the Van Riebeeck Festival that was published afterwards (*The Festival in Pictures* 1952: 38-39, 48). Dutch newspapers too reported enthusiastically on this "native village".¹⁰ Most of the approximately 900,000 participants and spectators (Witz 2003: 186) enjoyed the entertainment without dwelling on this display of White supremacy, which was experienced as a matter of course in their daily lives and heritage.

The Dutch migrants fitted seamlessly into this narrative of White Europeaness. The Dutch ambassador encouraged them to participate "as a token of appreciation for what their new homeland means to

¹⁰ E.g., *De Leeuwarder Courant* 22 March 1952

them,”¹¹ and indeed they presented themselves with a float dedicated to the so-called Golden Age.¹² Sponsored with money from the Netherlands Van Riebeeck Committee, a blond Dutch Virgin passed by, surrounded by at least twelve “figures from the world of art and literature such as Rubens and Rembrandt,” dressed in appropriate costumes (*The Festival in Pictures* 1952: 8). The self-congratulatory images from the Netherlands cultural canon were articulated, while the art and culture of African origin were neglected or marginalised to the subordinate realm of peeking at the almost naked bodies of the San.

As mentioned above: the Van Riebeeck Festival in South Africa sparked resistance against this “celebration of unity and exclusion.” Was there also a transfer of these protest repertoires from South Africa to the Netherlands? During the preparations and realization of the festivities, some information seeped through about the protests against the Van Riebeeck “Apartheid’s festival” in South Africa.¹³ It was known that the official start of the Van Riebeeck celebrations on April 6, 1952, coincided with the beginning of the Defiance Campaign against Unjust Laws by the African National Congress (ANC). In the Dutch media, however, there was hardly any interest in this campaign against the policy of Apartheid, let alone in the protests against the Van Riebeeck Festival. The sporadic references to the South African demonstrations could easily be overseen, despite the mentioning of a total of more than 16,000 protesters in Cape Town, Durban, Johannesburg and Port Elisabeth.¹⁴ Afterwards the editor of the monthly *Zuid-Afrika* stated that the Van Riebeeck Tercentenary in Cape Town had passed “without dissonance.”¹⁵ There was a similar lack of media interest in the small-

¹¹ “als blijk van waardering voor hetgeen hun nieuwe vaderland voor hen betekent,” *MZA* 29 (Feb. 1952), p. 24-25.

¹² The designation Golden Age—with its reference to the “golden” heyday of the Dutch Republic—is controversial because of the colonial violence and exploitation elsewhere in the world that accompanied that wealth. Today we instead refer to the seventeenth century.

¹³ The *MZA* 28 (Oct. 1951), *MZA* (Nov. 1951) and *MZA* 29 (Feb. 1952) shortly touched upon the protests, as did the independent newspaper *Het Parool*, the Catholic daily *De Tijd* and the liberal *Nieuw Rotterdamse Courant*.

¹⁴ E.g. the national and regional dailies like the *Utrechtsch Nieuwsblad*, *Leeuwarder Courant*, *Het Vrije Volk* of 7 April 1952.

¹⁵ “zonder wanklank.” NN (P.J. van Winter), ‘Na de feesten’ (after the parties) *MZA* 29 (May 1952), p.74.

scale protests in Amsterdam against the Van Riebeeck celebrations by the communists and social democrats in the city council.¹⁶ Also, no critical comments on this joyful commemoration of the arrival of the first European in South Africa and its echo in the Netherlands could be found in or from the Dutch colonies in the Caribbean.



With this reflection on the Van Riebeeck festivities in the Netherlands and South Africa, I aim to contribute to a historiography that takes into account the cultural and political transfer within the imperial network that connects the Netherlands as a former colonial power and one of its former colonies. After all, the Netherlands, its reach, and its history are not only part of “the North,” but as much part of “the West,” “the East” and “the South”. The transnational exchange of celebratory repertoires around the Van Riebeeck tercentenary gave me an opportunity to examine how a colonial past continued to fashion the self-image of the nations involved. The joyful re-enactments of Van Riebeeck’s arrival in both the Netherlands and South Africa show how the idea that civilisation and modernity were transferred from Europe to South Africa were circulated, strengthened, and celebrated in the context of a post-colonial, global network. The heritage of Dutch colonialism with its accompanying ideas of a superior European civilization was brought to the African continent. From there it was taken back to the Netherlands and Europe, and it returned to the White settler societies where it gained momentum in Apartheid South Africa.

The Van Riebeeck celebrations reveal a complacent self-image of the Netherlands and of Europe as a civilised and modern continent. An image that was fashioned by contrasting it with the image of unchristian barbarism elsewhere in the world, such as the “dark” continent of Africa. The narratives and images of Jan van Riebeeck arriving with his ship from the North of Europe made him an icon of White Europeanness connecting Europe with the “settler” population of South Africa and

¹⁶ The Communist newspaper *De Waarheid* of 10 Jan. 1952 mentioned a discussion in the City Council of Amsterdam, where the communist along with some social democratic representatives voted against the departure of an Amsterdam delegation to the Van Riebeeck Tercentenary because of racial discrimination in South Africa. Rumour of a small-scale protests of Surinamese-Dutch students at the Royal Tropical Institute could not (yet) be confirmed.

other settler societies—and vice versa. This circulation of European supremacy within different and overlapping imperial networks connecting Europe to the African continent deserves more attention, as it continues to shape Europe's self-image, which is deeply rooted in our colonial heritage, both inside and outside of Europe.

The current impact of this White European self-image is painfully illustrated in our different dealings with the refugee crises from Ukraine, Afghanistan, Syria and African countries. Because Ukraine is now seen and felt as part of Europe, the doors and hearts of the European people and governments (from East to West and from North to South) are open for White Ukrainian refugees. However, when it comes to African students who stayed in Ukraine and had to flee, they were all too often being refused a residence permit in the European Union. Similar barricades are imposed on those fleeing the violence in Syria, Afghanistan or African countries. In these cases, different, racialised standards of empathy and hospitality seem to apply, or are even denied by the European parties involved. The imaginations of a North-South divide threaten to obscure forms of inclusion and exclusion (such as wealth, and gendered and racialized differences) within the countries that are considered part of the Global South or Global North. South Africa, so much is clear, cannot be counted either among a "Global North" or a "Global South." Instead, it is a transnational space where prosperity—both past and present—is still largely distributed along the colour line.

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