

Race, politics and mountain-climbing

The hidden history of mountaineering in Cape Town, from precolonial era to present

By Farieda Khan

Dr Khan is an independent researcher and sports historian who has published extensively on the impact of race- and gender-based inequality on the development of mountaineering in the Western Cape. She has a PhD from the University of Cape Town and is a consultant in social impact assessment. She gave a presentation on the 'hidden history' of mountain-climbing to one of IFAA's public and online Forums, which are held regularly at Surplus Radical Books in Woodstock.

The story of mountaineering in Cape Town is usually narrowly confined to the history of the formerly whites only Mountain Club of South Africa. However, this article shows that this story is far more comprehensive, complicated and diverse than the conventional view of history. FARIEDA KHAN goes beyond the mainstream into the hidden history of mountaineering at the tip of Africa.

Precolonial era to the age of exploration

Mountaineering as a sport is a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of modern South Africa, dating back to the mid-to-late 19th century when European alpinists visiting the

Cape introduced local mountaineers to the emerging sport of rock climbing. However, mountaineering as a leisure activity, as opposed to a formal sport, is much older. It began during the era of European exploration from the late 15th century when European traders and sailors *en route* to the Dutch East Indies in South East Asia stopped at the Cape to take on water and barter for cattle. Many of those on board also took the opportunity to engage in some healthy exercise and recreation by walking to the summit of Table Mountain after months on end confined to a cramped ship.

However, mountaineering for survival is older still, dating back to the precolonial era, prior to Dutch settlement in 1652, when the native people of the Table Bay area, the Khoi, roamed the Table Mountain chain. They not only used the mountains for their encampments and to graze their cattle, but their intimate knowledge of the mountains and its flora enabled

them to collect plants for traditional medicine and, most importantly, food.

Mountaineering during the colonial era

During the colonial era at the Cape (i.e. from 1652 to the eve of the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910), the relationship that the white elite had with the Table Mountain chain mainly took the form of recreation, such as carriage drives on the lower slopes, mountain walks and picnics on the summit. In addition, visiting scientists and botanists scoured the mountains in search of botanical and wildlife specimens.

During this period, it was the black underclasses (*viz.* servants and slaves) who had expert knowledge of the mountain as a result of their work on the mountain, fetching water, chopping and carrying wood, doing the laundry in icy mountain streams, acting as mountain guides and carrying food and picnic paraphernalia to the summit ►►

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for the white elite, and also carrying the specimens collected by scientists and botanists. The mountains were therefore used by black people as a place of back-breaking work, and by the white elite as a place of recreation and scientific endeavour. The only exception to this racial divide in the use of the mountains was limited to the mountain walks and recreational activities undertaken by a small number of African pupils at Zonnebloem College in Walmer Estate (the children of African chiefs in the Eastern Cape) during the mid-to-late 19th century.

The development of mountaineering and rock-climbing as a formal sport began in the late 19th century, with the establishment of the Mountain Club of South Africa (MCSA) in 1891. The MCSA was firmly part of the establishment and attracted the cream of the social, professional and governing elite of the Cape – for example, Prime Minister Cecil John Rhodes and later in the 20th century

The Cape Province Mountain Club Founders 1931



Standing: W.Steyn, C.Fischer (leader), J.Kannemeyer, H.Flowers.

Sitting: C.Petersen (chairman), Mrs K.Petersen (treasurer), C.H.Townsend (secretary).

Prime Minister Jan Smuts became members. While the club's constitution did not specifically bar black climbers from membership, the MCSA had an exclusively white membership; black people were not accepted as members given the growing social segregation based on race at the Cape. In fact, the only role for black people in the MCSA was a subservient one: as cooks, carriers and campsite cleaners.

Mountaineering during the first half of the 20th century

The history of mountaineering as a leisure activity among black communities in Cape Town in all likelihood dates back only to the early 20th century when the youth in areas with easy access to the Table Mountain chain began rambling and hiking on the mountain. These areas included District Six, as well as other parts of the Bo-Kaap all the way around the mountain chain to Simon's Town. By the beginning

of the 1930s, the number of coloured mountain hikers and climbers on the Table Mountain chain had grown to such an extent as to cause comment at an MCSA meeting.

It was from the ranks of these mountaineers and hikers that the founders and early members of the Cape Province Mountain Club (CPMC) were drawn. The CPMC, which was established in mid-1931 by a group of enthusiastic climbers from District Six, drew its members mainly from the lower middle and working class. The club was able to obtain a hut on Table Mountain shortly after its formation. Regrettably, very little information on the club's early activities is available, due to the loss of the club's official documents. However, the club participated in mountain rescues, but only at an informal level as it was never invited to formally partner with the MCSA on rescues.

Most male members of the CPMC

saw service during WWII and during this period the February sisters, who lived in the Bo-Kaap and were the sisters of then club chairperson, Ronald February, kept the club going. The post-war years saw a lot of climbing activity and it was during this period that some of the most talented and self-taught members of the club, such as Charley Hankey, came to the fore. Many of these climbers opened new rock-climbing routes on Table Mountain.

The University of Cape Town Mountain and Ski Club (UCTMSC) was established on the campus of the University of Cape Town in 1933. Its membership profile was white and predominantly male, drawn from the educated, affluent middle and upper middle classes. The UCTMSC and the MCSA, having been established as exclusively white clubs, naturally only served the interests of the white elite during this period. Both clubs were able to leverage the privileged social and political position their members occupied in society to buy property for their club, amass equipment, and erect and maintain mountain huts. They also received special privileges and favours from the government, such as permission to access mountain areas that were off limits to the public.

It seems that the entry of the CPMC into the field of mountaineering represented something of a seismic shock for the MCSA, leaving the club at a loss as to how to deal with black people who were not porters, cooks and labourers, but fellow mountaineers. From the beginning, there was no equal or collegial relationship between the CPMC and the MCSA. Overtures from the CPMC were ignored and the MCSA did not invite the CPMC to any climbing meets or social events, or to participate in mountain rescues.

The MCSA's attitude to the CPMC was aloof and distant, despite the fact that the two clubs operated mere streets away from each other in central Cape Town. However, this was unsurprising

given the unequal power relations which existed between blacks and whites in a society in which racial discrimination and segregation was becoming the norm. The practical consequence of the MCSA's attitude was that the talented climbers in the CPMC were deprived of opportunities to gain further rock-climbing expertise and to learn from their more experienced counterparts in the MCSA.

In contrast to this was the close, cordial and collaborative relationship between the MCSA and the UCTMSC, which happily shared access to their climbing meets, training courses and mountain huts.

Mountaineering during the early decades of apartheid, 1950s – 1960s

The leading climbers in the CPMC during this period included Neville Hendricks, Dick Knipe, Ishmet Allie and Sydney Alexander. Charlie Hankey remained the club's leading climber, opening routes on Table Mountain. Unusually for that period, and against the rules of the MCSA, Hankey had formed a climbing partnership with MCSA member, Barry Fletcher. The club's first expedition abroad, to Kilimanjaro in 1951, was undertaken by three of its members. There was also heavy involvement in mountain rescues during this period.

The District Six community was a nursery for young mountaineers through the Silvertree Boys' Club, under MCSA member David McAdam, and the various scout groups which used the mountain for their activities. However, the club's problems increased greatly during the apartheid era, as the newly-introduced Separate Amenities Act barred members from accommodation on hiking trails and in nature reserves. The worst obstacle the club faced, however, was the Group Areas Act, when District Six was declared an exclusively "white area" in 1966. Not only did this end the club's usual use of venues

in the area, but it also put paid to its plans to establish a permanent club house in District Six and destroyed the organisations which acted as nurseries for recruitment. Most importantly, however, the club lost the advantage of proximity to Table Mountain as the community was dispersed to distant townships on the Cape Flats.

The Western Province Mountain Club (WPMC) was formed in 1967, with a membership drawn primarily from the Cape Flats. Many members had had their interest in mountaineering piqued by their experiences in the scouts or as a result of mountain hiking trips arranged by their high school teachers. Both the CPMC and the WPMC had been established as coloured clubs: the CPMC due to the ethnic sectarianism rife in the sporting sector among black communities during the first half of the 20th century while the WPMC was compelled by the local authorities to place a racially-exclusive clause in its constitution in order to receive a hut on Table Mountain.

The number of coloured leisure-seekers on Table Mountain spiked during this period, mainly as a result of an increase in the number of high schools; six new coloured high schools opened between 1946 and 1956. This added to the rise of a coloured middle class with leisure time to take an interest in outdoor recreation – an interest which was increased as high school teachers began taking their students on mountain hikes and climbs. The MCSA blamed the increasing coloured recreation users for the growing amount of litter on the mountain. As in the past, the MCSA sought to exploit the CPMC as a mechanism to address this problem. The increase in the number of black mountaineers also led to a number of "mixed" climbing partnerships being formed in defiance of MCSA policy, which required its members to resign if they persisted in doing so. >>

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In the late 19thC, students at Zonnebloem College (the children of African Chiefs from the Eastern Cape), loved to hike on Table Mountain

The relationship among the mountain clubs

The relationship between the CPMC and the WPMC with the MCSA continued to be aloof. The two coloured clubs were mostly ignored and the MCSA seldom interacted with them. The MCSA did not deal with these clubs on a basis of equality and wholeheartedly accepted the apartheid status quo and the privileged position this gave its members in society. The club went further than this, forbidding its members from forming climbing partnerships with black mountaineers, which in itself was not required under apartheid legislation. This prohibition prevented the free exchange of expertise among all the clubs, making the development of mountaineering skill and the amassing of climbing experience by black mountaineers extremely difficult.

The MCSA and the UCTMSC continued their cordial and collaborative relationship, allowing reciprocal access to their mountain huts in the rural areas of the Western Cape and sharing invitations to climbing meets. It was only on the issue of membership that the two clubs differed. While the MCSA continued to pander to the racist views held by most of its members (which ensured that its membership remained exclusively white during this period), the UCTMSC reluctantly opened its membership to all in 1959. However, this only happened after a determined five-year campaign by Kenny Parker, a UCT student and CPMC member. While the opening of the club's membership to all students could be seen as a radical step at a time when an apartheid society was being constructed, this step did not result in black students joining the club and it remained predominantly (if not exclusively) white right up until the 1980s.

Mountaineering during the late apartheid period, 1970s – end of 1980s

This was a time of great political turbulence and upheaval as the apartheid regime responded violently to the challenges posed by a growing domestic anti-apartheid movement. Mountain clubs in Cape Town had to grapple with this rapidly changing social and political environment.

The CPMC and WPMC were both poorly-resourced, had no permanent club houses and continued to be badly impacted by apartheid legislation, which barred them from unrestricted access to mountains in rural areas since most of the accommodation on hiking trails and nature reserves in areas such as the Cederberg were off limits to them. There were several unpleasant encounters with white farmers when crossing private farmland to reach the mountains, including one occasion when CPMC members were threatened with a firearm! As the implementation

of the Group Areas Act was ramped up during this period, this law continued to be a significant obstacle to the development of both clubs, since nearly all the coloured communities living in close proximity to the Table Mountain chain were forcibly removed to the distant Cape Flats, making it difficult, expensive and time-consuming to reach Table Mountain.

This period was also notable for the establishment of two non-racial mountain clubs in Cape Town, viz. the Bats Climbing Club (BCC) and the South African Climbers Club (SACC), which were both established as clubs for experienced climbers only. These two clubs did not last much beyond the 1970s. The BCC was established by MCSA member Dave Cheesmond, together with several other young mountaineers from the MCSA, the WPMC and the CPMC, including Ed February, who showed their dissatisfaction with the racist attitudes of the MCSA by forming their own club. The SACC was also primarily formed in opposition to what was perceived as the racism and non-inclusiveness of the mainstream mountaineering sector.

The MCSA continued to frown on their members partnering with black climbers and refused to share its facilities or open its membership and training courses to all. This meant that there continued to be no free transfer of skills among all mountaineers. Inevitably, this continued to retard the development of climbers in the CPMC and WPMC, and led to much frustration and resentment against the MCSA, especially among top climbers such as Ed February.

Neither the BCC nor the SACC seemed to have cordial relations with the MCSA, which was probably inevitable given the hostility that the MCSA still had to “mixed climbing” during the 1970s, and its eagerness not to offend the apartheid government. Where the two clubs differed was in the fact that the BCC had an informal

club structure, while the SACC was a formal organisation, which received government funding for climbing expeditions at home and abroad. The reason that a non-racial club received such funding was in all likelihood related to the government's efforts to end its sports isolation internationally by trying to show that non-racial sport was flourishing at home.

Response of the mountaineering community, 1990-to-mid-1990s

This was a period of political transition, as South Africa began to steadily move towards democracy, which was eventually implemented in 1994 when the country's first democratic elections were held. These political changes were reflected in the response of the mountaineering sector.

The MCSA began discussions in 1991 on the possibility of the CPMC and the WPMC becoming sections of the MCSA. Ultimately, however, both the CPMC and WPMC opted to retain their independence, fearing the loss of their history and institutional identity. Underlying their decision were the still-fresh memories of racism displayed by the MCSA and the "dehumanising and humiliating experiences" recalled by some of their members. These discussions stirred up tension in the CPMC and WPMC as both clubs lost members, mainly from the ranks of experienced climbers who wanted access to the superior resources of the MCSA.

Late in 1992 the MCSA made a formal statement on its policy of non-discrimination, a requirement for any organisation which wished to compete in the international arena, and as a result the club was accepted into the mountaineering world body in 1992, officially becoming South Africa's premier mountaineering organisation.

There was closer interaction among the Cape Town-based mountain clubs during this period – for example, the

first joint climbing meet by campus-based clubs, viz. the UCTMSC, the University of the Western Cape Mountaineering Club (UWCMC) and Stellenbosch University's *Berg en Toer Klub* (BTK) was held in April 1993. The UWCMC had been established more than a decade earlier but this was the first time that the UCTMSC and the BTK, which held annual climbing meets together, had invited the UWC-based club. The UCTMSC also launched an outreach programme for "underprivileged scholars" at high schools.

In 1993, the MCSA began considering how to address the "elitist label" with which it was often associated and decided to launch an "Outreach Committee" to expose young people in the townships to mountain wilderness areas and in this way nurture a new generation of members and leaders for the MCSA. At the end of 1994, which was the year that democracy was finally embraced by South Africa, the MCSA published a reflective editorial on its changing status as an NGO in a transforming society.

Despite the tensions which had been brought to the surface by the attempt to amalgamate the CPMC and WPMC with the powerful MCSA, in the main the 1990-1994 period was one of friendly and close interaction among all the Cape Town-based clubs as joint activities and social events were held and it seemed as though a solid foundation was being laid for a close and co-operative relationship for the future. At this point, the future for mountaineering in a democratic South Africa looked promising indeed: diverse, accessible and broadly participatory.

However, it was not to be, and currently relations among Cape Town-based mountain clubs remain fractured. As a result, the mountaineering sector has not been able to develop to its full potential in terms of diversity and broad-based climbing skill.

Conclusion

This article has presented a picture of Cape Town-based mountaineering history which unequivocally demonstrates the inextricability of sport and politics and highlights the fact that race and politics are central to an understanding of the skewed development of mountaineering – a legacy that the Cape continues to struggle with today.

By venturing beyond the history of mainstream mountain clubs and exploring the contribution and development of community-based and non-racial clubs, significant parts of the Cape's hidden mountaineering history have been uncovered. In so doing, this historical exploration hopes to contribute to the construction of a far more diverse, comprehensive and complex history of Cape mountaineering than the prevailing conventional view has thus far projected.

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