

**RESTORATIVE MEMORY – Considerations of colonial environmental distortion and the Salt River Estuarine & Riverine Territory.** – Patric Tariq Mellet 27/01/2022

Over the last 20 years I have carefully tried to look at the events that took place in 1510 that led to the Battle of Goringhaiqua in which the Portuguese under Francesco d’Almeida were defeated and d’Almeida and 60 of his officers killed. I have pushed the envelope many times, revising and revising as new information came to light until a relatively watertight record could be compiled as to what happened on the ground. Of course, there are others who have looked at possible other intrigues that may have played out between the Europeans themselves, but that has not been my concern.

Of greatest interest to me is what took place, particularly on day two of this saga, and the trajectory it took in terms of the terrain covered. And this is where constant review was necessary. In doing this a bigger subject emerged about the impact of colonisation on the Salt River Estuarine and Riverine Territory.

Though there is no shortage of research material and opinions, (some of these studies are noted in references attached to this article) a more recent and thorough research offering has done much to clear up many stumbling blocks or diversions concerning the terrain, because it involves the most comprehensive comparative study of the mapping of the terrain involved in the 1510 story and indeed of the bigger picture on the topography of struggles, forced removals and loss of land and environmental impact in the arena of this story since that time. This research is literally the biography of the land and environment that underpinned the stories of defence and loss of land and livelihoods over a half millennium. By taking in this story, it gives us a clearer picture of the 1510 events. I refer to Kathrin Krause – Salt River Estuary Restoration – Restoration methods for urban rivers; Master’s Thesis (2020) – Bauhaus University, Weimar, Germany.

Besides the negative impacts on indigenous Africans as a result of colonialism we also have major impacts on the environment of the Cape Peninsula land and topography. The latter has in many ways become invisible in the public discourse arena and assumptions are made that what we see today in our Peninsula landscape is what always has been the situation. The reality is that almost nothing that we see today is what once existed, and because people do not know this part of history it has allowed a colonial version of environmental protection to play out and to distort indigenous history and heritage to lend credibility to what can be called cosmetic environmentalism.

For those committed to restorative memory leading to restorative justice in the arena of history and heritage – tangible and intangible, there presently exists a danger, where distorted new popular narratives are shifting historical importance from the real sites and real events where war, forced removals, enslavement, atrocity, colonial dispossession, and colonial suburban environmental rape played out, to instead locate it elsewhere. This has huge implications for restorative justice and restitution.

Only by understanding the historical topography and the totally re-engineered Peninsula that has now become a dense urban environment, can we ensure that the epicentre of dispossession is not transferred from its Southern Suburbs heartland (now expensive real estate with many vested interests) to instead place that epicentre on what historically was a piece of uninhabitable and inhospitable marshlands.

It is so easy for real justice to fall afoul to constructed false histories that do not necessarily arise from mischief or malice, but simply fill gaps rooted in ignorance about the past. We are sometimes over hasty to replace tangible knowledge with the intangible, regardless of the importance of the intangible in our lives.

If we go back 4000 years ago, Mlambo & Parsons, explain how water covered most of the extended Cape Flats with a swarth of water from Table Bay to False Bay creating almost an island of the Peninsula high ground and mountains. By 500 years ago the amount of vleis, watery marshland and rivers was still a prominent feature of the Cape Flats and Peninsula. It was certainly a very different looking Cape Town than what we know today. If we look at the present vleis in Tableview and lagoon in Milnerton, or Zeekoeivlei and Princessvlei and multiply this five times covering much larger parts of our landscape you will get a better idea of what exists.

Fortunately, there are many maps from the 1600s to the present which can be compared to each other (notably in cartography there are always mistakes) and can be compared to the progressions, one on the other, until present. This provides us with what effectively is the biography of our landscape, which has to be taken into consideration when looking at the history of the peoples occupying the landscape.

What we know of the landscape in 1500 and in 1600, is that it looked completely different to what existed in 1790, 1865, 1940 and at present. During this long period of time many changes occurred largely by human intervention. Most affected was Cape Town's waterways, estuaries, marshlands, and wetlands. By the 1790s the changes were still such that recognisable features remained, but within the next 100 years the entire Salt River Estuarine and Riverine environment can only be described as a butchering of the natural environment.

Between 1865 and the 1970s the Salt River Estuary was completely obliterated, and much of the original Liesbeek and Black River between Observatory and the West Coast was obliterated and replaced to make way for a railway, highways, industry and sporting facilities. A confluence which previously did not exist, was created in steps, and gradually pushed back until when in the 1940s to 1960s the two separate confluences that now exist were created.

Back in the 1500s, 1600s and 1700s the original Liesbeek River and the Black River flowed separately into the Salt River Estuary at different places. Around it uninhabitable, and un-crossable vleis and marshland covered the area from the Table Bay West Coast through to where the Royal Observatory begins and up to where lower Station Road and half of Hartleyvale Stadium is today. The Royal Observatory began to be built in the 1820s and this was the first time that a part of the uninhabitable and inhospitable area was built on before one gets the old Valkenburg 1661 farmland. Builders at that time were scared of dangerous animals and snakes and much of the area was deep in water and impassable.

In earlier years going back to the time of Jan van Riebeeck, drownings had occurred and animals lost at the treacherous marshlands which both indigenous Africans and Europeans avoided. West African Kroom people were brought from Simonstown to work on the buildings in the mid-19th century, so scared were other builders to work there.

There was only one natural gateway for people and livestock to enter the lush lands of Table Valley and all the way along the slopes of Devils Peak to Newlands Claremont and Wynberg. This was a narrow fjord, or shallow passage called a 'drift' which allowed for crossing the Liesbeek River, Black River and Salt River Estuary – situated in the vicinity of Sydow Road and Voortrekker Road in Maitland.

An indicator of how anything further than this fjord was treacherous to man or beast, was that the Dutch would later build a little fort called a redoubt at that place and called it 'Keert de Koe' (turn the cow around – meaning no further passage for livestock). This point marked the Black River part

of the crossing, whereas the Liesbeek part of the crossing was around the area near Salt River Station.

In 1658 the land between the drift and what is today Salt River Station, was a smallholding that hugged the fjord and was called Vaarsche Vallei. This smallholding and the Keert de Koe redoubt effectively were a Dutch VoC military strategic point, vital to the seizure of the prime lands on the Cape Peninsula. (Varsche Vallei later became railways land). The VoC military seizure of the Vaarschedrift and Vaarsche Vallei played an important role in expelling the Khoe from the Peninsula and stopping the Khoe passageway into and out of the lush Peninsula area.

In October 1808 Vaarschedrift and Vaarsche Vallei was the scene of a major historical event, namely the clash between those 346 marching in the Jij Rebellion slave and Khoe revolt and Lord Caledon's dragoon cavalry which were sent to stop and capture the rebels. This story is muted in history and the area today is a run-down semi-industrial area.

From this passageway Vaarschedrift, until where the Royal Observatory was later only established 200 years later, was a no-mans-land which formed a natural barrier of treacherous, uninhabitable marshland. This marshland has been built over, dug out, piled in with infill and destroyed over time. A second new crossing was built in the late 17th century Rondebosch and called Westervoort (Westeford) crossing.

In 1510 when Francesco d'Almeida carried out an attack on a Khoe village around 6,2km inland from the first mouth of the Salt River Estuary (there was a southern mouth and a northern mouth) the Portuguese will have used the livestock trackways that according to studies, closely follows today's Main Road into the Southern Suburbs heartland, and well skirted the uninhabitable and dangerous marshland and river ways. This route from the coast would have seen d'Almeida passing through main road Observatory, past the ridge of Devil's Peak (known as 'behind the mountain') into Mowbray and beyond to Rondebosch and Newlands.

There are four European accounts of the d'Almeida story and one of those accounts gives us the distance of one league travelled to the Khoe village which would probably be at Rondebosch-Newlands. The battle of Goringhaiqua would have ensued as a running battle with the Portuguese in retreat and fought all the way back through what is today, the Suburban heartland. The battle would have ended on the sand dunes and beach at where the southern mouth of the Salt River Estuary was at the time. It would have been far away from the inhospitable marshlands so there is no credibility to claims that the battle occurred there – it's an impossibility.

While the final battle itself was on the beach, it was a running battle in which the Khoe forced the Portuguese to retreat in the face of a cattle charge used as though a cavalry barrage to push the Portuguese back. There is no doubt that the cattle-track route served this purpose. Therefore, the heartland of suburbia is the real epicentre of the battle together with the beach where now we have the container dockland infrastructure. The same applies as the epicentre of later land struggles from 1657 to the present.

When the second conflict over land occurred from 1657 – 1660 including the first Dutch-Khoe War, the land that was fought over, and from which the Khoe were forcibly moved, was not the useless and inhospitable marshlands. It was the lush parts of Observatory through to Newlands, and Claremont lower down the Liesbeek River from Mostert's farm to Rondedoorbosch.... the heartland of today's expensive suburban real estate.

A proper study of the ravished Cape landscape exposes Cape Town's dirty little secrets that are often papered over by colonial environmentalism today. But all of the proof is there – from the real areas of forced removals in the 1600s to the forced removals that we experienced in our lifetimes. Unfortunately shoddy and lazy journalism today sees journalist doing no research and simply giving credibility to tall tales and fake news.

History and the many available maps are also there to show how in a number of moves over 370 years, the entire original Salt River Estuary and Riverine Area was turned into a trickle called Salt River; how Paarden Island was changed from being a real island into what it is today; how there once were other vleis in the area and huge marshlands; how once there was a very different Liesbeek River following a different course through the peninsula, 14 feet wide and of great depth and entering into the south section of the Salt River estuary not far from the southern mouth; and how the mighty Black River did not confluence with the Liesbeek but entered the Salt River further away from the Liesbeek. Going down the Liesbeek River into the South Peninsula through Mowbray, Rondebosch, Newlands, this river was once majestic, with feeders from Table Mountain. Likewise in Table Valley the same Table Mountain feeders created the Camissa River system which also today is hidden from sight through colonial engineering.

To build the Southern Suburbs, largely from the sites of those first farms of the mid-17th century that replaced the traditional Khoe summer grazing lands for livestock, the Liesbeek was savaged and canalised and given a new course-way. The worst of the altering of the Liesbeek took place from 1940 to 1968 and between Mowbray and Observatory where effectively it was shifted over, for roadways and sportsgrounds, and even yet another confluence was built. Petitions from the white property owners in Observatory demanded that something be done about the flooding in lower Observatory, and this is how the environment was change from its original shape to the fake cosmetic environment of today. It's not even an old saga. It happened in our lifetime, but young people think that this is an 'ancient' environment that has just been simply modified rather than butchered in the name of cosmetic environmentalism.

There also was a petition to create a recreational boating facility at the bottom of Station Road. And so, the Liesbeek once again was assaulted for the sake of the colonial built-environment led by a white residents' campaign. What is called the Liesbeek River today is not what once was. Not by a long shot. The only genuine thing about the Liesbeek is the water that courses through it from Table Mountain.

Soil from the old River was used to build up the low-lying areas along Liesbeek Parkway, like Malta Park and Hartleyvale, and a boating area was quarried out and flooded, with a new channel cut across past the Royal Observatory. It was a repeat of what had happened before all over the Salt River Estuarine area. Then on the other side of the new fake confluence, the topsoil was all removed and toxic waste, railways scrap including old carriages, and building rubble from the mass demolitions in District Six, Mowbray and other places was dumped there to control the flooding, not that it did. A veneer was put over this crime against the environment with a recreational club and golfing greens. The other side of the fake confluence of the river was turned into a Bird sanctuary. And so this dirty little secret of Cape Town coated with cosmetic environmental veneer has been kept for the last 60 years.

Over the years there have been many studies done that argue for a total relook at the Salt River Estuarine and Riverine environment including taking a new look at the two rivers and broader district. It involves much expense and there are many differences of opinion, but all of the ideas if honesty prevails involves some kind of cosmetic solution to something that literally can never be

brought back. There is no moral high-ground for any of the proponents, nor any one-way that might improve the environment. There has also been many ideas around how within the entire district the indigenous African people's heritage and history may be honoured and again here there is no one superior way that outweighs another. So far too, there is nothing that has been put forth to address the indigenous people's heritage in the suburban epicentre where war, dispossession and forced removals took place over 370 years.

Furthermore, throughout this urban spread nothing has been done to address contemporary homelessness and joblessness. African people who are descendants of the Khoer and of African-Asian enslaved are still largely excluded from the epicentre of the terrain that was colonised and reshaped, and make up the majority of the people of Cape Town. Little consultation has happened except with the relatively small groups of organised Khoer Revivalists split into two factions. Far many more Capetonians have ancestral-cultural heritage rooted in both the Khoer indigenous peoples and in African-Asian enslaved peoples, who respectfully do not ascribe to the contemporary Khoer-revivalist approaches. Their voice is ignored and drowned out by the noise of the few. The only just way forward in dealing with Restorative Justice and Restorative Memory has to be governed by FOR THE MANY – NOT THE FEW!

Over the last couple of years we have seen two contesting versions of cosmetic environmentalism, both with merits and demerits, at war with each other and much distortion of history and heritage, tangible and intangible, has played out in the courts and in the court of public opinion. I take a non-partisan approach to both sides in this debate. But I am partisan to a decolonial evaluation of the facts. I am also partisan to the poor and dispossessed of Cape Town and not to the two vested and monied interests at play which has quite frankly distorted the interests of indigenous Africans and the greater poor of Cape Town. The propertied classes views, whether that of the developers or the landowners of the surrounding suburb of this small part of Cape Town in this matter have smothered the interests of the poor in greater Cape Town who need a much more honest and comprehensive approach to dealing with the bigger land issues at stake. Here I agree that the City authorities should have acted in the best interest of the bigger publics than just those in close proximity to the area in question.

Poorly researched journalistic articles have screamed out messages at the public, all claiming moral superiority for their views. Some even make the most bizarre claims. I am afraid that indigenous history and heritage has actually been consumed by a fight that has little to do with the past. And what we see happening is a distortion of memory and a diversion of the struggle for justice. At best the little bit of wasteland, barely recognisable, and the rivers by far nothing like the original rivers, simply now represent PROXIMITY of a piece of real estate situated on top of Cape Town's worst rubbish dump.

The heartland and epicentre of the crimes against humanity and land dispossession and war is certainly not where people say it is. It is in the Southern Suburbs heartland and that is an avoided issues with everything else a deflection. Until we have land dispossession tribunals in Cape Town to deal with the long history of forced removals and to deal with homelessness today, these other issues are a sideshow and deflection with little to do with history or heritage.

We are challenged to ensure that narratives are decolonised so that Restorative Memory can usher in Restorative Justice. Whoever takes this position and uses whatever is in their power to get people to look at the real rape of the people, then and now, the real colonisation and dispossession, and the real environmental tragedy, and come up with solutions, will be the ones to take us forward. We live in an age of instant gratification, fake news, radical-chic politics, populism, and shallowness. The

issues of reparation, restitution, restored dignity and justice now come a distant last to radical-grandstanding, ego, making a quick buck, elevator pitches and moments of glory in front of cameras.

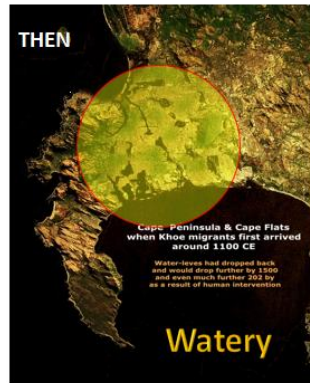
Those involved in the current conflict on all sides argue from vested interest of one type or another and each would like us to line up behind their partisan position as though one holds a superior moral high ground to the other.... whether on environmental grounds or on history and heritage grounds. This article does not subscribe to this manner of thinking but rather shows that THE LIE OF 1652 continues into the 21st century in all sorts of garb.... and that there is much decolonisation of narratives required to enable us to focus on real issues of justice. Ersatz justice-cries may press all of the right buttons to the casual gaze, but its authenticity has to be questioned.

In watching the court proceedings between protagonists in the 'two-rivers conflict' this last week, I saw little that bears any resemblance to the social reality, history, heritage, and environment, nor to African indigenous interests, even though this was frequently mentioned from all sides in the differences of opinions. Memory and truth are the greatest casualty and the divisions caused among indigenous Africans by the way the issue dubbed "the two rivers controversy" has been handled by all sides is sad.... and oh so colonial.... "divide and rule bly staan". It seems that the only authentic role-player is the water itself - ||Khamis sa.... 'Sweet water for all.'

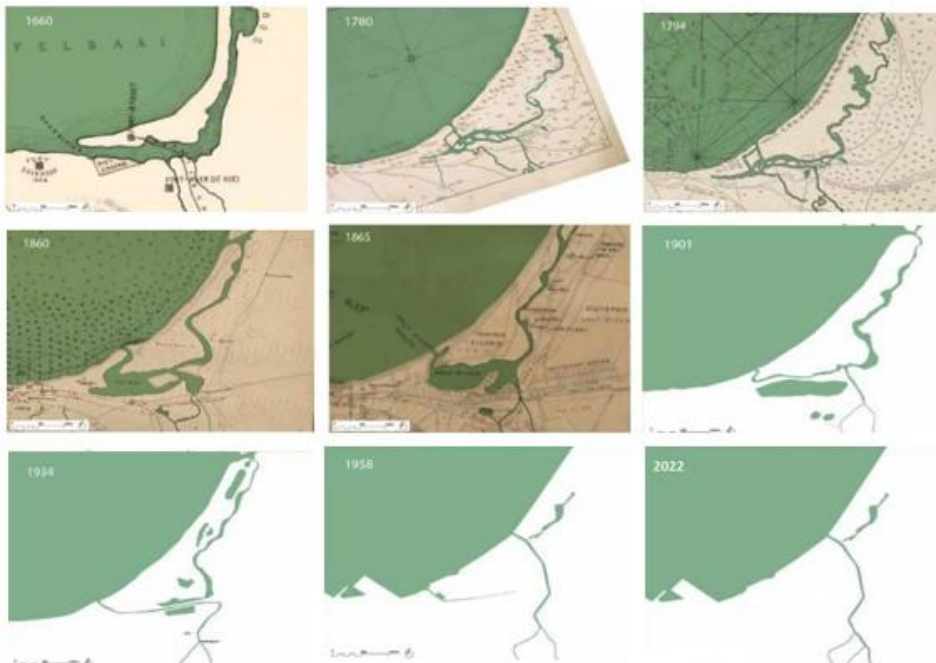
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- Kathrin Krause – Salt River Estuary Restoration – Restoration methods for urban rivers; Masters Thesis (2020) – Bauhaus University, Weimar, Germany  
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- Baseline Study <https://www.westerncape.gov.za/assets/departments/transport-public-works/Documents/2riversbaselineheritagestudy.pdf>
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## The historical anatomy of the Salt River Estuarine and Riverine environment

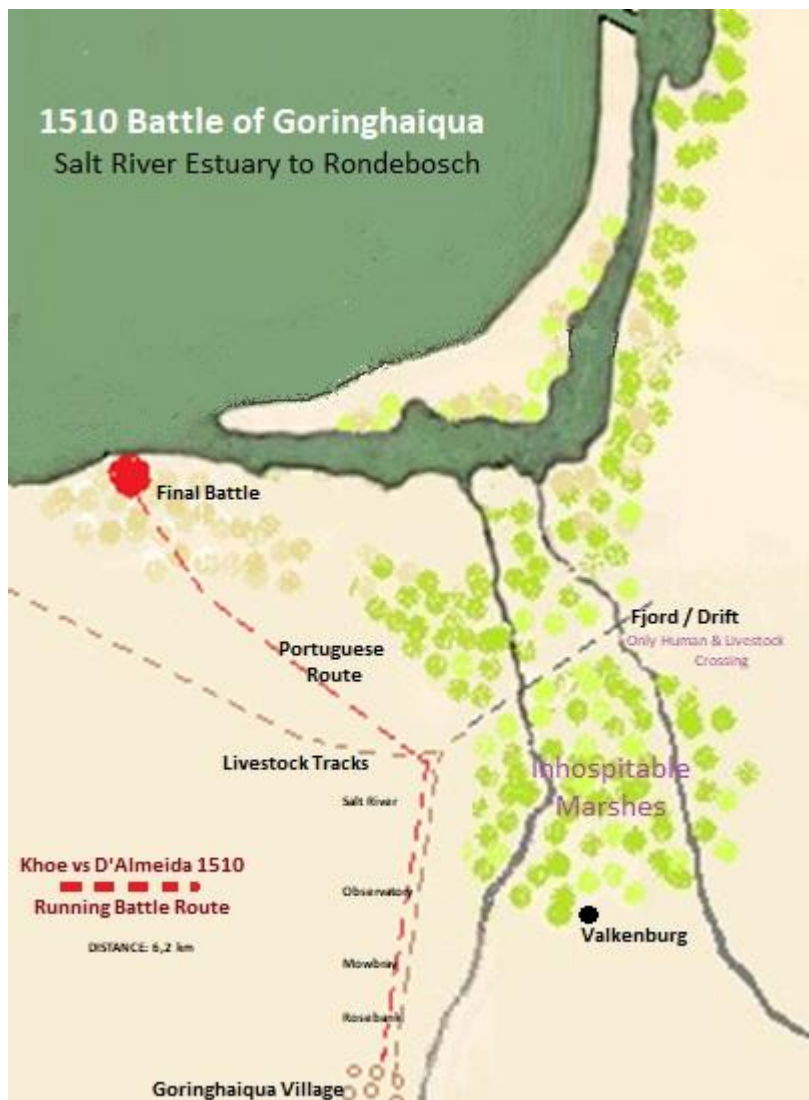
### Water-REMOVED



Pic by PT Mellet



Collage from maps in Kathrin Krause – Salt River Estuary Restoration – Restoration methods for urban rivers; Masters Thesis (2020) – Bauhaus University, Weimar, Germany



Pic by PT Mellet