SOUTH AFRICA
The Dutch East India Company, the General Government at Batavia, and the Cape Government may be compared to three seas, each having a distinctive source, yet flowing into one another. Ebb and flow would constantly re-act upon them – from Holland to Batavia, and back from Batavia to Holland; from Holland to the Cape, and back from the Cape to Holland; from Batavia to the Cape and back again to Batavia – thus the tide would come and go. These seas must also be regarded as of great depth, but in surface area the one representing the Cape is very small in comparison to the rest, which, however, does not impede its tidal flow and reaction upon the other seas.

With this written representation the German Otto Mentzel ended the first part of his three-volume book on the Cape of Good Hope, having spent eight years (1733–1741) in the Dutch colony.¹ He compared the three stations of the VOC to three watercourses that transformed and transported people, information and goods. He clearly saw the significance of the Cape colony as contributor to the vast VOC network. Indeed, the founding years of South Africa’s colony highlight this ‘tidal flow’ of knowledge, people, and objects to and from the Cape. The agricultural enterprise of the Dutch trading company allowed for an intersection of local knowledge, nature, and networks that then flowed via the VOC channels to distant Amsterdam or Batavia.

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