

COMMUNITY PLEA

'We need to know what happened to the bones' — Tiervlei community wants restitution, decades after bodies were forcefully removed



Ravensmead community members at the Hardekraaltjie cemetery. (Photo: Protouch Photography)

By Joel Ontong Follow 19 Jan 2023 0

During forced removals in the apartheid era, Stellenbosch University acquired land where a Bellville cemetery was located. Residents in this area are now engaging with the university in a restitution process.

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'We need to know what happened to the bones. Because its people, its family members, they buried their people there, and when they went there again, the people were gone. So how do you explain that to someone who wants to go show their lineage?'

These comments from Chefferino Fortuin, community researcher and Tiervlei community member, who is involved in efforts to see justice, decades after bodies were removed from a cemetery when Stellenbosch University (SU) acquired the land during forced removals, conducted in the brutal apartheid era.

The university acquired the land on which the cemetery, known as Hardekraaltjie, was located in Bellville in 1970, explained Fortuin.

SU removed a portion of the bodies from the cemetery for reburial, he said. Members of the community from Tiervlei, now known as Ravensmead, were buried there.

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About half a century after the community was uprooted and forcibly removed – including the removal of the bodies, the community is still seeking restitution and memorialisation in honour of the cemetery.

'It becomes this emotional issue, especially for the ageing ones in our community. For me, they are important because they have laid the groundwork for whatever successes we've achieved in our lifetime,' said Fortuin.

'It is not for us an academic exercise, we still want our ageing population; we want one or two of those people still to be alive to see their dreams coming to fruition. So that they can say: I said it was my people who were laying here,' Fortuin explained.

Forced removals

Anne and Bennie Parring are two elderly Ravensmead residents who had siblings buried at Hardekraaltjie. They recalled how powerless the community was during forced removals. 'Back then, you didn't have a say because it was apartheid. The white man talks alone,' said Anne. At that point, some community members still had their children and family buried at the cemetery, she added.

The two elderly residents said they were not informed that the bodies would be moved at the time. They only knew that building developments would take place near the cemetery.



Ravensmead residents Bennie and Anne Parring on the Hardekraaltjie cemetery land. (Photo: Protouch Photography)

Prof Aslam Fataar, from SU's department of education policy studies, said that the university has been doing work with "visual redress and spatial redress" in spaces that it had taken ownership of during apartheid.

The university "had been a participant in the forced removals of black and coloured communities to make way for its buildings [and] its faculties," said Fataar, who is also linked to SU's transformation portfolio. As a result "the Tiervlei community was disrupted by forced removals".

SU took ownership of the land on which the cemetery was built, next to Tygerberg Hospital, to build its faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Fataar told Daily Maverick. He said the cemetery had been decommissioned in the 1940s.

The land was transferred to SU in 1974, according to the City of Cape Town.

Land cleared when university took ownership

When the university took ownership of the land, they cleared the land and removed about half of the bodies for reburial, said Fataar. "We've anticipated that they've been reburied in the Stikland Cemetery."

Stikland Cemetery is also located in Bellville. Although the bodies were reburied, no building developments took place on the site of the cemetery itself, according to Fataar.

Due to pressure from the Tiervlei community, the university became aware of the cemetery and the issues around it, circa 2014, Fataar explained. "We received some pressure from individual members [of Tiervlei] to restate and to restate properly," he said. SU picked up the restitution and memorialisation project in 2020 and had been engaging with the community, he added.

"The ongoing community participation will involve several stakeholders, including Tygerberg hospital, Passenger Rail Agency of South Africa (Prasa), members of local communities and the Tiervlei community, and Heritage Western Cape," according to a press statement released by SU in 2021. "SU and the Tygerberg Hospital have committed to a restorative process to decide how the cemetery site and those buried there would be memorialised," read the statement.

Hardekraaltjie's sacred rituals

According to Fortuin, Hardekraaltjie was not an "uninhabited space". "It was a space that was important to people. It was a place where there were sacred rituals. It was a place of family, it was a place of lineage," Fortuin told Daily Maverick. "There is a lot of history and heritage for us in that space," he added.

Hardekraaltjie was established in the early 1900s, said Fortuin. Khoisan communities resided in the area, with Khoisan family members being buried in Hardekraaltjie. Fortuin added that there is limited available information on this topic.

During community engagement sessions, Khoisan organisations were also involved, according to Fortuin. Hardekraaltjie, and parts of Ravensmead where residents were displaced, still has Khoisan history, said Fortuin. "The people were displaced, but their memories were never displaced," he explained.

Ravensmead community members at the cemetery (Photo: Protouch Photography)

Restitution process

Fortuin said that the restitution process is a Tiervlei community initiative. "For us as a community, it's important that the cemetery is being acknowledged."

It is important that there is memorialisation around the cemetery and that there is concrete restitution, he said. "We don't only want a symbolic gesture, when there were actual bones that were disturbed and there were actual bones of our forefathers – in that area – that were removed." The community wants the university to acknowledge, take institutional responsibility and apologise for what happened at Hardekraaltjie.

The community is working with the university to create a plaque to memorialise Hardekraaltjie. On the plaque, they want to feature the Khoi language, along with other three languages, said Fortuin.

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Fortuin also reached out to the City of Cape Town to be involved in the process. When Daily Maverick reached out to the City, the response was that enquiries about the cemetery should be referred to the land owner, which is Stellenbosch University.

The City has planned no engagements with Fortuin or the Tiervlei community, reported IOL in August 2022. The City was also unaware of the exhumation of human remains at Hardekraaltjie cemetery.

Not only is the cemetery on land owned by SU, but it's also on land owned or controlled by Tygerberg Hospital and Prasa.

"Prasa has not been approached by the community regarding the land in question. Should there be a request received, we will do our utmost to cooperate," said Zinobulali Mihi, Prasa's acting head of the department of marketing and communication.

"Tygerberg Hospital is aware of the commencement of a memorialisation process of the Hardekraaltjie Cemetery located at the Tygerberg Hospital and University of Stellenbosch site," said Rozaun Botes, spokesperson for the hospital.

"The Steercom (Steering Committee) dealing with this matter is composed of representatives from the Ravensmead community, Tygerberg Hospital management and the University of Stellenbosch."

Gaps in the story

There were many gaps in the Hardekraaltjie story, said Fataar. "A key part of our restitutorial process is to do research and the research is now ongoing."

They are trying to tell a full story of what happened for proper restitution, he added.

Part of the restitution process involves collecting stories of descendants of those who were buried at the cemetery. "We've established a community participant process and we are about 20 months into it," he said. The university has interacted and communicated with the community and taken guidance from them with regards to the restitution process, Fataar added.

Anne Parring seemed happy that SU was engaging in the restitution process. "It's a good gesture for the children and families that were buried there," she said. DM

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