Telling History through Museums and Monuments: Memory and Representation

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Museums, memorials and commemoration days seek to reconstruct past events in the present epoch. In these spaces that we remember the past, memory is the agent through which reconstruction takes place. Most of the time our memories are triggered by objects that are familiar to us, in what Terdiman calls "an anchoring role in the mnemonic process."[1] In this paper I seek to understand what past was remembered in the public spaces in South Africa during the Colonial and apartheid periods? I also seek to understand what past did those who were opposed to Colonialism and apartheid remember and how did they remember it? In doing that I also examine the symbols and material cultures that sustained these memories. In order for us to concretely conceptualise this I examine two national museums that existed during the apartheid era and the other two during the post liberation period. For the pre liberation period, the South African Museum and the South African Cultural History Museum[2] are examined. Both museums are situated in Cape Town. For the "new" South Africa, I examine the District Six Museum and the Robben Island Museum. The importance of how in South Africa memory has been represented in the past in public institutions is important, not only because museums claims to represent and present our past but also because they also market themselves as places of education i.e. shaping the future in terms of the past. The ways in which some old museums have been marketing themselves within the past ten years have been questioned and the memories they display contested. The challenge and the questioning of the hegemonic memories represented by these museums through their displays have been accompanied by calls for them to transform.

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[1] R. Terdiman, *Present Pat: Modernity and the Memory Crisis: Past Present* (1993) p.13

[2] Because of the processes of transformation that are taking place within the South African museums, the South African Museum and the South African Cultural History Museum have been almagamated into a Southern Flagship known as Iziko.

It was however not surprising when some museums were reluctant to engage with the process of transformation, the major question that they asked was 'transform to what?' Thus the calls for change also triggered new sets of debates of how to think and reconceptualise our national past in the emerging society. In so doing the people calling for transformation had understood that " memory sustains hegemony, it also subverts it through its capacity to recollect and to restore the alternative discourses the dominant would simply bleach out and forget."[3] It is in that light that it is imperative for us to also examine what alternative memories were commemorated during South Africa's divided past? By this I mean that what memories did the majority of people have about the past that was not found in history books but was stored in peoples memories, which resulted to them remembering certain days rather than those that were legislated as national holidays. In doing that we will also briefly examine how the 'new' South Africa sought to deal and reconcile the two national pasts.

The construction of national identities in South Africa dates back to the wars of Shaka or what has become known as Imfecane. Some sees the Mfecane as a one of the early forms of nation building in Southern Africa. The wars took place between different ethnic groups with the smaller defeated groups being absorbed by the bigger and stronger groups. The fight between ethnic groups in South Africa is not unique to Africans. While Africans fought to build strong kingdoms, the white Colonialist were also participating in the scramble for land and in the building of a white hegemony. They at times pitted one chief against the other in order to obtain land and favour. One of the ways they did this is by offering certain chiefs with superior weapons like guns and ammunition. Through such offers they could sign treaties with the African Kings and Chiefs that were favourable to them. With the combination of strategies Natal and the Cape became the Queens colonies. Lesotho, which is near the Free State, became a British Protectorate.

The identity wars continued to take different formats that resulted in the Great Trek, which was from 1795 to 1843[4]. Symbols like flags, language and national anthems came

[3] R. Terdiman, Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis (1993) p.20
[4] The Great-Trek was the movement of dissatisfied Afrikaners by being ruled by the English in the Cape Colony.

to characterise the identity of a people and in turn they acted as agents of memories of what constitute that nation. In his famous essay of what is a Nation, Renan defines a nation as a "soul, a spiritual principle [with] two things constituting that soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past and one lies in the present and one is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories. The other is present day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form."[5] Evans takes this definition further and states that it is not only an object of political, geographical or economic analysis but also one of cultural analysis.[6] It is these dominant shared public memories that come to dominate the lives of future generations as part of their heritage. And in many situations these are communicated and shared through education, cultural practices and social values and the state machinery.

Such memories are also disseminated through public media, auto/biographies, documentary films, museums and monuments [among other mediums]. Statues of heroes are created and fill most of the cities in order to commemorate their memories, and Nietzsche called this "monumental history –that the great be eternal."[7] These are some of the ways through which national memories and the entrenchment of national identities take place. As such no one can sustain an argument that South Africans are different from other nations in worshipping these 'heroes.'

When the National Party came into power in 1948, it started a prolonged process of building Afrikaner identity and culture. For such a project to succeed, they had to create heroes from a distant past that traces their history. It was during this time that characters such as Jan Van Riebeck emerged and became powerful symbols of the Afrikaners. The story of the arrival of Jan Van Riebeck in South Africa was introduced in all history schoolbooks, both in black and white schools. In Cape Town all the entrances of the Civic Centre are named after the ships in which Van Riebeck came with in 1652 with his team i.e. Dromedaries, Reiche and Goedehoop (Good hope).

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[5] E. Renan, What is a Nation in G. Eley (editor) *Becoming National, A Reader*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (1996) p.52
[6] J. Evans, *Nation and Representation*, Routledge, London (1999) p.1
[7] F. Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1980) P. 15

In front of the National Parliament in Cape Town we are also confronted with another monument right in front of the South African sit of power. The past regime built a statue of Paul Kruger riding a horse. Paul Kruger was one of the conservative Afrikaners who in 1883 became the President of the Transvaal Republic. Kruger who was also a traditional Calvinist believed that he and the leadership of the Transvaal were answerable to the 'nation' first but above all they were answerable to the 'almighty' God. By believing that the state is answerable to God, the regimes of these two Republics did not take direct responsibility for their actions but passed them to God. It is not surprising that when the white minority government took independence from Britain in 1960 and unilaterally declared South Africa a Republic and excluded black people, they wrote a constitution that affirmed South Africa as a Christian state. By declaring South Africa a Christian state, the Nationalists were denying other religions place in South Africa although such groups had significant following. Further than that, they also excluded African people as citizens although the majority of them also professed to be Christians.

There are also two other monuments that are dedicated to Christiana Jan Smuts. The first one is situated behind the parliament in a beautiful park that is between the South African Museum and the South African Cultural History Museum. Another statue is situated in front of the Slave Lodge (South African Cultural History Museum) in a place where it imposes itself and demands to be noticed. Smuts was one of the Afrikaner heroes who fought in the Anglo-Boer war and later a Member of Parliament during the Union of South Africa in 1910 under Prime Minister Louis Botha. When WWII broke up he was the Prime Minister of South Africa who allied himself with Britain. For this some Afrikaner dissidents who sympathised with Hitler's Germany fiercely opposed him. Some historians have argued that, that was one of the reasons that he lost the 1948 elections to the National Party.

Although the majority of the Nationalists were opposed to the support Smuts gave to the Allied Forces, they however continued to view him as one of the Afrikaner heroes and figures. This is reflected on how Smuts is represented in history school textbooks. He is

symbolized as a hero and an international statesman who was a key figure in the formation of the League of Nations. His statue in front of the South African Cultural History Museum is the confirmation of his role in the construction of white national identity and solidarity in South Africa.

In South Africa the majority of white South Africans harbour fond memories of Smuts while black South Africans have sad memories about his period in office. He is in particular remembered for two catastrophes that happened under his rule. The first incident was the mineworkers' strike. During this strike the mine management could not settle a deal with the workers and they called on government assistance to suppress a looming strike. Instead of mediating between mine management and the leaders of the workers, Jan Smuts instead sent soldiers with an order to ruthlessly suppress the strike. Several people were killed and injured by the army.

The second incident that is remembered in black communities about Smuts is the Bullhoek incident. Bullhoek was a settlement that was occupied by Reverend Mgijima and his followers, the Israelites.[8] The Israelites were a large religious sector that believed that they were the chosen people of God. They also believed that the land they were occupying belonged to their forefathers and that they had the right to it. They lived in that land for many years without problems, until the neighbouring farmers complained about stock theft. In hearing the farmers' complaints, Smuts reacted by ordering the Israelites to vacate the land without offering alternative space. When the Israelites requested negotiations with him, he responded by sending the army so that they could be forcefully evicted. When the army came, they did not enter into negotiations with the "squatters" but instead opened fired without sufficient warning if there was. The army killed several people including women and children while many were injured. Yet, in all Smuts's memorial sites and in history schoolbooks this memory has been silenced.

There were also other forms of remembering the past that were not only restricted to statues, such as memorial sites that were built in memory of the Great Trek that took

[8] The Israelites was a religious sect that was predominantly African.

place from 1735 to 1843**.** Among the Afrikaners, the Great Trek is a symbol of triumph against evil as they moved from oppression in the Eastern Frontier under British rule to freedom in the Promised Land. During the Great-Trek, one of the Trek leaders, Andries Pretorius, referred to the British rule as that of Pharaoh against Gods people, the Afrikaners. The movement towards building a monument to commemorate the Great Trek started in 1938, when intellectuals from the Broederbond, which was an Afrikaner male secrete organisation started to propagate the commemoration idea. In these commemorations the ox wagon became the symbol through which the Afrikaners remembered their past. It was only after the Nationalist came into power that the Voortreker monument was built and became a place where each loyal Afrikaner aspired to visit and pay homage.

Further than that Afrikaner Nationalism was also entrenched through the naming of buildings, streets, high ways, airports and dams after leading Afrikaner leaders who once had occupied or continued to occupy positions of power at that time. All airports in South Africa were named after Prime Ministers and Presidents, i.e. Johannesburg airport was known as Jan Smuts, Kimberley was B.J Vorster, and East London was Ben Schoeman etc. Some major dams like Griep dam was named after Dr. Hendrick Verwoed who was one of the architects of apartheid. Dr. Verwoed, a psychologist by training who studied in Germany, is remembered by the infamous speech he made in parliament in the 1950s when he asked, what is the use of teaching a Bantu child mathematics when he can not put it in practice?

He further stated, a Bantu must be thought up to a level where he will see the fruits of Europeans but must not be able to touch. These are the symbols that came to characterise Afrikaner memories, in such a way that when in 1995, the Premier of Free State ‘Terror” Lekota ordered the removal of Verwoed statue in front of the Provincial parliament he offended many Afrikaners who viewed this as an attack on Afrikaner people, language and culture. By removing some of these symbols, some Afrikaners felt that they were being denied the right to: “look back on their origins with loyalty and to tender with

loving hands what has long survived, which was intended to preserve the conditions in which, they grew up and for those who were to come after [them].”[9]

For most Afrikaners the physical spaces in the cities, the huge buildings, the Dutch Reformed Church came to represent progress and civility in a continent where there was despair, poverty, civil unrest, pagans and barbarism. The advanced implements in the farms became a source of pride that once again demonstrated the civility of the Volk and that sets them apart from the African peasants. As a result of that the cities became part of the Afrikaner heritage that was built by sweat and blood of their ancestors, which needed to be preserved. The church, the civil centres, the museums, parliament, the courts all became symbols of that civilisation and advanced culture. These are types of memories, which Nietzsche described as antiquarian history. When Nietzsche examined this, he concluded that to such people the “history of their city become for them the history of their self. They understand the wall, the turret gate, the ordinance of the town council, and the national festivals like an illustrated diary of their youth. They greet the soul of their people as their own soul even across the wide, obscuring and confusing centuries.”[10]

At a time when the official history of South Africa was based on the memories of white South Africans at the exclusion of the indigenous populations, the liberation movements presented narratives that took into account the stories and histories of the black people. This history became known as alternative or peoples history. It was not disseminated through formal education. It found space in political workshops as part of political education or to what was known as cadre schools. The memory that was invoked in some of these cadre schools was that of a heroic past where the memories of those who fought against colonialism and apartheid were invoked.

Some of the other methods that were used to popularise the alternative forms of remembering were through rallies and progressive newspapers. The now defunct *New Nation* newspaper ran a series of people’s history programmes in its publications until it

[9] F. Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1980) p. 19
[10] F. Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (1980) p.19

ceased the publication. Schools, townships, peoples' parks and some township streets were named after those who were brutally killed by the system and also those who distinguished themselves in the resistance against colonialism and apartheid. In the Northern Cape as early as the early 1970s a school was named after the first General Secretary of the African National Congress, Solomon Plaatjie. Sol Plaatjie distinguished himself as a writer, politician, journalist and human rights activist. In 1999, the Northern Cape government converted his house in Galeshewe, Kimberley into a museum to remember his contribution to the liberation struggle, especially his role in popularising the evils of the 1913 Land Act.[11]

The University of the Western Cape in Cape Town took the monumentalisation of struggle heroes more serious than any other academic institution in South Africa. There are five residences that were named after such 'heroes'. The first one was the Cecil Esau residence. At the time of his arrest for his activities in uMkhonto we Sizwe, Cecil Esau was a graduate student at the University of the Western Cape. In the thick of violence that was taking place in South Africa in the 1980s, one of its victims was Colin Williams who was brutally murdered by the police. She was a high school student and Congress of South African Student leader who lived in a township next to the University. The University renamed that residence in honour of her memory. The Hector Petersen residence was named after one of the first victims of the Soweto uprisings in 1976; Hector was twelve years old when the police brutally killed him.

The 1950s have produced some of the bravest women in the liberation history in South Africa. One of those women was Ruth First, who in the 1950s was a journalist for the *World* newspaper. The *World* was one of the few progressive papers that were not intimidated by the state and which exposed some of the gruesome activities of the state. Ruth was arrested under the 90 days act and was incarcerated in isolation all that time. The only people whom she could communicate with were her captives when they came to

[11] The Act took away all rights of Africans to land in areas the state declared white sports. It also ended sharecropping between white farmers and African peasants. Sharecropping was a process whereby some Africans contributed with seeds, livestock and their labour in exchange for farming rights in a white farmer's land.

interrogate her. She later became an academic and thought at Eduardo Mondlane University where she was killed by a letter bomb sent by the South African Police. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has confirmed that, the bomb was sent by Craig Williamson, one of the apartheid spies. The Ruth First residence is dedicated to her memory.

The other two residences are Chris Hani and Eduardo Dos Santos residences. Chris was the General Secretary of the Communist Party and a National Executive Committee member of the African National Congress who was killed shortly after he came back from exile by a right wing Polish immigrant, known as Janus Walus. Walus claimed during his trial that he was a member of one of the right wing groups inside the country. During the TRC hearings he claimed that he killed Hani because he symbolised communism in South Africa, a system he ran away from in his native country. Eduardo Dos Santos resident named after the President of Angola. Angola is one of the few countries in Southern Africa that gave military camps to the liberation movement.

It is through these codes that the public memories of South Africa were contested and shaped during this period. Some of the means in which it was produced was through literature, graffiti, documentary films and commemorative days. As it could be expected, official holidays commemorated yet again the history of Afrikaners. An example of this is the Krugers day, which was on the day he was born i.e. on the 10 August. Paul Kruger was the only person to whose memory the Afrikaners dedicated a holiday.

On the other hand the unofficial holidays that were commemorated by the liberation movements were days like May 1, which is the International Workers day and 26 June, the day the Freedom Charter was adopted in the Peoples Congress that was held at Kliptown in 1955. As one can observe the differences in how the people of South Africa remembered the past was the affirmation that South Africa itself was a two Nation State, one black and poor and one white and prosperous. It was also an affirmation that the two nations had different histories and attached significance to two separate public memories. In explaining the ritual of remembering, Zerubavel once stated that, “commemoration

groups create, articulate and negotiate their shared memories of particular events. The performance of commemoration ritual allows participants not only to revive and affirm older memories of the past but also to modify them."[12]

In the recollection of the past there were also days like December 16 that both groups, black and white commemorated. On this day the whites, especially Afrikaners were remembering the war in which they defeated the King of the Zulu Dingaan in 1838. Among the Africans on this day they remembered the wars of land dispossession and the resistance to colonialism. It was for that reason that the African National Congress armed wing, uMkhonto we Sizwe first sabotage campaign was launched. However, within the South African historiography, even if the significance of the day has not changed for each racial group, the purpose of the day has changed on various occasions depending on the political circumstances. When this day was declared an official holiday it was known as Dingaans day. In the 1980s like a chameleon it became known as the day of the vow. During the new democratic order the day as again underwent a metamorphosis and became reconciliation day. On this day the state is calling upon its citizens to reflect on the past conflicts and to recommit themselves to peace and reconciliation. So, here one observes how the significance of the day can transform its importance depending on what it had to serve. Halbwachs states it clearly when he wrote that "we preserve memories of each epoch in our lives and these are continually reproduced, through them, as by continued relationship, as sense of our identity is perpetuated. But precisely because these memories are repetitions, because they are successively engaged in very different systems of nations, at different periods of our lives, they have lost the form and the appearance they once had."[13]

Differently stated, we can argue that in South Africa, the shift in the ways in which the nation remembers has to do with the change that took place in state policies. While in the past, the Apartheid State used to commemorate white supremacy and the liberation

[12] Y. Zerubavel, 'Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition" as quoted in V. Riofoul, *The Making of a new past for a "new" South Africa: the commemoration of Robben Island*, M.A thesis, UCT 1997, P. 39

movements used to honour heroes of resistance, the new state seeks to foster what they term "unity in diversity". This is the result of the radical changes that occurred in state policies: where the previous regime nurtured separation of races, the new government is deconstructing those notions and building a non-racial society. South Africa had become one country and in the process of constructing one nation as noticed in most Nation building advertisements e.g. adverts like Simunye (We are one) are some of the ways this vision is marketed on national television (SABC) that propagates this discourse in very interesting ways. In this transition from an apartheid state to a national democracy, we observe the encompassing ways used on how we remember the past. Therefore, the use of a unifying language is meant to foster group cohesion, and as such the "representation of the national past [are] continually shaped and reshaped so as to promote elements favouring the development of national consciousness and belittling division."[14]

Some of the ways in which nations spread group cohesion is through cultural institutions like memorials, museums, or one can argue that cultural institutions are influenced by the need to serve the state in bringing such unity through ways in which they present the past. Memorial sites are also spaces where a memory of a particular event is remembered by the nation state. In South Africa two years after the democratic dispensation, the site where Enoch Mankayi Sontonga was buried was officially declared a memorial park. On heritage day of the same year (23 September 1996) a monument was unveiled officially declaring that site Enoch Sontonga memorial site. The street where the grave park is situated was also renamed in his respect. Enoch Sontonga is well known for the song/hymn he wrote which later became the national anthem of the liberation struggle: Nkosi Sikelela iAfrika (God Bless Africa). In paying tribute to Sontonga, Mandela invoked the past in ways that serves the present when he stated that, "we are recovering a part of the history of our nation and our continent. [Nkosi Sikelela] unites town and

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[13] M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (edited and Translated by) L. A. Coser, The Heritage of Sociology (1992) p.

[14] V. Rioufol, *The Making of a new past for a "new" South Africa: the commemoration of Robben Island*, M.A thesis, UCT, 1997 P. 45

countryside…the vision [of the song] which once sustained the oppressed now unites all in our liberated nation."[15]

Museums and memorial sites are marketed as repositories of memory, history, culture, heritage and the need to preserve and represent that, and because their displays are seen as mirroring the past that once was, they have an ability to shape our understanding of the world around us. And also because of the visual means, in which museums communicate public memory, most members of society tend to accept their displays as the 'truth'. That reality is accepted in unproblematic ways, resulting to a very few people who understand that museums "present a particular version of the history of the community in which they are located."[16] The visual power that museums have helps trigger and mediate certain memories, however, "unlike personal memories which is animated by the individual lived experiences, museums give material form to authorised versions of the past, which in time become institutionalised as public memories."[17] Through the process of institutionalising the past, then history becomes official.

In South Africa there are two old museums that are both situated in the Western Cape: the South African Museum and the South African Cultural History Museum. The South African Museum is the second oldest museum in South Africa. It was established in 1825 as a museum of natural history and science. As a result it has a rich collections of variants of mammal, birds, fishes, minerals and meteorites and other natural species. The museum promotes itself as a museum that has "great diversity of specimens on exhibitions…popular exhibits include the only specimen in Africa of the extinct Quagga and the spectacular Whale Well."[18] Curiously enough it is also home to the culture and history of the black people like the Khoisan, Nguni and the Sotho. The history and culture of white ethnic groups is displayed in the South African Cultural History Museum. In taking a tour of the South African Museum, one would be entertained and educated about the most interesting natural species found in South Africa and also of the

[15] N. Mandela, Speech at the unveiling of the monument to Enoch Sontonga on heritage day, 23 September 1996, Johannesburg
[16] C. Miller-Marti, "*Local History Museums and the creation of the past*" in Muse/Summer/ete 1987 p.36
[17] P. Davison, "Museums and the Reshaping of Memory" in S. Nuttal, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, Cape Town (1998) p.145
[18] www.museums.org.za

scientific advancements that humanity as achieved. Within that scientific evolution, one would also view and be informed about the evolution of humanity. In the line of that evolution of a people not yet developed to their full capacity are what the museum displays have called the Bushmen and Bantus speaking tribes, depicted in prehistoric and static ways. As such the bushman diorama is one of the in/famous displays of the museum that has been highly challenged by politicians, the scholars and by the general public.

The exhibition was constructed in 1959 and completed in 1960 at the height of the National Party ideology of white racial superiority, when the Verwoedians were arguing that blacks have no history and culture, they only have customs and superstitions. The diorama is situated on the ground level of the museum from the main entrance. It is based on a "painting of such a camp by S. Daniell and the descriptions of such life styles of //Xan hunter-gathers in journals of J. Barrow and Somerville who travelled the Karoo at the beginning of the 19th century."[19] The diorama follows the painting that has just been described, however, in the exhibition the people in the drawing are cast that were made from villagers and farm workers who worked in the Prieska area in the early 1900, and were identified by scientists as the "real bushman." In this display it is inscribed, "humans have become the dominant form of life on the planet. Hunter-gathers exhibit many of the traits that have led to this human ascendancy." Following the diorama is the exhibition of Nguni and Sotho speaking groups, they are displayed not as agriculturalists but as pasturalists. Where they are displayed there are animals next to them that give the impression that they live with animals and among animals.

The South African Cultural History Museum as already mentioned somewhere was initiated on the basis that it displays the history and culture of South Africans. It is housed on the Corner of Adderley Street and Whale Street, 15 minutes away from the South African Museum. The building where the museum is housed dates back to 1679. While the museum purports to be a cultural museum of history for South Africans, a closer look at its collections and displays will reveal that its artefacts are those of the white ethnic groups. This is evidenced by the absence of the black 'material culture.' The

[19] w.w.w. Musems.org.za

museum invites its visitors to come and see "aspects of Cape Town's history and collections of ceramic, toys, tools, silver and textiles as well as artefacts from ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome."[20]

In one of the exhibition spaces there are displays of musical instruments such as organs, pianos, saxophones, guitars and other "Western" musical instruments. When one passes that space to the next room there are displays of the 17th and 18th European military artillery that was used during the wars of colonisation. In the opposite room there is an exhibition that present construction tools. When one takes a tour of the textile presentation, one can not fail to notice that the display is dedicated to European fashion that was imbibed by whites in South Africa during the past two to three centuries.

A tour of both museums will reveal that the parallels that exist between them and the manner in which their exhibitions were constructed was in support of the state ideology of apartheid. It is by no historical accident that the South African Cultural History Museum has been silent on the history and culture of black people throughout the decades. Neither is it by accident that the South African Museum chose to display the history and culture of black people in a natural science museum. It was also not by chance that they maintained a deep silence about white culture and history. The ideology of apartheid was based on the policy of race separation in all spheres of life, be it social, sport or cultural events. Therefore, one can argue that both museums were in the services of the Nationalists' discourse that believed in Darwin's social theory of the hierarchy of races.

However, with the transformation that is taking place within South Africa, all museums that were established during the colonial and apartheid period are also engaged in the process of transformation. While transformation in general has been slow, in particular that of displays as the face of the museum, there are encouraging indicators that there are

[20] w.w.w.museums.org.za/sachm/osl/index.html

some changes that are taking place. First, in the South African Museum, there are attempts to problematize the history of the dioramas and their place in public memory.[21]

The South African Cultural History Museum has not only changed its name to Slave Lodge but has also added displays on Khoisan and Cape Slave history as part of the museum narrative. The incorporation of the historically marginalized groups in the South African Historical Museum is undoubtedly influenced by the present political discourse of many cultures but one nation. The problematisation of the dioramas at the South African Museum on the one hand was influenced or triggered by former President Nelson Mandela's speech on the installation of the Robben Island Museum Council in 1997. In that speech Mandela called on the SA museum to stop depicting the history of the black people in degrading ways. He further outlined that, "our museums, represent the kind of heritage which glorified mainly white and colonial history and even the small glimpse of black history in others was largely fixed in the grip of racist and other stereotypes. [He further posed rhetorical questions that] can we afford exhibitions in our museums depicting any of our people as lesser human beings, sometimes in natural history museums reserved for the depictions of animals? Can we continue to tolerate our ancestors being shown as people locked in time?"[22] There have also been others who have criticised the manner in which transformation is taking place in South African museums i.e. Minkley, Witz and Rassool; they have called this process the "add on." By which they meant that it does not have an impact and lacks the ability to radically change the manner in which culture and history has been represented in South Africa over the centuries. Thus they argue that the reasons why museums are performing these additions is because they are left with no choice but to transform rather than challenge the present dominant discourse.

[21] On the 04 May 2001, the news wire reported that the "Bushman diorama was shutdown after 46 years following protest from the Khoisan community and others who said the diorama represented a time when Busmen were treated like specimen in a natural history museum." The Chief Executive Officer, Jack Loham of the Iziko museum also commented that the shutdown was part of the transformation of museums in order to make the institutions more democratic.

[22] N. Mandela, Address on heritage day, Robben Island Museum, 24 September 1997

Museum transformation has not only meant the reorganisation of old museums; it also meant the establishment of new museums. Some of the new museums started in the post apartheid period are Nelson Mandela Museum complex in Umtata - Eastern Cape, the Lwandle Museum of Migrant Labour History in Somerset - Western Cape, the District Six Museum and Robben Island Museum among others. In examining the purpose of the museums established in the post apartheid era, it seems that they aim to draw attention to the history of apartheid and the struggles of the oppressed. To illustrate this we will briefly examine the District Six Museums and the Robben Island Museum.

The District Six Museum is a culmination of community struggles that took place in the 1980s, which were influenced by the formation of the United Democratic Front in 1983. All community organisations at this period were organised along racial lines while at the same time they were rejecting the racism that existed in society. They however accepted membership or affiliation on a non-racial basis, since in their constitutions they stated that they were non-racial. The District Six Museum is a result of the forced removal of people from one of the Cape Town slums that were multiracial in character. It was a community that was started by freed slaves in the Cape and many people migrated into it because of its close proximity to the City Centre. People were removed to areas designated for their groups according to the Race Classification Act, which classified people according to Whites, Coloureds, Indians and then Africans. The only group of people who could remain in the area were whites because the District was classified a white residential area by a proclamation in 1966 under the 1953 Group Areas Act. This Act divided society according to ethnic groups. One of the well-documented effects of the Group Areas Act is that it divided many families as they were relocated in different areas. In many talks about District Six Museum, Ciraj Rassool, a member of the museum trustee/council always argues that the formation of the museum was a result of a political task. With the new democratic order in place there was a new legislation, the Land Rights Act No 22 of 1994. This act established the Land Claims Commission and created a process of land restitution. This resulted to the idea of District Six Museum as a metaphoric way of reclaiming the land.[23] In the introduction of a book about District Six

[23] Ciraj Rassool in many forums where he spoke about the District Six Museum has made this argument.

museum that has been published recently, he states that, "a strong position was articulated that the mission of the Museum was not to network with museums, but to mobilise the masses of ex-residents and their descendants into a movement of land restitution, community development and political consciousness."[24] As a result, the museum was opened on the 10 December 1994. The narrative/s in the museum are based on the history of the area and that of forced removals in general. This story line is also reflected in the museum exhibitions.

In taking a tour of the museum there is a panel that summarises the aims of the museum, the panel is a poem about memory. As a point of illustration, here we take two verses from it:

Remember District Six
Remember the racism
Which took away our homes
And our livelihood
And which sought
To steal away our humanity…

In remembering we do not want
To recreate District Six
But to work with its memory:
Of hurts inflicted and received,
Of loss, achievements and of shames.

The racism that took place in the country is also made evident in the museum through an exhibition about the Group Areas Act. In recalling the practices of racial segregation, in the museum, there is a chair with one of the original boards that were used to inform people for whom a particular space is meant, the board reads in English and Afrikaans: Europeans Only. Slegs Blankes. The English version is slightly misleading as it might imply the space is only meant for those who come from Europe, but the Afrikaans version is explicitly clear that the space is for white only. Indeed the reason that in later years the European was officially changed even in English to white in the late 1960s was

[24] Ciraj Rassool et al (editors) *Recalling Community in Cape Town: Creating and Curating the District Six Museum* (District Six Museum Publishers, 2001) P. viii

because it was so confusing that some white people who came from other countries were found in beaches meant for blacks only. When the police interrogated them they realised that most of them interpreted European as meaning only those from Europe unlike in South Africa where European signified whiteness.

As a museum of consciousness it seeks to articulate strongly its shared past with other millions of South Africans who were forcefully removed from their land and homes. It does this by recreating some of the life style and homes that existed at District Six. It also seeks to show the suffering and the successes of the people that lived in the District. In one of the exhibit houses one enters into a typical home of Distict Six where the kitchen, the bedroom and the sitting room are in one space. This typical home would have belonged to one of the migrants who could have been a tenant and not a landlord. By recreating that space the museum attempts to show that not everybody who lived in District Six was a house owner: there were landlords as well as tenants.

In the second level of the museum, there are photographs of some of the former residents of District Six. Among those are poets, teachers, artists and revolutionaries. There is a photograph of Alex La Guma, who went into exile in the 1960s. Alex La Guma was an activist who wrote poetry. He was a regular contributor in the *Staffrider*, which was a cultural journal of South Africans that were in exile. He has also produced books in poetry.

This exhibition also pays compliment to Moses Kotane who was a leader of the South African Trade Unions (SACTU). Moses Kotane came from Johannesburg and was sent to Cape Town to revive the trade union movement and the Communist Party. He stayed in Cape Town for years and while he was there he resided at District Six. Kotane is one of those leaders of the Tripartite Alliance (ANC SACP and SACTU) that died in exile.

In entering the museum one is challenged by street signs that are exhibited in the museum. The street signs are meant to trigger the memories of those that lived and knew this community. Further than that they are a tangible proof of the existence of District

Six. The street signs were recovered from one white male worker who was supervising the demolishing of the area. One of the museum workers and former resident learned about the signs from the grapevine and followed the story until he found the person. He kept the signs in a very safe place and environment in his cellar. When he wanted to sell the signs to the museum, he was reminded that what he did was against state regulations that clearly stated that after the destruction of any community all the traces of that community must be destroyed. This incident took place before the democratic order and when the District Six Committee was still involved in the 'hands off district six" campaign. The fellow in whose possession the signs were recovered requested that the Committee and later the museum should keep his name anonymous. In summarising the story of the museum it would seem to me that it symbolises District Six itself, it also represent their joys, their successes, their bitterness and also their destruction, but it also signify their survival and their struggles against apartheid and the spirit not to forget.

At the same time as the District Six Museum was created to commemorate the pain of removal, the Robben Island Museum was established to commemorate the history of struggle and that of imprisonment. The Robben Island Museum was opened on 1 January 1997 with the aim of portraying an alternative history to that which was taught at schools. The museum is situated at Robben Island itself, which has a long history of isolation, deprivation and imprisonment of those who once populated it. When the cabinet declared Robben Island as a National Heritage site and a National Museum, they declared that it should become a "showcase of the new South African democracy,"[25] that would be a powerful reminder to future generations not to repeat the tragedies of the past.[26] In commemorating the history of the Island the museum was to pay tribute to human courage in the face of prejudice and racism,[27] and this statement by Mzimela who was the first Minister of Correctional Service after the first democratic elections set the pace of how the space should be remembered. In that way the space does not only become a place where the history of the liberation struggle is showcased, it also becomes a site of celebrating the memory of the struggle that tends to serve the present political discourse.

[25] Media Statement, Ministry of Arts, Science and Technology, 1996
[26] *Cape Times, 04 January 1997*
[27] *Cape Times, 04 January 1997*

For the museum to serve the present political discourse in tangible ways that are not contradicting the overall state project of National Reconciliation, it also had to tune its narrative/s to fulfil that objective.

To illustrate this, the Robben Island Museum from its inception was marketed as a space where one could come and see former enemies i.e. in the symbol of former prison wardens and ex-political prisoners working together in harmony. This was seen as a live demonstration of the new South Africa that is prepared to forgive and reconcile its traumatic past and was forward looking rather than backward. In order to support this dream, some of the major South African newspapers like the *Cape Times* and *Mail and Guardian* ran supplementary articles that showed the success of how in practice reconciliation was succeeding at Robben Island Museum. By doing so, they sought to challenge anyone in the black community who was not yet ready prepared to undergo the process, to say if people who were incarcerated and suffered a lot in prison then who am I not to have the space to forgive and support the project of reconciliation. As we can see there was a concerted effort to pool people together to support the process and by doing so, it was interpreted as a way of rejecting the apartheid notions of a divided society and a building of a new national identity that is non-racial.

The museum also contributes to the creation of this new national identity through its tour narratives and exhibitions. There are several different tour experiences that tourists obtain when they visits the museum. The experience starts with the boarding of the boat at the Cape Town harbour. There are two sets of boats that are used by the museum to ferry people over to Robben Island, the first set is the old boats that were used during the prison period i.e. the Diaz and the Susan Kruger. The Diaz is named after Bartholomew Diaz who passed the Cape in the 1400s to the East Indies in search of spice. The Kruger is named after the wife of Jimmy Kruger who was the Minister of prisons in the National Party government.

The new set of boats are equipped with television and video monitors and are named after prominent indigenous leaders who resisted colonialism during their times. The

Aushomato was named after one of the Khoi leaders who was better known by the colonialist as Herri the Strandloper or even in more derogatory names as Herri the Hottentot. The Dutch imprisoned Autshomatu in the late 1600 to Robben Island, and it is claimed he is one of the few prisoners who managed to escape from the island. The second boat is named after Makana (Nxele ka Makhanda) who was one of the African leaders from the Eastern Cape who resisted British Colonialism and was imprisoned at Robben Island during the Wars of Dispossession. It is claimed that Nxele drowned on the ocean when he and others escaped from the island to Blaauwbergstrand. Some among the Xhosa believe that he was killed by the British and buried secretly as his remains have never been found. Because there was the strong belief among his followers that he was soon going to return, and when this did not materialised it result to one of the Xhosa idioms that says “Ulinde ukubuya kuka Nxele” (you are waiting for the return of Nxele, which is something that will never happen.) when ever they suspect that somebody is not going to return. The naming of boats after resistance leaders is in line with the Robben Island message of also representing the histories that were marginalised in the past.

When one takes the latest boats that are technologically equipped, they get to see a 12 minute documentary video that briefly outlines the history of Robben Island from time immemorial and closes with the latest period of political imprisonment and the handing over of the prison to the museum. The documentary is an expository text and is characterised by a narrators voice with subtitles that are directed towards the viewer with images that serves as illustrations. This is done to accommodate elements of the interviews, which are subsequently subordinated to an argument offered by the film itself via the camera, which speaks on behalf of the text. Those that were interviewed and are forgrounded by the film are Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Neville Alexander, Govan Mbeki, Steven Tshwete, Ahmed Kathrada and Kwedi Mkalipi. In this documentary ex political prisoners speak about their humiliation in the hands of the prison authorities, however they also emphasise how they resisted such humiliation through struggles they fought inside jail. Some of the proud victories often mentioned were that of a right to study although such gains were often reversed by the authorities and they had to fight again. In illustrating the humiliation they sometimes felt, the documentary quotes Govan

Mbeki as saying: “One occasionally got off the island to see medical specialist at Cape Town. When you got out to the outpatients department there would be a general buzz, like a beehive, from the hundreds of outpatients. The moment a prisoner appeared in leg irons and handcuffs, the people were suddenly quiet. You would feel their eyes penetrating your entire being. It was an experience one does not like.” This in the documentary is juxtaposed with a prisoners accompanied by a warder who is in chains in a hospital. The documentary concludes by stating that, “the warders were transformed by men wearing chains here where the restoration of the nation was shaped. Graduates of the prison occupy leading positions in government that is why, I too can rejoice at the triumph of the human spirit that prevailed on my shores.” The importance of this story is not how documentaries are done but it sets the stage for the type of narrative/s one receives at Robben Island. Unlike a person who is ferried by the old sets of boats, they are not clamatised to the type of stories they should expect once they arrive at the museum.

When one arrives at Robben Island Museum, there are two forms of tour experiences, i.e. the prison tour and the village tour. In the village tour the visitors are taking with a bus through the village and the natural environment of the island. They are entertained and informed about the animal species, the trees and vegetation and not to forget the birds that are found on the island. Further than that it is in the village tour that tourist are taken to where the prisoners used to work e.g. the stone quarry and the lime quarry. It is also through the tour village that tourist are taken to the Sobukhwe house. Sobukhwe was detained after he completed his sentence at Pretoria prison. Because he was no longer a prisoner he was isolated from other prisoners. In the stone quarry visitors are informed about how prisoners used to chip stones form rock to gravel, from gravel to small stone and from that to dust. It is also here that visitors are informed about the humiliation that the warders inflicted on prisoners. One of the well-known stories that tour guides like to narrate is that of Johnson Mlambo who was a leader of the Pan Africanist Congress. One day Mlambo was punished by one of the Kleinhans brothers when they were working in the quarry. They instructed some of the common law prisoners to dig a hole and they forced Mlambo inside the hole and buried him with only the head appearing. When he

complained of thirst, Piet Kleinhans one of the twins, urinated in his face and told him that is the nicest wine he will ever get. This is where the sadism of prisoner's warders is narrated.

The second space is the lime quarry, and in the lime quarry is where people who were in the isolation section worked or those who were regarded by the authorities as leaders and dangerous. In the lime quarry is where the entire Rivonia trialist worked and the Neville Alexander group leader of the New Unity Movement allied organisation known as the Yu Chi Chan Club. This space is presented to tourists in glowing terms as a space where people were politicised and also studies for academic qualifications. There is a deep vertical hole in the lime quarry, which the authorities used as a toilet facility and a kitchen alternately. In that whole tourist are informed that is the space where prisoners taught each other how to read and write. The lime quarry is also described as a space where prisoners assisted other prisoners with their studies. Some of the guides will further say that even some of the warders were encouraged by prisoners to continue with their education, and often they will make an example by Christo Brand who publicly admitted that he was encouraged by Nelson Mandela to complete his matriculation certificate.

After the village tour, visitors are driven to the prison where former political prisoners meet them who takes them through the prison. One of their stops in the prison is the isolation courtyard or better known as 'B section'. In the isolation section courtyard, they are taken to a photograph of Nelson Mandela talking to Walter Sisuslu. The second photograph is that of prisoners sitting in two rows, the first row the prisoners are breaking stones while in the second row they are sewing or mending old clothes. These photographs were taken somewhere in 1965 when a group of journalist from Britain visited Robben Island prison. In the second row are political prisoners and immediately when the crew of journalist left, the old clothes were taken away from them and given five-pound hammers to break stone. That is why some political prisoners believe that the authorities allowed the journalist from Britain to photograph them even although it was against prison regulations was for propaganda purposes which they had no way of controlling at that moment.

It is also in the courtyard where the ex political prisoners tell their personal accounts to the tourists. However, their personal accounts are enriched by those of others, for instance when they narrate about a period they were not in prison or an incident which happen in another section, they clearly state that they understand this is what happened and will mention a name of a person who can give an eyewitness account to that. While tour guides speak most about their experiences in this section, also singled out Mandela and Sisulu for providing leadrship and encouragement to other prisoners, with Sisulu taking more fatherly like responsibilities. It is also in the courtyard where visitors are informed about where the authorities found a copy of the scripts of the Mandela autobiography Long Walk to Freedom that he wrote while in prison clandestinely.

Where Sisulu was seen as the father, prisoners saw Mandela as a unifier who used to rise above party politics in prison. Lionel Davis, a former member of the Yu Chi Chan Club likes to remind visitors that in prison all prisoners faced a common enemy irrespective of political affiliation. And on that note will emphasis that these are the issues that Mandela will stress to them in prison and call upon all the prison community to respect each other's ideologies in the fight for a common enemy. After the talk the guides would always requests the tourist to go inside the prison and will inform them of cell no 5 which was the cell where Mandela spent most of his time while he was at Robben Island prison. The guides conclude the tour in the isolation section prison hall with a call for forgiveness and reconciliation. In Patrick Matanjana's words, "we have fought with each other, we have killed each other what has that produced…hatred and more hatred, if we happen to differ with each other why can't we just sit down and iron out our differences by talking and then embracing each other as fellow human beings after that." In my opinion that is the story that the museum likes to tell, it is a narrative of embracing each other and reconciliation.

This piece was an analysis of how the South African public remembered its past through public history. We sought to understand what memories were remembered during the colonial and apartheid era in South Africa and how they were remembered. We also

argued that the past regimes privileged certain narratives while they marginalised others. The narratives that were marginalised are those of the black majority. However I also contended that the liberation movements that represented the aspirations of the black majority challenged the dominant official narrative by devising creative ways to remember the past.

During the post apartheid period, I argue that there have been attempts to reconcile the diverging and often contradictory memories about South Africa. One of the examples I have cited is the National Anthem whereby few words have been added from the old Afrikaans anthem and some few words have been added. I have also cited the reconciliation day on the 16 December and argued that this day seeks to reconcile the divergent ways in which those who opposed apartheid and those who supported apartheid remembered. Lastly, I looked at two museums that were established during the apartheid period and what and how they tell the history of South Africa. I also examined two museums that were established in the post apartheid South Africa. In them I also look at what stories they tell and how they communicate their narratives.

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