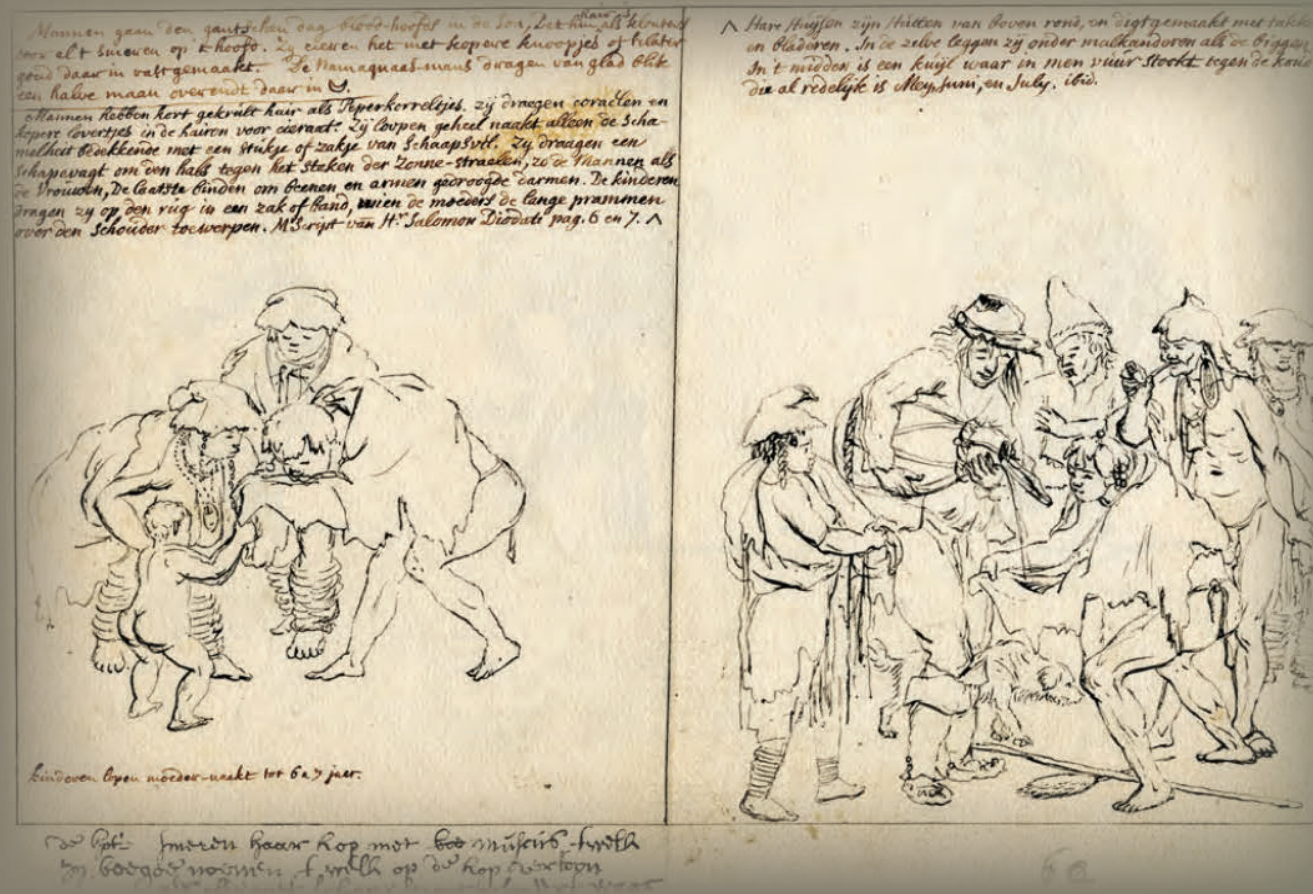# Krotoas !khaes Krotoa Place

Above: The V.O.C.'s 1st fort at the Cape in 1660, although stylised in this painting, is much as Krotoa might have seen it. She lived and worked here from childhood.

Left and below: These depictions are from a series of the only known firsthand drawings of Khoekhoen herders rendered by an unrecorded eyewitness at the Cape around 1700.
Courtesy: National Library of South Africa

KROTOA (c1642 - 1674) was for a while one of the most influential women at the Cape. She was a niece of Autshumato, chief of the Goringhaicona and sister-in-law to Oedasoa, chief of the powerful Cochoqua. She was about 10 years old when Commander Jan van Riebeeck and his wife took her into the Fort as a servant, at the time of the first European settlement settlement. Krotoa adapted well to Dutch culture, culture, and her interaction with the commander and his wife earned her their affection. While living in the Fort, Krotoa wore Eastern attire, but on her her visits to her sister, chief Oedasoa's wife, she would wear her native karos. She acted as an interpreter and negotiator between the Dutch and the Khoekhoen herdsman, speaking Dutch and also Portuguese.

Krotoa was baptised in the Reformed faith on 3 May 1662 in Fort de Goede Hoop, and was given the name Eva. She was instrumental in the peace settlement that ended the war for control of the Liesbeeck Valley, or First Khoekhoen - Dutch War (1659 1660).

After Van Riebeeck's departure for Batavia in May 1662, her relationship with the Fort deteriorated. The issue of divided loyalties contributed to an estrangement between her and her own people. Krotoa who now had two children, married Pieter van Meerhof, a Danish surgeon. She became the first among the Khoekhoen to marry according to Christian custom and they had wee children together.

The civil ceremony took place on 26 April 1664. Commander Z. Wagenaer gave her a dowry of fifty Rixdollars from the VOC and a small wedding feast. Van Meerhof was promoted to the position of 'posthouder' on Robben Island, but after he was killed on a slaving expedition to Madagascar, Krotoa found life on the island lonely, and resorted to alcohol. She also bore several other children, and is the subject of one of the earliest recorded cases of prostitution. Commander Wagenaer took a dislike to her, referring to her as a 'lewd vixen', and terminated her service as an interpreter.

In 1668 she returned to the mainland with her children to a house that the VOC gave her. Caught between two cultures, Krotoa was eventually rejected by both and descended into a life of abject poverty and alcoholism. She was occasionally invited to the Fort to dine at the Commander's table, but after publicly insulting the Commander and abandoning her children, she was confined to Robben Island in February 1669. The Van Meerhof children, Jacobus, Pieternella and Salomon were placed with foster parents Sophia and Gerrit van der Bijl, the Castle's master carpenter.

In May 1673 Krotoa was allowed a last visit to the mainland to have a child baptized, and she died on the island during a great storm on 29 July 1674. Despite her estrangement from the Company, she was given a Christian burial in the temporary church of the almost completed Castle of Good Hope.

In 1677 the Council of Policy gave two of her children, Pieternella and Salomon, in the care of the childless freeburgher couple Bart and Theuntje Borns, to accompany them to Mauritius. There Pieternella married Daniel Zaayman. They had eight children and became moderately wealthy. She and her husband returned to the Cape when the outstation was closed in January 1709, and they became the ancestors of the Zaayman I Saaiman and De Vries families in South Africa.

Krotoa's tale goes on:

Îs di | aob ge |oadisin di khurugu ! nâ ra !gû.
Her blood flows in the veins of many thousands of South Africans.

KROTOA PLACE at the intersection of Castle Street and St George's Mall, is marked with a circle of benches donated by the Rock Girl project, aimed at creating safe places for women and children.