

van der Merwe, Clinton David¹

Contested Heritage(s) – The Case(s) of the Battle of Blood River (December 16th, 1838), Dundee and Nquthu, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Battlefield tourism is a well-established niche in cultural and heritage tourism the world over. This paper explores the contested nature of a specific battlefield in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, where two separate museums exist to memorialise the same event, but from two perspectives. The Battle of Blood River (December 16th, 1838) remains a contested event in history books, portrayed from Afrikaner and AmaZulu points of view at the Blood River Heritage Site and Ncome Museum, respectively. People interested in visiting battlefields are slowly dying out, and if South Africa wants to take advantage of growing Battlefield Tourism in the future for surviving generations of those involved in these battles, a new approach will be necessary to sustain and develop this niche of cultural and heritage tourism in the country. This paper uses netnography to analyse the internet footprint of this historical event through the museums' websites. The paper argues that a more balanced and two-sided perspective should be given at both museums to grow and develop the interest in battlefield tourism across South Africa and encourage mutual visitorship to both museums on the same battlefield site.

Keywords: culture, contested heritage, heritage tourism, battlefields, South Africa

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Humanities Education, Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria, Hatfield, 0028, South Africa, Tel: +27 (012) 420 5566, E-mail: clinton.vandermerwe@up.ac.za, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6861-2773>

INTRODUCTION

South Africa is a cosmopolitan country filled with varied people from different heritage and cultural backgrounds. This paper argues that heritage remains a contested concept within this 30-year-old democracy and has various consequences for heritage and cultural tourism going forward. Specifically, the focus of this paper is upon a specific historical battlefield site – the Battle of Blood River (which took place along the present-day Ncome River on the 16th of December, 1838). The battle occurred between 464 Voortrekkers (Boers who had left the Eastern Cape Frontier, disenchanted with British rule, to find new land to settle in and become independent in the interior of South Africa) and between 10,000 and 20,000 AmaZulu Warriors. It began at dawn and was over by midday, “more than 3000 Zulu casualties were counted around the laager. Only three Voortrekkers (including Voortrekker leader Pretorius) were wounded; none were killed. The Ncome River became red with the blood of the slain. Hence, the river became known as ‘Blood River’” (South African History Online, 2023).

The battlefield exists across two local municipalities (both part of the uMzinyathi District Municipality – which consists of 4 local municipalities) in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa. The Afrikaans site, called the “Bloedrivier Erfenisterrein” (Blood River Heritage Site), in the Endumeni Local Municipality (is located on the west side of the Ncome River – numbered 1 on the Google Earth Image); and the Ncome Museum (the AmaZulu site), which is located on the east side of the Ncome River, numbered 2 (still known by some as Bloedrivier – as seen in the Google Earth Image), in the Nqutu Local Municipality. Figure 1 shows the position and layout of each site along the river.

Figure 1. Google Earth Image of the Battle of Blood River Site



Source: adapted from Google Earth (2023)

In the context of the small towns of Dundee and Nquthu in KwaZulu-Natal, this paper examines battlefield tourism as part of the South African cultural and heritage tourism economy in light of this heritage’s contested nature and representation. The focus on local development impacts is especially appropriate in the context of the problems of unemployment, poverty and the need for sustainable

livelihoods in the non-metropolitan areas of South Africa (Rogerson, 2019; van der Merwe, 2016). Previous studies have explored tourism-led development of local economies and job creation, which feature as major themes in much of the research on heritage tourism in South Africa (Marschall, 2008a; 2008b; Marschall, 2012; Marschall, 2013; Taru et al., 2014).

It is argued in this paper that heritage remains a contested concept in the ‘new South Africa’, and that means to tell ‘both sides of the story of a particular historical event’ needs to be done on a united front, not by two distinct museums adjacent to the river on the same battlefield site or precinct. This paper suggests that what is required for the Battlefields region in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa to become a sustainable and more responsible form of heritage tourism will require the working together of various stakeholders and perspectives of the varied heritage(s) that are represented at the Battle of Blood River. Arguably, if South Africa is to market and sustain heritage tourism more effectively, extended research on Battlefield Tourism and heritage tourists in the context of contested heritage(s) is still necessary.

Numerous studies on heritage tourism in South Africa have emphasised the importance of understanding heritage tourists to improve cultural and heritage tourism market interpretation (Khumalo et al., 2014; Masilo & van der Merwe, 2016; van der Merwe & Rogerson, 2013). This paper focuses on the Battlefield of Blood River in Dundee and Nquthu, South Africa, and its significance in the international context of research on contested heritage and battlefield tourism. The study conducted a netnography of the respective websites of the Blood River Heritage Site and the Ncome Museum. Netnography is a research method used to study online communities and cultures. This paper also examines the local tourism development policies and challenges in maximising local tourism and presents a profile of social media perceptions of each representation of the battlefield site. The paper draws from various sources, including local planning documents (known as the Integrated Development Plans, or IDPs) of the local municipalities in the Battlefields Route area and other documentary sources, to analyse the local promotion initiatives surrounding tourism in Dundee and Nquthu (with its surrounding areas).

LITERATURE REVIEW

International perspective on battlefield heritage tourism

Battlefield tourism involves visiting war memorials, museums, battle re-enactments, and the actual battlefields themselves (Dunkley et al., 2011); and it has gained popularity worldwide (Fallon & Robinson, 2016) since the beginning of time. While there has been extensive research on World War I battlefields (Clarke & Eastgate, 2011; Seaton, 2000; Winter, 2009, 2012, 2016), with the 2014 centenary of WWI (1914–1918), many people are still visiting these sites. Battlefield tourism is a subset of thanatourism known as “dark tourism” (Kokkanikral et al., 2016; Miles, 2014; Yan et al., 2016). There are several reasons why people visit places of death and destruction, including personal interest, thrill-seeking, validation, authenticity, self-discovery, iconic sites, convenience, morbid curiosity,

pilgrimage, remembrance and empathy, contemplation, legitimisation, economic resurgence, the discovery of heritage, acts of remembrance, and personal aspirations (Clarke & Eastgate, 2011; Kiss, 2022; Kim & Butler, 2014; Ryan, 2007; Winter, 2009, 2012 and 2016). Most research on battlefield tourism focuses on representation, management, and maintenance (Garcia-Madura & Grillo-Mendez, 2023; Ryan, 2007; Millar, 2016; Zhang, 2010). However, there is a lack of research on the contested nature of heritage and the representation of the event, which this paper aims to address.

Contested heritage(s)

The concept of representing history and whose perspective it is from is a topic of debate in academic literature (Hlongwane & Ndlovu, 2019 and Winter, 2009). Several scholars have criticised the Afrikaners' perspective of this battle, saying that God could not possibly have given them the victory over the AmaZulu simply because they had made a vow with Him to build a church and religiously remember the day as a public holiday if they were to be victorious. Understanding battlefields and struggle/liberation heritage tourism requires further investigation (Baines, 2007; Bialostocka, 2013; Bialostocka, 2014; Naef & Ploner, 2016; Pentz & Albert, 2023). The Pacific War Battlefields, for example, have caused unease and shame among many Japanese people due to their ancestors' involvement in the war (Cooper, 2006). Heritage and battlefield tourism contribute to developing and understanding social memory and remembrance (Lloyd, 1998; West, 2016). Battlefields are studied as a memory or commemoration of the past (Iles, 2008; Leopold, 2007; Winter, 2012; West, 2016). It is suggested that battlefield sites possess their own life cycle of meaning and attraction, becoming not only places of memorial for a recent past generation but also a place of heritage to inform future generations (Ryan, 2007). This means they have a wider appeal to a larger audience (Tourism KwaZulu-Natal, 2004, 2008). It is crucial to carefully represent and image the battlefield to create awareness among visitors about the sobering nature of the conflict and its consequences for everyone involved. Increasingly, battlefield tours have strong religious overtones around remembrance and sacrifice, which are constituted and fulfilled in a pilgrimage (Clarke & Eastgate, 2011).

Heritage custodians and tourism authorities have a suite of moral and ethical dilemmas to reconcile in portraying the history of a particular heritage site (Tourism KwaZulu-Natal, 2004). Another important theme within battlefield tourism is the authenticity of the experience for the tourist (Geiling & Ong, 2016; Ryan, 2007; Miles, 2014; Winter, 2009). People visit battlefields for a number of reasons, and “the visitor experience is thus multifaceted with an appreciation of the site as a heritage, not a specifically dark, tourism site” (Miles, 2014, p. 145). Increasingly, contemporary research explores the meanings and motivations of people visiting battlefields with a “desire for learning and commemoration play(ing) an important part in motivating battlefield tourists” (Dunkley et al., 2011, p. 860). Stakeholders of battlefield tourism are thus coming to the realisation that these tourists are “an emotionally sensitive, nuanced and reflexive constituency” (Dunkley et al., 2011, p. 866). In this research, it will be shown that battlefield tourists are a specific niche of the cultural/heritage tourism market (Henama et al., 2016) and need to thus appreciate ‘both sides of the story’.

A recent article by Smit et al. (2016) emphasises the need for more research on South Africa's military geography. Although battlefield tourism has been studied in many countries, there have been few studies on local tourism planning and how battlefields impact local economies. In South Africa, heritage and cultural tourism can be utilised as an economic development tool for several reasons (Drummond et al., 2021). Firstly, South Africa's cultural and heritage assets, such as battlefield sites, differ from those in developed countries. Secondly, many of these sites are located in remote rural areas where there are limited economic and revenue-creating activities (Visser, 2023). Thirdly, battlefield heritage and cultural tourism can promote small tourism enterprise development, such as Bed and Breakfasts in local settlements. Furthermore, little capital is required for entry-level Small, Medium and Microenterprises (SMMEs) to support heritage or cultural tourism. However, challenges related to contested heritage in battlefield tourism have not been explored in recent literature. Liu et al. (2021) argue that there is still limited knowledge about what contested heritage is and how it is realised in society. Additionally, scholars have identified issues around the contested nature of heritage in terms of battlefield tourism.

This paper aims to explore the complex relationship between tourism, memory, and the heritage of the Battle of Blood River in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Murtagh et al. (2017) examined the intricate nature and complexity of contested heritage and cultural tourism in Derry/Londonderry, Northern Ireland, where tourists are interested in the city's dark events and subaltern expressions of memory but also saw through the propaganda and questionable ethics that created so many blatantly partial renditions of the past. Visitors to heritage sites for the Battle of Blood River should also be informed and discerning, but is this the case? Jacobs et al. (2023) propose a new theoretical framework, "matterscape, mindscape, and powerscape," for understanding the dissonance in heritage(s) that future research could explore. Heritage conceptualisation, theory development, and empirical research have shifted from a predominant focus on material objects and preservation to include heritage discourse, functions of heritage, meanings of heritage, politics of heritage, and development.

Heritage scholars are increasingly suggesting that augmented and virtual reality is the way forward in negotiating the difficult nature of contested heritage(s) (Bec et al., 2019). Both museums at Blood River could consider incorporating more AI in their displays to mediate better the histories between the Afrikaaner and AmaZulu representations of the battle. This has various resource implications for South African museums.

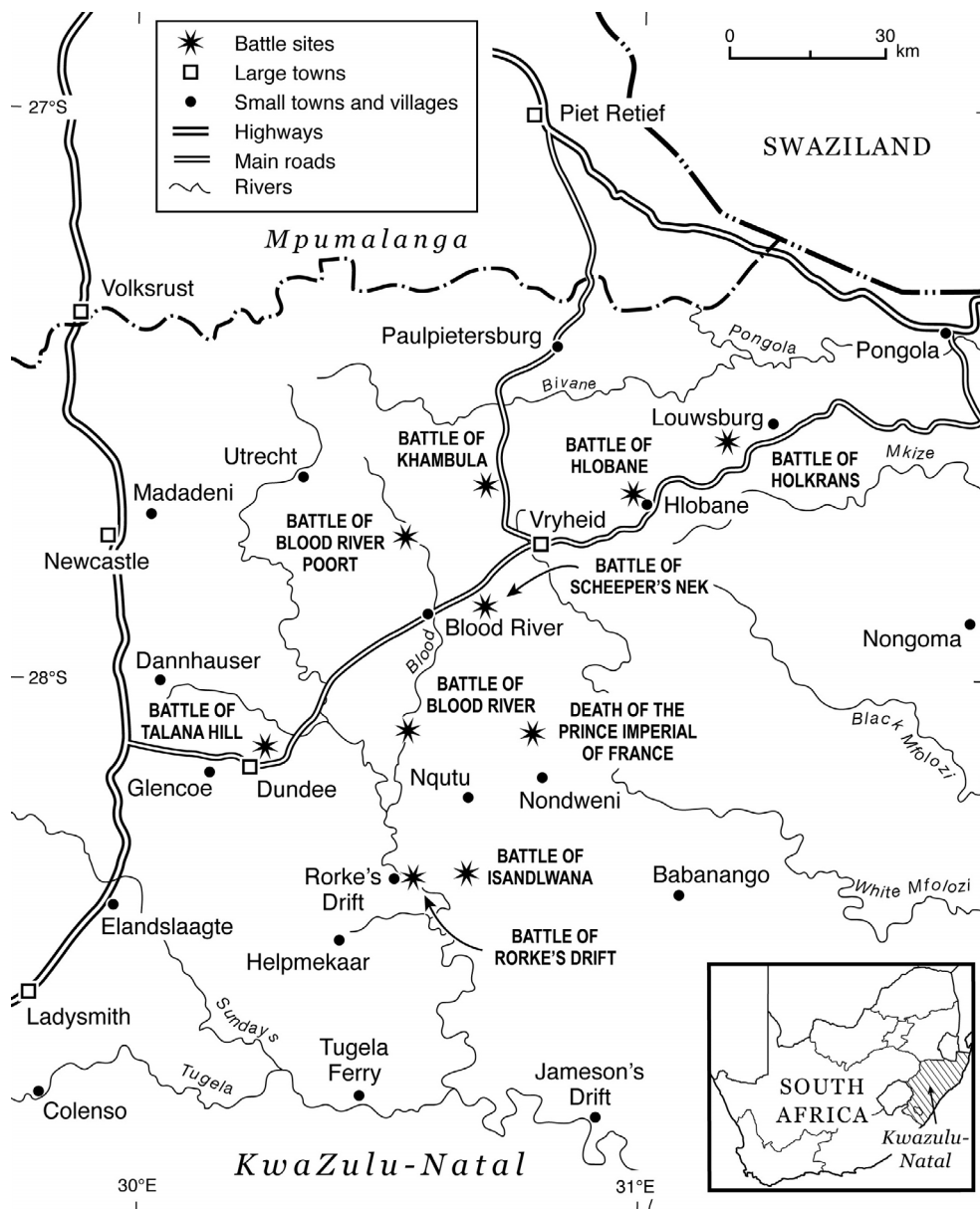
Battlefield tourism in South Africa – the case of Dundee and Nquthu in KwaZulu-Natal

Dundee and Nquthu in KwaZulu-Natal are prime examples of battlefield tourism in South Africa, which plays a significant role in the country's collective identity and history (Tourism KwaZulu-Natal, no date; Venter, 2011). After South Africa became a democracy in 1994, the government initiated the creation of memorials, monuments, and heritage sites to address the existing apartheid heritage landscape under the leadership of Nelson Mandela (Marschall, 2008: 88). Many of the battlefield

sites throughout South Africa are designated as national heritage sites and chronicle some of the most important events that have shaped South African history, ranging from colonial conflicts in the 18th and 19th centuries to the 2nd Anglo–Boer War of 1899–1902 (von der Heyde, 2013, p. 12).

According to Moeller (2005), battlefield tourism in South Africa has experienced significant growth in recent decades, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal and the Northern Cape provinces (see van der Merwe, 2019). KwaZulu-Natal alone has over 140 sites to visit, providing a detailed account of the Boer, British, and AmaZulu conflicts (Battlefields Route, no date; Rattray & Greaves, 2013). These battles are part of South Africa’s history, which “stemmed from colonisation by the Dutch and the British, as well as conflicts between different African societies over resources and territory” (von der Heyde, 2013, p. 14).

Figure 2. Location of battlefields in Dundee, and Nquthu in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa



Source: Author's Map, van der Merwe, 2016, p. 189.

Figure 2 displays various battlefield sites that hold significance to South African history and contribute to the country's heritage. One of these sites is the Battle of Blood River, depicted in Figure 3 from the Afrikaans' perspective. Alternatively, the conflict is known as Ncome from the AmaZulu perspective and occurred when Andries Pretorius, a Voortrekker leader, led 464 Dutch trekkers to invade Zululand. The motive behind this invasion was to avenge the killing of Piet Retief and his companions, who were murdered on February 5th, 1838, by King Dingane and his Zulu people (von der Heyde, 2013).

The KwaZulu-Natal battlefields are located throughout the region and can be visited in a day's travel. Figure 2 provides an overview of their locations. A guided tour is available, where a tourist guide will drive visitors to the site and narrate the battle's events using visual aids such as maps and the surrounding landscape. Some locations have visitor centres where audio-visual aids are available to provide additional context and history, and museums on-site exhibit many artefacts.

Figure 3. Bloedrivier Erfensterrein (28° 06' 18" S; 30° 32' 28" E)



Source: Author's Photo, van der Merwe, 2016, p. 190.

Figure 4. The Ncome Museum (28° 06' 19" S; 30° 32' 45" E)



Source: Author's Photo, van der Merwe, 2016, p. 191.

METHODS

Heritage tourists and the battlefields

This research encompassed an interpretivism approach; various pieces of grey literature were analysed in light of ascertaining the level of contested heritage(s) from both sites' perspectives on the Battle of Blood River. Stakeholder interviews were conducted with various role-players interested in and impacted by heritage tourism on the battlefields of KwaZulu-Natal. A month-long netnography analysis ascertained people's social media perceptions of each site's internet footprint.

The Blood River Heritage Site is a battlefield site that is privately owned but has administrative connections to both the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria and Pietermaritzburg. The site had 1,932 visitors from January 1st to June 30th in 2023 (J. Jansen van Vuuren, personal communication, July 27, 2023). The low number of visitors is attributed to most tour buses exiting eSwatini heading directly to the coast and visitors returning to Gauteng OR Tambo (the international airport in Johannesburg, Gauteng) going via Dundee. As a result, groups usually sleep over, visit two battlefield sites south of Dundee the next day, and exit directly back for Gauteng. This information was confirmed by another expert respondent, Sutcliffe (personal communication, June 30th, 2023), who stated that the development of the R66, a major arterial route down to Ulundi, is needed. Many tour operators bring busloads of tourists that usually arrive in Johannesburg, then travel to the Kruger National Park and Lowveld, through eSwatini, into northern KwaZulu-Natal, Zululand game parks, and Zulu heritage sites, battlefields, Drakensberg, and exit through Golden Gate before heading off to Cape Town.

The Ncome Museum was built to showcase the AmaZulu perspective of the Battle of Blood River in Nquthu. "The site was unveiled on December 16, 1998, the 160th anniversary of the battle and officially opened on November 26th 1999... However, despite the reconciliatory spirit espoused by the speakers, this was not universal, and there was 'sparse Afrikaner attendance' as well as a separate Afrikaner ceremony being held simultaneously at the Voortrekker laager monument on the opposite side of the river" (The Contested Histories Initiative, 2021, p. 11).

In comparison, from January 1st to June 30th, 2023, 2713 tourists visited the Ncome Museum (N. Gwala, personal communication, July 28th, 2023). In total, 4645 tourists visited the Battle of Blood River precinct over the 6-month period in 2023. It would be interesting to find out and note how many of these people visited both museums as part of a future research project. Ascertaining their reasons and experiences of visiting both museums would be telling too. In 1998, the local municipalities worked together to construct a bridge over the Ncome River (Figure 5), allowing people to move from one museum to another. It was officially opened on the 16th of December, 2014 by then-President Jacob Zuma.

Figure 5. Ncome Museum Pedestrian Spiral Bridge



Source: Hot Dip Galvanizers Association (2023)

RESULTS

The challenges for developing battlefield tourism

As noted in previous studies, the region's current institutional framework for tourism development lacks coordination (van der Merwe, 2014; van der Merwe, 2016). The Battlefields Route of KwaZulu-Natal Association is a private initiative promoting the battlefields in South Africa (Battlefields Route, 2014). The route began in the late 1980s with three women and was formally established in 1990 by a group of history enthusiasts and tourist guides. Its members include representatives from various public and private sector organisations, such as tourist guides, the accommodation sector, local tourism authorities, and municipal and provincial stakeholders (Battlefields Route, 2014). Amafa, the provincial heritage agency for KwaZulu-Natal, had been without a CEO for over three years, which impeded the implementation of plans and budgets. This highlights the lack of high-level leadership to support heritage tourism in KwaZulu-Natal, which needs to be addressed to ensure the leadership and strategic development of the battlefields. The absence of adequate funding and leadership has resulted in the deterioration of infrastructure at battlefield sites. As one interviewee put it, "Amafa is not responsible for the maintenance of battlefield sites, but they are doing it by default to protect the tourism industry's interests at over 45 sites in Dundee" (van Vuuren, personal communication, July 15th, 2013).

Most of the stakeholders interviewed, including accommodation owners, expressed a lack of trust and confidence in the local and provincial authorities with respect to tourism management and maintenance, which appears to be a widespread issue (Millar, 2016). Insufficient strategic direction, duplication and wastage of resources, inadequate budgeting, poor or non-existent marketing strategies, and a lack of capacity are among the shortcomings highlighted by various stakeholders. One

stakeholder stated that “the (battlefield tourism) product needs to be better promoted in a professional manner and moved forward into the 21st century. It needs to be de-politicised and targeted at what the visitor wants and will pay for. The sector is divided and not coordinated at this time” (BF/5). The fragmentation and capacity issues in the Battlefields area remain a significant problem. Tourism industry stakeholders believe that local and district municipalities have a political agenda. Many stakeholders expressed their frustration and difficulties in working with policymakers and politicians who are constantly driving the transformation agenda and saying, “We do not want you white people involved... it kind of gets our backs up after years and years of effort to make the battlefields tourism route work. Knowledge and skills are lost from the route by this attitude” (McFadden, personal communication, August 12th, 2014).

Many local and district municipalities are not paying their subscription fees to the Battlefields Route Association, which creates budgetary constraints for the marketing and promotions of the battlefields. Maintenance is once again a significant problem as many municipalities (who are mandated to run and effect tourism) are not adequately performing this function, whereas “battlefield sites need to be clean, visible and visitable – this all comes down to proper and sustained maintenance” (Battlefields Routes, 2014). Accordingly, funding remains a significant issue. For the Battlefields Route Association to effectively manage battlefield tourism in KwaZulu-Natal, an annual budget of at least R450,000 (€23,619) is required, with income from the website and affiliation fees payable by all stakeholders. There is still a shortfall of R300,000 (€15,746) (Battlefields Routes, 2014) on an annual basis. Battlefield tourism must be a “three-way process”: government-led, community-owned, and private-sector funded and supported; this partnership needs to be strengthened and made more viable if battlefield tourism is to be a sustainable tool for local development in South Africa (Keitumetse, 2016; van der Merwe, 2014, 2016).

Several policy-related suggestions were made to expand and maximise the potential of battlefields as a tourism asset. Interviewees argued that the promotion of heritage tourism should be activity-based, with annual festivals and events that encompass heritage and other attractions to attract visitors. Tourists should come for specific heritage elements and then have access to a broader package. As one interviewee stated, “[a]lso in this type and stage of development of the business, it is still very much personality driven with individuals making a mark but limited to particular sites. There is a need for innovation, new ideas, and a realisation that the same old stuff will not keep selling. This is a difficult concept for the locals – what we make or can do, so what is wrong with it?” (McFadden, personal communication, August 12th, 2014). Furthermore, municipalities must grasp the concept of the tourism industry and the potential it holds for local development. The netnography revealed some interesting findings. Visiting both museum sites’ websites is quite telling. The Blood River Heritage Site is only available in Afrikaans (with no facility or provision for translation into English or any other language); this immediately excludes tourists and non-Afrikaans speaking visitors. Figure 6 is a screenshot of their website.

Figure 6. Screenshot of the Bloedrivier Erfenisterrein website



Source: Author's own creation (visit the website at: <https://bloedrivier.org.za>)

On the other hand, when visiting the Ncome Museum website, one reaches a page on the internet which says that “this website may be impersonating www.ncomemuseum.co.za to steal your personal financial information”. Both the Tourism KwaZulu-Natal website (<https://zulu.org.za/travel/>) and the Battlefields Route KwaZulu-Natal website (<https://www.battlefieldsroute.co.za>) feature each of the Battle of Blood River Museums on their websites. The narratives are quite different and are told from either the Afrikaner or the AmaZulu perspective; no middle ground is found. On the 4th of November, 2022, the 10th Courageous Conversations Conference – Building a Cohesive Society – A Reflection, was held at the Ncome Museum in Nquthu (across the Ncome River), where some rather engaging and meaningful discussions were had (UMSunduzi and Ncome Museums, 2022). Although, as revealed in “The Contested Histories Initiative, Ncome and Blood River Monuments, Nquthu-Dundee, South Africa”, published in February 2021 – not much has changed:

The Blood River Monuments, Bloedrivier Museum are synonymous for the same site. These different names still inform the perspective of the viewer. While a new name was proposed to encompass the entire site – eKukhumelaneni umlotha (Zulu for ‘place of reconciliation’) –, this never came to fruition. The Battle of Blood River and its subsequent manifestations became powerful imagery fuelling both apartheid mythology and black resistance. The nuanced interpretations from the 1990s serve a small part in rectifying the hurt stemming from this highly contested event. With attempts of reconciliation, the symbolism of the day has changed within the post-apartheid era. These attempts, however, are not without their criticism. The Eastern Bank, still run by the Voortrekker Monument, is not only a testament to the Great Trek, it is a place of nationalist pride: the Western Bank mirrors this. Rather than reconciling opposition, resistance and pain, as suggested by the Legacy Project’s academic panel, it symbolises a troubling interpretation of Zulu culture created by both Afrikaner and Zulu nationalists. Neither side reconciles their own problematic past or

the conflict between them. However, it is important to note that while historically the sites have been referred to separately as the Ncome Museum and Blood River Museum, this has changed over the ages to the Ncome-Blood River Heritage site. Nevertheless, The Bridge, which should act as a physical representation of the monument, is often locked. It is therefore clear that, while the physical spaces may change, reconciliation at the site is an ongoing, slow-moving process (The Contested Histories Initiative, 2021, pp. 14–15).

CONCLUSIONS

The various narratives that exist about the Battle of Blood River at both the Blood River Heritage Site and the Ncome Museum are contradictory and contested. Most tourists visit either one or the other and few people visits both, to get a balanced perspective of what happened that fateful day on the 16th of December, 1838. Both museum sites host various cultural and nationalistic events throughout the year and both encourage school visits, but are visitors getting a balanced view of this history? The local government, provincial government, and all stakeholders involved in the Battlefields Tourism industry need to rethink how they work together to create a consolidated and objective experience of cultural and heritage tourism in this region. This has important implications for sustainability (Csapó et al., 2010), marketability and positive local economic impacts and benefits of the battlefields in South Africa. More research is necessary to find solutions on how this would be possible. A negotiated and nuanced perspective of this battle needs to be made from both the Afrikaner and Zulu sites; then more international visitors will partake in this form of cultural and heritage tourism. As long as the footbridge between the museums remains locked from both ends, visitors will only get one side of the Battle of Blood River story.

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