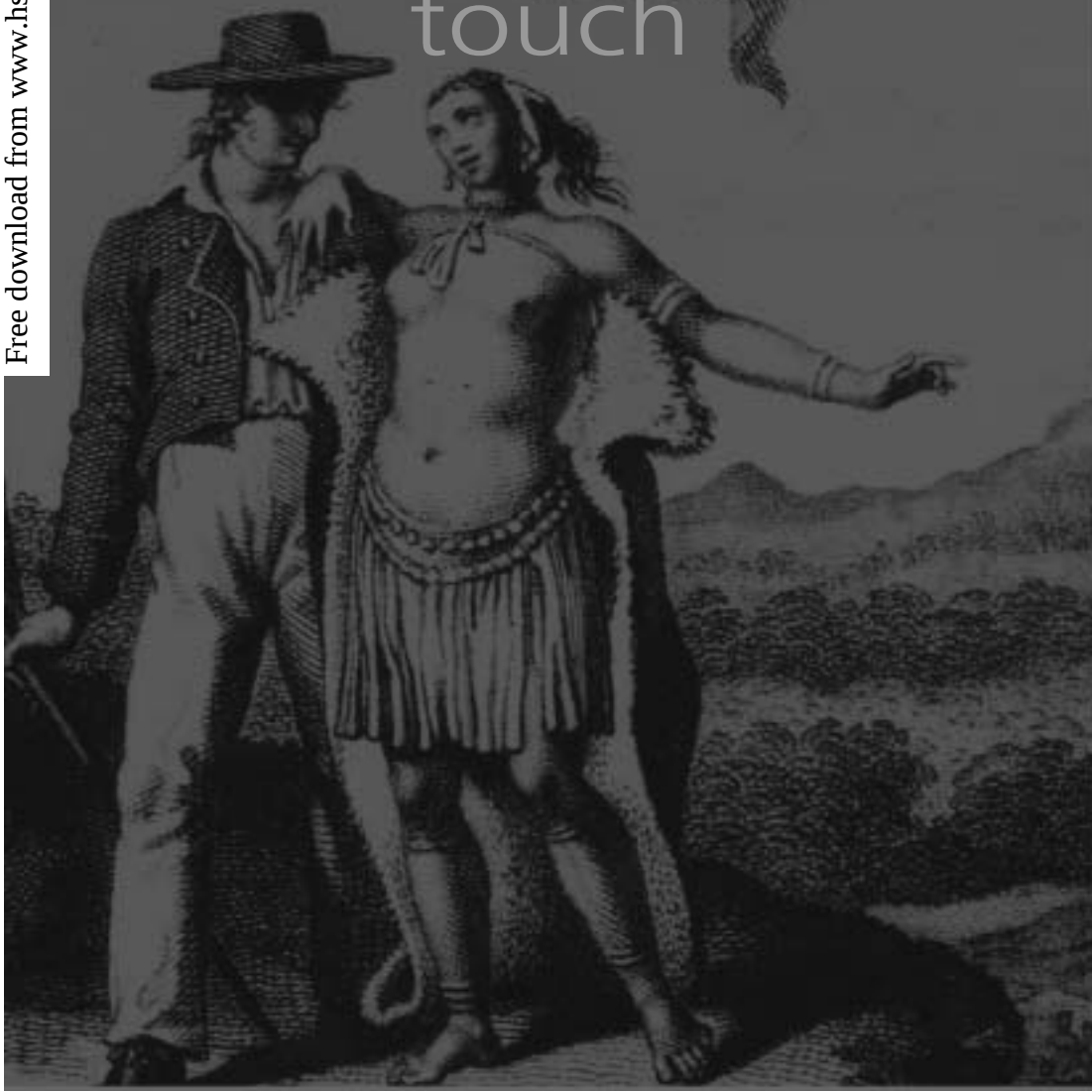


[chapter three]

Being in touch



[chapter three]

Being in touch



Ray and Diana de Proft with a photograph of their son, Graham, and his white girlfriend, Sonia. Theirs was an outlawed, and tragic, love.

One winter's day in 1974, a young Cape Town man made his way to a suburban railway station with a desperate idea in his mind.

He was in love, but his love was a secret. Soon it would be a secret he would no longer be able to conceal. As the next train thundered down the tracks, 20-year-old Graham de Proft leapt from the platform.

It was the price of being in touch in a South Africa that had become coldly obsessed with keeping people apart.

De Proft had just learned that his girlfriend was pregnant, but because he was classified 'coloured', he could not marry her as the Mixed Marriages Act forbade marriages across the colour line. He took his life instead. As a last token of his love, he left the girl all the money he had – about R40 – to help her buy clothes for the baby. But the girl's father took the money and used it to pay for an abortion: a legal

abortion could be obtained only because the father was classified 'coloured'. The girl, who learned of her lover's death only when he failed to arrive to take her to the cinema, tried to commit suicide by cutting her wrists, but failed.

The story of Graham de Proft and his girlfriend, Sonia, was repeated in different forms in countless cases in the second half of the 20th century. But the tragedy and anguish of the Graham de Profts of the time were heartlessly weighed in some quarters.

'I have a great deal of sympathy with people who have suffered under this Act, and who have committed an offence under this Act,' JT Kruger, National Party MP for Prinsshof, told the House of Assembly on 26 February, 1971. But, in defence of the Immorality Act

and Mixed Marriages Act, he added:

My attitude towards people is not a callous one, but the fact that people commit suicide means in actual fact that they realise that they have contravened a code of social behaviour. That means that the code of social behaviour is so strong that it can move a man to commit suicide. That is once again the justification for this Act.

But it wasn't always like that. Graham de Proft's very existence is evidence of social interaction that, though taboo in his time, was once unexceptional.



Intimacy – conversationally and intellectually, emotionally and physically – is what makes families and communities and, ultimately, societies, what they are. It is part and parcel of being human, yet, under

conditions of mistrust, suspicion and ignorance, it is not always easy or commonplace.

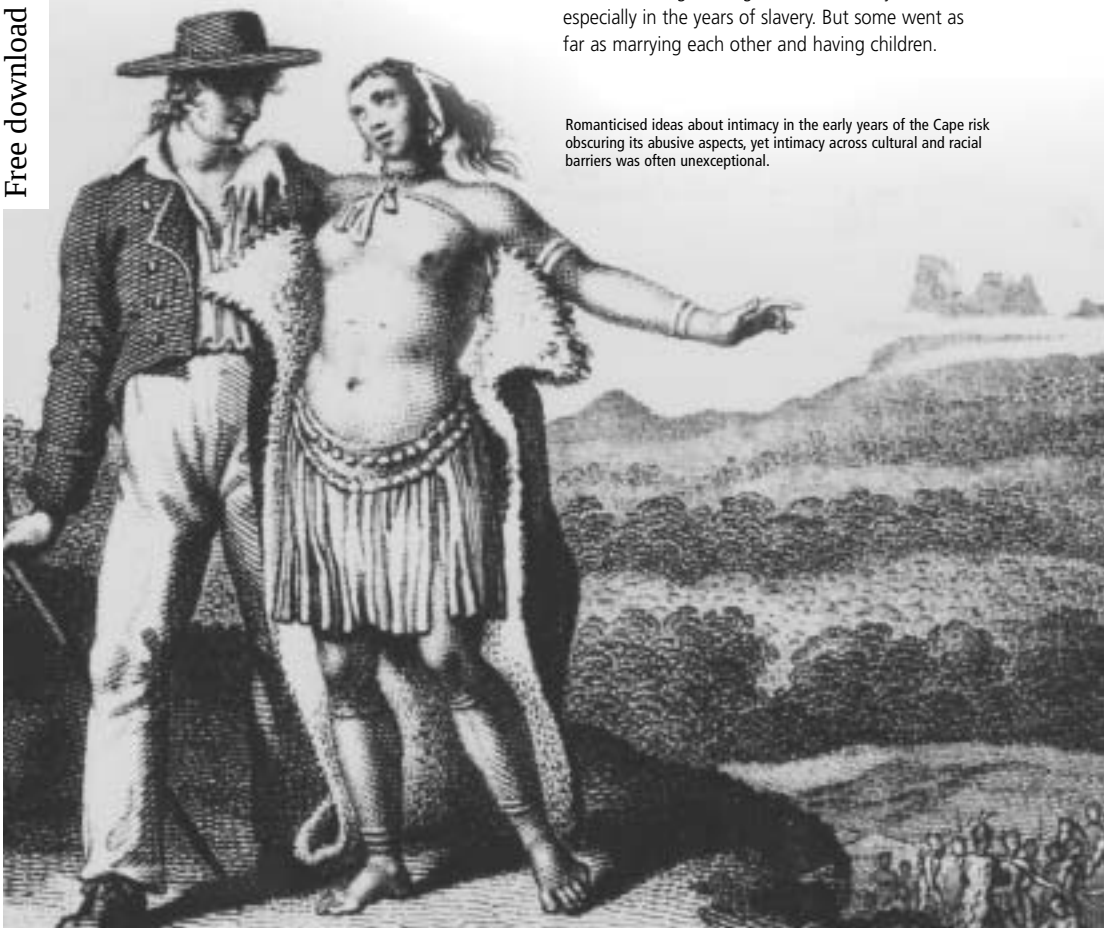
In the first decades after European settlement in southern Africa, the barriers of language and culture – and, often, false perceptions – were not easily overcome.

Yet there were people from the sharply contrasting communities coming into contact in the second half of the 17th century who did bridge the divides.

The degree of intimacy varied, and so did the reasons for being in touch. From early on there was a measure of interdependence, of people doing things in certain ways because they had begun to depend on one another. Often, without doubt, intimacy was involuntary, not chosen.

The one-sidedness of the written record makes it difficult to be sure just what 'being in touch' really meant. In some cases, people were friends of sorts. Some were allies, or partners in business arrangements. Some came together against their will, by force, especially in the years of slavery. But some went as far as marrying each other and having children.

Romanticised ideas about intimacy in the early years of the Cape risk obscuring its abusive aspects, yet intimacy across cultural and racial barriers was often unexceptional.



Historian Robert Ross notes that in the early years 'a number of slave women were able to exploit the relative scarcity of their sex to achieve upward mobility for themselves and their offspring': between 1657 and 1807,

408 women of apparently 'black' descent married into the white population ... [and] their descendants could reach the highest positions in the Colony, as, for instance, occurred with the Bergh family.

Olof Bergh married Anna de Koning, daughter of Anna van Bengal. One of his descendants became landdrost of Stellenbosch and another a burgher lieutenant. There were many such family histories.

In different ways, these bonds all played a part in the unfolding story of what was to become South Africa and what it meant to be South African.



Krotoa, who became a tragic Eva.

The wedding took place in the hall inside the fort. The bride was 21. She was a remarkable woman who, in six or seven years, had bridged the divide between Europe and Africa and was a symbol of sorts of what the new country could become, and would become. Her name was Krotoa. Hers is, ultimately, a tragic story.

But on 2 June, 1664, her marriage to 27-year-old Danish soldier and explorer Pieter van Meerhof, and the 'little marriage feast' in the house of the com-

mander Zacharias Wagenaer, was a joyous occasion.

The keeper of the diary hints at the significance of the union: 'the first marriage,' he writes, 'contracted here according to Christian usage with a native.' It was just 12 years after Van Riebeeck's landing at the Cape.

The young Khoekhoe girl had been taken in by the Van Riebeecks in the first days of the settlement, working as a servant to the commander's wife, Maria de la Quellerie. She was about 10 or 11 when the Dutch settlers arrived, and is first mentioned in Van Riebeeck's diary in January 1654, described as 'a girl who had lived with us' in the first hastily erected fort. Three years later, the diarist notes that Krotoa 'has been in the service of the commander's wife from the beginning'.

Soon, her familiarity with the settlers would complicate her existence. She was the first indigenous southern African to be baptised a Christian – the Van Riebeecks named her 'Eva' – but her role, and her importance, had as much to do with her identity as a person who was not of Europe as with her identity as a newly christened, Dutch-speaking indigene.

In his account of her life, *Krotoa, Called 'Eva', A Woman Between* (1990), VC Malherbe notes that she 'pioneered a hazardous terrain: the frontier between the Cape's Khoekhoe herders and Europe's premier trading nation, the Dutch'. As Krotoa's command of the Dutch language and her familiarity with Dutch ways grew, so did her usefulness as an interpreter, a go-between. This was not an easy time for such delicate work. The people who had taken her in, dressed her in new clothes and taught her their language were, in the late 1650s, gradually taking over her own people's land and forcing their will on them. Krotoa often struggled to maintain trust on either side.

The measure of her difficulties emerges from an accusation later levelled at her (and reported by Van Riebeeck's diarist) by Khoekhoe chief and sometime interpreter Doman. 'I am a Hottentot and not a Dutchman,' Doman is reported to have declared, 'but you, Eva, try to curry favour with the Commander [Van Riebeeck].' He regarded her as a traitor.

Yet Van Riebeeck, who understood that Krotoa was the niece of the Goringhaicona chief Autshumato (called Harry, first by the English, then by the Dutch), felt she was overly devoted to her uncle. He often treated her revelations 'with reserve' as a result. Ironically, it was on Krotoa's advice – supported by

Doman – that Van Riebeeck once had Autshumato captured and sent to Robben Island. This, too, illustrates the precarious politics the teenage Krotoa became embroiled in.

Later, abandoning the European clothes the Van Riebeecks had dressed her in and changing into the animal skins of her own people, she would leave the fort and spend time with her Khoekhoe relatives. She would always return to take up her Dutch ways at the fort, and information she brought back with her was useful to them, but these comings and goings reflected, perhaps, the conflicts of loyalty and identity she was grappling with.

The departure of the Van Riebeecks, her 'Dutch family' in a sense, in 1662 must have left Krotoa feeling vulnerable. She had been recommended to Van Riebeeck's successor Wagenaer, but the new governor was suspicious of her. This was partly because of her going off to live with her own people from time to time.

It became especially hard for Krotoa when, after the death of both Autshumato and Doman in 1663, she was left as the only experienced go-between at the Cape.

Still, the prospect of a better life was offered by her relationship with Pieter van Meerhof.

Van Meerhof, who arrived at the Cape in 1659, was to gain a reputation for perseverance and bravery for his part in six expeditions into the interior over the next six years. Krotoa's information was often of importance to these expeditions, and probably explains why or how they met.

Their relationship grew more intimate, and on 26 April, 1664, three months after Van Meerhof's sixth expedition, Krotoa's engagement to the explorer was announced. They were married less than two months later.

A year later, the young family went to live on Robben Island when Van Meerhof was appointed superintendent there. It was the beginning of a tragic end for Krotoa. The bleak and windswept island was not a pleasant place to live and while her husband was kept busy running a small garrison and overseeing convicts whose work was to collect shells for making lime and stones for the building of the fort on the mainland, there was little for Krotoa to do, and she didn't have much company.

When Krotoa, who already had two children, gave birth to another child in 1666, the family returned briefly to the mainland to have the baby baptised.

Just one year later, Krotoa's sad decline began.

Evidence suggests she had started drinking, possibly out of despair and loneliness. Her sense of hopelessness must have been deepened when her husband, who had been commissioned to lead a slaving and trading expedition up the east coast of Africa, was killed in a skirmish in Madagascar.

Krotoa and her children returned to the mainland in September 1668. She was a shattered woman. One day in February 1669, her drunken behaviour at the dinner table of Commander Wagenaer was the last straw. This, coupled with her increasingly bitter outbursts against the settlers, provoked a warning from the Dutch that if she did not correct her ways, she'd be banished. Krotoa ran off, leaving her children behind, but was soon hauled to the fort as a prisoner, and, at the end of March banished to Robben Island. Several similar banishments followed until, five years later, she died on the island.

'This day departed this life, a certain female Hottentoot, named Eva,' wrote the Dutch diarist on 29 July 1674, 'long ago taken from the African brood in her tender childhood by the Hon Van Riebeeck and educated in his house as well as brought to the knowledge of the Christian faith, and being thus transformed from a female Hottentoot almost into a Netherland woman'

Almost into a Netherland woman, but not quite, the Dutch believed, since her life was 'a manifest example that nature, however closely and firmly muzzled by imprinted principles, nevertheless at its own time triumphing over all precepts, again rushes back to its inborn qualities'.

For centuries, this fundamental prejudice would persuade generations of whites that African people were incontrovertibly savage. It was an ironic contradiction of the popular mythology of the 'noble savage', the idea that people living in a more natural state were untainted by the vanity and greed of 'civilisation'.

Despite all, Krotoa was, a day after her death, buried 'according to Christian usage in the church of the new Castle'.

Krotoa's legacy is, of course, a living one.

The two younger children of her marriage to Pieter van Meerhof, Pieterella and Salomon, were taken in 1677 to Mauritius by a man named Bartholomeus Born. The children grew up there. Pieterella later married the free burgher Daniel Saayman. They had four sons and four daughters, naming their second

daughter Eva after her extraordinary grandmother. The story came full circle in 1709 when Pieternella and her family returned to live at the Cape.

While little is known about the lives of Pieternella's brothers and the half-brothers and sisters Krotoa produced out of wedlock, what we do know is that Krotoa's bloodline continues today in families who are neither Dutch nor Khoekhoe, and who are, conceivably, both 'coloured' and 'white'.



Guillaume Chenu de Chalezac was just 14 when he left France in haste. His life was at stake. In 1685 there were hundreds of thousands just like him, Protestants who, after 87 years of living in relative security in Roman Catholic France, were now suddenly and unexpectedly vulnerable again.

They had been given a measure of religious freedom under the Edict of Nantes, an agreement signed in 1598. But that assurance was shattered in 1685 when the Catholic king, Louis XIV, revoked the agreement.

If they wanted to remain true to their faith, and live, there was nothing for French Protestants to do but leave. As many as 500 000 of them eventually left the country.

Young Chenu had an older brother in Germany, so the family hatched a plan to get him on a ship bound for the island of Madeira, from where he could take another ship back north, to Holland, and then travel overland to Germany.

The first part of the plan worked out well. He got to Madeira. But when the French put pressure on the island authorities to hand over fugitive Protestants, Chenu had to leave sooner than expected. Fatefully, he secured a berth on an English ship, the *Bauden*, bound for the East Indies. It was to be an extraordinary adventure.

Disaster struck when the *Bauden* encountered pirates soon after leaving Madeira, and though the ship evaded capture, the captain and first pilot were killed in the fierce engagement. This was to have grave consequences later when the ship reached the coast of southern Africa.

In the absence of the dead officers, nobody on board knew exactly where they were when, after many days' sailing, they approached the African mainland. They were, in fact, off what would later be known as the Transkei coast, but, of course, they didn't know it.

Chenu and seven others were sent off in a boat to find a suitable anchorage. For three days they struggled to get ashore and decided finally to return to their ship. But, to their horror, a storm had driven the *Bauden* away. They had become castaways.

Theirs was among the very first encounters between Europeans and the African farmers of what is today the Eastern Cape. It was just 34 years after the beginning of the Dutch settlement in southern Africa, and Chenu's story was the first the Dutch knew of Xhosa people in the region. (In the report he produced later, he vividly describes clothing, war-making, kingship, attitude to cattle, settlements, dwellings, marriage customs, circumcision, diet, beer-drinking, hunting, religious rites, fear of death, burial customs, witchcraft as cause of death, punishment of witches, laws and manners.)

Chenu's account of what happened reveals the uncertainty, lack of understanding, fear – and therefore suspicion – that seems typical of most early contacts.

A picture emerges of an ill-matched encounter between the settled people of the region, and newcomers equipped with better weapons, and hidden or at least unclear objectives and intentions. Yet, what is remarkable about Chenu's fuller account is that, unlike so many early observers, he is full of praise for his African hosts, under whose protection he lived for a whole year – as the foster son of a local chief – and reveals the warm, human bond that existed between them.

But to start with, when Chenu and his comrades, realising their ship was gone, finally went ashore, their encounters with the Africans were beset with fear and confusion on both sides. This is how he described it:

We had not gone far when we saw six blacks herding a large herd of cows. As soon as they caught sight of us they fled, but one of them, braver than the rest, came towards us, as we had tried to call him by shouting and gestures of supplication. We tried with all manner of signs to make him understand our need, to which he made no reply but put out his hand towards us. We took this for a sign of friendship and pressed it heartily, but this was not what he wanted. We soon comprehended this and put in his outstretched hand a small piece of copper. We were astonished, however, that he thereupon departed from us with amazing speed, and at first we believed he had cheated us. We soon saw him

returning with a large leather bag filled with curdled milk. We went back to rejoin our comrades and made a meal which we all confessed was the best we had ever eaten in our lives.

The next morning, Chenu and his companions woke to find 'the beach was full of blacks'. They reached for their guns, 'more to wake fear in them than to do them harm'. (Their gunpowder was wet, anyway.) The visitors fled. But the marooned seamen realised they would need help from the Xhosa if they were to survive, so they put their weapons aside. In due course, the people 'returned in great numbers and brought us all kinds of birds, sheep and oxen to trade with us'. (It was, Chenu notes, 'easy for us to obtain stores at little cost, for they sold us a whole ox for a piece of copper only as long as a finger'.)

So far, then, the encounter had gone smoothly enough. There had been some tension, but it seemed now to have eased.

Then it turned ugly.

Having concluded their trading, the seamen were waiting for the high tide to float their boat off when 'an old woman brought us an earthenware pot which we filled with meat in order to cook ourselves something'. This they did, and had just sat down to eat it when

the old woman [seeing] we had served the meat and the pot was still lying near the fire, ran up in order to take it away, but our helmsman, thinking we would frequently have need of this utensil,

got up abruptly in order to prevent the woman from taking the pot.

She then obviously became afraid, seized the pot suddenly and ran away. The helmsman pursued her and in fact called to her that he wanted to pay for the pot. The blacks, however, did not understand him, imagined he wanted to lay violent hands upon her and therefore came to us in a crowd. Without giving us time to pick up our guns they attacked us with stones, spears and sticks.

All Chenu's comrades were killed. The young French boy himself was badly beaten, but managed to flee down the beach. He was later overtaken by two men, who urged him to return. When he refused, they beat him again, and 'left me lying there, more dead than alive'. Not long after, two other men appeared. He thought he was to be attacked again. But 'these two ... with great humanity, raised me up and, since I had no strength left to walk, dragged me to their huts. They made a little fire for me and applied cow dung, as a dressing, to my head wounds. They also gave me a little to eat.'

In due course, he was taken into the local chief's household.

A year later, he and the survivors of other wrecks along the coast made their way to the Cape in a vessel, the *Centaurus*, which had been built by stranded sailors on the Natal coast.

In an extraordinarily poignant passage about the moment of his rescue, when, after his year with the

Stranded sailors building the *Centaurus*, the vessel on which Guillaume Chenu de Chalezac made his way to the Cape after his year of living with the Xhosa.



Randolph Vigne sums up the teenager's African experience:

He lived for a year among them, as a member of the chief's family, fighting with his protector's men against Khoekhoe invaders, and hunting with them. He was even coveted by the women of the chief's household. His love for his host, clearly mutual, overcame any sense of superiority he expressed as a Christian and man of Europe over these 'barbares'. His worst times were not while living among them, but on his two failed attempts to journey on to the Cape with parties of Dutch seamen. Even his decision to live among the latter he regretted, and returned to the family of the chief.

This, Vigne adds,

is the warmest and most kindly account of the Xhosas as seen by Europeans in this period.

This was more than 150 years away from

the crude abuse of the 'Kafir hordes' by later reporters, and almost a century from the harsh rejection of white shipwreck victims suffered by the Grosvenor survivors who paid the price for the long and bloody sequence of Frontier Wars that had already begun. Defeat, poverty and European liquor had not yet combined to lower the dignity of so many Xhosa leaders, helping to give false justification to settlers and soldiers for slaughter and expropriation

Vigne suggests that Chenu's account gives 'hope that the best of the relationship between black and white such as Chenu and his contemporaries experienced it may come again'.

From Guillaume Chenu de Chalezac, *The 'French Boy'* (1993) by Randolph Vigne (editor)

Xhosa, Chenu joined other stranded sailors on the coast to board the *Centaurus* and leave for the Cape, the young French boy describes how the chief who had been his host carried him to the ship, in tears:

As the ship could not come close up to the land, it was necessary to wade out into the sea. He [the chief] sat me on his neck and carried me out to the ship, albeit against my will. During this journey his face was no less wet with tears at my parting from him than his body was with sea water. Until we parted he rent the air with his cries, and I in turn could not refuse the love of a man to whom I owed so much.

From Guillaume Chenu de Chalezac, *The 'French Boy'* (1993) by Randolph Vigne (editor)

Chenu's recollections from the late 1600s have an almost haunting quality since they express a sense of the common humanity that would be deeply eroded by the conflict and bitterness of the centuries to come.



Piet Retief is remembered either as one of the heroes of the Great Trek or as an agent of the invasion and

dispossession of the interior of southern Africa. The light always catches different facets of history, depending on how it falls or how it is shone.

But there is another element to Piet Retief that is not obvious, and the examination of which was once actively discouraged.

It concerns a princely figure who became an unlikely inhabitant at the Cape. The Rajah of Tambora – among the exiles described in chapter two – was a member of the Muslim aristocracy in the Indonesian island states when the Dutch began building their empire there. Tambora, the third largest island east of Java, fell under the Sultanates of Macassar, and when the Dutch took over the Sultanate of Goa, Tambora fell to the European power, too.

The rajah resisted the invasion, but was overcome and sent to the Cape as a prisoner in chains in 1697. Though he had been sentenced to hard labour, the Dutch at the Cape, under Simon van der Stel, took a more lenient view: he was given more reasonable accommodation and his wife was allowed to join him. Of course, he desperately wanted to go home, but was kept at the Cape until his death 22 years later. He left many descendants in both the white and the coloured communities.

This is a story told by Alf Wannenburgh in his

book *Forgotten Frontiersmen* (1978). 'His most notable connection with the white community,' Wannenburgh writes, 'was through a great granddaughter who married into the family of Piet Retief, the Voortrekker leader.'

It's a connection, intriguingly, that involves another important exile of the early years, Sheik Jusuf, regarded as the father of Islam in southern Africa.

The rajah took the Sheik's daughter Zytia as his second wife, in the late 1690s, just a few years after arriving at the Cape. After the rajah's death in 1719, her requests to be sent back to Batavia were declined, just as her husband's had been, and the family remained at the Cape. Having lived in virtual isolation from the rest of the Muslim community, most of the family ultimately converted to Christianity. The oldest son, Ibraim Adahan, was baptised Abraham de Haan.

Wannenburgh writes:

Abraham married Helena Valentyn, the daughter of 'free blacks' Hercules Valentyn and Cecelia of Bengal. Two of Abraham and Helena's daughters married young Hollanders, and one son married and had two children by Christina Alesia Everskyk, from Amsterdam.

The third daughter married first a Hollander and then a German, having four children by her first husband and five by her second. One of the daughters by her second husband married Francois Johannes Retief.

Though she had married into the family of the Voortrekker leader, she was not related to him by blood, because her marriage to Francois Retief produced only a daughter.



Perhaps the most unlikely bonds were those formed between slaves or former slaves and their masters or former masters, and there were many of them.

During the first 20 years of European settlement, three-quarters of the children born to slave mothers had white fathers. It was often quite matter of fact, though some of the individuals involved were regarded as odd or eccentric, perhaps because they were also politically liberal.

This was probably the case with the missionary and former soldier, Johannes Theodorus Vanderkemp, the son of a Rotterdam theology professor, who arrived at the Cape at the age of 53 in 1799. Within a few years he had established a mission station on the eastern frontier (in what today is the Eastern Cape at Betheldorp). His idea, as he once described it, was to create a settlement where refugees from what had been a war zone in the conflict between colonists and the Xhosa, could be 'perfectly free, upon an equal footing in every respect with the colonists'.

Many farm labourers took refuge there, but, with insufficient water and grazing, there often wasn't much for them to do. Local farmers came to resent the mission and, in 1805, the Dutch governor Janssens had the missionaries withdrawn to Cape Town to avoid conflict. Vanderkemp worked in the slave community in

Cape Town, buying the freedom of several slaves, and marrying one, a 17-year-old girl named Sarah, whose mother had come from Madagascar.

They returned later to the Betheldorp mission, which continued to struggle and draw criticism from the colonists. This was partly because of Vanderkemp's campaigning efforts on behalf of farm labourers. Vanderkemp died while visiting Cape Town in 1811 to give evidence on the mistreatment of farm workers. His young wife, who had had three sons and a daughter with him, later married the son of a Dutch artillery officer.

Vanderkemp's assistant at the mission, James Read, married one of his Khoekhoe converts in 1803, and had three sons and five daughters by her. (Read later admitted to 'being seduced' by a young black girl in the church at Betheldorp and was transferred



Johannes Vanderkemp



James Read

by the London Missionary Society to Kuruman in the Northern Cape.)

One of Read's sons later served with distinction as a commandant in the 8th Frontier War, while the

eldest son became a missionary like his father.

This pattern – of race or the mixing of races being irrelevant to the capabilities and achievements of people – has been borne out repeatedly in South Africa's past, even though the philosophy of apartheid, and colonial thinking before apartheid, tried to deny it.



Millions of South Africans today, of all skin colours, owe their identity, their language and their culture – their heritage, and their inheritance in the truest sense – to the human impulse that moved their distant forebears to be in touch. It was not always how some of them would have chosen it.

What is certainly true is that it was an intimacy that, though often unremarkable and socially acceptable in the early years of the meeting of cultures in southern Africa, would in time be severely tested, stigmatised, even outlawed, yet ultimately celebrated.

'This was part of my genealogy of which we did not speak – and of which I did not know – when I was a child.'

These are the words of Frederik Willem de Klerk, President of South Africa from 1989 to 1994, a staunch and successful Nationalist politician under apartheid for much of his political career, and the man credited with having the courage, in submitting to political, social and economic pressures, to signal the end of apartheid in 1990 by unbanning the liberation movements and freeing the man who later replaced him as the first democratically elected president, Nelson Mandela.

The 'genealogy of which we did not speak' – and which FW de Klerk revealed in his autobiography, *The Last Trek – A New Beginning* (1998) – concerned a woman named Susanna. The story of the De Klerks, he writes, is 'the story of the emerging Afrikaner nation'. And this is no less true of Susanna.

She was the daughter of Diana of Bengal, an Indian slave who was sold to one Augustin Boccart in 1667. Her father was Detlef Bibault and she was raised with her white half-brothers and -sisters by Bibault's Dutch wife Willemtyntje de Wit, 'apparently without any problem or discrimination'.

De Klerk writes: 'Susanna married Willem Odenthal in 1711 and was the mother of Engela Odenthal, who married my direct ancestor, Barend de Klerk, on 7 April 1737.'



Former President FW de Klerk