

# Ncome—Monument and Museum as “Critical Response”\*

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*Abstract: The Ncome monument and museum in KwaZulu-Natal was built in 1998 by the post-apartheid South African government to commemorate the fallen Zulu warriors of the 1838 “Battle of Blood River.” The article traces the origins of this project to the construction of a museum on the Afrikaner Nationalist battlefield of Blood River, initiated short after 1994. It is argued that Ncome ultimately became a political necessity because the authorities in charge failed to modify the existing heritage site to be more balanced and inclusive, and notably to represent a re-interpreted battle narrative in the newly established Blood River museum. [Keywords: Ncome, Blood River, heritage, museum, post-apartheid]*

## Introduction

The Ncome monument and museum was built to pay tribute to the fallen Zulu warriors of the battle that entered official history books as the Battle of Blood River. It was fought in northern KwaZulu-Natal (near Dundee and Nqutu) in 1838 between a small, but well-armed group of advancing Voortrekkers and a large army of Zulu warriors equipped with stabbing spears. Although ever more ambitious additions to a series of commemorative monuments accumulated on the site over the decades and periodically renewed the memory of the Voortrekker victory, no formal memorials had ever been erected on this battlefield in memory of the Zulus, who had lost their lives in such numbers that their blood allegedly colored the river red.

After the first general democratic elections in April 1994, which formally ended apartheid, the new Government of National Unity initiated a host of memorials, monuments, and heritage sites to redress the existing heritage landscape, which was heavily biased towards the achievements, the suffering and the victories of the white minority. In this context, Blood River was officially re-named Ncome, its traditional Zulu name, and on December 16, 1998, at the occasion of the 160th anniversary of the contested battle, the new Ncome monument/museum was officially unveiled on the opposite (eastern) side of the river from the existing monument, telling the “other” side of the story in the interest of reconciliation and nation-building (Figure 1).

The Ncome project attracted not only extensive media interest, but also some scholarly attention, notably from South African historian, Nsizwa Dlamini, and international scholars Paula Girshick (2004) and, most recently, Scott Schönfeldt-Aultman (2006).<sup>1</sup> Dlamini’s (2001) meticulous historical analysis retraces the planning process of the Ncome project and critically evaluates the initial museum exhibition, which has since been changed. Ncome was part of the National Legacy Project, a state-initiated series of nine heritage developments constructed throughout

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South Africa to commemorate previously neglected, now deemed nationally significant, aspects of the past.<sup>2</sup> He concludes that the Ncome project, despite being funded by the national government with the intention to become an inclusive national symbol of reconciliation, was “hijacked” by Zulu nationalist forces for the revival of ethnic nationalism and partisan political agendas (Dlamini 2001:132) – a view that both Girshick and Schönfeldt-Aultman support. Girshick (2004:25) argues that Ncome was initially envisaged as a memorial (to the fallen Zulu warriors), but as a result of ethnic resistance to a state ideology of reconciliation, the project changed into a monument during the course of its conceptualization and implementation: a monument celebrating Zulu military prowess and a heroic tradition as a proud warrior nation.



Figure 1. Ncome Monument and Museum at the battlefield of Blood River/Ncome. Unveiled 1998, museum opened 1999. KwaZulu-Natal, near Dundee. Photograph by the author, 2008.

This article does not aim to contest these findings or to engage with the issue of monument versus memorial, but rather I attempt to throw new light on this interesting project by considering how the Ncome monument and museum essentially grew out of an Afrikaner initiative to upgrade the Blood River battlefield site.<sup>3</sup> I argue that Ncome and the “need” for a representation of the Zulu perspective on this battle emerged as a direct result of what amounted to a largely publicly funded promotion of the Afrikaner nationalist perspective at a crucial time of socio-political change in South Africa and the emergence of new discourses on the country’s



contentious past. I further argue that the Ncome project was a trend setter in the region and perhaps beyond, as it constitutes an early and prominent precedent for what soon became a popular strategy of the post-apartheid state's politics of public memorialization: the concept of "completing" the memorial landscape by "countering" existing monuments with new ones, or—more crudely put—juxtaposing "white" with "black" heritage.

## **Blood River and Afrikaner Nationalist Commemoration**

I shall not repeat details about the historical event that the Ncome project commemorates, as this is well covered in the historical literature (notably Laband 1995) and in Dlamini's (2001) and Girshick's (2004) articles. It is important, though, to reiterate firstly the historical significance of the Zulu defeat, as it opened up the land for white settlement; and secondly the symbolic significance of the battle in later Afrikaner nationalist discourses. Because the Voortrekkers had allegedly made a covenant with God before the decisive battle, their victory and subsequent occupation of the land was construed as divinely ordained. The battle hence became a key event in the construction of Afrikaner nationalism and the Afrikaner foundation myth, especially from the 1930s onwards, when the community celebrated the centenary of the "Great Trek," the historical exodus from the Cape into the interior in search of new lands.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, the battle site of Blood River soon became one of Afrikanerdom's holiest shrines, closely associated—historically, ideologically and aesthetically—with the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria and the Voortrekker Museum and Church of the Vow in Pietermaritzburg, the capital of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN).<sup>5</sup> Members of the Afrikaner community erected the first commemorative marker, a small cairn, on the battlefield in 1866, followed by a larger cemented, pyramidal cairn in 1938. At the same time (the occasion being the centenary of the battle), Afrikaner nationalists investigated plans for a much more impressive monument, which came to fruition and was eventually unveiled in 1947, consisting of a life-size granite ox-wagon monument sculpted by Coert Steynberg. In 1967 the National Monuments Council (NMC) officially declared the battle site a national monument, prompting even more ambitious commemorative intervention. In 1971, Steynberg's sculpture had to be moved (apparently much lamented by the artist) to make room for the life-size, recreated ox-wagon *laager* (camp) monument of the Voortrekker leader, Andries Pretorius, for which Blood River is now best known.<sup>6</sup>

Unveiled on December 16, 1971, but fully completed only many years later, the monument (designed by Cobus Esterhuizen) consists of 64 bronzed cast-iron wagons, which were originally placed in a D-shape along the edge of the river (later re-arranged as a circle), replicating what was then thought to have been the shape of the original battle formation (Figure 2). While Steynberg's granite version of the symbolic ox-wagon was slightly stylized as a necessary concession to the medium, the bronze wagons were indeed facsimiles of the actual wagons, modeled on the Johanna van der Merwe centenary wagon, which had been used in the symbolic re-enactment of the Great Trek in 1938. In a quest to further enhance their realism, all ox-wagons were equipped with real lanterns (later replaced by electrical lights), which could be lit at night. Furthermore, replicas of Pretorius' gun were cast and placed in the openings (van Tonder 1961, 1975; Oberholster 1972; Rankin 1988).



Figure 2. Blood River monument at the battlefield of Blood River/Ncome. Commemorative cairn in the foreground and bronze ox-wagons in the back. Photograph by the author, 2008.

Both Dlamini (2001) and Girshick (2004) have closely analyzed the Ncome monument and museum in the context of the Legacy Project and the coalition politics of the time, notably the tension between the African National Congress (ANC) and its national agenda of reconciliation and nation building versus the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and partisan Zulu nationalist aims. I argue that key elements of the project (both conceptual and aesthetic) unfolded long before the Legacy Project came into being and it is this earlier genesis that is of prime interest here. I intend to show that the very existence of the new Ncome heritage project was prompted by proposed changes to the Blood River heritage site, and that virtually every element of Ncome's design and proposed function took its cues from what exists on the western side of the Ncome river.<sup>7</sup> It will become evident that the Ncome project fundamentally shaped the politics of public commemoration in post-apartheid South Africa and particularly in KZN.

## **Blood River Museum Initiative**

In the context of the post 1994 re-shuffle of the museum administration field, the state-funded Voortrekker Museum in Pietermaritzburg was temporarily put in charge of the Blood River monument site, originally owned by the Dutch Reformed Church. Management immediately decided to upgrade the monument site by adding a museum that would include various visitor amenities. The KZN Regional Office of the NMC considered an application with plans for the proposed new development towards the end of 1994 and promptly rejected it. The proposed museum or visitor center, reportedly designed as a British-style medieval fortress with towers and battlements, was “entirely inappropriate for the site,” explained NMC Regional Manager, Andrew Hall, because “developments on battlefields and similar sites should be as unobtrusive and understated as possible” (1994). This statement is rather ironic in view of the earlier-mentioned ostentatious monument developments that the NMC had previously approved for erection on this battlefield site.

Significantly, Hall went on to suggest that the funds available for this project should rather be utilized to purchase the other portion of the battlefield on the opposite (eastern) bank of the river, “thereby attaining an ability to portray the Zulu role in the battle” (1994). This would foster a “better” (read more inclusive) interpretation of the history of the Province and create facilities relevant to the development of the heritage tourism industry, as well as being in “the spirit of the times” (Hall 1994), i.e. the impending socio-political changes and associated revaluing of long-neglected African perspectives on local history.

While the western bank of the river belonged to the province of Natal, the eastern bank was part of the “homeland” of KwaZulu, where the KwaZulu Monuments Council (KMC) was in charge of administering heritage conservation, but an amalgamation of the two conservation bodies was already anticipated at the time (finalized in 1997 and called Amafa aKwaZulu-Natali [Amafa]). The director of the KMC, Barry Marshall, had long cherished the idea of building a Zulu counterpart to the Blood River monument, and was hence highly supportive of Hall’s proposal to unify the battlefield site. Yet, it is significant to note that even at this early stage, divergent visions existed about the symbolic significance of the proposed development among various individuals in the two conservation agencies and associated heritage bodies: some saw it as an opportunity to make a Zulu nationalist statement, while others wanted it to symbolize reconciliation (Hall, e-mail to author, April 20, 2007). Nevertheless, these developments constituted the first concrete steps in building a Zulu counterpart to the Afrikaner Nationalist monument and, more importantly, the beginning of what soon became a key strategy in the post-apartheid politics of remembrance throughout South Africa.

At a meeting on February 1, 1995, members of the NMC considered a revised design for the museum building on the Voortrekker side of the battlefield, prepared by renowned architect Hannes Meiring. Compared to the initial British-style medieval fortress proposal, Meiring’s blueprint drew on North African and Ndebele architectural sources of inspiration, presumably in an attempt to “Africanize” the building and make it more relevant in terms of the “spirit of the times.” But the KZN Plans Committee of the NMC again deemed this proposal unsuitable for aesthetic reasons, as it was not unobtrusive enough and the specific African references were considered unsuitable for a building on this site.<sup>8</sup> Meiring eventually produced an acceptable



design (Hall 1995a), consisting of a one-story red brick building with sparse detailing and a flat roof (the currently visible hipped roof and gable were added years later) (Figure 3). Although the committee had in principle been in favor of the proposed development, because it acknowledged that the site was in need for tourist facilities, a more fundamental issue had been opened up by the projected museum, quickly creating avid media attention (e.g. Chothia 1995).



Figure 3. Blood River museum at the battlefield of Blood River/Ncome. Opened in 1996. Photograph by the author, 2008.

The controversy revolved around the fact that a considerable amount of money, mostly financed by the Voortrekker Museum and the *Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge* (Federation of Afrikaner Cultural Associations [FAK]), the most important and influential Afrikaner cultural organization, was about to be spent on a commemorative development at Blood River, an emotionally and politically sensitive site, to represent narrow, sectarian interests.<sup>9</sup> This furthermore occurred at a time of significant socio-political changes, in the context of which familiar historical narratives and their public representation were already becoming subject of critical re-assessment. As Hall cautions in a letter to the Director of the NMC: "...we are coming under increasing pressure from the Province, Zulu leadership, the IFP and the Kwazulu Monuments Council, to use the NMC's powers to make those sponsoring the development re-evaluate it in light of the concerns of a community broader than that which they represent"

(1995b). Simultaneously, the Director of the FAK intervened in the matter and urged Hall and the provincial Plans Committee to approve the plans. Hall advocated that the issue be addressed at the NMC policy making level and suggested that a broad process of consultation with other cultural formations and communities be instituted before the proposed development should be permitted to proceed (Hall 1995b, Hall, e-mail to author, April 20, 2007).

Hall then informed Meiring of the required community consultation exercise and advised that the KMC had pointed out the need to add “some sort of Zulu focus,” most likely a statue, but ultimately to be decided upon through the consultation process (1995c). Although the inclusion of a Zulu symbol was now a condition of the permit, by September 1995, it became clear that the *Stigting vir die Bloedrivier-Gelofteterrein* (hereafter *Bloedrivier Stigting*), a heritage foundation established to manage the site, would not be prepared to spend enough money on this requirement to produce a significant icon. Arguably this fact laid the foundation for the national government’s later decision to finance the Ncome project through its inclusion in the National Legacy Project, hence turning a provincial initiative into a national venture. In a faxed letter to Marshall, Hall (1995d) explains that the *Bloedrivier Stigting* was planning to erect a large *indlu* (round thatched hut) on either side of the Coert Steynberg ox-wagon monument, which the local community could either use to sell crafts, or for exhibition purposes. This directly foreshadows details of the later Ncome project, where such huts are now found in front of the entrance for precisely these purposes, but precedes the Legacy Project and its directives.

In the same fax, Hall (1995d) highlights the need to extend the boundaries of the officially protected battlefield across the river and emphasizes the desirability of a future re-interpretation of the entire site, which would in effect give previously marginalized communities a chance to have a say in the creation of the museum exhibition. This was significant, because it would invariably lead to a more inclusive and balanced representation of this contested battle than if stakeholders of the Afrikaner perspective were exclusively in charge. The museum building—incidentally referred to as an interpretation center, just as the Ncome museum was also initially conceptualized as an interpretation center—was by now almost completed and two bronze plaques, one in Afrikaans and one in isiZulu, were affixed on either side of the entrance. The inscription of the plaques refers to reconciliation between Zulu and Afrikaner and the unveiling of the Zulu plaque by a prominent Zulu-speaking representative of the KZN government in November 1995 presaged the emerging role of this battlefield site as an icon of reconciliation at a time when the National Legacy Project was still in its conceptual stages. Even the idea of creating a physical link between the two sides of the battlefield was already discussed at the time.

### **Ncome’s Inclusion in the National Legacy Project**

If the NMC had hence pushed the project into a specific direction, no further steps were taken to enforce the plans and communications exchanged earlier.<sup>10</sup> No members of the Zulu community or historians representing the Zulu perspective on the battle were involved in the exhibition of the newly opened museum, which predictably depicted the battle exclusively from the Afrikaner perspective. No steps were taken towards the construction of a bridge and no Zulu statue was erected. Amazingly, by the end of 1998, the NMC had still not declared the eastern side of the

battlefield a national monument. This was in fact only accomplished on December 11, 1998 after intense pressure from the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST), following Ncome's inclusion in the National Legacy Project (Havemann 1998). Girshick (2004:26) established that Ncome was not part of the preliminary list of sites selected for the Legacy Project, but was added only later and then immediately prioritized over other projects on the list. This occurred in early 1998 as a result of Lionel Mtshali's intervention, who had taken over the portfolio of the DACST from Ben Ngubane in September 1996.

In terms of the coalition politics of the early post-election period, it is important to note that Mtshali was a senior member of the IFP in the ANC led Government of National Unity, but unlike Ngubane, he was also a prominent Zulu nationalist, who was keen on promoting Zulu culture and the notion of a proud Zulu nation. He had apparently picked up the idea of the Ncome project directly from Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, prominent leader of the IFP, leader of the former KwaZulu "homeland" and personally related to the Zulu royal house. However, Bongani Ndhlovu, Curator of the Ncome Museum (e-mail to author, March 5, 2008) importantly adds that Mtshali had grown up in the Ncome area (in Kingsley) and suggests that he was likely to have a personal interest in the project and its anticipated economic and development benefits for "his" area.

According to Girshick (2004:26), Mtshali seized the opportunity to "make an historical end run around what he saw as an ANC 'cabal' in the Ministry who were trying to force their own partisan monuments through." This assessment aside, I want to suggest that the lack of response on the Afrikaner side to represent Zulu perspectives on the battle, the absence of a substantial move towards a re-interpretation of the biased historical narrative must have been a strongly contributing factor in Mtshali's decision to include Ncome in the National Legacy Project and endow it with relatively substantial funding. The prioritization and fast-tracking of this project was inevitably prompted by the upcoming 160th anniversary of the battle on December 16, 1998.

Based on the supreme significance attached to the Battle of Blood River, Afrikaner Nationalists had always considered the 16th of December a holy day, initially called Dingaans Day.<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that the post-apartheid government did not eliminate the date from the newly devised list of public holidays after 1994, but rather renamed it the Day of Reconciliation.<sup>12</sup> This was particularly apt, because the 16th of December was also the day that the ANC in alliance with the Communist Party had chosen in 1961 to launch its armed wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe, marking the beginning of the armed struggle. It was logical that the battlefield associated with this key date should now become a symbol of reconciliation—in the narrow sense between the two warring parties of the past (Zulus and Voortrekkers), and in a broader sense about black and white in the present—to supersede or redress the divisive historical moments that date had traditionally marked.<sup>13</sup> From this perspective, the Ncome project fit well into the National Legacy Project and it may not have been obvious from the start that the project would end up promoting an exclusive Zulu ethnic cause, in conflict—as Dlamini, Girshick and Schönfeldt-Aultman argue—with the government's inclusive agenda of national unity.



## Ncome as Response to Blood River

The processes that occurred during the following period of intense activity in the run-up to the anniversary date have been traced in detail by Dlamini (2001) and Girshick (2004). Mtshali appointed Musa Xulu, also an IFP loyalist, as Deputy-Director General of the DACST and made him ultimately responsible for the Legacy Project and specifically Ncome. He set up the Blood River/Ncome Steering committee, bringing together a diverse group of heritage and museum officials, academics, representatives of various cultural foundations, and local tribal authorities. Several sub-committees were established, among them one focused on devising the conceptual framework for the new heritage site. The DACST assembled a diverse panel of academic historians, representing different intellectual and ideological perspectives, who were tasked with developing a historical account that would “reconcile” different interpretations of the battle and rework its symbolic meaning in the interest of nation-building (Dlamini 2001:129).<sup>14</sup> Other sub-committees attended to the architectural design and construction of the monument, as well as to the planning of the public unveiling ceremony.<sup>15</sup> Although various tensions and divisions manifested themselves in meetings and communications, the project eventually took shape through the process of negotiation among members of these different sub-committee groups (Girshick 2004:26).

The committee work engendered various proposals about how the project would express its intended message of reconciliation. Not only would the development of a parallel structure to the overall site create aesthetic and conceptual balance, but the reconciliation was to be furthermore emphasized through symbolic architectural signifiers. The most important element in this regard, both in symbolic and practical terms, was the proposed footbridge linking the two sections of the battlefield, thus encouraging visitors to experience both perspectives on this contested battle. Furthermore, the unveiling ceremony on the day of the 160th anniversary was intended to become a public show of reconciliation with prominent representatives of Afrikaner and Zulu constituencies in attendance.

Dolf Havemann, Deputy Director of the Heritage Section of the DACST and in charge of supervising the Ncome planning process, conceived of the idea that the envisaged Wall of Remembrance should take the shape of the much celebrated horn-like Zulu attack formation, *izimpondo zenyathi* (‘horns of the buffalo’), commonly used by the Zulus at the time of the battle. A few artists were invited to compete for the design of the monument, but its basic shape was never open for negotiation.<sup>16</sup> Hall remarks (e-mail to author, April 20, 2007) that a monument/museum building of this kind was very much in line with the experience and expertise of Havemann, who had worked in the field of museum services under the old regime for many years.

Some viewers may appreciate the concept of an architectural shape with recognizable references to Zulu cultural icons as a (re)conciliatory gesture. But others, especially perhaps older people, may perceive it as a patronizing and even racist signal, because during the heyday of apartheid, government-funded architectural developments in the “homelands” (e.g. universities, administration buildings, and especially any buildings with a “cultural” purpose) were frequently designed to include “tribal” iconographic references. In the heartland of KwaZulu for instance, the architecture of the KMC office and museum at Ondini outside of Ulundi (built in the 1980s)

is inspired by a Zulu homestead, or *umuzi*, and the roof of the adjacent amphitheatre takes the shape of a traditional cowhide shield. The state presumably promoted this design approach to increase the level of identification that “homeland” citizens would develop with “their” institutions, as well as to imprint a discernible mark of difference onto the contemporary built landscape.

But while an ethnically explicit approach to architectural design was certainly familiar territory to Havemann and perhaps others on the committee, I suspect that it was also precisely the narrative quality and explicitness of the Afrikaner Nationalist *laager* monument on the other side of the battle, that prompted the Ncome Steering Committee to favor a narrative structure over an abstract memorial marker or a plain Wall of Remembrance. If the Blood River monument literally depicts the Voortrekker battle formation on the one side of the river, the shape of the Ncome monument likewise represents the Zulu fighting formation on the other side.

The Ncome monument’s one-story structure consists of two roughly parallel plastered and painted masonry walls, describing a semi-circular “horn” shape, while the ground plan of the museum space inside recalls the shape of a shield. Metal shields with painted cowhide patterns representing the different regiments that fought in the battle, are also mounted along the “horn’s” convex center part, facing the Boer *laager* in a simulated front. The ox-wagon has become a key icon of Afrikaner culture (symbolizing a home, a fortress, and a church according to the Blood River museum exhibition) and the strategically placed wagons played an important role in the Voortrekker victory. Likewise, certain animal horns are highly symbolic in traditional Zulu culture: cattle horns, for instance, are linked with ancestral beliefs; the horns of the sacrificial cattle are traditionally placed on the hut of a deceased person and fulfill a commemorative function. The Zulu battle formation imitating the horns of the buffalo has not only become legendary within Zulu culture, but is inter-culturally associated with the success and efficiency of the 19th century Zulu military machine.

The museum exhibition, which opened only a year later, was developed under great time pressure and presented in a haphazard manner, e.g. artifacts were displayed without labels indicating dates or regional provenance. Only one of the four glass cases displayed information on the battle; the rest contained Zulu ethnographic material such as weapons, beadwork, pottery, and baskets. They were borrowed from various museums in KZN and did not necessarily represent the specific styles and shapes typical for the region around Ncome. The emphasis on ethnographic material shifts attention away from the humiliating military defeat to a proud celebration of Zulu tradition and culture, represented as homogenous, fixed and static, much in line with stereotypical tourist imagery (Girshick 2004:30-31; Dlamini 2001:134).

The museum exhibit of the battle itself, argues Dlamini (2001), did not reflect the findings of the collective report worked out by the academic panel of historians, but was rather primarily guided by the radical Zulu nationalist interpretation of one member of the panel, namely Jabulani Maphalala (IFP), a Zulu nationalist historian from the University of Zululand. Maphalala was also extremely close to Xulu, who had become very involved and influential in the running of the Ncome project and made some crucial decisions, including, in July 1999, to change the initially envisaged interpretation center into the development of a museum on Zulu culture (Girshick 2004; Hall, e-mail to author, April 20, 2007). Dlamini argues that Xulu was key to the “Ncome

contradiction,” i.e. the project’s appropriation by Zulu nationalist forces, which succeeded in exploiting a national resource for the advancement of partisan ethnic identity discourses, thereby contradicting the aims of the Legacy Project (2001:132). While officially espousing the national government’s goal of reconciliation, Girshick (2004:26) agrees, Mtshali’s main concern was to promote a particular Zulu version of the historical past and the notion of an heroic Zulu nation, much in line with IFP ideology.

But considering the matter from an ANC perspective, one could also argue that by including Ncome in the National Legacy Project, the ANC-led national government with its aims of national unity, non-racialism, and non-sectarianism, ultimately retained some control over the site and what it should symbolize. This effectively pre-empted the IFP-led provincial government from devising its own commemorative venture at this contentious site, as happened, for instance, at the nearby battlefield of Isandlwana. Here, Amafa initiated a memorial similarly honoring the previously unrepresented Zulu dead with funding raised from the traditional Zulu leadership. Amidst much praise, the project (unveiled in 1999) was also criticized, namely for fostering partisan ethnic identity discourses, the Zulu nationalist cause, and IFP political party agendas instead of representing a commemorative “message” with which all South Africans can identify.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, the fact that the Ncome monument/museum was envisaged to become an independent national museum, administered and managed directly by the DACST, indicates that the national government wanted to remain in charge of this important heritage site and keep it out of the sphere of influence of partisan forces. Due to logistical and funding difficulties, however, the government requested the Voortrekker Museum in Pietermaritzburg to administer Ncome (intended as a temporary measure). Significantly, the Voortrekker Museum itself, previously exclusively focused on Afrikaner history, was by then in the process of transforming itself into an inclusive museum with exhibits representing all sectors of the local population.

The initial exhibition inside the Ncome museum criticized by both Dlamini and Girshick was soon changed, not least perhaps as a result of turbulent internal politics within the DACST.<sup>18</sup> Much of the originally displayed ethnographic material has been removed and the focus is now on the representation of the battle and the historical circumstances that surrounded the conflict. Along the left-hand wall of the museum, a combination of glass cases and larger objects on open display are arranged under the following headings: *Amabutho*—Age Regiments; Women at War; Medicinal Plants; Traditional Weapons; and Sotho Material Culture (Figure 4). The inclusion of the role of women and the display on Sotho culture arguably pre-empt critiques about an ethnically and gender exclusive perspective. The right hand side contains small artifacts in continuous glass cases with ample explanations on labels and text panels, detailing the historical context of the Zulu kingdom, the events leading up to the battle, and the course of the actual battle.<sup>19</sup>

The final glass case before the exit, dedicated to the Dingane-Retief agreement, is arguably the most important display in contesting the Afrikaner version of the battle. A copy of the alleged treaty between Piet Retief and King Dingaan (also spelled Dingane) is shown with the accompanying text questioning how the latter, who was illiterate, could have signed his name “King Dingaan.”<sup>20</sup> This particular display is firstly significant in terms of its content, because it



discredits a piece of paper that has long played a crucial role in legitimizing Afrikaner claims to the land.<sup>21</sup> Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it makes a fundamental point about historiography and its methodology in direct response to the Blood River museum.



Figure 4. Interior of Ncome museum after complete re-arrangement of the original exhibition. Photograph by the author, 2008.

Both the exhibition and the video in the Blood River museum were changed in 2002 after the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria took over the administration and management of Blood River.<sup>22</sup> Wall panels with images and abundant text are mounted all along the walls and a display case with various artifacts occupies the center of the room (Figure 5). The exhibition and the video now acknowledge the existence of other perspectives on the battle and its historical context, although there is still an unmistakable subtext privileging the traditional Afrikaner version. In part this is achieved by emphasizing that the Afrikaner narrative of the battle is entirely based on “written sources,” presumed to be reliable and accurate (according to an older, Western school of thought), while the Zulu version is based on oral history, implied to be largely fictitious.





Figure 5. Interior of Blood River Museum reflecting changes implemented after 2002. Photograph by the author, 2008.

In their predominantly one-sided, nationalist orientation, both museums nevertheless remain skewed reflections of each other. In fact, the new commemorative development at Ncome echoes its existing ideological counterpart at Blood River in almost every respect. Although members of the Steering committee had proposed that Ncome should not become a monument in the conventional, western sense, but rather a place of pilgrimage that would serve the local community both culturally and economically (Girshick 2004:26-27), the end result is just as much a monument as the bronze laager on the other side of the river. Virtually every facility and activity offered on the one side is replicated on the other. For instance, just as the Blood River site is used for Afrikaner cultural events, especially on December 16, various Zulu (and Sotho) cultural activities are performed at the Ncome site.<sup>23</sup> A kind of flower and herb garden can be found on both sides of the river; the cairn on the Blood River battlefield finds its counterpart in a newly established cairn or *isivivane* at Ncome, where each visitor is requested to add a stone. Blood River offers tourist accommodation and at Ncome, similar accommodation is currently under construction.<sup>24</sup> In 2004 the Voortrekker Museum published a visitor information brochure on the “Ncome - Blood River Heritage Site,” a simple photocopied A4 folded leaflet, which provides all relevant information for Blood River on the one side and for Ncome on the other (Voortrekker Museum 2004).



## **Ncome: Success or Failure?**

“Two monuments at the site of the battle, commemorating the participation of both sides, will complete the symbolism,” said a satisfied Lionel Mtshali at the opening of the Ncome monument in December 1998 (quoted in Schnehage 1998). Some might however rather agree with Jabulani Maphalala’s view (interview with author, January 4, 2005) that the Ncome monument on the other side of the river constitutes an “apartheid-style solution” to the problem of publicly commemorating a contested battle. To him the very existence of the Ncome monument/museum testifies to the failure of this Legacy Project’s reconciliatory aim, because the two monuments, facing each other like two hostile camps, ostensibly perpetuate old divisions (Figure 6). Indeed, the construction of Ncome as an entirely separate monument and museum was ultimately the result of a failure to modify the existing commemorative site at Blood River to be more inclusive, and notably to represent a re-interpreted battle narrative in the newly established Blood River museum.



Figure 6. Blood River monument (foreground) facing Ncome monument/museum (background) across the river. Photograph by the author, 2008.

Much has been made of the fact that the pragmatically and especially symbolically significant footbridge between the two sides of the battle field was never constructed; in fact, the sight of the



unutilized concrete pylons already constructed in the river brazenly highlights the absence of the bridge up to the present day. A range of different reasons for the delay have been suggested, but ultimately, as Maphalala aptly put it, “the bridge must start in the mind” (interview with author, January 4, 2005). The problems and contradictions surrounding the Ncome project are evidence of the continuing tensions between the utopian vision of a non-racial society, at peace with the world and itself, and the daily reality of a deeply divided society, segments of which are highly defensive and adamantly resistant to change and reconciliation, despite the national government’s efforts in that direction.

The unveiling ceremony of the Ncome monument on December 16, 1998 revealed precisely these fissures. The occasion was marked by lavish festivities attended by thousands of people, which included many dignitaries, traditional leaders (*amaKhosi*), representatives of various Afrikaner organizations, international tourists, and foreign media representatives. Many of the speeches and statements delivered at that occasion focused on reconciliation between Afrikaner and Zulu people as the primary objective and significance of the new monument and prominent representatives of both constituencies engaged in symbolic gestures of reconciliation.<sup>25</sup> But the festivities were also marred by interference from Afrikaner right-wingers, who displayed their strong disapproval and resistance to the notion of reconciliation (Milazi 1998). This overture was followed, during subsequent years, by occasional incidences of racial discrimination against black visitors by white racists, especially on the public holiday of December 16, the Day of Reconciliation, which sometimes escalated into outbursts of hatred and abuse (e.g. Courier 2004). Since the Voortrekker Monument took over the administration of Blood River, the two museums or the two sides of the same battlefield are now administered by separate entities, one arguably associated with inclusiveness and transformation, the other with an ideologically repositioned, albeit still exclusive, Afrikaner identity.

Despite this, I believe the Ncome project in general and the specific question of whether or not it achieved its officially intended objective should not be judged too quickly. To what extent monuments and memorials can contribute to reconciliation is in any case difficult if not impossible to measure. It must be acknowledged that reconciliation is always a long-term process or a work in progress and that different viewers or groups of stakeholders might perceive the project and its success differently. Moreover, Girshick (2004) rightly raises the question whether reconciliation and redress are indeed always compatible goals. One might say that at Ncome a bold statement of resistance, reflecting a radical Zulu nationalist perspective, might be necessary in order to achieve a balanced representation of the past, and an effective counterpoint to the conventional Afrikaner version of the battle, which can be considered radical in its own right.

## **Multiple Interpretations**

However, as much as I agree that one *can* plausibly interpret Ncome as a Zulu nationalist statement, it is important to emphasize that this is not the only meaning of Ncome. For instance, while the iconographic references support a reading of both monuments as two hostile camps facing each other frozen in time, some visitors may also interpret the widely opened U-shape of the Ncome monument/museum as an embracing form reaching out to the other side in a gesture

of reconciliation. Likewise, not all visitors will interpret the museum displays in the same manner and much depends on the narrative and attitude of the on-site guide and especially the guide that any visiting groups may bring along. In short, I argue that a potential ambiguity pervades many aspects of the project, opening up a possible multiplicity of interpretations and meanings, which can be considered an asset and which decisively impacts on the question of whether the project was a success in terms of its stated objectives.

Schönfeldt-Aultman (2006), although unequivocally endorsing the interpretation of Ncome as a Zulu nationalist statement, makes an important contribution to the debate by illustrating the possibility of multiple interpretations. The author engages with the politics of representation and specifically with an examination of Zulu identity through the visual signifiers of the monument structure and the museum exhibition. He includes a detailed and very personal interpretation of, among others, the color, shape and position of the building and the multiple meanings it communicates to him about Zulu identities (Schönfeldt-Aultman 2006:222).

For instance, the author contemplates the possibility of a symbolic meaning of the pinkish color painted on the exterior of the plastered building. Noting that the same color frequently appears in Zulu beadwork, pottery and other crafts produced by women, he suggests that “the color may be intended to call attention to women’s role in Zulu society” (Schönfeldt-Aultman 2006:222). He then considers the meaning of pink in Zulu beadwork, which he says (drawing on Hilgard S. Schoeman) alludes to “poverty, laziness, high birth and rank, oath, and promise. Thus the color simultaneously symbolizes the significant role of women in the Zulu warrior nation, the still poor rural Zulu people, the royal blood and identity claims of Zulus, and a new covenant to a new South Africa” (Schönfeldt-Aultman 2006:222).<sup>26</sup> The author carries on relating pink to “the red blood bled by Zulus and ... slightly sunburned white skin” (Schönfeldt-Aultman 2006:223), based on which he develops some thoughts about Zulu and Afrikaner identity.<sup>27</sup>

Not everyone will consider these suggestions plausible; some may find them far-fetched or even completely outlandish, but the example illustrates the range of personal interpretations that are possible when an individual encounters a museum or in fact a cultural product of any kind. It illustrates the potential for an accidental accrual of meaning(s) that can never be controlled or predicted and that may contradict or subvert the originally intended meaning. The issue of communication and multiple interpretations in the museum and heritage context has gained much attention in scholarship internationally (e.g. Mason 2005) and has influenced scholarly work on museums in South Africa (e.g. Coombes 2003; Rassool 2006; Witz 2006). The ensuing understanding of the audience (or the tourists) as consumers and, more importantly, producers of meaning represents a paradigm shift away from the central role of the curator or, as in the case of Ncome, the institutional-political forces that initiate and shape the project and its meaning.

Ironically, in the current South African context, I observe that practitioners in the museum and heritage field and especially political officials who initiate or promote specific heritage developments, frequently attempt to limit the range of possible interpretations or “fix” meaning (Marschall 2004). Alternative, possibly contradictory, interpretations of newly established museums and heritage sites are implicitly considered undesirable, counterproductive or a threat to the unmistakable “messages” that these cultural products are intended to communicate in order to fulfill their socio-political purpose as a targeted measure of redress. This issue and how

it can be addressed at a practical level remains a key challenge for the museum and heritage field in South Africa today.

### **New Monuments as “Critical Response”**

The Ncome project must be understood in the broader context of cultural politics during the immediate post-election period: the government’s objective to adjust an inherited symbolic landscape in accordance with a changed socio-political landscape had to be attained without alienating the previously dominant group and depriving it of their valued cultural symbols. Simon Harrison maintains that “[c]ompetition for power, wealth, prestige, legitimacy or other political resources seems always to be accompanied by conflict over important symbols, by struggles to control or manipulate such symbols in some vital way” (1995:255). He calls this behavior “symbolic conflict” and distinguishes four prototypical forms.

One of these forms is particularly apt in the present context. In an “expansionary contest,” writes Harrison (1995:263), one group in society tries to displace the symbols of a competing group’s identity with its own symbols. This can result in the disappearance of the defeated side’s identity symbols, not necessarily in the sense of their physical destruction, but in the sense that they are no longer used to represent the identity of the respective group. The aim of suppressing the rival group’s identity symbols is not to leave that group in some sense devoid of an identity, but “to integrate or absorb the group by supplanting its symbols of identity with one’s own” (Harrison 1995:265). The Ncome monument/museum does not destroy the contested (and for many people outright offensive) Blood River monument/museum, but it displaces the latter as a symbol of Afrikaner nationalism, and invites all groups in society to identify with the reshaped heritage site on this important battlefield.

Being a component of the prestigious National Legacy Project, furthermore the first one to be completed, the Ncome monument/museum and its crucial relationship with the existing Blood River monument/museum had an explicit or implicit influence on many other commemorative projects. The principle of “countering” an existing colonial or apartheid era monument, memorial or statue with a new one—often directly juxtaposed or employing a similar conceptual approach or aesthetic—has become so common in South Africa and especially in KZN that one could easily consider it as one of the defining characteristics of post-apartheid public commemoration.

For instance, directly following the Ncome example, memorials representing the fallen Zulu warriors have been erected on various battlefields in northern KZN (e.g. Isandlwana or Rorkes’ Drift) and the same principle has occasionally been applied on battlefields elsewhere (e.g. the Egazini monument in Grahamstown, which represents the previously neglected Xhosa combatants of the 1819 Battle of Grahamstown against colonial settlers). Throughout the country, bronze statues of black chiefs or liberation struggle heroes are erected next to—and imitate the style of—statues of Afrikaner leaders or white colonial heroes. Examples include the new statue of Chief Tshwane in Pretoria near the statue of Andries Pretorius; the new statue of King Dinuzulu next to Louis Botha in Durban; the proposed statue of King Cetshwayo next to Queen Victoria in Pietermaritzburg; and the statue of Steve Biko in East London next to an equestrian statue commemorating the British regiments of the South African Anglo-Boer War. In

Port Elizabeth, now part of the Nelson Mandela Metro, the Settler Monument, a tall campanile erected in honor of the 1820 British settlers and a prominent icon along the edge of the sea, will in the future be dwarfed by one of South Africa's most ambitious commemorative projects in the making, namely the Freedom Tower, dedicated to Nelson Mandela and others who contributed to the liberation struggle. The Freedom Park at Salvokop outside Pretoria "counters" the Voortrekker Monument on the opposite hill—the list goes on.

## **Conclusion**

One might think that there is a correlation between the interpretation of Ncome as an "apartheid style solution," in Maphalala's words, and the fact that the origins of this monument/museum predate the National Legacy Project. In other words, perhaps the approach to commemoration at this important battle site was still, if only subconsciously, infused with the ways of thinking and influenced by established modes of development and planning (separate facilities for blacks and whites) carried over from the previous era. Although I have illustrated that the emergence of Ncome as a separate monument/museum was essentially the result of a failure to make a substantial, inclusive intervention on the existing Blood River site, it is indeed compelling to note the parallels with the past.

As I have shown above, the Ncome approach of countering existing heritage sites with new ("separate but equal") heritage sites has since been replicated throughout the country and in fact characterizes some other components of the National Legacy Project, notably Freedom Park. In the museum context, the "add-on" approach—filling gaps of representation by adding exhibits about the history and culture of previously neglected groups—quickly became a standard response to the socio-political need for transformation after 1994. This strategy has been criticized for replicating apartheid-era identity categories and solidifying, rather than challenging, racially or ethnically defined notions of "community," hence falling short of real transformation (e.g. Rassool, Witz and Minkley 2000; Rassool 2001). On the down-side for those in favor of transformation, reconciliation and redress, the construction of post-apartheid counterparts makes the continued existence of largely unchanged Afrikaner monuments and museums possible. They retain their integrity and originally intended meaning as identity symbols in the eyes of the ultraconservative Afrikaner minority, who presumably use these sites to affirm their own sense of identity and pass it on to the younger generation.

Yet, in defense of the government's approach, I want to venture that the deliberate juxtaposition of old and new heritage as represented by the case of Blood River/Ncome certainly challenges historical narratives once officially sanctioned. It publicly contests especially the Afrikaner nationalist identity discourses once associated with these sites, while not depriving a specific minority community of their arguably legitimate right to their own identity symbols. The new, competing symbols hence neutralize or displace the existing ones without physically destroying them.

To some extent this strategy has succeeded, because sites such as Blood River and the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria have indeed been de-stigmatized and are now publicly presented and marketed as cultural, rather than political icons. Their management officially

dissociates itself from the exclusive, racist discourses of the past and the broad Afrikaner community has long ceased to embrace these as celebrated identity symbols (Coombes 2003). Any visitors to the Blood River site must inadvertently take note of the fact that there is another (contesting) monument/museum across the river, and this will inevitably influence their visitor experience, even if they opt not to visit Ncome. Lastly, I firmly believe that many ordinary people may find the mere existence of new post-apartheid monuments and museums, including Ncome, very meaningful and symbolically important, irrespective of the details of their architectural design or the particulars of their museum exhibits.

## **List of Acronyms**

Amafa – Amafa aKwaZulu-Natali ('Heritage KwaZulu-Natal')  
ANC – African National Congress  
DACST – Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology  
FAK – *Federasie van Afrikaanse Kultuurvereniginge*  
IPF – Inkatha Freedom Party  
KMC – KwaZulu Monuments Council  
KZN – KwaZulu-Natal  
NMC – National Monuments Council

## **Notes**

1. See also Bishop (1998); Khumalo (1998); Pienaar (1998); Raper (1999); Ross (1998a, 1998b, 1998c).
2. The National Legacy Project was constituted at Cabinet level within the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology after 1994; by 1997, a list of proposed projects had been developed and in January 1998 the government budgeted about R7 million for the Legacy Project (Dlamini 2001). At present most projects are implemented, a few are still under construction or development.
3. Much has been written about potential ways of distinguishing between monument and memorial. The most influential and frequently cited attempt at a definition remains that of art historian Arthur Danto (1987), who declared triumphalism, celebrating heroes and victories, as characteristic of monuments, whereas a memorial is a solemn precinct honouring the dead. However, Danto's definition has been criticized as oversimplified and ambiguous (e.g. Rowland 1999). I have engaged with this discussion elsewhere (Marschall 2006), arguing that a memorial can also change into a monument over time. In this article, I refer to Ncome as a monument, both because I concur with Girshick's analysis and because the structure is commonly referred to as a monument in the archival documentation and the media.
4. The centenary celebration involved a re-enactment of the "Great Trek" and led to the establishment of many memorials in towns along the route, culminating in the laying of the foundation stone for the well-known Voortrekker Monument outside Pretoria in 1938. The



commemorations contributed substantially to the construction of a specific Afrikaner identity as a unified, coherent “nation” sharing a mutual history and a quest for freedom from (British colonial) oppression.

5. The Church of the Vow was built in 1840 in the Voortrekker’s newly founded capital, Pietermaritzburg, in gratitude for God’s supposed assistance in the Voortrekker’s victory over the Zulus at Blood River. The original church building was later replaced and temporarily used for various other purposes, but in the early 20th century, it was declared a national monument. It now houses a museum dedicated to the history of the Voortrekkers and forms part of the Voortrekker Museum complex. The Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria, penultimate symbol of Afrikaner nationalism, is a tall, square-shaped structure inside an “ox-wagon laager” represented through a circular wall with life-size relief images of ox-wagons. Its foundation stone was laid on December 16, 1938, the centenary of the Battle of Blood River, and it was unveiled in 1949, a year after the National Party victory that marks the formal beginning of apartheid.

6. Andries Pretorius (1798-1853) was a reputable and experienced commando leader who took over the leadership of the Voortrekkers headed for Natal after the death of his predecessor, Piet Retief, in February 1838.

7. As both Dlamini (2001) and Girshick (2004) confuse the two sides, it should be clarified that Blood River is located on the western and Ncome on the eastern side of the river.

8. “The current design was not suitable. A new design of which the principle was that the structure should be part of the landscape rather than deriving inspiration from any cultural context would be likely to find acceptance” (KwaZulu-Natal 1995).

9. The building was to cost around one million rand, which equates to approximately US\$140,000 at the current exchange rate.

10. This might in part be due to the fact that Hall, who had been a driving force in the negotiation with the stakeholders of the Blood River museum initiative, left the regional office of the NMC around this time.

11. It was later renamed Day of Covenant (1952) and since 1980 celebrated as the Day of the Vow.

12. Ultimately, this provides ultra-conservative Afrikaners with the opportunity to carry on commemorating the date in their accustomed way as the Day of the Vow.

13. Although not part of the Legacy Project, one might, in comparison, similarly consider the case of the new memorial and museum at Sharpeville: the 21st of March, the day previously commemorated (especially by members of the PAC) as “Sharpeville Day,” was included in the official list of public holidays as “Human Rights Day;” consequently, the new commemorative structure (erected mostly with government funding) was called “Sharpeville Human Rights Precinct” (rather than Sharpeville memorial) and meant to symbolize a broader, national agenda

of human rights values in addition to the specific historical circumstances of the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960.

14. On October 30, 1998, a Seminar on the Reinterpretation of the Battle of Ncome/Blood River was held at the University of Zululand. According to the official programme, the following academics were scheduled to present papers: J. Carruthers, J. Laband, J. Sithole, L. Mathenjwa, J. Grobler, M. Kunene, J.J. Guy, F. Pretorius, J.S.H. Maphalala.

15. In archival records, the Ncome project is referred to in various ways, e.g. as a “Wall of Remembrance Monument,” a “Monument of Reconciliation,” the “Battle of Blood River/Ncome Monument.”

16. Although the architectural plans (now housed at the SAHRA head office in Cape Town) were drawn up by Pretoria-based architect, André Kriel, the initial design for the Ncome monument was made by Dolf Havemann’s son, who immediately produced a model and later happened to win the competition (Girshick 2004).

17. “Why is a monument that celebrates Zuluness—not blackness, not South Africanness, but distinctly Zuluness—being unveiled in the heart of a region that is being ripped apart by internecine violence,” asked Alex Dodd (1999) at the occasion of the official unveiling, which took place only months before the elections. She insinuates that the high-level appropriation of the new memorial for the Zulu nationalist cause was an attempt by the IFP to please the local voting community, known to consist overwhelmingly of IFP supporters.

18. When Ben Ngubane returned to the Ministry (in 1999), he clashed badly with Xulu and his adherents. Xulu was suspended (in mid-2000) and subsequently dismissed on charges of misconduct, while Havemann left soon after (Hall, e-mail to author, April 20, 2007; South African Government Information 2000).

19. Topic headings are as follows (from the entrance): The Zulu Kingdom and its Political Framework, Life in KwaZulu, Healers, King-in-Council, NoMgungundlovu, Royal Palace, Protection, Causes of the Ncome War, Retief’s Arrival, Death of Retief, Aftermath of Retief’s Death, The Zulus Prepare for War, Women in the War, Regiments Leaving, Women’s Drift, Attack, Dingane Passed Away, and Dingane Retief Agreement.

20. Captions and labels in the display case entitled “Dingane Retief Agreement” read as follows: “King Dingane was illiterate, and land in the Kingdom of KwaZulu was indivisible and could not be partitioned into farms. Land was regarded as an important resource given to the people by God. It was only the King who could give people residential sites.” “Amakhosi, i.e. ‘chiefs’ in the 1880’s were putting crosses when they signed but here it is said that Dingane signed the document. Does this make sense?” “Did he really sign or is this a fake signature?”

21. The official Blood River guide book (published in 2000 and reprinted in 2007) reproduces the hand-written treaty document and spells out its exact wording. The introductory paragraph explains that “in this treaty Dingane ceded all the land between the Tugela and the Umzimvubu rivers to the Boers.” (d’Assonville 2007:10).

22. Several other changes were made to the site, including the modification of the roof of the museum building, the upgrading of the on-site tourist accommodation and the caravan park, as well as the installation of an automatic access gate to the fenced-in site. The older version of the video was still sold in the museum shop for a few years subsequently (but not anymore).

23. According to the information brochure (Voortrekker Museum 2004), the most important annual event at Blood River is the Vow commemorations on December 16, which includes a church service and listening to the history of the battle as told by historians. Traditional Voortrekker activities such as baking bread, fixing wagon wheels or horse riding are also demonstrated. Cultural events at Ncome include monthly performances of isiZulu and seSotho traditional songs, as well as displays of traditional isiZulu/Sotho food, dress, and dances.

24. More precisely, at the time of writing (February 2008), earthworks for such accommodation facilities have been completed, as well as paving and parking bays, but actual construction has not yet started.

25. “Freedom Front leader Constand Viljoen and Blood River Foundation Chairman Hennie de Wet crossed from the Afrikaner monument to the Ncome monument on the other side of Blood River, to extend the hand of goodwill and reconciliation” (Bishop 1998).

26. See Schoeman (2008) for the discussion of Zulu beadwork, cited here and by Schönfeldt-Aultman.

27. My own speculation about the choice of the pink-reddish color is that it may have been inspired by the red face-brick finish of the Blood River museum on the other side of the river. It must be considered that the color has probably faded somewhat over the years and may originally have appeared more reddish than pink. In South Africa, plastered sections of a brick building are sometimes painted in reddish color if the intention is to blend in the two or aesthetically minimize the difference.

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