# FROM NCOME OVER „BLOEDRIVIER“ TO NCOME AND BEYOND

Ben Khumalo-Seegelken,
Carl von Ossietzky University, Oldenburg, Germany

Conference:
*Courageous Conversations*
Ncome Museum, KwaZulu-Natal
6 – 8 November 2013

*Abstract:*

Before and long after the *Voortrekkers* and their descendants had turned to rename the river Ncome *“Bloedrivier”,* at least two oral versions about the battle on and around 16 December 1838 circulated among the earlier inhabitants of that region on the one hand and the trekker- and settler-communities on the other.

Generations of history-writers and –teachers have with only a few exceptions generally preferred to adopt and promote the trekker-version uncritically with the result of it presently being treated in text-books and research as the only valid account of the *iMpi yaseNcome* [1838].

Two simple and yet not so simple questions deserve a conclusive answer: What took place at Ncome on and around 16 December 1838? When and on what reason and for what purpose was the river Ncome renamed *„Bloedrivier“?* A third and a fourth question – probably the most essential ones – arise: Where do we go from here? Should one not be seriously concerned, that the focus and the emphasis in the commemoration of December 16 and the management of the site(s) of *iMpi yaseNcome* today would rather retard and threaten to reverse the laudable intentions and endeavours connected with the *„Day of Reconciliation“* in democratic ‘new South Africa’?

This paper sets out in the first place to present a brief account as to when the date and the venue under review attained which designations on the side of the descendants of the *Voortrekkers* and on what reason or in which intention. A selection of oral versions of the narrative about *iMpi yaseNcome* circulating among the inhabitants of the areas surrounding Ncome today which could help to identify such divergences and contradictions to the standardised version as might and do prevail in text-books and research today, has been compiled by the author. In this paper this shall, however, merely be referred to without engaging in the comparative analysis that would have to be undertaken, if an attempt were to be made to revisit and probably revise the writing of history about the *iMpi yaseNcome* in text-books and research today – a project that could induce ongoing processes of mutual understanding and inspire not only the descendants of the Ncome-generation to persist in striving for reconciled togetherness.

In conclusion, perspectives for implementation are outlined and a proposal is made concerning an *iHlambo likazwelonke* (a national Cleansing- and Reconciliation-Ceremony) at *Ncome-Bloedrivier* on 16 December 2014 [20 years

democracy] could, for example, be the most suitable opportunity for initiating such transformation country-wide.

**Keywords:** Kommandos; *amabutho* [regiments]; *iMpi yaseNcome;* protagonists; dates and venues; *Weltanschauung;* historiography; sources; documents; personal memories; public commemoration; retrospective construction; narratives; myths; ideological instrumentalisation; unintentional confluence and congruence of interests; interdependence and interconnectedness; burden, perspective and legacy; Land Issue; *Dingaansdag; Geloftedag; Day of Reconciliation; uMkhonto weSizwe;* constructively critical scholarship; responsible citizenry; '*die Groot Trek'; Apartheid; Voortrekker*-monument(s) (Völkerschlacht-Denkmal/Leipzig); *iHlambo likazwelonke*.

[]

## FROM NCOME OVER „BLOEDRIVIER" TO NCOME AND BEYOND

### *1 Some of the Principles underlying Historiography*

I start by briefly calling to mind five of the common factors that determine the pursuit of reading and writing history and histories [historiography] in scholarly and public fields:

- Reading and writing history and histories has to do with persons and communities in relation to incidents, dates and venues over periods of time.

- Readers and writers of history are very often **not identical** with the protagonists of the same history even though they might be descendants of these.

- Readers and writers of history can take cognisance of and relate to instances, occurrences and undertakings preceding their own lifetime primarily by acquring **access to sources and documents** – oral, archeological, graphical, etc. [including most probably memory-notes by *Zeitzeugen* (Contemporaries; „veterans") as well].

- Instances, occurrences and undertakings preceding the lifetime of contemporary readers and writers of history are **subject to interpretation**.

- **Models and versions** of interpretation **vary** according to circumstances [*izimo; omstandighede*] including socio-political, economic and ideological factors. [*„Weltanschaaung"* - a subconscious perspective on issues and developments that is admittedly subjectiv]

### *2 Observations and Conclusions*

There are three observations and conclusions that I have arrived at and am grappling with in my endeavour to read and understand the history of the *iMpi yaseNcome:*

1. In as much as a **calender-date** can – over a certain period – come to be known, remembered and commemorated under differing names, a **venue** of a particular instance, occurrence or undertaking can adopt or discard the names given to it consecutively or simultaneously. The 16th of December and the river Ncome are two examples in this regard.

2. Readers and writers of history will always know of **various models and versions of interpretation** and will often tend to favour or disfavour the one or the other depending on circumstances [*izimo; omstandighede*] including socio-political, economic and ideological factors. [*„Weltanschaaung“* - an admittedly subjective underlying perspective on issues and developments].

3. Readers and writers of history do participate in varying scholarly and public undertakings and are capable of **facilitating contemporary processes** of addressing the past in a given context even responsibly and sustainably.

*3 iMpi yaseNcome: two essential questions*

Two simple and yet not so simple questions deserve attention to start with: *What took place at Ncome on and around 16 December 1838? When and on what reason and for what purpose was the river Ncome renamed „Bloedrivier“?* Naturally a third question – certainly the most important one - has to be posed: *Where do we go from here?*

I cite a few examples to illustrate the significance of these questions and, hopefully, to substantiate my subsequent attempts to answer them as well as the proposals I wish to make and the arguments I present:

*4 Examples: **calender-dates** | **venues** – changing names*

A number of years after the military encounter at Ncome on 16 December 1838, the survivors on both sides – *amabutho kaZulu* [the regiments of the Zulu-Kingdom] and the *Voortrekker*-kommandos - and their families used to remember that day and commemorated it in their homes in different ways.

In 1864 – well over two and a half decades **after** *iMpi yaseNcome,* the survivors from the ranks of the *Voortrekker*-kommandos, their families and their descendants decided to widen the scope and saw to it that the commemorating of 16 December 1838 henceforth be an issue of public interest in their church and - shortly after that [1865] - also in one of the territories that they had up to then occupied and renamed the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek* [later renamed the *Transvaal*]: The Synod, the governing body of their Church, meeting at *Pietermaritzburg* in what had then been declared the *British Colony of Natal*, resolved on October 3, 1864 that *„Dingaansdag“*, as the 16th of December then used to be referred to, be observed in the life and liturgy of the congregations within its area of influence; an annual commemoration-service, that would be co-convened by their Church at Ncome, was agreed upon. To a public holiday *„Dingaansdag“* was declared in 1865 in the territory the *Voortrekkers* had renamed “Transvaal”, that was over 27 years after the *iMpi yaseNcome*. When in 1910 the territories that both the British and the Boers had up to then declared their own colonies or ‘republics’ were put together to form what they termed the *Union of South Africa,* they

installed *„Dingaansdag“* as public holiday in the entire territory known to us today as South Africa.

I take a big leap from 1910 up to 1952; am aware that, in doing so, I leave a series of aspects of our theme untouched. These are, for example: *‘die Groot Trek’* in the context of developments in Africa and elsewhere before and after *iMpi yaseNcome*; the World Wars; *Apartheid*; *Voortrekker*-monuments in their relationship to the *Völkerschlacht-Denkmal* (War-Memorial Monument) in Leipzig in its significance to the Nazi-dictatorship in Germany [1933-1945] and in their significance to the apartheid-regime [1948-1994].

When in 1952 – three years after the inauguration of the *Voortrekker*-monument in Pretoria in 1949 – *„Dingaansdag“,* the 16th of December, came to be renamed *Geloftedag,* Day of the Covenant, almost one hundred and thirteen years had elapsed since the *iMpi yaseNcome*. None of the direct protagonists in that war were still living or were in any way actively involved in any of the deliberations or decisions taken in 1952. The descendants on both sides – the descendants of *amabutho kaZulu* and of the *Voortrekker*-kommandos - and even more the general public had grown into being the primary bearers of the memories once held and passed on by the generations succeeding the protagonists of *iMpi yaseNcome* before them. The version and versions of the narrative that were then in circulation about *iMpi yaseNcome* were at best of the fourth generation.

Up to 1952, December 16 had moved from an informal day of personal and family-commemoration in homes, over to a day of a liturgically composed and synodically instituted and sanctioned public ceremony with religious overtones at the venue of the incident under review, up to a legally enforced public holiday throughout the whole territory of present day South Africa. For the rest of the colonial and post-colonial era, through to the rise and fall of the apartheid-regime, 16 December 1838 preoccupied and moved more than only the descendants of the direct protagonists in *iMpi yaseNcome* considerably. This date has, indeed, become the foundation and the corner-stone of the entity and the constellation of interests and peoples known today as *South Africa*. This constellation of interests and peoples from all population-groups – not only the descendants of the *Voortrekkers* - can today rightly claim to have been born as a political entity, *South Africans,* at Ncome on 16 December, 1838.

The struggle for liberation against colonialism and apartheid had, of course, always related to this date as well: That ***uMkhonto weSizwe***, the armed wing of the liberation-movement co-ordinated by the African National Congress (ANC), was launched on December 16 in 1961, could certainly not have been co-incidental at all.

Dates and venues – once more:

- *„Dingaansdag“* and *„Geloftedag“* are but two of a series of names the 16th of December has come to bear over the decades, each of which was and is expression of:
    - a particular perception,
    - a particular version of interpretation,
    - a particular definition of perspective and

- a particular programme of action on its own.

The same holds for the name „Bloedrivier“ [„Blood River“ „eBhodriva“.

- The *date*, 16 December in and after 1838, 1910, 1938, 1948, 1971 - *„Dingaansdag“, „Geloftedag“, „Day of Reconciliation“* on the one hand and the *venue*, Ncome and *„Bloedrivier“*, on the other hand are in themselves a lucid illustration as to how historiography – the reading and writing of history and histories – more than seldom goes over to adopting changed perceptions and interpretations of occurences and events and even becoming prone to effecting ideological instrumentalisation[1] and presentation of incidents, issues and events that the protagonists just simply would have experienced totally differently.

The *date*, 16 December in and after 1994 – the *„Day of Reconciliation“*, on the one hand and the *venue*, Ncome-*Bloedrivier* on the other hand, tend of late to alienate instead of reconciling: The focus and the emphasis on the bone of contention between the descendants of the survivors of the *iMpi yaseNcome - uZulu* and the *Boers* today - degrades the rest of South Africa's population at best into tolerated spectators or simply unwelcome outsiders in matters of heritage and nation-building supposed to be the concern of everyone. The seSotho-speaking part of the local population does not seem to have fully arrived at the issues at stake and to have become part of the decision-making and implementation processes at and around Ncome-*Bloedrivier* since 1994. One should, indeed, be seriously concerned, that the focus and the emphasis in the commemoration of the date and the management of the site(s) around *iMpi yaseNcome* today would rather retard and threaten to reverse the laudable intentions and endeavours associated with the *„Day of Reconciliation“*. [2]

## *5 IMpi yaseNcome: historiography, politics and perspectives today*

Once more: *What took place at Ncome on and around 16 December 1838?*

---

[1] Nsizwa Dlamini, 'The Battle of Ncome project: state memorialism, discomforting spaces', *Southern African Humanities,* Vol. 13, Pietermaritzburg, December 2001, Pages 125–138; M. Xulu, *Legacy Project: Blood River memorial, towards the reinterpretation of history,* (undated); Dlamini, 135: "In this brand of narrative, historical events are arranged and rearranged in a 'sectional way to affirm a moral superiority and ascribe a particular identity' … The mythico-history that was produced in the Bloedrivier Monument is now reproduced in mirror image by the new Ncome Museum, and interpretation of the battle consists of two opposing mythico-histories.".

[2] Dlamini (2001), 138: "During the past 13 years [1988-2001], people of the Nquthu-area have suffered ethnic and political conflict, and the elevation of Zulu ethnic-nationalism and the erasure of the Tlokoa from the history of the region might see a prolongation of this conflict. This conflict of dual identities started in 1988 with the killing of chief Elphas Molefe's son, allegedly because it was 'suspected that he was an ANC or rather UDF (United Democratic Front) member'. This was followed in 1989, by the suspension of chief Molefe from his position as a chief of the Molefe. In 1992, he was finally dismissed from this position. The situation was aggravated on 7 November 1993, when his house was attacked, an event which claimed 11 deaths. This was followed in April 1994, by the shootings which resulted in the killing of an *induna*, Alfred Molefe. Subsequent incidents in July 1995 and March 1996 resulted in chief Molefe's house being 'destroyed, and the material [from his house] stolen'. Certainly, the Ncome site effaces the contributions of the Tlokoa and is a vehicle for 'Zulu-isation' in the area. One wonders if the monument falls within the dual identity discourse, servicing an ethnic and a political party identity".

*When and on what reason and for what purpose was the river Ncome renamed „Bloedrivier“ ? Where do we go from here?*

This conference might and should give room for these and other questions to be reflected upon and enable the participants to outline possible avenues of constructively critical scholarship and responsible citizenry.

I have two statements to make in this regard.

The first one: It stands beyond doubt that *iMpi yaseNcome* saw the blood of the protagonists from both sides flow and stain the soil of this part of the African continent indelibly. In view of the blood shed on both sides at and around Ncome on and around 16 December 1838, Ncome today bears the name *„Bloedrivier“*, this however, in a sense that is as inclusive and in no way as ideologically-manipulative as might certainly have been intended by those who coined and gave that name in the years and decades following 16 December 1838. „Ncome“ and „Bloedrivier“ are two sides of the same coin; they have become siamese twins.

The second one: Whereas *iMpi yaseNcome* on the one hand is held to have resulted in the victory of the one side of its protagonists over the other, on the other hand doubts prevail up to this day concerning the validity of such a claim. The circumstances, the scale and the dimensions generally attributed to the military encounter under review are simply too unique and too extraordinary to be true. *IMpi yaseNcome* will most probably have been won and lost by **both** alike – *amabutho kaZulu* and the *Voortrekker*-kommandos: On military terms both *lost*; on political terms both *won* the war – the one more, the other less.

Both sides of the encounter at Ncome – *amabutho kaZulu* and the *Voortrekker*-kommandos - emerged as a new constellation of polities – a new political reality - in Southern Africa that, notwithstanding the open questions and the ongoing animosities between them, even British imperialism those days could not have afforded to ever underestimate – *uZulu* and the *Boers*/*amaBhunu* [as the *Voorktrekkers* and their descendants more and more turned to be known].

Retrospectively one may resume presumably rightly so: Seemingly endless and almost irreconcilable animosity has characterised *uZulu* and the *Boers* more than any other constellation in colonial and post-colonial Southern Africa since 16 December 1838. *UZulu* and the *Boers* have over almost two centuries - obviously unintentionally - experienced and endured confluence and congruence of interests in an inextricable way and have paradoxically witnessed moments of interdependence and complex interconnectedness over decades under different political constellations since 16 December 1838, including the apartheid-era. The Land Issue is certainly one bone of contention in the microcosmos between *uZulu* and the *Boers* that has stayed and *trekked* with them into wider horizons of the subcontinent.

The history of Southern Africa since December 16, 1838 would hardly have resulted in the diversified constellation of reconciling interest-groups and communities of our days were it not for the heavy legacy *iMpi yaseNcome* imposed on its protagonists and their descendants. That legacy rests on our shoulders to this day and is the driving motive for a get-together like ours today.

Where do we go from here?

*6 Conclusion - from Ncome over „Bloedrivier“ to Ncome and beyond!*

In conclusion: Historiography is not without *challenges* and can uncover *perspectives* hitherto unprecedented. Being mindful of the **legacy** of *iMpi yaseNcome* for us today, therefore, necessarily means and must lead to

1. **realising and accepting** that every date and every venue in a community with as divers a heritage as the South African, can be known, remembered and commemorated in various ways concurrently – Ncome, Bloedrivier, Blood River, eBhodriva, … as designations for one and the same venue by people from the various sectors and ancestoral lines of one and the same community on the basis of a democratic constitution upholding human rights and promoting diversity.

2. **transforming and developing** the venues of military encounter into venues for learning and advancing, meeting and recreation and living - a *classroom* for young and old, a *picnick-site* and an *open-air theatre* for everyone. *lHlambo likazwelonke* (a national Cleansing- and Reconciliation-Ceremony) on 16 December 2014 [20 years democracy] could, for example, be the most suitable opportunity for initiating such transformation country-wide.

3. cultivating a **culture of remembering and reminding** which would ensure that coming generations know of the past and would consequently avoid engaging in confrontative encounters of similar nature and seek to give room to confluence and congruence of interests in sustainable measures.

4. assuming responsibility for the initiation and the maintainance of networks of **constructively critical scholarship and responsible citizenry** that reach out and cooperate in transnational and global contexts - *from Ncome over „Bloedrivier“ to Ncome and beyond!*

Ngiyabonga. Dankie!

Ben Khumalo-Seegelken
6 November 2013; eNcome-Bloedrivier.

## Bibliography:

Nsizwa Dlamini, ‘The Battle of Ncome project: state memorialism, discomforting spaces’, *Southern African Humanities,* Vol. 13, Pietermaritzburg, December 2001, Pages 125–138

André du Toit, ‘Facing up to the future: some personal reflections on the predicament of Afrikaner intellectuals in the legitimation-crisis of Afrikaner nationalism and the Apartheid state’, *Social Dynamics,* 7, 2, 1981 [1-27].

Hermann Giliomee, *The Afrikaners. Biography of a People,* Cape Town: 2003.

Hermann Giliomee, 'Constructing Afrikaner Nationalism', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 18, 1-2, 1983 [83-98].

Ben Khumalo-Seegelken, *UMLANDO,* (ongoing research: 1994- ; not published)

Wolfram Kistner, 'The 16th of December in the context of Nationalistic thinking in colonial and apartheid South Africa', in: Theo Sundermeier (ed.) 1975: *Church and Nationalism in South Africa*. (Johannesburg: Ravan) 73-90.

Cynthia Kros, 'Telling Lies and then Hoping to Forget all about History', *South African Historical Journal,* 42, 2000, 69-88.

John Laband, *Rope of sand: the rise and the fall of the Zulu Kingdom in the nineteenth century* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1995).

B.J. Liebenberg, *Nederland en die Voortrekkers van Natal,* Communications of the University of South Africa, C.51, Pretoria: 1964.

G. MacKeurtan, *The cradle days of Natal (1497-1845),* London: 1930.

J. S. H. Maphalala, 'The re-interpretation of the War of Ncome (renamed Bloedrivier and Blood River by the Voortrekkers and the British respectively), 16 December 1838', unpublished paper presented at a seminar held at the University of Zululand, 30 Oct. 1998, pp. 10–13.

Roelf Meyer and Beyers Naudé, 'Geloftedag: Christusfees of Baalfees? `n ope Vraag aan Suid-Afrika oor Geloftedag', in: Die Christelike Instituut van Suider-Afrika, *Pro Veritate* (Braamfontein: 1971).

C.F.J. Müller, 'The Period of the Great Trek, 1834-1854', in: C.F.J. Müller , *Five Hundred Years. A History of South Africa*. Pretoria | Cape Town: Academica, 1969 [146-182].

M. Nathan, *The Voortrekkers of South Africa,* London: 1937.

G.S. Preller (ed.) 1918-1938. *Voortrekkermense,* 6 vols., Cape Town, etc.

F. Pretorius, 'Blood River: a plea for reconciliation and a new synthesis', paper presented at a Seminar held at the University of Zululand, 30 October 1998.

M.C.E. van Schoor, *Die nasionale en politieke bewuswording van die Afrikaner in migrasie en sy ontluiking in Transgariep tot 1854,* Archives Year Book for S.A. History, 1963, vol. II.

>>> From Ncome over „Bloedrivier" to Ncome and Beyond
06.11.2013