Dutch contexts of Cape burgher protests

Teun Baartman
University of Cape Town
teun.baartman@gmail.com

Abstract

This article seeks to emphasise the notion that the Cape settlement of the VOC period needs to be studied within the context of the Dutch world and not in isolation. In recent research, empires are seen more as a collection of nodes than structures of a centre with peripheries. Each node can be part of several networks, which contribute to the shaping of that node. When applied to the Cape settlement this concept makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of Cape society and its residents. The Cape was a complex society in which several different groups lived together. Each of these experienced their environment in another manner influenced by the networks they were part of, and each of these made their own contribution to the shaping of the Cape settlement. This article focuses on the burgher group and especially those burghers from the middle and upper layers. These burghers were the ones who were mostly exposed to the many connections of the Cape with the Netherlands through for instance religion, education, enterprise, the justice system, and travel. As a result, they came to regard themselves as burghers of the United Netherlands who were entitled to all the rights and privileges of that status. The VOC administration did not agree and argued that all were subjects of the Company. The position on both sides of the conflict needs to be referenced to the larger framework of the Dutch world. As such this clash is a practical example of how the Cape during the Dutch period can only really be understood as part of a larger context which shows that the Cape, although perhaps unique and atypical, ultimately was part and parcel of the Dutch trading empire and its networks.

Keywords: Cape Colony; Eighteenth century; VOC; Burghers; Dutch Republic; Dutch seaborne empire; Networks; Dutch identity; Town planning; Dutch Reformed Church; Cape Patriots.

Introduction[1]

In 1783 an interesting book was published in the Netherlands. It was a historical and political outline of the settlement at the Cape of Good Hope and was titled *Nederlandsch Afrika* (Dutch Africa).[2] This title left little to the imagination and illustrated the writer's opinion that he considered the Cape to be an integral part of the Dutch Republic. To emphasise this he stated that "the residents of this tip of Africa live under the rule of the High Government of the Commonwealth of the seven United Netherlands".[3]

The book appeared at the height of a conflict which had rocked the small Cape community since 1779. The friction started when a group of burghers, who later would become known as the Cape Patriots, organised themselves and demanded a larger say in local government and greater economic freedom. They did not want to be limited by boundaries and restrictions imposed by the Dutch East India Company (VOC).[4] The outcome of the conflict was that the Company directors made minor concessions to the burghers, but ultimately policies and governance did not change. The Company stayed in control and the burghers remained in second position in Cape society.

The burgher protesters also accused several local Cape VOC officials of maladministration, corruption and nepotism. During their investigation into the burgher complaints the Company directors asked these officials to reply to the charges. One of these men was the public prosecutor or Independent Fiscal, Willem Cornelis Boers, who wrote a lengthy response.[5] *Nederlandsch Afrika* was in large part a reaction to Boers' justification of his actions, in which the anonymous author refuted his claims and arguments.

But ultimately *Nederlandsch Afrika* was more than a political statement against the VOC. With the publication of this book in the Netherlands the

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1   This article is partly an updated version of information contained in T Baartman, *Fighting for the spoils. Cape burgherschap and faction disputes in Cape Town in the 1770s* (Doctoral Thesis, Cape Town, University of Cape Town, 2011), pp. 42-82 (available at http://uctscholar.uct.ac.za/PDF/55226_Baartman,%20T.pdf), as accessed on 15 November 2015.

2   Anon., *Nederlandsch Afrika; of historisch en staatkundig tafereel van den oorsprongelyken staat der volkplantinge aan de Kaap de Goede Hoop, vergeleeken met den tegenwoordigen staat dier volkplantinge, In't licht gegeeven naar het Handschrift van een wel onderricht Opmerker* (Holland, 1783).

3   Anon., *Nederlandsch Afrika...*, p. 26.

4   For more about the protest movement see C Beyers, *Die Kaapse Patriotte gedurende die laaste kwart van die agtiende eeu en die voortlewing van hul denkbeelde* (Pretoria, JL van Schaik, 1967); T Baartman, *Fighting for the spoils...* .

5   WC Boers, *Verantwoording gedaan maken, ende aan de Wel-Edele Hoog Achtbare Heeren Bewindhebberen der Generale Geoctroyeerde Oost-Indische Compagnie der Vereenigde Nederlanden* (Cabo de Goede Hoop, 1779).

writer brought a local conflict in a remote outpost of the Dutch seaborne empire under the attention of the Dutch public, and in doing so he tied the Cape directly and firmly to the Dutch Republic. To a large extent the book symbolised the clear connection there was at the time between the Netherlands and its overseas territories. The writer was seeking support for the Cape burghers in Dutch public opinion. He would not have done that if he did not believe that he would find fertile ground for it. Many people in the Netherlands knew about the Cape and were quite interested in what was going on there.

This article seeks to highlight the many different kinds of links that existed between the Cape and the Netherlands as well as other parts of the Dutch empire before 1800. These connections and their impact helped shape Cape society at large and in particular the identity of those residents who belonged to the upper layers of that community: burghers and higher VOC personnel. It was there that the conflict between burghers and administration played itself out. Therefore this article also wants to contribute to the notion that Cape burgher protests against the VOC government were motivated by the identification of Cape burghers with their Dutch counterparts. The protests must be placed within the context of the pre-1800 Dutch empire and history, and should not be seen as a proto-Afrikaner liberation movement.[6]

The Cape and the "networks of empire"

The Cape's position on the southernmost part of Africa placed it on the periphery of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds. It is not too difficult to understand why some historians have struggled to place the Cape settlement. Even though the Cape was a major connection between the western and eastern worlds, eighteenth century travellers had "difficulty in deciding to which of the two worlds Cape Town belonged".[7] The Cape was an area which did not really fit in with the rest of the Dutch colonial empire and has been described as "something unique – save for short-lived New Netherland – in the possessions of the Dutch East and West India Companies",[8] "an atypical

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6   As was the opinion of Coenraad Beyers: C Beyers, *Die Kaapse Patriotte...*, pp. 291-295.
7   R Ross, "Cape Town (1750-1850): Synthesis in the dialectic of continents", R Ross and GJ Telkamp (eds), *Colonial cities. Essays on urbanism in a colonial context* (Dordrecht, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1985), pp. 105-121.
8   CR Boxer, *The Dutch seaborne empire 1600-1800* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd, 1973), p. 277.

part of the VOC's empire",[9] and in all respects different from the settlements in Asia.[10]

The Cape was not a source of the lucrative spices and other trade goods which Asian settlements offered and which were so essential to the financial well-being of the VOC. The settlement was actually nothing more than a transit point for Asian luxury goods transported to the Republic and from there to other parts of the Dutch Atlantic world. But this function was only of minor economic importance to the Atlantic world and therefore "does not justify including the Cape Colony and its marginal links to the Dutch Atlantic".[11] At the same time the shipping network between Europe and Dutch Asia that connected at the Cape was exclusively European and VOC, and that separated the Cape settlement from other existing Asian and African shipping networks.[12]

The Cape was just one of the many settlements established by the VOC in its Asian (and African) territories during the seventeenth century. In fact, between 1600 and 1800 there existed 93 VOC posts.[13] They varied in size and stature, and most of them were short-lived. The VOC only managed to occupy and settle the Indonesian islands, Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and the Cape of Good Hope for a considerable length of time. And only the Cape settlement developed into a full-scale settler colony. This was due to the fact that climatic conditions were moderate and relatively healthy for the residents in comparison to the Dutch Asian settlements. Therefore the area attracted large numbers of European settlers. In addition there was no serious threat from a large or hostile indigenous population or from other European nations.[14]

The Cape settlement may have been unique within the larger framework of the Dutch seaborne empire, but it and its residents were certainly not cut off from the world. Since the 1990s, research has begun to emphasise this

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9   R Ross, "The first imperial masters of colonial South Africa", *South African Historical Journal,* 25, 1991, pp. 177-183, p. 178.
10   FS Gaastra, *De geschiedenis van de VOC* (Zutphen, Walburg Pers, 1991), p. 80.
11   G Oostindie and JV Roitman, "Introduction", G Oostindie and JV Roitman (eds), *Dutch Atlantic connections, 1680-1800: Linking empires, bridging borders* (Leiden, Brill, 2014), pp. 1-21, p. 6.
12   K Ward, *Networks of empire. Forced migration in the Dutch East India Company* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 170.
13   R van Oers, *Dutch town planning overseas during VOC and WIC rule, 1600-1800* (Zutphen, Walburg Pers, 2000), pp. 25-26.
14   G Oostindie, "Migration and its legacies in the Dutch colonial world", G Oostindie (ed.), *Dutch colonialism, migration and cultural heritage* (Leiden, KITLV Press, 2008), pp. 1-22, pp. 2-3; K Ward, *Networks of empire*, pp. 10-11.

notion and the influence of networks on the shaping of Cape society.[15] In virtually every historic study about Cape Town the settlement is described as a refreshment station: a post established by the VOC where its ships and crew could repair and replenish. The Cape kept this function for at least the 143 years of the VOC period. Knowing this it is hard to see why certain writers would describe the Cape as being isolated, because this purpose and the considerable amount of ship traffic which passed the Cape every year implies in itself that the settlement had to be part of a large shipping network. [16] It has been estimated that between 1720 and 1780 on average about 10,000 sailors and soldiers coming from either Europe or Asia visited the Cape and spent several weeks there. They generally stayed with locals and there can be no doubt that goods, news and ideas were exchanged on a regular basis. Ship traffic furthermore had a profound impact on the Cape economy.[17]

In a recent study Kerry Ward describes the concept of *Networks of Empire*.[18] The traditional description of empires was one of centres and peripheries, whereby overseas territories were governed and influenced from a central point and they were nothing more than places from where goods were extracted. In opposition to this approach of describing empires as simple two-way streets, Ward supports the notion that empires actually consisted of a collection of nodes. These nodes are not only identified as places, but also as for instance groups of people, corporate institutions, and individuals. Each of these nodes could be part of one or more networks and it was via these that there was an interchange of goods, information and people. In Ward's study the Cape emerges as far from being isolated, but as one important node in a multitude of networks. The forced migration of slaves and political exiles between the Dutch Asian territories made the Cape part of the Indian Ocean network and as such influenced the spread of Islam and the challenging of existing hierarchies.

Ward's focus is mainly on the lower strata of Cape society, but there were of course other groups as well. Apart from slaves, there were free blacks,

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15 N Worden (ed.), *Cape Town between east and west. Social identities in a Dutch colonial town* (Cape Town, Jacana, 2012), p. xi.

16 HJ Wiarda, *The Dutch diaspora. Growing up Dutch in new worlds and the old. The Netherlands and its settlements in Africa, Asia, and the Americas* (Lanham, Lexington Books, 2007), p. 145.

17 WH Boshoff and J Fourie, "Explaining ship traffic fluctuations in the early Cape settlement: 1652-1793", *Stellenbosch Economic Working Papers: 01/08* (Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch University, 2008); WH Boshoff and J Fourie, "The significance of the Cape trade route to economic activity in the Cape colony: A medium-term business cycle analysis", *Stellenbosch Economic Working Papers: 23/08* (Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch University, 2008).

18 K Ward, *Networks of empire...*, pp. 6-14.

burghers[19] and VOC employees. Within each of these groups there was a stratification based on rank and status, which again made Cape society more complex and intricate. The ruling elite at the Cape was formed by the middle and top layers of burghers and high-ranking Company officials. Because of this position it is likely that they had more contacts with the Dutch world than other groups and this helped form their perspective on Cape society and on how this settlement and its residents were or should be placed within the Dutch seaborne empire.

Connections to the Netherlands

The association with the Dutch world started with the physical environment of the Cape settlement itself. There seemed to be a kind of familiarity to the Dutch overseas settlements on which travellers often commented. The eighteenth century traveller Francois Valentijn wrote about Fort Cochin in Kerala (India): "because of high buildings, churches and towers, it resembles a European city".[20] A visitor to Zeelandia (Taiwan) in 1670 described it "as perfectly and beautifully built as any city in Holland ... The streets had been paved with square bricks". The sugar cane and paddy mills around Zeelandia were situated in the "polders".[21] The town of Batavia was "laid out as a Dutch [town], with houses in a row and manifold canals bordered by shady trees".[22] The Dutch colonial picture was often completed with drawbridges, so well-known of cities in the Republic. Another common sight in Dutch overseas places was the fort or castle, which was the administrative and commercial centre of the Company. These forts had either four or five bastions and it was general practice to name these after places or provinces in the United Netherlands.[23] The Castle in Cape Town is a prime example of this.

The reason why Dutch overseas posts were somewhat similar to each other was more a result of location and purpose than the consequence of express

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19 I define burghers in the Cape settlement as those residents who were free, i.e. not employed by the VOC and not slaves, and whose status was determined by specific and exclusive rights and duties. Access to this status group was not determined by race.

20 A Singh, *Fort Cochin in Kerala 1750-1830. The social condition of a Dutch community in an Indian milieu* (Doctoral Thesis, Leiden, Universiteit Leiden, 2007), p. 17.

21 JL Oosterhoff, "Zeelandia, a Dutch colonial city on Formosa, 1624-1662", R Ross & GJ Telkamp (eds.), *Colonial cities...*, pp. 51-63, pp. 51, 54.

22 L Blussé, "An insane administration and insanitary town: The Dutch East India Company and Batavia, 1619-1799", R Ross & GJ Telkamp (eds.), *Colonial cities...*, pp. 65-85, p. 66.

23 R Raben, "Klein Holland in Azië. Ideologie en pragmatisme in de Nederlandse koloniale stedebouw, 1600-1800", *Leidschrift,* 9(2), March 1993, pp. 45-63, 46; A Singh, *Fort Cochin in Kerala...*, p. 23.

town planning. Surveyors and engineers overseas were not necessarily working with a fixed notion of an urban form (the ideal city), but instead they were building with the experience of centuries learned by their predecessors in the Netherlands. They applied various temporary and flexible grids which had worked in Dutch cities and were often adapted to local circumstances. [24]

A significant characteristic of the colonial cities, and a circumstance that Dutch town planners would have been very familiar with after a constant battle with water, was that they were all situated on the coast and at the mouth of a river or bay, an estuary, and in some cases on an island.[25] This was not surprising as the overseas cities were the primary link between the sea routes and the hinterland. The most important need of the Dutch trading companies was that of having a port from where goods were exported to the Republic and wares from Europe or other parts of the empire were imported. There also needed to be a supply of fresh water for residents and visitors and the growing of produce, while the water could furthermore be used for defence purposes.

In Cape Town the stream coming down from Table Mountain was channelled into a moat around the Castle. Water leading from the mountain was also canalised to run through and irrigate the Company Gardens, while this channel was extended into the main axis forming the *Heerengracht*, where the most prestigious Company buildings (the Dutch Reformed Church, the hospital and the slave lodge) were constructed and which became a place of residence favoured by prominent citizens (as the name implies).[26] The presence of a river or stream, which frequently was canalised, explained why most Dutch overseas settlements had an elongated shape with a main street running down the centre.

The connection between the overseas settlements and the motherland ran via the VOC. The Company was a trading conglomerate and its policy was first and foremost aimed at creating trading posts. These had to be easily

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24 C van den Heuvel, "Multilayered grids and Dutch town planning. Flexibility and temporality in the design of settlements in the low countries and overseas", P Lombaerde, C vanden Heuvel (eds.), *Early modern urbanism and the grid. Town planning in the low countries in international context. Exchanges in theory and practice 1550-1800, Architectura Moderna 10* (Turnhout, Brepols, 2011), pp. 27-44.

25 R Raben, "Klein Holland in Azië...", *Leidschrift,* 9(2), March 1993, p. 46.

26 N Worden, "Space and identity in VOC Cape Town", *Kronos,* 25, 1998/1999, pp. 72-87, pp. 75-78; R van Oers, "Landscape as guiding element in the design and planning of Dutch colonial settlements, 1600-1800. The case of Cape Town (South Africa)", 4 January 2012 (available at http://www.projetsdepaysage.fr/landscape_as_guiding_element_in_the_design_and_planning_of_dutch_colonial_settlements_1600_1800, as accessed on 3 April 2015), pp. 1-18.

defensible against competitors or other aggressors, hence the construction of forts. And although it was not the preferred option, if it did become necessary to have larger settlements where residents of different backgrounds had to live together, then the Company needed these to be stable and well-organised. Most of all, the overseas posts had to be cost-effective and cheap to maintain. That is why one did not find elaborate status buildings, like big cathedrals or government palaces, in Dutch settlements. The regular grid (still found in the Cape Town city-centre) served the purposes of the Company perfectly. This design was "symbolic of an ordered, well-managed society, hierarchical but democratic, it was emblematic for the hard working God fearing Dutch Calvinists".[27]

   Although arguable this last statement does lead to another dimension of the connection between the Netherlands and the VOC posts overseas, namely that of religion through the Dutch Reformed Church. Due to recent research this link has to be nuanced considerably. After the northern Dutch provinces liberated themselves from Spanish rule and formed the United Netherlands through the *Unie van Utrecht* in 1579, the Dutch Reformed Church embarked on a process to take over the privileged position of the Catholic Church. Over time the Dutch Reformed Church became the public and preferred denomination, which meant among other things that its religious rituals became used in public functions and it had a large say in issues of public morality. In many (but not all) Dutch towns only members of the Dutch Reformed Church were eligible to hold public office and to be appointed to high positions.

   But while the Dutch Reformed Church was dominant, it never held a religious monopoly or became the official state church. This was partly due to the nature of the Dutch Revolt against the Spanish rulers. It was not a religious uprising of Calvinism against Catholicism, but a struggle for liberty ranging from political autonomy to freedom of conscience. This freedom was clearly spelled out in the *Unie van Utrecht* constitution. The Netherlands lacked a strong central government. Each province and town had its own regents and they were not inclined to let some church pastor prescribe the law. Although the Dutch Reformed Church was the public church the principle of freedom of conscience was not abandoned and religious convictions were not enforced. The regents were seeking social and cultural consensus rather than having to deal with religious disputes.

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27   R van Oers, *Dutch town planning overseas...*, p. 156.

During most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries only about half of the population confessed to be Dutch Reformed. More than a third of the people were still Catholic, and then there were several other Christian religious communities, such as Huguenots, Mennonites, Baptists, and Lutherans. It now appears that there was a much more active interplay between the Dutch Reformed Church and these other confessions in shaping the public morality which came to be known as "Calvinism", and which left an imprint on Dutch society for a long time. It has furthermore become apparent that even though other religious denominations may not have been allowed officially, they were not heavily or actively suppressed. This attitude of tolerance resulted in a public sphere which was not uniquely or predominantly Dutch Reformed.[28]

The Dutch Reformed Church was exported overseas by the VOC, even though its original charter did not say anything about religion as such, because it was taken as a given by the Company directors that the overseas settlements would be Christian. And because the Dutch Reformed Church was the public church at home it followed that it would be the same elsewhere. Yet for the commercial enterprise of the VOC the spread of Christianity was certainly not a priority and the Dutch were a minority in their Asian territories. There was little effort to convert the many Hindus and Muslims and only a minimal Christian legacy was left. Again the Cape was the exception, because it did have a large and growing European population and Christianity therefore had more impact. But even here the Dutch Reformed Church was not all-important. The Cape happened to have a sizeable Lutheran population mainly as a consequence of the many German immigrants. A large number of them achieved high and important positions in Cape society. Despite the best efforts from Dutch Reformed ministers and governors to prevent it, the VOC in 1780 finally had to give in to the demand from the Lutheran congregation to establish their own church.

The Company needed to keep a firm control on what happened in its settlements. It monitored virtually all major decisions taken by other organisations and groups. Like the regents in Dutch towns the Company officials in Asia controlled all appointments to church councils and in other church functions, and the ministers were paid by the Company. It must

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28 On Calvinism and the Dutch Reformed Church see: GJ Schutte, *Het Calvinistisch Nederland. Mythe en werkelijkheid* (Hilversum, Verloren, 2002); W Frijhoff, "Was the Dutch Republic a calvinist community? The state, the confessions, and culture in the early modern Netherlands", A Holenstein, T Maissen and M Prak (eds), *The Republican alternative. The Netherlands and Switzerland compared* (Amsterdam, Amsterdam, University Press, 2008), pp. 99-122.

also be noted that, as in patria, overseas not all the settlers were members of the Dutch Reformed Church or were even loyal church-goers. The terms Christian, Reformed and burgher were certainly not synonymous.[29]

The Dutch Reformed Church was therefore not autonomous nor paramount in the Netherlands or overseas, but as the public church it held a strong (if dependent) position in colonial society, and it did function as a way via which the religious mores and traditions which were prevalent in Dutch society were taken to overseas settlements. However it could be argued that this was mainly the case in the circles of the ruling elite of VOC employees and burghers, members of which were most likely to serve on church councils as part of their duties as regents.

A further connecting line between patria and overseas settlements ran via the justice system. A study of the criminal and civil cases which were heard by the Court of Justice in Cape Town will immediately reveal that the justice system was based on Roman-Dutch law as it was used in the Netherlands.[30] Lawyers referred to legal precedence set in the Republic and quoted Dutch legal scholars in their arguments. One of these was Hugo de Groot (Grotius) and his "Inleydinghe tot de Hollandsche Rechtsgeleerdheydt" (Introduction to Dutch Law – 1631). Another was Simon van Leeuwen, who described the Roman-Dutch law in the seventeenth century.[31] The procedure which was followed in the Cape civil court was virtually the same one as was common in courts of many Dutch towns and regions.[32] Besides this the administration of justice also created a network of links between the overseas settlements and the motherland. Parties who were not satisfied with the outcome of the trials in Cape Town or other Asian outposts could lodge an appeal with the Council of Justice in Batavia. From there the case could even be referred back to the Dutch Republic. In his book *Bitters Bruid,* Leonard Blussé describes the marital battle between Joan Bitter and his wife Cornelia van Nijenroode,

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29 GJ Schutte, "De kerk onder de Compagnie", GJ Schutte (ed.), *Het Indisch Sion. De Gereformeerde kerk onder de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (Hilversum, Verloren, 2002), pp. 43-64; AW Biewenga, "Kerk in een volksplanting: De Kaap de Goede Hoop", GJ Schutte (ed.), *Het Indisch Sion...*, pp. 201-218.

30 T Baartman, *'The most precious possession': Honour, reputation and the Cape Council of Justice* (Unpublished paper, Cape Town, University of Cape Town, 2012), p.12.

31 *Het Rooms-Hollands-Regt* (1664). An English translation was used by the British after they took over the Dutch settlements to assist their lawyers in overseas courts which still used Roman-Dutch law.

32 EJ Broers, "Vrij onbeschaamd en zeer oneerbiedig. De civiele rechtspraak in Brabantse beledigingszaken in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw", *Leidschrift,* 12(1), November 1996, pp. 55-72; M van der Heijden, E van Nederveen Meerkerk, G Vermeesch & M van der Burg (eds), *Serving the urban community. The rise of public facilities in the low countries* (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2009); A van Meeteren, *Op hoop van akkoord. Instrumenteel forumgebruik bij geschilbeslechting in Leiden in de zeventiende eeuw* (Hilversum, Verloren, 2006).

which lasted two decades.[33] The judicial fight between the spouses took place both in Batavia and in the Netherlands and several times the parties had to travel from the one to the other location to submit themselves to the jurisdiction of local courts.

Other regular travellers between the Cape and the Netherlands were the children of Cape families seeking higher education, because schools at the Cape only taught basic subjects such as reading, writing, and perhaps some calculus. Yet burghers at the Cape were not un-educated and had comparable literacy levels as those of Dutch towns. It has been established that about 60% of the burghers could write and that literacy levels were higher in the more affluent social layers of Cape society.[34] For a better and higher education Cape residents had to go to the Dutch Republic.[35] There are several requests to the Council of Policy of fathers who asked permission to send their sons to the Republic to pursue a higher education. This was a costly exercise and the family concerned had to be financially well-off, which was again an indication that this connection mainly related to the upper layers of Cape society. Some of the boys left at a young age and spent a number of years in the Netherlands. During this time there naturally was correspondence going back and forth between family members and associates in the Republic and at the Cape, which ensured that the people at the Cape remained aware of events and ideas in the Netherlands. After finishing their education many students returned, bringing with them Dutch values and (new) customs, fashion, and literature, while they had gained and maintained fresh personal connections with friends and family in the Republic. The students formed a tangible connection between the Netherlands and the Cape.

Several members of VOC and burgher families at the Cape entered the service of the Company after their education in the Netherlands. If they wanted to make a career in VOC service it was necessary for them to accept that they were posted to other Asian settlements, but at the same time they made use of social and familial networks to advance their rise through the ranks. The careers of various VOC officials who were rooted in Cape families suggest that there was a fair amount of mobility within the Dutch seaborne

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33   L Blussé, *Bitters bruid. Een koloniaal huwelijksdrama in de Gouden Eeuw* (Amsterdam, Uitgeverij Balans, 1997).

34   A Biewenga, *De Kaap de Goede Hoop. Een Nederlandse vestigingskolonie, 1680-1730* (Amsterdam, Prometheus – Bert Bakker, 1999), pp. 165-171; N Worden, E van Heyningen, V Bickford-Smith, *Cape Town. The making of a City* (Cape Town, David Philip Publishers,1998), p. 74.

35   PS du Toit, *Onderwys aan die Kaap onder die Kompanjie 1652-1795* (Cape Town, Juta & Co,1937), pp. 94-101; G Schutte, "What was Pieter Cloete doing in Utrecht?", *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa,* 62(1), 2008, pp. 36-43.

empire. They had networks which reached from the Netherlands to as far as Japan. And not only men moved around. There were many Cape women who married officials from elsewhere and as a result thereof moved to other settlements. No doubt they became a vital part of the networks of patronage which existed within the VOC hierarchy.[36]

   The existence of networks of personal nature was further confirmed by the discovery that The National Archives in London housed almost 40,000 Dutch letters. These letters had been obtained by the British admiralty from Dutch ships which were captured by British ships. The writers were people from all social layers who were based in places like Batavia, Colombo, Paramaribo and Cape Town, and who were writing to family members who had stayed behind in the Netherlands and vice versa. The letters contained family news about births, deaths and marriages, and also just plain gossip about friends and neighbours. There was correspondence about business matters and there were requests for assistance with careers. Overseas residents were informed about wars and important political events. Often newspaper clippings, political pamphlets, books, and gifts were included.[37]

   The letters illustrate that contact between the Dutch Republic and the rest of the empire was not limited to official correspondence, but that many people outside of the official channels wrote letters about their daily lives and thoughts. It follows that people overseas were not at all isolated. There was a lively correspondence and constant flow of news and ideas, all of which contributed to them staying in touch and maintaining a Dutch identity.

   Despite the fact that the many different lines between the United Netherlands and the outposts of the empire resulted to a large extent in the latter 'being Dutch' one needs to immediately ask the obvious question: how Dutch was Dutch? The term 'Dutch' is of course an anachronism when applied to the eighteenth century and before. Even though many of the settlers inhabiting the overseas territories came from an area known as the United Dutch Provinces, this common origin was still very much a work in progress. A Dutch nation only came into being in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Before that the

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36   R Ross and A Schrikker, "The VOC official elite", N Worden (ed.), *Cape Town between east and west. Social identities in a Dutch colonial town* (Cape Town, Jacana, 2012), pp. 26-44.
37   R van Gelder, *Zeepost. Nooit bezorgde brieven uit de 17de en 18de eeuw* (Amsterdam, Olympus, 2010), pp. 38-49; R van Gelder, "Letters, journals and seeds: Forgotten Dutch mail in the National Archives in London", N Worden (ed.), *Contingent lives. Social identity and material culture in the VOC world* (Cape Town, University of Cape Town, 2007), pp. 538-545; J Brouwer, *Levenstekens: Gekaapte brieven uit het rampjaar 1672* (Hilversum, Verloren, 2014). See also the website (www.gekaaptebrieven.nl, as accessed on 4 April 2015).

residents of the Netherlands were subjects of local and regional authorities rather than an overarching national government. Laws differed from city to city. There were many different languages, customs, kinds of dress and systems of coinage and measure. Therefore it is arguable if there was something like a unified Dutch culture. It must also be noted that it were especially the regents from the provinces of Holland and Zeeland who drove the overseas expansion, while the other areas of the Republic were far less invested in it. Therefore one should actually speak of a *Hollands-Zeeuws* empire rather than a Dutch one.[38]

Another question to be asked is to what extent the Dutch overseas settlements could be called "Dutch". Many, if not most, of the employees of the VOC were from other European territories like German-speaking countries, Scandinavia, the Southern Netherlands and Switzerland. This was especially so in the eighteenth century. Nevertheless it must be recognised that there was some sort of common background: most settlers were protestant Christians and northern European and shared "the same social system with the same norms and values".[39] Just as there were different European nationals in the Dutch overseas settlements, in many of these there were also local indigenous populations. In fact, the Europeans only remained a small section of the total number of residents in Dutch settlements (with the exception of the Cape). In some cases the indigenous populations contributed significantly to Dutch colonisation. For instance, the Dutch settlement in Java and Taiwan would hardly have been possible without the numerous Chinese immigrants. A number of authors have commented on the impact of these on the shaping of overseas societies.[40]

Notwithstanding these cautionary remarks it is undeniable that many elements of Dutch social, economic and political life found their way to the overseas settlements, which consequently developed a certain measure of Dutch identity and character. The political and economic relations as well as the personal links of settlers with family and friends back home played a role in the way they experienced and set up their overseas environment. They did not just let go of their Dutch legacy and this influenced their identities as well as their views on society. It was in this environment that the burghers

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38   A-M Cantwell, "Landscapes and other objects: Creating Dutch New Netherland", *New York History,* Fall 2008, pp. 315-345, 316; P Emmer and J Gommans, *Rijk aan de rand van de wereld. De geschiedenis van Nederland overzee 1600-1800* (Amsterdam, Uitgeverij Bert Bakker, 2012), p. 14.

39   A-M Cantwell, "Landscapes and other objects...", p. 316.

40   See works by L Blussé, JG Taylor, R Raben and U Bosma, K Ward, *New York History,* Fall 2008.

developed their ideas about their position and rights.

The Company and the burghers

The political position of cities in the Netherlands and the people who governed them influenced the way the overseas towns were organised. Dutch towns were of overwhelming importance to Dutch economic, social and cultural life in the new political reality that had come into existence at the end of the sixteenth century: the United Netherlands, a federation of seven provinces in the Northern Netherlands.[41] Each of the provinces was governed by a Provincial States, and these again were represented in the Republic's governing body: the States-General. In the Provincial States cities had to share power with landed gentry and ecclesiastical estates. In most provinces the landed gentry managed to hold on to a large share of the vote, namely 50 percent, but in the Provincial States of Holland and Zeeland – the two most important provinces - the nobility held just one vote against a majority of individual cities. The cities were key political players simply because they had significant financial and economic power and could therefore not be ignored. Especially in Holland the Provincial States always took great care to consider the interests of the cities. And because Holland was the leading province in the Republic the autonomy of the towns there boosted urban independence in the rest of the country. Though the cities were never officially politically independent, the complex interplay between the various political structures within the Republic made the period between 1580 and 1800 "the period of the urban domination of the state which made the Dutch Republic so unique in Europe".[42]

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41   The following section on the Dutch Republic is based on information found in: S Groenveld, HLPh Leeuwenberg, N Mout and WM Zappey, *De kogel door de kerk? De opstand in de Nederlanden en de rol van de Unie van Utrecht 1559-1609* (Zutphen, De Walburg Pers, 1979); JI Israel, *The Dutch Republic. Its rise, greatness and fall 1477-1806* (New York, Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 276-306; M 't Hart, "The Dutch Republic: The urban impact upon politics", K Davids and J Lucassen, *A miracle mirrored: The Dutch Republic in European* perspective (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 57-98; M Prak, *The Dutch Republic in the seventeenth century: The golden age* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 166-181; AT van Deursen, "The Dutch Republic, 1588-1780", JCH Blom and E Lamberts (eds), *History of the low countries* (Oxford, New York, Berghahn, 2006), pp. 143-218; M Prak, "The Dutch Republic's city-state culture (17th-18th centuries)", MH Hansen (ed.), *A comparative study of thirty city-state cultures* (Copenhagen, Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 2000), pp. 343-358.
42   WW Mijnhardt, "The Dutch Republic as a town", *Eighteenth-Century Studies,* 31(3), 1998, pp. 345-348, p. 345.

The individual cities in the Republic were so powerful that any attempt to limit their powers was successfully countered. The Dutch cities did not want a state structure in which they would lose their autonomy. They each wanted to promote their own commercial interests and only worked together because it was beneficial to them as parts of economic networks. They pragmatically supported the new political set-up of the United Provinces because the political unity provided a stable structure in which they could thrive while maintaining a measure of independence. This political reality prompted at least one contemporary observer to describe the Republic as a federation of "about fifty republics, all very different the one from the other".[43]

In the complex political world of the Republic the burgher became the most important component. The term *burger* came from the Latin concept *civis*, which meant being a member of an established political community or *civitas*. From the early medieval period onwards regional rulers started to award privileges to communities – like the right to a certain political and judicial autonomy – in return for, among others, the duty to pay taxes and tolls, which the rulers needed to finance their administration. Gradually the need to highlight the difference between privileged and non-privileged people and to associate it with a circumscribed space, like a city, became stronger.[44] The outcome of this process was that at "the centre of the Dutch world was a burgher, not a bourgeois".[45] This statement from British historian Simon Schama expresses that the typical Dutch city dweller of the seventeenth and eighteen centuries was not defined in economic terms. He was first and foremost a *burger* with a specific politico-legal status which provided him with tangible economic, political, legal and social benefits. It was this burgher who completely dominated public affairs in the Dutch Republic. However, not everybody could call himself a burgher. In the period between 1600 and 1800 the Netherlands became increasingly and highly urbanised.[46] And it was

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43 M Prak, "The Dutch Republic's city-state culture...", MH Hansen (ed.), *A comparative study of thirty city-state cultures* (Copenhagen, Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 2000), p. 353.

44 P Leupen, "Burger, stad en zegel: Een verkenning voor de Noordelijke Nederlanden", J Kloek and K Tilmans (eds), *Burger. Een geschiedenis van het begrip 'burger' in de Nederlanden van de Middeleeuwen tot de 21ste eeuw* (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2002), pp. 19-31.

45 S Schama, *The embarrassment of riches: An interpretation of Dutch culture in the golden age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1988), p. 7.

46 In 1500 about 15.8% of the population of the Netherlands lived in towns with 2500 residents or more. By 1800 this number had increased to 37%. The province of Holland, which dominated the Dutch Republic in many ways, was the most populous area: almost half of the total Dutch population lived there and 60% of these people lived in urban areas. In contrast, the number of city dwellers in France only reached 12% of the population. The Republic was the most urbanized area in Europe. M Prak, "The Dutch Republic's city-state culture"..., MH Hansen (ed.), *A comparative study of thirty city-state cultures* (Copenhagen, Kgl. Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 2000), p. 343; WW Mijnhardt, "The Dutch Republic as a town", *Eighteenth-Century Studies,* 31(3), 1998, p. 345.

for the many city dwellers that "burgerschap" was reserved, thereby excluding the rural population. And even within the cities it was only intended for a privileged minority.[47]

The protesting burghers of the Cape settlement regarded themselves to be just that: privileged. They were adamant that their special burgher status and rights needed to be acknowledged by the VOC administration instead of them being treated as second rate citizens. They argued that because the VOC received its mandate from the government of the United Netherlands, the burghers of the Cape were actually free burghers like those of cities in the Republic.[48] The Company formed the ultimate link between the Netherlands and overseas settlements and this was illustrated in the way the VOC had decided to set up and govern these settlements.

The pre-eminent position of the cities and their regents in the United Provinces also permeated the two large Dutch trading companies, the Dutch West India Company (WIC) and the VOC. Both were organised in chambers, each of which were based in a Dutch town or area. The VOC had six chambers: Amsterdam, Zeeland, Delft, Rotterdam, Hoorn and Enkhuizen. Of these Amsterdam and Zeeland were the most important: this was where the administrative apparatus of the VOC was based. Even though the "bewindhebbers" or directors in these chambers mostly came from the name-giving cities, they had representatives from other places as well. For instance, in the Amsterdam chamber the cities of Haarlem and Leiden, which both had significant interests in the overseas trade, managed to acquire a seat on the board after 1645. It was the original intention when the VOC was founded in 1602 that the appointment of new directors in the chambers would be the responsibility of the respective Provincial States. But almost immediately the province of Holland delegated this authority to the cities, while the same thing happened in Zeeland in 1646 after a fierce battle between the Provincial States and the cities.

The close connection between the cities and the large trading companies was furthermore strengthened by the fact that many Company directors had one or more functions in the administration of the participating cities. The incestuous relationship between the Dutch patriciate and the VOC

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47 WW Mijnhardt, "The Dutch Republic as a town", *Eighteenth-Century Studies,* 31(3), 1998, p. 347; E Kuijpers and M Prak, "Burger, ingezetene, vreemdeling: Burgerschap in Amsterdam in de 17e en 18e eeuw", Kloek and Tilmans (eds.), *Burger*, pp. 113-132, p. 113.

48 Anon., *Nederlandsch Afrika...*, p. 15.

administration resulted in this grievance: "if we complain to the regents and the magistrates of the towns, there sit the directors … if to the admiralties, there are the directors again. If to the States-General, we find that they and the directors are sitting there together at the same time".[49] This did not change as time went on: throughout the period of activity of the WIC and the VOC the vast majority of the directors were recruited from the Dutch ruling elite. Only two of the twenty-nine men who were directors of the VOC chamber Delft since 1750 did not have a position in the city government. And the directors of the chamber Rotterdam each had on average about ten functions in the city administration in the second half of the eighteenth century.[50]

The VOC was given a charter by the Dutch States-General which ensured the Company a monopoly of Dutch trade and navigation east of the Cape of Good Hope and west of the straits of Magellan. The board of directors or *Heeren XVII* was given wide powers. They had the authority to conclude treaties of peace and alliance, to wage defensive wars against competitors as well as indigenous populations, and to approve the building of fortresses and strongholds in the overseas territories.[51] Besides these extensive powers the VOC had the authority to exercise judicial and administrative functions in their settlements. It was especially here that elements of Dutch society came to the fore, because overseas "the Dutch replicated all the well-developed municipal institutions of their burgher society in the home country, such as town halls, hospitals, courts of justice, churches, reformative institutions, and alms houses".[52] And just like in the Netherlands the overseas settlements eventually came to have burghers.

The Cape settlement turned out to be quite a costly affair for the VOC and soon after its establishment in the 1650s the directors became worried about the losses the Company incurred in running the refreshment station. They saw the solution in the creation of a burgher group as was present in other parts of the Dutch empire. These burghers would have to focus on agriculture and provide the fresh produce required by the settlement and the passing ships of

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49 CR Boxer, *Dutch seaborne empire...*, p. 50. The original Dutch quote can be found in Gaastra, *Geschiedenis van de VOC*, p. 34. Both CR Boxer and FS Gaastra discuss the close links between regents and directors and more recently this has been well set out in: HJ den Heijer, *De geoctroieerde compagnie: De VOC en de WIC als voorlopers van de naamloze vennootschap* (Deventer, Kluwer, 2005).
50 FS Gaastra, *Geschiedenis van de VOC...*, p. 164.
51 There is a vast amount of literature on the VOC. See the following website for a good introduction to this literature (available at http://www.voc-kenniscentrum.nl/literatuur1.html#overzichtswerken, as accessed 6 April 2015).
52 L Blussé, *Visible cities. Canton, Nagasaki, and Batavia and the coming of the Americans* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 39.

the Company. It would be cheaper for the VOC to have burghers who were financially independent than having to pay for the labour of VOC employees and the keeping of slaves. The Company could also reduce the military expense, because the burghers were expected to contribute to the defence of the settlement and were organised in burgher militia. Of course there were expenses incurred in settling and governing the burghers, but these could be offset against the various taxes which could be collected from them. And so from 1657 onwards the VOC administration started to release Company servants from their contracts and settle them as free burghers. From early on the burghers did not limit themselves to the agricultural sector. A number of them settled in Cape Town proper and made a living by performing some sort of skill, enterprise or service, and a large number provided lodging and catering for seamen.

It was almost immediately after the creation of the burgher group that a conflict between a group of farmers and Commander Jan van Riebeeck occurred (1658). The farmers were not informed of the price they would be paid for their wheat and feared it would be too low. At the same time they complained that they were forbidden to trade cattle with the Khoe. And even though they played a major role in the defence of the settlement against the indigenous population, according to them they were treated as Company slaves. Van Riebeeck responded that the burghers were not slaves, but they were subjects of the VOC and they should not try to go against their lawful authorities.[53] What Van Riebeeck understood was that the burgher group was created for the benefit of the Company and not to "provide an island of liberty for some of its employees".[54]

But what Van Riebeeck and his successors perhaps underestimated was that the Cape burghers over time developed a robust self-conscious identity. They worked the soil on farms and built up enterprises, while their sons and daughters followed in their footsteps. Burgher families came to span several generations. The burghers put down roots and in time their sense of belonging in this Dutch Africa became stronger.

In the process the burghers created their own view on how and why their group was created, and this interpretation was in contrast with what was described above. This story was most clearly told by the author of *Nederlandsch Afrika*.[55]

53   H Giliomee, *The Afrikaners. Biography of a people* (Cape Town, Tafelberg, 2003), pp. 1-2.
54   H Giliomee, *The Afrikaners...*, p. 6.
55   Anon., *Nederlandsch Afrika*, pp. 7-24.

He wrote that the first Cape settlers were given "the assurance they would enjoy the same advantages of freedom as they enjoyed in the Commonwealth" of the United Netherlands.[56] The interests of the settlers and the Company were inseparable and the Company was after all dependent on the burghers for its success. In the beginning, under Commander Van Riebeeck, the rights and status of the burghers were recognised and legally secured: "the short period in which justice and equity ruled at the Cape, during the rule of Van Riebeeck, can be called the golden age of the Settlement".[57] In the view of the anonymous author the successors of Van Riebeeck chipped away at the original social contract. The Council of Policy, the main administrative body, consisted only of VOC officials and burghers did not have a say here. The various other governing bodies were dominated and chaired by VOC employees. Justice could not be properly obtained, because the burghers were not judged by their peers, but by the Company. The Governor allowed his officials to act arbitrarily and in direct economic competition with burghers. By the 1780s the burghers in their view had been subject to a long period of injustice and cruelty. Instead of being free and independent, as they were originally promised, they were now nothing more than slaves according to the author of *Nederlandsch Afrika*.[58] It was this kind of thinking which contributed to the outbreak of the troubles in 1779.

It is possible that the conflict could have intensified under the influence of the ideas of Enlightenment, which were prevalent in Europe in the eighteenth century and which were another manner in which the Cape and the Netherlands connected. There was a push for more burgher rights and freedom, which contributed to the American and French Revolutions. Residents of the Cape must have been familiar with these ideas, because there was a regular coming and going of people between the Cape and Europe. In *Nederlandsch Afrika* the author wrote that the American settlers provided a memorable example and taught the British that it was ill-advised to oppress their subjects and to no longer regard the settlers as brothers.[59] And in May 1778 a pamphlet entitled "The power and the liberties of a civil society defended by the foremost legal minds, submitted to the judgement of the Cape burgher" was dropped in

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56 Anon., *Nederlandsch Afrika...*, p. 115.
57 Anon., *Nederlandsch Afrika...*, pp. 22-23.
58 Anon., *Nederlandsch Afrika...*, pp. 23-58.
59 Anon., *Nederlandsch Afrika...*, p. 3.

front of the houses of several burghers.[60] It was directly copied from a Dutch pamphlet and argued that it was the foremost duty of every member of society to improve the welfare of himself and his fellow residents to the best of his ability. The task of looking after and improving the general welfare of the population and to uphold the natural rights of the people was delegated to the government. But this did not mean that the people could sit back and disregard their responsibilities. They would have to make sure at all times that the government executed its tasks properly. If that was not the case, then the people had the right and duty to stand up and protest. This all was a direct reference to the theories of the Social Contract developed by John Locke, one of the major Enlightenment philosophers. His work was quoted abundantly in the document.

But at the end of the day it all came down to an irreconcilable difference in interpretation of burgher status and rights between the VOC and the burghers. As far as the VOC was concerned the Cape was never meant to be an exact copy of towns in the Dutch Republic. In his response to the burgher complaints Independent Fiscal Willem Cornelis Boers worded it as follows: "one makes a big mistake if one wants to compare the residents of a settlement like this with the privileged burghers of our great cities in the Republic".[61] One could of course argue that the Company directors could have prevented a lot of problems between them and the burghers if they had decided to call them something different. By naming them *burgers* as the free residents of Dutch cities were called and affording them to a large extent the same rights, they created an expectation of freedom and equal standing among the burgher population even though that was one thing that the Company had no intention of fulfilling. The Cape burghers could argue as much as they wanted that they were equal subjects of the United Netherlands, but the reality of the situation was that they were not free burghers like their Dutch counterparts, but Company burghers. They were there to promote the goals of the VOC and were under complete control of the Company administration. They did not govern themselves, but were governed by employees of the Company. The opposing views between burghers and VOC were the cause of regular strain in the relations between them throughout the period of VOC dominance of the Cape.

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60 Staten Generaal van de Verenigde Nederlanden, *Missive van bewindhebberen der Oost-Indische Compagnie, met copie van alle de stukken, brieven, resolution, &c. relatief tot het werk van de Caab*, 4 vols, 's-Gravenhage, 1785 (Short reference: *Kaapsche Geschillen*), *Kaapsche Geschillen,* I, pp. 13-27.
61 WC Boers, *Verantwoording gedaan maken...,* p. 43.

Conclusion

The conflict between Cape burghers and VOC had other aspects and facets than just that of a disagreement about the position of burghers. It was for instance also a fight for resources between ruling family factions.[62] However, the focus in this article has been on the way the Cape burghers identified and placed themselves in Cape society in relation to the larger framework of the Dutch trading empire. They developed a greater sense of belonging and identity with every generation, and they related that identity to that of their counterparts in the Dutch Republic, simply because in their day-to-day experiences they were so obviously connected. This became problematic when they actively tried to claim the place they felt entitled to, because this place was denied to them by the VOC. The VOC directors argued that the Cape was not a Dutch city, but a Company settlement, which they could justify with the backing of the extensive powers the VOC was invested with.

But what this article most of all wants to illustrate is that "context" must be the operative word when researching Cape history before 1800. The burghers were inspired by the many different connections with the Dutch Republic, and they felt strongly that their "Dutch Africa" was just as much part of the Netherlands as any other. They did not live in a vacuum, but were, just as the Cape settlement itself, part of many different networks and channels through which there was a constant flow and interaction of people, goods and ideas. Since the 1990s this idea of the Cape as part of a broader global world and its many influences has vastly enriched the historiography of the settlement.

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62   T Baartman, *Fighting for the spoils...,* pp. 115-181.