

Memory and Representation: Robben Island Museum 1997-1999

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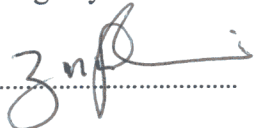
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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of History, University of the Western Cape.

Supervisor: Dr. Leslie Witz

Date Submitted: 15 November 2000

“I declare that *Memory and Representation: Robben Island Museum 1997-1999* is my own work and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledge by means of complete references.”

Signed:.....

Witness:.....

DEDICATION

The mini-thesis: Memory and Representation: Robben Island Museum 1997-1999 is dedicated to my late father, mentor and friend Reverend Ntoninji Theunis Solani

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Introduction

Memory, Museums and the Making of the National Past

The notion of what constitutes a nation has been a subject of many debates. Anderson asserts that a nation is an imagined political community, imagined because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives images of their communion.¹ In his famous essay on 'what is a nation' Renan defines a nation as "a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. 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. The nation, like individual is the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice and devotion."² The post apartheid project of reconciliation in South Africa is part of this desire to live together as citizens of one country irrespective of past differences. This desire transforms itself to cultural institutions like museums or rather cultural institutions represents this desire in a more systematic way in the post apartheid South Africa as they seek to transform. Evans takes the notion of a nation further and states that 'it is not only an object of political, geographical or economic analysis, but also, one of cultural analysis'.³

In an attempt to understand how memory is reconstructed at Robben Island Museum, I find the definitions of a nation by Anderson and Evans most useful in terms of their

¹ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London (1996) p.6

² E. Renan, "What is a Nation," in G. Eley *Becoming National, A Reader*, Oxford University press, Oxford (1996) p. 52

³ J. Evans et al, *Nation and Representation*, Routledge, London (1999) p. 1

broad understanding of the complex ingredients of nationality. They are also useful in understanding the construction of nationalism in the post apartheid South Africa with its divided past. However, the definition by Renan can also not be ruled out in terms of how some members of the public in South Africa understand the notion of nation and nationalism as many see it as Renan does, as the 'soul of the nation.' Some of the vehicles used in the construction of a nation in South Africa are cultural institutions. As a cultural institution that participates in the project of nation building, Robben Island Museum also needs to be analysed as "an object of cultural analysis" to borrow Evans words.

Robben Island itself is situated at the shores of Cape Town; "surrounded by the ice cold Atlantic Ocean with no protection from the strong winds of the Cape that constantly sweep across its rocky surface."⁴ This made it the most ideal and secure place in South Africa to keep away people unwanted by society. Robben Island was used for various purposes in its long history. The voyagers used the island as a refreshment station for passing European ships in the 17th century. During the British period occupation of the Cape, it was used as a prison and a medical institution for people with leprosy and mental illness. In 20th century, it was used both as a military camp during WWII and as a prison from the 1960s⁵ until it was closed as such and became a museum in 1997.

⁴ B.Hutton, *Robben Island Symbol of Resistance*, Mayibuye, Bellville (1996) p.10

⁵ This history is well documented in a book edited by H. Deacon, *The Island: A history of Robben Island 1488-1990*, Mayibuye, Bellville (1996) also see B. Hutton, *Island Symbol of Resistance*, Mayibuye Books, Bellville (1996)

Smith asserts that “[w]ithin its wave beaten boundaries, Robben Island holds the memories of a nation and the legends of the greatest and weakest of South Africans.”⁶ Smith’s assertions invoke questions of nationality and immediately presume that Robben Island is a centre where the memories of South Africans are held. Such comment immediately situates Robben Island at the centre of nation building. Thus situated the experiences of those incarcerated at the island become the experiences of a nation and not merely part of the nations experiences. For example the notion of Robben Island holding memories of the nation excludes other national memories. Just looking at the memories of the apartheid period, the notion of Robben Island as holding such memories as Smith asserts excludes the memories of those who were in other prisons like Pretoria Central prison. It also excludes those who were in exile, in banishment and most of all those who were imprisoned in South African farms as “labourers.” As a result such understanding of a nation denies the diverse experiences of the “new” South African nation.

Perhaps one of the ways to broaden the Robben Island “story” (and this is also to a limited extent) is to place it within a context of apartheid, resistance, and repression. In 1961 the National Party decided to outlaw the African National Congress (hereafter the ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (hereafter the PAC) after the Sharpeville massacre. The Sharpeville massacre was a result of a protest against the pass system. This march was organised by the PAC under the leadership of Robert Sobukwe⁷. The pass system was one of the ranges of discriminatory systems instituted by the

⁶ C. Smith, *Robben Island*, Mayibuye Books and Struik Publishers, Bellville (1997) p.5

⁷ Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe was sentenced to three years imprisonment in Johannesburg. When he was about to complete his sentence the racist South African parliament passed a law that could hold prisoners longer in prison even if they have completed their sentence. This law became known as the Sobukwe clause. As a result of that in 1963 he was transferred from Pretoria to Robben Island where he was detained for a further five years.

National Party. It is important to remember that the National Party came into power on a platform of separate development better known as apartheid. Among the pillars that apartheid was based on were, the 1952 Group Areas Act (GAA), the Population Registration Act (PRA), Mixed Marriage Act (MMA) and Bantu Education Act of 1955. Together these acts did not only separate people but socially and economically privileged white society.

The Group Areas Act separated people according to their skin colour. There were areas strictly designated for whites only. There were also areas for Africans, Coloureds and Indians only. People who resided in an area designated for one group were forcibly removed if they refused to sell their property to the state. This law affected many black people who stayed in mixed communities that were mostly near city centres. The establishment of separate locations for different racial groups was a consequence of the National Party ideology of nation building. As one can observe this type of nation building was founded on racial supremacy with the whites at the upper rung of the ladder and Africans at the lower rung of the ladder. In Cape Town, District Six was designated a white suburb and those who were not white were removed and their homes were demolished.

In Johannesburg, Sophiatown was destroyed and it was declared a white suburb. Sophiatown was one of several places in the Transvaal where Africans had succeeded in buying land before the prohibitive 1923 Urban Areas Act was passed.⁸ In 1955, property owners and tenants alike were faced with removal. While the ANC protested against forced removals and urged people to defend their homes and property, when

⁸ T. Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*, Longman, London (1983)p. 93

the trucks came accompanied by armed soldiers and police they could not stop them. Most of the people were moved to South Western Township better known as Soweto.

The Population Registration Act classified people according to their “national” groups i.e. Xhosa, Zulu, Ndebele, Swazi, Tshangaan, Southern Sotho, Tswana, Pedi, White, Cape Coloured, Malay, Griqua etc. The Mixed Marriages Act was meant to prevent multiracial marriages. While the Bantu Education Act was meant to bring unequal education among the different populations and prevent them from studying in the same schools, together with the Population Registration Act it further fragmented Africans, socially, politically and educationally. For those who were allowed in cities and towns because of section 10, their townships and locations were divided along ethnic lines. There were Xhosa squares or Zulu squares in the same township. At schools Tswanas had their own schools, Pedis had their separate schools from Tswana and Sothos. An excellent example of this planning is found at Soshanguve near Pretoria. The name indicates people who are residents there and the divisions that were created within that community. So means Sotho, Sha means Shangaan; Ngu stands for Nguni while Ve is the abbreviation of Venda. This happened under the pretext of promoting mother tongue education. However, it was a strategy by the Nationalist Party to divide, rule and stay in power.

A heavy influence on the apartheid ideology of 1948 was the theory of social Darwinism that presumed a hierarchy of races. While Darwin’s theory in the 1870s was developed in regard to natural species, social scientist adapted the theory to explain the differences between humans. Some people are of the opinion that it was Spencer who championed this interpretation more than any other person writing on

this subject. It was further developed by white South African academics that studied in Germany and were influenced by fascist ideas of pure nations. One of the people who believed in this theory was Dr. Hendrick Verwoed a psychology professor at Stellenbosch University. He later became the minister of education and again at a later stage the Prime Minister of the Republic of South Africa during the National Party rule. In the hierarchy of races, whites were the superior race. In South Africa they enjoyed more privileges as they accorded themselves custodians of inferior races who were by their definition non-white. For the white community to stay in power they had to convince everybody that, blacks were still in the developmental stage and were not yet ready to govern themselves.

Through separate government the Nationalists maintained that the white ruling party was to teach them how to govern. When they were confident that they were ready to govern, they would give them gradual independence in their homelands. Hence the creation of separate “nations” based on ethnicity. This legislation created in the public minds the idea that it was not only necessary for black and white to be separated but also desirable. Those, outside the dominant group were theoretically permitted, even encouraged, to exist as distinct entities, yet in practice were denied substantive autonomy.⁹

Since the institutionalisation of apartheid in the late 1940s, South Africa was divided into segments of “nations”. Blacks were not regarded as South Africans but as “subjects”¹⁰. All black people who stayed in urban areas were allowed to be there because of section 10 Act No 25 of 1945 and its sub-sections. One of the requirements

⁹ P. Furlong, *Between Crown and Swastika: The impact of the radical right on the Afrikaner Nationalist Movement in the Fascist Era*, Wesleyan University Press, London (1991) p.261

¹⁰ M. Mamdani, “Citizen and Subjects” in S. B. Ortner et al (editors) *Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Fountain publishers, Kampala

of this section was that those who stayed in cities and towns had to be formally employed. Otherwise all those who were unemployed were deported back to the “homelands,” these homelands were reserves that were used by the regime to dump unworthy subjects and who were mostly unemployable in towns and cities. The homeland system was based on ethnic origins. This was done through the creation of bantustans.

The National Party understood the concept of a nation as meaning groups of people who shared the same language or “cultural practises”, in short on tribal/ethnic lines. Hence independent states were created based on tribal affiliation. The first bantustan to take independence was the Transkei under Kaiser Daliwonga Matanzima, the chief of the Thembu. Transkei took its independence in October 1976. In theory Transkei was meeting the requirements of a “nation.” It had its own boundaries with Xhosa as an official language and its own government and thus the ruling party regarded the people from this geographical area as a “nation”. The second bantustan to take independence was Bophuthatswana under Chief Lucas Mangope in 1977. Chief Mphephu of Venda followed Chief Mangope and lastly L. L. Sebe of Ciskei in 1981. The four homelands became known as TBVC states in South Africa. These independent states were to play a major political role when political prisoners were released from prison. Former prisoners released in the 1970s were sent to these homelands. For example those who were registered as amaXhosa were sent to the Transkei or Ciskei irrespective of whether they had no family or relatives in those “states.” The homeland system explains the South African apartheid government understanding of nationality. Nationality according to this understanding was based on tribal origins. The white community was automatically regarded as citizens in

South Africa irrespective of their tribal or ethnic origins. According to this formula, South Africa had four independent nations with some nations like the Zulu under indirect rule by the South African government.¹¹

With the National Party promulgating new laws, that denied the black majority any fundamental rights within the Republic of South Africa, the ANC intensified the struggle against white supremacy. It is as a result of this, that many historians like Francis Meli, have seen the 1950's as a period of mass struggles. These struggles included the 1950 defiance campaign, the adoption of the Freedom Charter on the 26 June 1955 and the Women's march to Pretoria on 09 August 1956 against the pass laws that were extended to women. As demonstrations were gaining momentum, the ruling party was also becoming more ruthless. In 1960, the National Party banned all major black oppositions when it outlawed the ANC and PAC, thus silencing the legitimate black voices among the majority of the black people. The banning of the major liberation movements in South Africa in the 1960s led to the detention and arrest of many activists. The first group of Umkhonto weSizwe cadres and Poqo to be arrested was in 1962.¹² They were sentenced in 1963 and sent to Robben Island, Kroonstadt prison, Pretoria Maximum prison and many other prisons in South Africa. Most black male political prisoners were sent to Robben Island prison, and most white male political prisoners were sent to Pretoria maximum prison while most black women were sent to Kroonstad prison.¹³ The division of prisoners according to racial

¹¹ M. Mamdani, *Citizens and Subjects: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Fountain Publishers, Kampala (1996)

¹² Umkhonto weSizwe was the military wing of the African National Congress. It was formed in 1961 when the ANC was outlawed. Poqo on the other hand was the military wing of the Pan Africanist Congress and was also formed when the PAC was outlawed. The strategy that was applied by both military wings was sabotage.

¹³ *South Africa: The imprisoned Society*, International Defence and Aid Fund, London (1985)

classification of apartheid was meant to show consistency by the Nationalists in their policies.

Robben Island prison had become the focal point of South African imprisonment when the Rivonia group was sent there in June 1964. The Rivonia trialists were the underground High Command of Umkhonto weSizwe and high profile members of the Congress Alliance. The majority of them were arrested at Liliesleaf farm near Rivonia in a police swoop. Those arrested at Rivonia were Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Ahmed Kathrada, Dennis Goldberg and Rusty Bernstein. Elias Motsoeledi and Andrew Mlangeni were later arrested at their homes. Nelson Mandela who was already serving a five year sentence for leaving the country without a valid passport and for breaking his banning orders was recalled from Robben Island prison to stand trial with the others. The trial took place in 1963 and was concluded in 1964 with all of the accused sentenced to life imprisonment except Rusty Bernstein who was discharged on all counts. All the black prisoners were sent to Robben Island prison to serve their prison term. Dennis Goldberg who was the only white prisoner among them was sent to Pretoria central prison to serve his sentence.

The 1970s experienced yet another intensification of apartheid policies by the National Party government. This period saw the National Party promulgating laws that gave independence to the “homelands”. Yet again the liberation movements opposed this move. They argued that separate development of “nations” based on Verwoerdian philosophy was diverting attention from the real issue i.e. that of equal rights of all people based on non-racialism and equal franchise for all adults of voting age. Most of those who were imprisoned in apartheid jails also rejected the

independence of homelands. Offers of conditional release to homelands were made to many individuals who were in jail. All were met with rejection. It was not rejection of release per se, but rejection of the conditions in which these releases were proposed. Instead the prisoners used this opportunity to demand unconditional release and the unbanning of political organisations.

When F. W. de Klerk lifted the ban on political organisations in 1990 it was an acceptance by the National Party that racial segregation based on Verwoedean philosophy was not the solution to racial harmony in South Africa. In that speech de Klerk also announced that all those who were in prison because they advanced the ideology of these organisations would soon be released. However, when negotiations started the release of all political organisations was made a gambling tool by the National Party to obtain concessions from the liberation movements especially the ANC. As a result, this delayed the release of many political prisoners especially those who were at Robben Island prison.

The Robben Island prison was closed in 1996. On the 1 January 1997, Robben Island prison was opened as a National Museum and a heritage site. When the cabinet endorsed Robben Island as a museum, one of its visions was that Robben Island becomes a showcase of South African democracy and to invoke memories of the struggles against apartheid.

Public Memory and the National Past

The public memories commemorated or represented in museums are a result of individual memories brought together collectively. Public memory is shared memory and communicated through multiple voices. It negotiates its image through textbooks, biographies and autobiographies, documentary films, museums and monuments among other mediums.

Statues of great man are created to commemorate their memories. In South Africa, there are two statues of Jan Smuts in Cape Town. One is situated next to the South African Cultural History Museum. The situation of Smuts' statue next to this institution is the confirmation of white culture and the role Smuts played in the building of white South Africa. Smuts was one of the persons who were present in the negotiations for the amalgamation of the four provinces in South Africa. The four provinces were Orange Free State and the Transvaal (that were governed by Boers or Afrikaners) on the one hand and Cape Province and Natal (British Colonies) on the other. The Union of South Africa came into existence in 1910 under General Louis Botha. Smuts served under the Botha government in the Union of South Africa. However, during WWII Smuts was the Prime Minister of the South Africa. Because of his keen participation in world politics he became one of the key figures in the formation of the League of Nations. Under his rule South Africa experienced two major catastrophes, the one was the mines strike, which he ruthlessly suppressed, the other was the Bulhoek incident. The Bulhoek incident was a result of a religious sector occupying empty land that they believed belonged to them. The religious sect

that was known as the Israelites was led by Reverend Mgijima. In removing the occupiers the police massacred and injured hundreds of people including children and women. However, the memorials to Smuts do not make mention of these. It would seem to me that the reason this history is silenced in the constructed Smuts memorial sites is to portray him as an international leading figure and statesman that believed in peace and racial harmony.

Some of the symbols in the construction of nationalism and nations are monuments. In 1938, the Afrikaners organised commemoration services in many towns and cities of South Africa. The ox wagon was used as a symbol of the Great-Trek. In 1949, after the National Party came into power the Voortrekker monument was inaugurated to remember the past in the present. These events by Afrikaners in the construction of Afrikaner nationalism were not directly organised by the government, but by organisations affiliated to the Broederbond, an Afrikaner secret organisation that was aligned to the National Party.

When the National Party took over government it continued to present a segregated national past based on racial superiority. Most important spaces for instance were named after Afrikaner heroes. All airports in the apartheid era were named after Prime Ministers. Some major dams were named after ministers, for example the Hendrick Verwoed dam near Orange River. Dr. Verwoed is credited by many as the architect of apartheid based on former segregationist policies.

The liberation movements also presented alternative public histories. The past was remembered through the naming of schools, townships, streets etc after leaders of the

resistance movement. In Kimberley a primary school was named after the first General Secretary of the ANC, Solomon Plaatjie. Sol Plaatjie Primary School was built in the early 1970s and was named in his memory. At the University of the Western Cape, between 1985 and 1994 four residences have been named after political activists. One residence has been named after Cecil Esau. Cecil Esau was one of the student leaders. He was arrested for Mk activities while a student at the University and was sentenced to five years imprisonment. He served his sentence at Robben Island Prison. Colin Williams' residence was named after an activist from Bonteheuwel who was later brutally killed by the police. The last two residences are Hector Petersen and Chris Hani residence. Hector Petersen was named after the first victim of the Soweto student uprising in June 1976. He was a 12 years old boy when he was brutally killed by the police on 16 June 1976. Lastly, Chris Hani residence was named after one of the ANC leaders and General Secretary of the South African Communist Party murdered by right wing elements in the person of Janus Waluz in South Africa in 1993, three years after he returned from exile. All these monuments are intended to situate history directly in the nation's mind.

The naming of spaces helps shape public memory but nations also remember by commemorating significant dates. Such dates are then declared public holidays. The significance of the days that are commemorated can also be contested because in "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."¹⁴ In South Africa days like 21 March 1960 are commemorated by the nation as Human

Rights day. In the past this day was commemorated by resistance organisations to remember the Sharpeville massacre. On this day in Sharpeville, the PAC led a protest march against pass laws to a nearby police station. Instead of accepting the partition the police shot at the marchers. More than sixty-nine (69) people were killed and many injured. In the new South Africa, the significance of the day has been altered not as much to remember those who died and the brutality of the police and the past regime but to bring people together in respect of human rights as enshrined in the constitution.

June 16 is another significant public holiday that commemorates the role that was played by young people in the liberation struggle. However, in the post apartheid South African calendar the day is boldly written as youth day, thus putting less emphasis on what happened on that day. Some argue that the manner in which the nation commemorates these days is forward looking rather than backward looking. On June 16, 1976 in Soweto students marched and protested against the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in school curriculum. They were given three minutes by the police to disperse. When students failed to disperse they were randomly shot and many were killed and injured. The selection of these days and similar ones on the national calendar as significant is directly related to historical thought. However, as memory is not static but “changing colour and shape according to emergencies of the moment [and] progressively altered from generation to generation”¹⁵ so does the manner in which significant days are commemorated in South Africa today.

¹⁴ Y. Zerubavel, “Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition” as quoted in V. Rioufol, *The making of a new past for a “new” South Africa: the commemoration of Robben Island*, M.A thesis, U.CT 1997, P.39

¹⁵ R. Samuels, *Theatres of Memory* (1998) P.X

When we look at the aforementioned days, the manner in which they are commemorated today has changed. In the past, they were used to protest against the apartheid system and the National Party government that continued to govern. With the birth of a democratic order in South Africa and the building of a united nation, the significance of these days had to be encompassing hence Human Rights day for Sharpeville day and Youth Day for Soweto Day. The importance of using such encompassing concepts is meant to “foster group cohesion [therefore] the representation of the national past has to be continuously shaped and reshaped so as to promote elements favouring the development of national consciousness and belittling division.”¹⁶

Shades of Memories

Post apartheid South Africa has engaged in a process of racial reconciliation and nation building. In that process, culture has been used as one of the weapons to achieve reconciliation and build a non-racial society. The rugby world cup in 1995 was promoted by the state as a national victory. The nation was mobilised through adverts and other mediums to support the national team. In doing so a common purpose was created. Similarly to rugby, when the African Cup of Nations was staged in South Africa in 1996, the nation was lobbied behind the soccer national side, Bafana-Bafana. When they won the African Cup of Nations, this was hailed as a national victory. It is through these victories in sport that shared common memories are created for all South Africans. This enables people to share opinions on what unites them rather than the past that is seen to separate them.

¹⁶ V. Rioufol, *The making of a new past for a 'new' South Africa: the commemoration of Robben Island*, MA thesis, U.C.T, 1997 P.45

Common victories and experiences are created on the sport field and no longer on the battlefield. This creates no doubt that the South African government views sport as one of the most important vehicles for nation building and the creation of a common memory. However, like society at large the different sporting codes under apartheid were mostly divided according to racial groups. As the whole of the country is in the process of transformation, sporting codes are required to transform too. The visible transformation in terms of racial representative in different codes it is believed will show people that South Africa is changing. Furthermore, this thinking believes that sport plays a role in bridging a gap between former foes. Hence the recreation of the ministry of sport in the South African national parliament, that shows the importance of sport as part of this project.

Sport did not only become important during the post apartheid era, it was also important during the apartheid government. While there was no official apartheid policy on sport, the National Party in line with its policy of racial segregation enforced apartheid laws in sport through other means. The Group Areas Act was one of the vehicles that, was used to enforce segregation in sport as sport facilities were segregated according to this Act. This was clearly stated by Donges who was the minister of interior in 1956 that:

Whites and non-whites should organise their sporting activities separately, there should be no inter racial competition within South Africa, the mixing of races in teams should be avoided, and sportsmen from other countries should respect South Africa's customs and she respects theirs.¹⁷

The apartheid regime did not only isolate people through sport, sport was just one of the ways in which they sought to apply their policies. There are other avenues the

¹⁷ J. Nauright, *Sport and Nation: Sport, Cultures and Identities in South Africa*, Leicester University Press, England (1997) P. 127

government used to suppress the aspirations of the majority of the people of the country, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission revealed some of these ways.

One of the other ways in which the post apartheid South African government sought to deal with the past was to establishing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was mandated to investigate all human rights abuses during the apartheid period. In doing that individuals and groups were encouraged to submit their stories to this institution. During the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings various forms of truths about the South African past emerged. There were acts that were openly admitted by individuals and organisations while other allegations were censored or denied or the blame for them shifted. For instance in 1985, during mass protests and arrests throughout the country, a system of eliminating police informers came into existence. This system was known as the necklace system. A car tyre was put around the victim's neck and set alight. This form of eliminating apartheid informers was both condemned and condoned by the liberation movement.

Some leaders in the exiled ANC said that the system was not in line with the ANC policy. While some ANC leaders inside the country seemed to support it. For example the famous speech by Winnie Mandela in an NUM (National Union of Mineworkers) rally said that South Africans would liberate the country through boxes of matches and tyres. The following day this statement made headline news in the *Diamond Fields Advertiser* and the *South African Broadcasting Cooperation* (radio and television). It was at this stage that the President of the ANC Oliver Tambo called on Winnie to retract the statement. When that happened, the young people of this country

had already received the message from Winnie Mandela loud and clear, as she was one of the prominent leaders of the revolutionary struggle.

During the TRC hearings the ANC again distanced itself from this act. However, many young people involved in the liberation struggle during the already mentioned period would claim that they were advancing the liberation struggle under the banner of the African National Congress. While the ANC distanced itself from the necklace system in the TRC hearings, it was proud of sabotage activities by Umkhonto weSizwe cadres. The Sasol bombing, the bombing of police stations throughout the country and other such related activities were viewed as positive contributory factors in the fight against apartheid. This form of selective remembering impresses itself upon the present in the collective memory of the ANC, that the Movement has always been a peaceful organisation that, even when forced to turn to violence, did so on a limited scale. It is selective because it seeks to deny acts committed by its cadres and youth in their honest fulfilment of the aims of the ANC. To illustrate its commitment to a human rights culture, the ANC on its own accord instituted a commission to investigate human rights violations in its camps especially Quattro. When the Motsoenyane Commission revealed that there were indeed human rights violations, the ANC accepted its findings and admitted to such acts and they were incorporated as part of its submission to the TRC.

The ANC submission showed clearly that the ANC was prepared to accept certain human rights violations, while the National Party sought to distance itself from any human rights violations committed by the state machinery in fulfilment of state policies during its rule. It charged that as the government they were ignorant of police

activities of torture and killing of anti apartheid activists although this was widely reported by the press especially the *Mail and Guardian*, *City Press* and *New Nation*. They continued to deny this irrespective of the TRC revelations to the contrary and the admissions by Adrian Vlok of having given police an order to bomb Khotso house. Adrian Vlok was minister of police under the Nationalist governments of both P.W. Botha and F. W. de Klerk. Khotso house was a building used by the South African Council of Churches as its headquarters. In dealing with the past in this case memory is “affected by forgetting and denial, repression and trauma and more often than not serving the need to rationalise.”¹⁸ In rationalising memory selects not only what is important but also what is useful and it is that process of selective remembering that influences the past.

The Role of Museums in the Construction of Public memory and a national past

The philosophy of museums is based on history, culture, memory, heritage and the need to represent that culture or past. They present themselves as mirrors of past and present societies through their narratives/exhibitions. Through museums each country represents both events that occurred recently in history or points to events¹⁹ that occurred in the more distant past. The majority of museums are not national museums but local museums presenting themselves as mirrors of the local history of a particular community. One of the key roles museums play is educational. They educate their audience through their narratives, exhibitions, books, etc. Thus museums help shape our understanding of the world around us. Added to that, museums “present a

¹⁸ S. Robbins, “Silence in my fathers house: Memory, Nationalism and narrative of the body” in S. Nuttall et al. *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* Cape Town (1998) p. 120

¹⁹ P. Boylan (editor) *Museum 2000*, Routledge, London (1992) p.25

particular version of the history of the community in which they are located.”²⁰ As a result of that, museums today are challenged to produce histories that are more compelling, more accurate and more sophisticated.

Museums are part of knowledge production and are also used to communicate public memory. They communicate public memory visually i.e. by using artefacts/material objects, photographs, video documentaries etc and they influence how the public remembers and communicates their past. While they represent a selected past, they have an ability to trigger and mediate certain memories to the visitor. “ Museums like memory mediate the past and present the future. Unlike personal memory which is animated by individual lived experiences, museums give material form to authorised versions of the past, which in time become institutionalised as public memory.”²¹ When the past is institutionalised it changes form and often becomes the ‘official’ view of the past.

The official representation of the past in museums however opens them to contestation like all historical narratives. This is because in constructing the past museums decide what to “collect, what to let go, what to record and what to ignore.”²² In selecting what is thought as relevant, striking and important museums are selecting what to remember and what not to remember in the making of public memory. Furthermore, in constructing public memory, museums use objects that they authenticate as carriers of the past. Because objects can be interpreted in many ways, curators can decontextualise or recontextualise them to suit the past they want to tell.

²⁰ C. Miller-Marti, “Local History Museums and the Creation of the Past” in *Muse/summer* 1987 p. 36

²¹ P. Davison, “Museums and Reshaping of Memory” in S. Nuttall, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, Cape Town (1998) p. 145

²² G. Kavanagh, *Making Histories in Museums*, Leicester University Press, London(1996) p. 5

These memories, like history, are mostly mediated by the curator/author while the visitor also has some responsibility in the manner in which they interact with the exhibition. The curators are often invisible to the museum audience. The invisibility of the author presents the exhibition to the audience as a real unmediated past. When that happens museums provide formal and official version of the past called histories, offered through exhibitions or the individual or collective accounts of reflective personal experience called memories encountered during the visit or prompted because of it.²³

Political discourse and how the museum views its role influence the contextualisation of these narratives. Thus in the project of nation building the new South African government has tended to emphasis commonality rather than a divided past.

One can see this, for instance in the Cultural History Museum. This museum was founded on the basis that it portrays the culture of South Africans. In examining their exhibitions, one will notice that the culture portrayed in the museum is mostly that of white South Africans of different languages. There is one big room supposed to be a lounge that displays all forms of music material culture like pianos and such related artefacts. The next exhibition space shows the building equipment used by Europeans in the construction of modern day houses that did not exist in Africa before the arrival of Europeans. And of course it also portrays European weapons like guns and such related military artillery. As a last example, there are displays showing all types of clothing and fashion that whites used to wear. At the moment the museum is going through a process of transforming its exhibitions. As part of that transformation, there

²³ G. Kavanagh, "Making Histories, Making Memories" in *Making Histories in Museums*, Leicester University Press, London(1996) p.1

are new exhibitions that depict the culture and history of the Cape. Examples of these are the renaming of the building as slave lodge, the new Khoisan displays and slave displays. The incorporation of historically marginalised groups in the museum is influenced by the present political discourse of many cultures but one nation. This is what Minkley, Witz and Rassool call “the add on”. For the museum to be seen to be transforming it is left with no choice but to incorporate rather than challenge the present dominant discourse.

The culture of black South Africans is exhibited at the South African Museum, which is dominated by exhibitions of science and technology. The South African Museum was established as a natural history museum. The museum followed in the footsteps of scientific museums in Europe. For example the exhibitions of colonised people in France and England were influenced by contemporary scientific theories of race. By the 1880s Darwin’s theory of evolution dominated science and anthropology. The “social Darwinist model had an obvious appeal to imperialist because it implied that there was no possibility of improvement for the races who had been positioned at the tail end of human development.”²⁴ Exhibitions in natural museums reflected this thinking. African cultures and Africans were exhibited in natural history museums in line with social Darwinism. In South Africa the location of Africans in a science museum speaks volumes about the history of South Africa and how Blacks were viewed in the past. While state policies have changed since then, the question is why does the South African Museum continue to portray the history of Africans in a natural history museum? If museums are “symbolic structures which make visible our public myths, the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves are institutionalised and

²⁴ A. Maxwell, *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions: Representations of the native people and the Making of European Identities*, Leicester University Press, London (1999) p.15-17

materialised in our museums”²⁵ then what type of reflections are reflected in the South African Museum about ourselves as a nation. This perhaps suggests that, in spite of the assertions above, changing political contexts do not always automatically lead to shifts in museum displays and exhibitions.

The new political scenario has not only meant the changing of displays in old museums, there are also new museums that seek to incorporate the history of the oppressed. Among these are the District Six Museum, the Lwandle Migrant Labor Museum, the Mandela Museum complex in the Eastern Cape and the Robben Island Museum which is the focus of this mini-thesis. The District Six Museum was established to remember the history of District Six. District Six like Sophiatown in Johannesburg was one of the multicultural cosmopolitan suburbs in Cape Town. Its residents came from different classes and walks of life. In 1960 the area was promulgated a white area under the Group Areas Act. Those who were classified other than white had to move to areas designated for them. Africans were moved to Gugulethu and Langa townships while Coloureds and Indians were moved to other areas such as Bonteheuwel and Mitchellsplain. The Group Areas Act affected and divided many families as they were relocated in different areas. The District Six Museum narratives are based on the history of District Six and the history of forced removals. Its exhibitions attempt to reflect those memories.

The Robben Island Museum seeks to reflect a different version of South African history, especially that of political imprisonment. The space where the museum is situated has a long history of occupation. The space, which is part of the heritage of

²⁵ J. Cannizzo, “How Sweet it is : Cultural Politics in Barbados”, in *Muse/Winter* 1987.p.22

the people, is rich with a history of isolation and deprivation of those who populated it. When the Museum was opened as a Heritage site and a National Museum in 1997, it was aimed that it should become a “showcase of the new South African democracy”²⁶ that would be a powerful reminder to future generations not to repeat the tragedies of the past.²⁷ In commemorating the history of the Island the museum was to pay tribute to human courage in the face of prejudice and racism.²⁸ This statement by Mzimela, who was the Minister of Correctional Services in the first democratically elected government of the Republic of South Africa set the pace of how the space should be remembered. In this instance the space does not only serve as a site of historical importance and memory but also as a site to commemorate those memories in the present, that serve present national interests. In serving the present discourse, the museum was to act as an agent of change and an example of reconciliation. In this regard cultural institutions like Robben Island were identified to play a role in the national project of nation building and reconciliation. To show this, Robben Island Museum from its inception was marketed as a space where one could come and see former enemies and foes working together in harmony. The former prison warders were working side by side with their former prisoners. It was an example of a new South Africa and a live demonstration of forgiveness and reconciliation. The *Cape Times* and other newspapers ran articles that showed how reconciliation was working on Robben Island.²⁹ In promoting the notions of reconciliation in a united South Africa, Robben Island Museum was contributing in the construction of a new national identity and rejecting apartheid notions of many nations.

²⁶ Media Statement, Ministry of Arts, Science and Technology, 1996

²⁷ *Cape Times*, 04 Jan. 1997

²⁸ *Cape Times*, 04 Jan. 1997

²⁹ *Cape Times*, 04 January 1997

Many recent studies produced in the 1990s have looked at the political significance of Robben Island.³⁰ Rioufol has looked at the public representation of Robben Island in the making of a 'new' South African past. She has also examined the reasons why Robben Island was declared a National Museum by the post apartheid government and F. Buntman in her study on resistance at Robben Island has examined the political reasons why most people that were involved in the national liberation struggle found themselves at Robben Island prison. This study adds to the debate by examining how Robben Island Museum itself selects the past it represents in the museum through the creation of public memory and the selection and shaping of individual narratives. In this way the thesis seeks to examine how Robben Island Museum mediates its past through oral narratives and exhibitions. The main focus of the study is about the ways the history of Robben Island has been represented at and by the Robben Island Museum in particular on how the history of the Island as a political prison between 1963-1991 is being represented.

Much of the work by Rioufol, for instance, has seen this as a discourse that is imposed by the state and sees Robben Island Museum as merely inserting itself into this discourse. However, this is too much of an instrumentalist position, as it tends to see ordinary people as merely passive recipients in the production of history. As the stories of former political prisoners and tour narratives will reveal, the state ideology often found resonance in the lives and stories of those who sought to reconstruct histories of Robben Island.

³⁰ V. Rioufol, *The Making of a 'new' past for a new South Africa: the commemoration of Robben Island* (MA thesis) UCT, Cape Town (1997) p.155 F. Buntman, *Robben, 1960-1990* (PhD thesis) Texas, USA

In the introduction it has been argued that the concept of a nation in South Africa is a problematic one. This is because South Africans were divided into different nations through legislation that was instituted by the various governments before the destruction of legislated racism. To redress long years of institutional racism and apartheid the new post-apartheid government had to engage in a process of nation building and reconciliation. I have showed how the government hopes to achieve this. It has been argued that the government is using a multi-prong strategy. For example they use sport as a vehicle while on the other hand they established a commission to research the human abuses that were committed by the apartheid government. This body was known as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. However, as the stories of former political prisoners reveal, reconciliation is not imposed from above by the government, ordinary people themselves want to reconcile and for the process of reconstructing the South African nation to be realised. This work will show how collective memory has been used or is used to as a tool to achieve reconciliation.

Chapter 1 will show how oral narratives of Robben Island are used in the process of nation building and reconciliation. In this chapter it will be argued that in a society like South Africa where the majority of people are illiterate it is important to collect oral narratives in attempts to reconstruct our history. This chapter will examine how former political prisoners remember the years they have spent in prison.

Chapter 2 of this work will examine the biographies and autobiographies of former Robben Island prisoners. In doing so it will look how at the ways the story of Robben Island has been remembered and told through auto/biography. In examining the auto/biographies of former political prisoners who were incarcerated at Robben Island

prison it will also look at whether the narratives of Robben Island have changed over time and how they have changed.

In chapter 3 this thesis will examine how the Robben Island Museum tells and represents the stories of former political prisoners through the tour narratives. At Robben Island Museum there are two types of tours that take place at the moment. Visitors are taken on a bus tour that goes to the village. The second part of the tour experience is the maximum-security prison complex where a former political prisoner takes visitors on a prison tour. In both these tours we will also seek to understand what gets included and what is excluded and the reasons for such inclusions and exclusions.

The last chapter will examine the new exhibition at Robben Island known as 'Cell Stories,' that has been constructed as a result of the oral narratives discussed in chapter 1. The Cell Stories exhibition uses material objects and audio-material in telling the Robben Island story. This chapter will examine the ways in which this exhibition complements the dominant Robben Island Museum narrative. In other words it will argue that while many have seen the Cell Stories exhibition as challenging the dominant Robben Island Museum narrative, this is not so.

Chapter 1

Robben Island Oral Histories

In 1997, the Eastern Cape Province commemorated Heritage Day at East London Museum. The commemoration theme was democracy, tolerance and human rights. This was in the third year of the new democratic order and the second year that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was in session. A close look at the theme reflects the concerns of the new democratic government. The East London Museum was opening a new travelling exhibition entitled the Eastern Cape Robben Island connection. Through this exhibition the museum was reconnecting the Eastern Cape and Robben Island. Former Robben Island Prisoners who reside in the Eastern Cape led a procession from East London's main thorough fare, Oxford Street, to the museum.

The East London Museum was initially founded on the natural and cultural history of the Border region of the Eastern Cape. It was established on the 19 July 1921. The Museum has since displayed exhibitions on "natural sciences, ethnographic and cultural history."³¹ Some of the earlier displays were on marine life including a comprehensive collection of South African fishes e.g. *latimeria chalumnae*. Two galleries were devoted to the birds indigenous to the region. There are also displays dedicated to the multiple "cultural" practices of the region. In the "first floor of the museum the ethnographic collections illustrates the tribal dress, ornaments and

³¹ This information can be accessed from a book on museums of the Cape titled *Museums of the Cape*, published by the Department of Nature and Environmental Conservation, Cape Town (1982) p. 30

handcrafts of the Xhosa, Mfengu, Bomvana, Thembu, Xesibe and Sotho people of Transkei and Ciskei before Western civilisation influenced their customs.”³²

In his address to the function in 1997 Reverend Stofile, Eastern Cape Premier, emphasised the importance to “remember the past and pay tribute to those who sacrificed.”³³ Sonwabile Mancotywa, the Eastern Cape Minister for Sport, Science and Technology saw the day as a “victory of the revolutionary ideas over moribund and reactionary practices.”³⁴ The memory that was evoked on this day was that of resistance and sacrifice, linked to Robben Island as a symbol of resistance.

The presence of former political prisoners at this function was to enhance that symbolism and the connections of the province within the broader narrative of triumphalism that appears in most of the Robben Island Museum’s historical productions. In many ways the former prisoners in the Eastern Cape were claiming a space and place that was previously not available in the East London Museum. The closure of this space for the modern political prisoners started in 1963, when the first groups of prisoners were sent to serve their sentences at Robben Island Prison. Most of these prisoners were arrested and sentenced under (a) the Suppression of Communism Act, Act 44 of 1950 (b) Belonging to an unlawful organisation and/or (c) under the Security Act and General security Act, Act no 62 and/or (d) contravention of Act 34 of 1955, leaving the Republic without a valid passport.

³² Most of the information about the East London Museum is found in the book: *Museums of the Cape*, Aided by the department of nature and environmental conservation. The displays in the museum reflect s its history and development and the need for it to transform.

³³ *Heritage Report, Eastern Cape, 1997*

³⁴ *Heritage Report, Eastern Cape. 1997*

To have a broader conceptualisation of this period of political imprisonment from former prisoners' perspective, their personal accounts have been used. These were collected by the Robben Island Museum between October 1997 and January 2000 and placed at University of the Western Cape, Robben Island Museum, Mayibuye archives³⁵. The project is known as the Robben Island Museum Memory Project.

When the project started we had to choose the format in which former political prisoners stories were to be conducted. Being aware of the factors that shape remembering and forgetting, the Memories Project chose to collect life history interviews. In that way it was hoped that through life histories, informants would be able to remember as many factors as possible and will be able to shape what they choose to remember and that the interview questions would act as a guide for the interviewers.

The interview guide was divided into several sections. The first section was concerned with personal data and family background. In this section informants were asked for example, about when they were born and who their parents were and to describe the social conditions in which they grew up. The second component was concerned with the political dynamics of the time, for example which organisation did the informant belong to and why he joined that organisation and what campaigns he participated in and what were the reasons for his arrest. The third part was concerned with the journey to Robben Island Prison and the life in prison, and the last part was concerned with life after imprisonment. Lastly informants that had material objects

³⁵ I will refer to the UWC Robben Island Museum, Mayibuye Archive just as Mayibuye archive.

were asked specific questions about such objects. Questions about objects related to what significance the person attached to the material object.

The difficulties of linking with former political prisoners in different provinces and the limited time that researchers could spend in each province imposed certain time constraints which resulted, at times, in a shallow product. After the initial life interviews in Mdantsane in the Eastern Cape and Kimberley in the Northern Cape the exhibition designer, Roger Mentjies, decided to construct an exhibition around the life histories collected. That resulted in a need to have more interviews done with analysis of the data that was already collected to see what information it was yielding and to look for better ways to solicit additional information from informants. In that regard as research was driven by exhibition needs, time became important and was very short. This resulted in some field researchers just following the questionnaire and most of the time not being able to make follow up research with those individuals where they might have sought clarity on certain historical issues that were not clear in their interviews. In each standard interview, interviewers spent a minimum of an hour and a maximum of two hours. There are exceptional cases where interviewers spent up to four hours with the same person, and in other cases follow up interviews were made.

Most of the interviews were recorded with a Merantz recorder that has good radio broadcast quality while some were recorded with a video camera. The interview master copies were then taken to the Mayibuye archives at the University of the Western Cape to duplicate. The copy of the interview was then taken to Veritas

Transcription Company to be transcribed. Some of the transcribed copies form part of the Cell Stories exhibition on Robben Island.

In examining the questionnaire one can argue that the questions in it helped to shape a particular narrative that also influenced how the Cell Stories narrative was constructed. The story that the questionnaire sought was that of hardship, triumph and reconciliation. The dominant part is that of triumph and reconciliation. For example the type of questions selected borders on a particular type of narrative. Both the interviewer and the interviewee shaped the narrative process. The respondent shaped it in the way in which they responded to the questions. To illustrate this, one of the questions that was in the questionnaire asks respondents to clarify what were the most interesting things that took place while they were at Robben Island. It also asks questions about sport and cultural activities at Robben Island. In that way it assumes a certain life style that the respondents must respond to. The questionnaire does not give hundred percent freedom to the respondents to shape their narratives as they wish.

The Cell Stories exhibition team also selected from the interviews certain extracts that communicated their story line. In that manner the narrative entered another stage of interpretation, although the interpretation is also that of triumph and reconciliation. Thus, while the development of the Cell Stories exhibition is “innovative” to borrow Ciraj Rassool words³⁶, it is not without inclusions and exclusions. The fashion in which the story is told lay with the exhibition designer who did the selection and constructed the story line. Two other people helped the Cell Stories exhibition designer in his tasks. Mavis Smallberg fine-tuned the extracts and Ashwell Adriaan

³⁶C. Rassool, Cell Stories Exhibition at Robben Island, *Mail and Gurdian*, November 26-December 2, 1999

was Roger Mentjies' assistant. Those who were interviewed were not consulted or given time to comment on the exhibition or how they were represented or wished to be represented before the exhibition was made public.

Oral history, it is claimed by Thompson, provides an invaluable means of generating new insights about a community. In order to understand the history of a community, we need to understand individual backgrounds, where they lived and how they lived.³⁷ Most of the former political prisoners who have begun to reclaim their spaces in the museum did not record their experiences on paper. Such experiences are stored in their memories. Because of the nature of the political struggle they were involved in, many of their activities are not reported in newspapers, nor did they keep diaries to record daily events and how they viewed them.

Some social scientists have criticised the use of oral evidence as subjective and open to abuse. This sometimes borders on the opinion that written documents are the only authentic evidence of the past. In the case of Robben Island Prison or for that matter most prisons in South Africa, while official records do exist, we cannot uncritically rely on them to reconstruct the history of former political prisoners during the apartheid period. This is particularly so at a time when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has revealed how state organs like the police misled the courts of this country or the courts allowed themselves to be misled by the police. Some judicial officers uncritically accepted their testimonies. These are some of the reasons that led the research unit at the Robben Island Museum to the decision to use oral method in an attempt to reconstruct the experiences of former political prisoners who were

³⁷ P. Thompson, *The Voices of the Past: Oral History*, Oxford University Press, London (1988) p.

incarcerated at Robben Island prison. In conducting some of these interviews, the researchers were mindful of the facts that while individual memories are archives in them, “human memory is given to error, misconception, elision, distortion, elaboration and downright fabrication.”³⁸ It will be an error of judgement to claim that the interviews conducted by the researchers do not have silences and some distortion of events. Having said that I believe that most of those interviewed narrated their stories as best they could at the time they were interviewed. Most people insisted that they wanted to be interviewed in English in order that many people who speak different languages would have access to the information. For most of those interviewed English was their second or third language and this was also true for researchers who were collecting the interviews. Linguistic problems might therefore have influenced what got narrated and how it got narrated as both the interviewer and the interviewees often had difficulties searching for English words to express themselves.

In conducting this research the idea was that it would provide us with a window to understand the experiences of others from their own personal perspectives. We thought we would “give voice to the experiences of previously marginalised groups and recover the agency of ordinary people. [We also thought that we] were creating an archive for the future and an alternative form of historical documentation.”³⁹ Added to that the product produced was to be used in exhibitions at Robben Island Museum, and students and researchers could access the interviews pending permission given by the interviewer.

³⁸ See T. Keegan reference: in G. Minkley and C. Rassool, “Orality, memory and social history in South Africa” in S. Nuttall, *Negotiating the past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, South Africa (1998) p. 91

What we failed to recognise was the dynamics of memory and its changing nature. Minkley and Rassool argued that previous attempts to place categories of people as “hidden from history” at the centre of historical studies “from below” have deepened their marginalisation and perpetuated their special status. Accordingly, the hidden and the silenced were inserted into histories largely as a contextual device.⁴⁰ In the final analysis the Robben Island Museum memories project also perpetuated the marginalisation of other political prisoners that were not on Robben Island and thus gave special status to those who were imprisoned at Robben Island prison. At Robben Island Museum the hidden history recovered through interviews is presented to the public by means of exhibitions and a library in the same exhibition space. This approach also has the limitation of treating oral interviews not as oral narratives in them but as sources to create historical narratives or/and exhibitions.

Having noted some limitations of oral interviewing and its use, I also acknowledge that it has its strengths that need to be utilised. Portelli summarised the importance of oral interviewing when he said, “oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believe they were doing, and what they now think they did.”⁴¹ To illustrate what insights the interviews yielded accounts from the interviews with Andrew Masondo, Ntsikelelo Kwezi, Kader Hassim and Playfair Morule will be used.⁴²

³⁹ G. Minkley and C. Rassool, “Orality, Memory and Social history in South Africa” in S. Nuttall and C. Coetzee in *Negotiating the Past: The Making of memory in South Africa*, South Africa (1998) p.90

⁴⁰ G. Minkley and C. Rassool, “Orality, Memory and Social history in South Africa,” in S. Nuttall and C. Coetzee, *Negotiating the past: The making of memory in South Africa*, Oxford University Press, South Africa (1998) p. 98

⁴¹ A. Portelli, “What makes oral history different” in: R Perks and A. Thompson (editors) *The oral history reader* Routledge, London (1998) P.68

⁴² Andrew Mandla Masondo, was interviewed by me in Pretoria in September 1998. Ntsikelelo Khwezi was also interviewed by myself in December 1998 at Robben Island Museum. Kader Hassim

On Trial

The journey by former political prisoners to Robben Island started through their activities in the liberation struggle. The two cannot be divorced, as there would not have been a journey if they did not oppose the policies of the apartheid government. Many people have commented that Robben Island was physically ideal to isolate them from society because of its geographical situation. This comments is sometimes said with a tone as if prisons by their nature were not meant to isolate and deny people their freedom. The ideal of constructing a prison is to confine individuals in a space where they are going to be controlled, their movement regulated through rules. This is what Foucault sees as the aim of imprisonment on the “reparation of the crime,” not the “amendment of the guilty man.”⁴³ This was more so at Robben Island prison as we will later see.

Political participation in the liberation struggle meant that people were cast as enemies of the government. In South Africa, they did not only become enemies of the government but also became enemies of the state apparatus, the police and the courts. In most Western democracies the role of the courts and parliament are separated. All citizens of the state can challenge the government in a court of law for any injustice they might perceive. In apartheid South Africa, the legal order was a peculiar blend that resulted in a system of dual law and class justice in South African society. Courts and legal officials were perceived and perceived themselves as instruments of the

was interviewed several times, the interview I am citing here was conducted by myself at Pietermaritzburg in March 1998. I interviewed Playfair Morule in March 1998 in Bloemfontein. All these interviews were conducted as part of the Robben Island Museum Memories Project that started in October 1997.

government.⁴⁴ This was meant to subordinate blacks to apparent needs of officialdom. By making apartheid the supreme law, with blacks excluded from parliamentary politics meant that they did not have any rights but privileges. Indeed it meant that as Mamdani says blacks were not citizens but subjects of the Republic of South Africa.⁴⁵ Those who opposed the government and found themselves arrested went through spaces that were by law of the country already hostile towards them. Starting from the courts to prison this hostility is clear in most of the ex-prisoners' narratives.

The mistrust that existed to the courts of this country is clearly evident in prisoner's narratives when they comment about their trials. Even those who had studied law and had hoped that there was some independent thinking in the courts had their hopes dashed by the results of the courts when they were sentenced. Ntsikelelo Khwezi, a product of the United Democratic Front who worked in the underground structures of the ANC and who was imprisoned between 1985 and 1990 had this to say about his trial for sabotage and belonging to an unlawful organisation.

I said some hard words to him [magistrate] which, I think he never liked. I knew he was going to sentence me because he was taking orders from the police that was how the system worked. He was representing the system, the system that brought him up, that made him to be a magistrate you see. This I told him.⁴⁶

Jeff Radebe on the other hand had confidence in his defence team. While he expected to be sentenced, he thought that he would receive a light sentence because of the

⁴³ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Penguin, London (1991) p. 234

⁴⁴ J. Hund et al, *Legal ideology and politics in South Africa: A Social Science Approach*, University press of America, Lauham (1986)

⁴⁵ M. Mamdani, *Citizens and Subjects: Contemporary Africa and Legacy of Late Colonialism*, James Currey Fountain/Phillip Publishers, London and Cape Town (1996)

⁴⁶ Robben Island Museum Memory project (Ntsikelelo Khwezi, December 1998)

nature of his defence. Radebe a law graduate knew all the statutes, he had studied them and therefore felt he could reasonably also weigh the balance of the scale in the court. However, his hopes were dashed when he noticed how the magistrate was reasoning when he was reading the court findings.

...So when the magistrate sentenced me to ten years I already felt it. It is because of the way he read the sentence to me. The way we had conducted our defence, one never expected that he was going to get such a severe sentence.⁴⁷

The courts also became a space of hostility and part of the system that sent them to jail. The other spaces of hostility were police stations where interrogation took place and the prison that they spent time in during their trials. In prisoner memories this space and the power dynamics of it are clearly spelt out. While this space was seen as hostile by the prisoners it is the very same space that some used to further the aims of their organisations. Frans "Playfair" Morule who was sentenced for terrorism in 1984, followed leaders that were sentenced before him and turned his trial into an educational to stage politicise people and teach them about the aims of the ANC. According to him he also aimed at teaching the magistrate about the aims of the ANC.

I did not listen much to what the magistrate was saying, he was the product of apartheid, and was indoctrinated in an ideology of racial superiority. In court I was struggling to transform even such minds, to show them that we are equal, to give them the history of the ANC, because they believed the propaganda that we are after their wives, their property and their daughters. Surely I told them that that is not what the struggle is all about.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ RIMMP (Jeff Radebe, October 1998)

⁴⁸ RIMMP (Playfair Morule, March 1998)

The court was the last battleground where they could either decide to politicise their cases and not defend the charge as laid by the state or to challenge the charge by the state. Some chose to challenge the charges laid against them while others sought to explain why they decided to engage in the struggle.

A substantial number of those sent to Robben Island prison had participated in military formations of the liberation movements. Many remember their participation in the armed struggle as the major cause that led them into prison. It was the same participation in the armed struggle that the authorities would time and again remind them of in prison. As a result those sentenced because of this had an extremely tough time in prison, as they were a double threat to the authorities. The authorities were aware of their military skills that, if used, could open possibilities for escapes. They were also aware that the reason that they were in prison was because of their opposition to the legal system they represented and protected.

The Road Journey to Robben Island prison

The manner in which they were transported to the Island was consistently described as inhumane. Andrew Masondo once an Applied Mathematics lecturer at Fort Hare University was sentenced in 1963 for sabotage and was sentenced to twelve years imprisonment. His co-accused were Nelson Dick and Mac Gloria Mdingi⁴⁹, two of his students at Fort Hare. The Masondo group was sentenced in Grahamstown and was transported to Port Elizabeth prison known as Rooi Hell at the back of a lorry where other prisoners were collected en route to Robben Island prison. The Masondo

⁴⁹ *The World*, 23 April 1963.

journey to the Island is similar to the journey described by Indres Naidoo in his book, *Island in Chains*. In describing this journey Naidoo says,

We sat crowded together on the floor of a speeding van. A dozen pair of people, legs linked by chains, wrists by handcuffs bumping along in a rigidly hot atmosphere. We could hardly see each other's faces we could just feel our bodies pressed together in an uncomfortable mass. We wanted to scratch but there was no way of doing so-we were on top of each other and had to endure, for hour upon hour, a discomfort and an agony that was getting worse all the time.⁵⁰

Similar to the journey described by Naidoo, Masondo, his co-accused and others were transported, handcuffed and their legs placed in irons. This was towards the summer of 1963. Masondo described the heat at the back of the lorry as being unbearable. This was made worse because they had to sit at the back of the lorry with a bucket that they had to relieve themselves in.

In 1970, the road journey to the Island was the same, prisoners were still transported in the back of a lorry. Kader Hassim, a New Unity Movement activist chose to use the following words in describing his journey:

We stopped at Kroonstadt and we were given a chance to go to the toilet with leg irons, you had to work in unison with your partner because it hurts, these things are around the ankles and bone...there were ten of us in the truck.⁵¹

The nature of the journey en route to Robben Island prison continued on similar lines up to the 1980's. What is remembered on this journey is not so much the camaradie, but the humiliation that former prisoners went through. This humiliation amongst many on the journey to the Island was the continuation of what was taking place in

⁵⁰ I. Naidoo, *Island in Chains: Ten Years on Robben Island by Prisoner 885/63*, Penguin, London (1982) p.58

⁵¹ RIMMP (Kader Hassim interview, March 1998)

the spaces they once occupied on their route to the Island. In his autobiography Natoo Babenia comments that,

At Leewukop we were herded out of the van like cattle and the warders' howling started. It never really stopped for years and years. Amidst the shouts and cracks our leg irons came off, we got some cold porridge and then were locked in a big cell smelling of old blankets.⁵²

When Babenia was transferred to Robben Island prison, he was transferred under the same conditions he describes from Durban to Leeuwkop. As he says the shouts never stopped, when they were transferred to the Island it just continued. The shouts were an indication that they were now in prison. New rules applied and the authorities were there to ensure that orders are followed.

⁵² N. Babenia, *Memoirs of a Saboteur*: As told to Ian Edward, Mayibuye, Bellville (1995) p.121-122

The Boat Journey to Robben Island Prison

The transition to Robben Island prison took place through detention, trial and a long road journey by those outside the Western Cape. However, their journey was not complete, the last leg of the journey was through a boat that had to carry them to the prison. Similar to the previous journey prisoners narrate this journey in horrendous terms. The picture that is drawn through interviews is similar to that of the passage system for slaves to the New World, with the emphasis on cramped conditions and the use of leg irons. This is especially so of the prisoners who had arrived in the early 1960's.

Dlamini who went to the island in the early 1960's describes this journey like that of slaves during the Atlantic slave trade.

As we went into the boat, we saw looming in the distance, what was to be our home for a very long time [...] with insults from the warders escorting us, there was no time to have a proper look of the island. Manacled on our hands and legs in two's, we were taken to the cabin and there made to lie flat on our backs. As soon as we settled, a warder came in holding a pick handle. He told us in Afrikaans that anyone who opened his mouth would have the taste of the pick handle in his hand. They called us kaffirs and Communist.⁵³

Jeff Radebe who went to Robben Island prison in the mid-1980's had similar experiences to people like Dlamini who went there in the early 1960's. Twenty years later the treatment had not changed,

They took us to the dock to get a ferry to Robben Island. They put us in the bunker in chains, leg chains, handcuffed, it was a horrible journey because

⁵³ M. Dlamini, *Hell-Hole Robben Island*, African World press, p.15

the boat the way it was moving at sea, you did not know whether you are sinking or not.⁵⁴

When they were taken to Robben Island their anxiety was increased because some of them claim that they knew stories of Nxele (Makana or Makhanda) who had never returned home. Nxele was one of the African leaders who resisted British colonialism during the wars of resistance of 1818-1819. It is said, by some historians that Nxele tried to escape from Robben Island in 1820 with 30 other prisoners but the boat that they were using capsized and he was drowned. The modern political prisoners who claim that they knew such stories were anxious of whether they would ever come back home alive. This anxiety was further increased by the manner in which they were pushed in to the boat. Most had never travelled by sea and the treatment of the authorities did not lessen their anxieties.

Relations between Prisoners

Between 1960 and 1966/7 there were two broadly defined categories of prisoners on Robben Island: there were those who were sentenced for political offences⁵⁵ and those who were sentenced for common crime and were known as common law prisoners. The authorities used the integration of common law prisoners and political prisoners to their advantage. Because common law prisoners were divided into gangs the authorities used them to punish and abuse political prisoners. This happened where prisoners worked.

⁵⁴ RIMMP (Jeff Radebe interview, October 1998)

⁵⁵ A political offence here is understood as any crime committed by an individual or individuals with the sole motive to change the apartheid system and that really depends on the context in which the offence was committed and the nature of the political objective. A further understanding of what a political prisoner was understood as in the South African context can be found in the Groote Schuur Minutes agreed upon between the apartheid regime and the African National Congress in the talks about talks in 1990; in Albie Sachs papers-Box MCH 91, UWC RIM Mayibuye Archives.

The aim of the authorities was to punish the political inmates and instil fear so that they can respect authority. They hoped that by removing them from society and the mainland, that at the end of their sentence none of them would want to continue with the freedom struggle once released. They would have broken them in spirit and soul.

One of the ways in which prisons break people's spirits is by "assume[ing] responsibility of all aspects of the individual, his physical training, his aptitude to work, his everyday conduct, his moral attitude [and] his state of mind."⁵⁶ At Robben Island the authorities were assisted by common law prisoners to perform this task against the political prisoners. However, political prisoners' memories as regard to common law prisoners vary according to the period and the cell one was in. Generally speaking common law prisoners' were a nuisance to political prisoners. While there were those who sympathised with political prisoners there were also those who were used by the authorities to mishandle political prisoners. Naidoo and Babenia relate different but similar stories. Naidoo remembers,

Whenever we moved we found ourselves mixed with common law prisoners, many with scarred and battered faces, their eyes glazed but their bodies muscular and physically tense. 'Watch out we will get you' some of them threatened. 'Don't worry we will look after you, some of them whispered'.⁵⁷

Babenia also commented;

The Big fives were one of the notorious criminal gangs, which operated on the Island. They were a real bad bunch who had allied themselves with the Kleinhans brothers.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Penguin, London (1991) p.240-245

⁵⁷ I. Naidoo, *Island in Chains*, Penguin, London (1982) p. 70

⁵⁸ N. Babenia, *Memoirs of a Saboteur*, Mayibuye-UWC, Bellville (1995) p. 129

The relationship between the political prisoners and the common law prisoners' was not fixed. Because common law prisoners were divided into gangs they also fought against each other, but there was one group that allied itself with the warders. It is this group that dominated the common law prisoners' community at Robben Island in the early 1960's. Many political prisoners remember this group as especially close to the Kleinhans brothers.

The Kleinhans brothers were prison warders who were twins and who were infamous for their bad treatment of political inmates. They are described in interviews by ex political prisoners as vicious and sadistic in their approach. Many former inmates accused them of having been extreme right-wingers. At Robben Island prison there was also another group that was in the minority known as the Big Six. The Big Six hated the Big Fives for their collaboration with the prison authorities. Dlamini on the one hand remembers that the Big Six against the Big Five at times helped them. Dlamini recalls a day when the Big Six warned them at tauza⁵⁹ time, that, during supper they must be careful because some members of the Big Five had been sentenced to death.

They [the Big Five] were going to be knifed
and the Big Six did not want us to be involved
in the fighting.⁶⁰

It is therefore clear that the contact between political prisoners and common law prisoners did not only have negative aspects. It would seem political prisoners also took advantage of their presence and divisions. They politicised some of the criminal elements among them and some even decided to join the liberation organisations. The

⁵⁹ Tauza is when prisoners were instructed to strip naked and be searched; they had to bend so that the warders could inspect their anuses for any objects.

⁶⁰ M. Dlamini, *Hell Hole Robben Island*, African World press, p.82

recruitment of criminal elements within the liberation movement has advantages, because most of them were good in smuggling. They taught political prisoners how to smuggle newspapers and other educational material inside prison. Masondo remembers that Mandla Mazibuko who was sentenced to long-term imprisonment for murder was successfully recruited by the ANC. Mazibuko grew up at Sophiatown. For Masondo it was easy to open communication with Mazibuko because they grew up in the same townships and Mazibuko's father was Masondo's Primary School teacher. It was as a result of this communication that Mazibuko joined the ANC and when he was released he decided to join the ANC in exile. He is today a brigadier in the South African National Defence Force. Naidoo remembers Mazibuko because the authorities saw him as a

Typical, ja baas type. But to us Mandla, the common law prisoner serving long sentence for armed robbery, from the start was a comrade. He smuggled in newspapers, tobacco, and even radio's and carried out his role brilliantly.⁶¹

In the long term the strategy by the authorities to use common law prisoners to break the spirit and moral of political prisoners failed. When the authorities realised that some common law prisoners like Zwi and Sipho Xhorhile were assisting political prisoners they removed all common law prisoners from the Island in 1966/67 and placed them in another prison. The resistance by the political prisoners not to allow the authorities to control all aspects of their lives was a resistance to the codes of imprisonment as they sought to take control of their lives within the confines of imprisonment. The removal of common law prisoners from the Island was a victory for them and a failure of the authorities to subject them to a certain regimented way of life and make them docile to authority.

⁶¹ I. Naidoo, *Island in Chains*, p.96

In assuming control of the state of mind the authorities regulated and denied prisoners study rights. Access to newspapers was also denied. Furthermore, prisoners were classified according to groups that regulated how many letters or visits one was to receive per year.⁶² Letters and visits in addition to isolation and removal from other inmates were used as punishment by the authorities. In 1963, when the first group of prisoners arrived, Robben Island prison was still a tough place compared to later periods. All political prisoners who arrived in prison were classified as F-group. This was the lowest category in prison. It meant that one was allowed to receive one letter per year and one visitor per year. Masondo chooses the following words to describe this period.

The place was tough, the Boers were still white⁶³, you woke up in the morning and they would expect you to have made up your bed, stand in the queue for a cold porridge which, was dished out at 03:00 am. Everything there was according to apartheid. Africans got less sugar than 'coloured' for instance." This differentiation also extended to clothes. "We [Africans] used to wear sandals with short pants and in winter with socks. Our jackets were canvasses, whereas coloureds and Indian comrades had thick lumber jackets military type thick. The food at Robben Island was also based on your classification and your racial group. I think I stayed two years at Robben Island until I went for a further charge I never ate bread because Africans did not eat bread."⁶⁴

Many earlier inmates of the prison echo the memory of the denial of bread. Govan Mbeki remembers that for 13 years while at Robben Island they were not allowed bread rations because the authorities argued that bread was not the Africans staple diet.

⁶² F. Buntman, *Robben Island: Symbol of resistance 1960-1990* (PhD thesis) Texas (1997)

⁶³ Boers were still white refers to the behaviour of conservative white supremacist who believed that because of their skin colour they were naturally superior to blacks.

⁶⁴ RIMMP (Govan Mbeki-1998)

It is interesting to note that whenever people are commenting about food those memories are linked to memories of work. Prisoners would often narrate stories of how they worked hard especially in the stone quarry, only to realise after work that if you did not make the quota required by the authorities one would be deprived of food as punishment for not fulfilling that quota. This was especially so for prisoners who arrived before the mid-1970s when hard labour was still compulsory at Robben Island prison. At Robben Island prison labour was seen as productive labour. This was contrary to what Foucault sees as the aim of imprisonment being “not profit, nor even the formation of a useful skill, but the constitution of a power relation, an empty economic form, a schema of individual submission and of adjustment to a production apparatus.”⁶⁵ In South African prisons, prison labour was used not as an empty economic activity but prisoners were seen as a productive force. For example the present Robben Island Maximum prison was built with prison labour. Some of the roads of the island were also constructed and repaired by the prisoners. The authorities showed their power in the manner in which they treated prisoners at work. Because prisoners did not work for wages, the authorities used food as a bargaining tool to force prisoners to fulfil certain quotas.

The deprivation of food and other basic human necessities was the first impression Govan Mbeki had when he first arrived at Robben Island prison in the winter of 1964.

I remember the first thing we saw it was something like five hundred prisoners marching to work early in the morning. They did not seem to walk properly. They were going to dig up rocks and damp sand. That is the rock you find on the walls of the prison of Robben Island. They made the cement blocks, which were on the inside of the rock. They dug that rock, dressed that rock and put it in position. We in section B worked in the lime quarry. But first we started by breaking

⁶⁵ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Penguin (1991) p. 243

stones, making gravel, breaking stones with pound hammers to make concrete.⁶⁶

In describing the conditions under which this work took place, Masondo remembered that,

We went to work, you know in winter you come there, the Boers would say, take off your jersey and within a short time you will be sweating because they pushed you. Then they tried to use the wheelbarrow, they would call all those who had driving licences and give them wheelbarrows. If your hands are soft you got blisters pushing that wheelbarrow and they did not care, you continued pushing that wheelbarrow until your blisters got healed.⁶⁷

Many political prisoners echo the memories of suffering especially at work. This is particularly so of those who were imprisoned in the early 1960's when the jail was still being built. Prisoners were grouped into different working groups and each group was under the supervision of a warder. While there were many working groups, the two prominent groups that get always mentioned in biographies, comments and interviews of former prisoners are the two quarries, i.e. the stone quarry and the lime quarry. As Mbeki says only prisoners from the isolation section worked in the lime quarry. The majority of prisoners from all sections worked in the stone quarry.⁶⁸

In the memories of the prison, there are certain dominant narratives about each quarry. The stone quarry, where most inmates worked, is remembered for the brutality that took place there. Most of the prison authorities brutality took place in the stone quarry and most of the struggles that took place in prison were planned and started in the stone quarry. This planning took place clandestinely as prisoners were not allowed

⁶⁶ RIMMP (Govan Mbeki interview-1998)

⁶⁷ RIMMP (Masondo-1997)

⁶⁸ RIMMP (Govan Mbeki interview-1998)

to communicate. The prisoner, “is only allowed to speak to the warders, with their permission and in a low voice.”⁶⁹ Foucault continues to argue that “this rule accustoms the convict to regard the law as sacred precept whose violations brings just and legitimate harm.”⁷⁰ At Robben Island prison the authorities used this rule to dominate prisoners. Masondo, like many other inmates, remembers how the Kleinhans brothers used that code,

Those chaps were terrible, when we got there; we were not allowed to go anywhere without permission. I remember one chap who refused to say baas and he had a running stomach, he had to relieve himself with his trousers on and those boys will be laughing and saying, ‘kyk hy kaak op sy broek’ (look he is shitting himself in his trousers).⁷¹

The stone quarry is where the authorities and common law prisoners collaborated in mistreating the political prisoners. For some political prisoners like Zwelonke the stone quarry is synonymous with Robben Island prison. According to him that is where most things took place, as he says, “the island was no other place but the quarry, not the cells, not the ugly vegetation, the quarry had become symbolical, the graduation centre: torture and the island, suffering and the island,” that was the stone quarry.

Torture in the stone quarry took many forms. For some it took the form of chipping stones to gravel and from gravel to dust. Those who were in the wheelbarrow group, had to transport big heavy stones from one place to another in sand, which made it difficult for an old rusted wheelbarrow to move. When prisoners failed to perform these tasks they were regarded as lazy and could forfeit three meals per day and be on

⁶⁹ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Penguin, London (1991) p. 238

⁷⁰ M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison*, Penguin, London (1991) p.238

⁷¹ RIMMP (Masondo-1997)

spare diet. In the stone quarry the common law prisoners who helped the authorities to abuse them aggravated the misery of political prisoners.

‘All the new ones one aside’ said a strong looking warder. The criminals imitated him, not meaning to sneer, but soliciting for the highest favours. They were a few convicts called the blackliners. There are your lorries; they yelled pointing at rusted, squeaky monsters that were once wheelbarrows. No leave those alone! They shouted when we rushed for the rubber wheelbarrows. Those are yours there. The warders said it too.⁷²

The level of violence against the prisoners was not only limited to ill treatment through work but also proceeded to physical beatings by the authorities. Govan Mbeki recalls what happened to Masondo in the early 1970s:

Many people suffered at Robben Island. Take a man like Mandla Masondo, they were digging and he had to push a wheelbarrow up. Mandla was a strong man, but he failed to push the wheelbarrow up. One Kleinhans brother, they were twins, pulled out a baton and knocked Mandla on the head, cracked across it and one another at the back below the shoulder blade. Mandla was on Robben Island for fourteen years, that baton was tattooed on his back.⁷³

While this picture of brutality at the stone quarry is painted through interviews, most prisoners also paint a picture of resistance. This picture is one of resistance against behaving like machines and being stripped of dignity. These struggles were mostly struggles for better quality of life. Most of these struggles revolved around demands for better food, the right to play sport and study rights. However, there was not always unanimity on the need for hunger strikes. It would seem that some hunger strikes divided political prisoners. For instance Naidoo narrates a story where a substantial minority of political prisoners from the PAC refused to participate in hunger strikes. The group that refused to participate in the strike did not see the need of a strike as

⁷² D. M. Zwelonke, *Robben Island*, Heinemann, London (1973) 31-32

they argued that they were in the enemy camp and the objective of revolutionaries in such circumstances is to survive. The strike they argued would further worsen the situation in which they already found themselves. On the other hand some political prisoners are of the opinion that, this group refused to participate in the strike because they were benefiting from food smuggling which was also a result of why inmates were starving. This group of prisoners was led by Selby Ngendane and was called the Babanginta by their comrades in the PAC. At the same time many political prisoners like Zifozonke Tshikila (himself a PAC senior member) tell stories where Jeff Masemola and a small group that used to follow him would engage on lonely strikes that were not supported by the organisation.

In the representation of hunger strikes, former political inmates always play down the divisions that existed between them or will label those who disagreed with them as the minority that did not have an impact on their actions. As there were many hunger strikes at the Island, it is possible that most prisoners choose to remember those actions that were successful and where, there was unity in action. Looking at the early 1960's among political prisoners there were people who chose not to involve themselves in hunger strike actions. Most people nonetheless remember the first successful hunger strike. This strike followed after one hunger strike that was not successful because it lacked popular support.

[The first 1963 strike failed] and those prisoners who participated were taken back to the cells and beaten up, after being beaten they were taken back to work to go and carry those stones with their hands instead of wheelbarrows. [Second hunger strike took place in 1965]-it was head warden Delport who precipitated our first major act of defiance. We had been seething at the constant

⁷³ RIMMP (Govan Mbeki-1998)

brutality and humiliations near breaking point on many occasions, and we often speculated about how we could fight back.”⁷⁴

This strike yielded some results according to many. It consolidated the unity that is illustrated below and resulted in study privileges being granted.

Prisoners who were in the isolation block used to work in the lime quarry. What most prisoners remember about the lime quarry was the glare it had and the way it affected their eyes. It was a result of this that they started a campaign for the provision of sunglasses by the authorities. While many campaigns started in the general sections and spread to the isolation section, there were however campaigns that were initiated in the isolation section. One of these campaigns was a demand for the Prison Act. Another campaign that started in the isolation block was the demand by prisoners for their own unconditional release. Masondo gives a summarised background why they undertook these two campaigns.

We said that the National Party had no business in locking us up particularly John Vorster because we were fighting for our rights. We took up arms because we had no choice our organisations were banned. Whereas people like Van der Berg and Vorster were released before they finished their sentences when they were arrested for treason and had a right to vote, and we had none of those.⁷⁵

These are memories that people share about what happened in the lime quarry and the isolation section. When prisoners continued with the campaign to demand their own unconditional release the government was offering them conditional release to the homelands. This became more common after the Transkei under K.D. Matanzima

⁷⁴ I. Naidoo, *Island in Chains: Ten Years on Robben Island by prisoner 885/63*, Penguin, London (1982) p. 164

⁷⁵ RIMMP (Masondo-1997) -The John Vorster group was part of the Afrikaner Nationalists who supported Germany during WWII and were arrested in 1940 and charged for treason. However this group of Afrikaner

took independence in 1976. As the number of homelands who took independence increased the government also continued to offer conditional release to the inmates. However all these offers were rejected by most of the inmates as they did not recognise the fragmentation of South Africa into tribal pieces. Masondo remembers that earlier on Raymond Mhlaba was coerced into accepting to be released to the Ciskei. Mhlaba took their proposal to the ANC high organ and it was tabled on the agenda and, as expected, was rejected. Such memories are told by prisoners to illustrate the dedication and unity that existed to the liberation struggle by inmates.

In the communal cells also known as the general sections⁷⁶ in order to achieve some of the demands they continued convincing people of the need for a hunger strike. In prison, like in society at large, for people to be united they don't only need a common ideological belief but also a common enemy in order for them to act as a group. At Robben Island prison, prisoners were able to identify that common enemy to a large extent. The common enemy became those who represented the system. It is because of this that many prisoners remember actions of unity rather than those of difference. Andrew Masondo remembers that in 1963 he was one of the few ANC members and he soon realised the need to form an ANC structure inside prison. According to Masondo and Naidoo by 1963 ANC cadres did not number more than twenty individuals. The first group of ANC members was his group and they were three in total, Indres Naidoo's group followed this group and they were also three in total. The Naidoo group came at the same time with the Jacob Zuma group who were in total not

nationalists was released in 1946. On their release they had not completed their sentences. John Vorster later became the Prime Minister of the Republic of South Africa under the National Party government.

⁷⁶ Robben Island prison was divided into various sections, each section had four communal cells and the majority of prisoners were kept in these sections. There was only a small number of prisoners that was kept in the isolation block which is composed of single very small cells.

more than five individuals. This need to organise was inculcated to Masondo by Govan Mbeki, as he says,

For the ANC I began to work out a structure because I always believed it does not matter where I am and that is what Oom Gov. [Govan Mbeki] used to tell me as well, that you must organise yourselves 'cause if you don't organise yourselves you are going to act as individuals and you can never be strong.⁷⁷

This unity first among the ANC inmates and then a working relationship with the Pan Africanist Congress was not achieved easily. There were some people who did not want to co-operate with the ANC because they believed the Communists influenced it. Also among the ANC inmates there were those who accused the PAC of dogmatism and at times refused to recognise it as a liberation movement. This was mainly because by 1963, the PAC was only five years old and its membership was mostly young people. What happened in those early years according to Masondo was,

The PAC would ask us in the cell that they want to have a lecture, what they would be doing is attacking the African National Congress. So I went to the leadership of the PAC and Ngendane⁷⁸ was one of the people I talked to. I said to him, please let us not create a situation where we will fight because if we were to fight the Boers would mow us down. I also tried to make some friends with the PAC people to try and reconcile. When we had problems I would take them up even for them [PAC] so I began to have a lot of respect even from the PAC chaps.⁷⁹

It would seem to me that the highlights about how working relationships between political prisoners is given priority is because of the need to explain why it was important for the liberation movement to engage in the process of reconciliation. For

⁷⁷ I. Naidoo, *Island in Chains*, p.164

⁷⁸ Ngendane was the leader of the PAC in the Transvaal and served in the National Executive Committee of the organisation.

those who were imprisoned at Robben Island, they have found a way of explaining this through the events that took place in prison.

One also observes that from early on prisoners rejected the code of imprisonment of individualising the prisoner and preventing the “bonds of community”⁸⁰ It is through the creation of a common enemy that prisoners today remember the common struggles they fought together. Whenever differences are raised they are quickly contextualised so that the reader or the listener or these intended listeners cannot misunderstand the circumstances under which these differences occurred. For example when prisoners talk about sport, they would inform you that in the beginning sport was organised around political affiliation but that soon stopped as teams began to look for good players. This, many will explain should not be viewed as division between prisoners but in the beginning people were comfortable with those they knew. At times these differences would be raised in order to show the strength, discipline and the determination that existed to solve some problems. For instance many former inmates such as Lionel Davis, Neville Alexander and Govan Mbeki tell a story where the ANC, the PAC and other political organisations that existed in prison adopted a code of not recruiting each other’s members. This code was only broken when the post 1976 generation⁸¹ arrived on the Island. It was only then that recruitment occurred again. However it is clear that recruitment always caused tensions.

⁷⁹ RIMMP (Masondo-1997)

⁸⁰ D. Schalkwyk, “Community and Otherness in South African Prison Writing” in S. Nuttall, *South African Cultural Studies* Oxford University Press, Cape Town (forthcoming)

⁸¹ The post 1976 generation was those young people who were sentenced because of the 1976 uprisings that started in Soweto and spread through out the country. Most of those young people who were

In his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom* Nelson Mandela commented that one of the things he had done when he arrived in prison was to write a calendar. The calendar was an indication of a person who wanted to take full control of his life. Another example of how prisoners maintained control of their destiny is demonstrated in Kathrada's Prison Letters. In the introduction of this book Walter Sisulu comments, "We were not allowed to keep copies of letters we wrote. Kathy had the enviable habit of making a copy of each and every letter he wrote and he managed to keep them."⁸² The determination to keep record of ones memories inside prison and the desire to know what was taking place outside prison was also influenced by the determination not to forget. Among the landmark campaigns undertaken by prisoners was the struggle to remember and to keep their memories not only in their minds but also in written forms. Prisoners remember that in the early 1970s the head warden instructed them through the prison intercom to burn all letters they received from their families. Such instruction meant that the only possession most prisoners had from their families had to be destroyed. Such a tactic was not only calculated to deprive prisoners of their memories but also to disguise future evidence of how censorship took place in prison. The prisoners sent a delegation to inform the Commanding Officer to confiscate their letters, which, were their possessions and burn them himself. The Commanding Officer did not confiscate their possession, as that would have been contravention of private property.

The memories of hardship are of course juxtaposed with the memories of success. These successes are most of the time represented in terms of the education people

sentenced to Robben Island prison were students who had participated in protests against the use of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction at school.

⁸² R. Vassen, *Letters From Robben Island :A selection of Ahmed Kathrada's Prison Correspondence, 1964-1989*, Mayibuye/Michigan State University Press (1999) P.xvi

received while at Robben Island prison. While education was not a right but a privilege, prisoners exploited such opportunities to their advantage. This, in my opinion does not necessarily mean that all prisoners who were at Robben Island received higher education. As evidence shows, there were many that were released from Robben Island without a matriculation certificate. However, whenever this is raised prisoners always counter by saying that some people did not have money to register and had to study informally and write informal examinations marked by those who were highly educated among them. Education and the right to study also formed a major part of strikes that took place at Robben Island prison. Like the rest of the black community the right to education has always formed part of the grievances of the black people. When the Nationalist government forcefully took over black education from missionary societies the African National Congress strongly protested against such acts. The Nationalists had structured an education system that divided people according to racial groups. African education was called Bantu education and it was meant to teach African children that they are inferior to others in society. As the Minister of Native education Dr. H. Verwoed asked in rhetorical terms,

What is the use of teaching a Native child mathematics when he can't put it in practise? [and continued to state] good racial relations are spoilt when the correct education is not given. Above all, good racial relations cannot exist when the education is given under the control of people who create wrong expectations on the part of the Native himself.⁸³

There are some former prisoners who believe that there is nowhere in South Africa where literacy education took place more than Robben Island prison. If that is the

⁸³ T. Lodge, *Black Politics since 1945*, Longman, London (1983) p. 115

case, perhaps it was at Robben Island where the Congress of South African Students⁸⁴ slogan of “each one teach one” was practised more than anywhere in South Africa at the time. Prisoners with higher education assisted those with lower education than them.

The field of education was not only restricted to academic education. Political education and life skills formed an integral part of education at Robben Island prison. Masondo argues that the commitment to education at Robben Island prison cannot be compared to that anywhere in South Africa. In tracing the reasons why they embarked on education programmes, Masondo remembers that, this was because of the high illiteracy rate among the prisoners. In his comment he narrates,

At Robben Island education was taken very seriously, it was one of the tools that exercised prisoners’ minds and increased their educational knowledge. Also it was one of the tools that liberated those who cannot read and write. Before I was transferred to isolation section, I noticed something that was very strange to me. There were chaps I worked with, whom I thought were better educated, a chap could speak fluent English and addressed people in English. Then one day you find a chap comes to you and says Mfundisi [teacher] can you write me a letter? Then you ask, why should I write it for you. Then your comrade tells you, no, I did not go to school I can’t write. I did not believe it until I ultimately realised it was true. That is when I saw it necessary to teach people how to read and write.⁸⁵

When former prisoners narrate stories about how both formal and informal education was valued at Robben Island prison, they always give examples of people who received a certain level of education while inside the prison. People such as Daweti, whom Masondo says never received formal education before he came to prison had

⁸⁴The Congress of South African Students was a student organisation that operated in high schools. It was formed in 1979 in Natal. On its formation it adopted the policy of non-racism, non-sexism, free and dynamic education for all. It was the first student organisation in the 1970s to adopt the ANC’s non-racism and later the Freedom Charter as its guiding document.

completed a STD 6 certificate when he left Robben Island. Moseneke who came to jail with a junior certificate left with two degrees. Walter Sisulu who had a STD 6 certificate managed to obtain a degree and several diplomas. Ahmed Kathrada obtained two degrees in prison. This to some political prisoners like Masondo shows the successes of the education programs run by prisoners that took place in prison.

It is only unfortunate that the prison authorities did not keep statistics of the education level of people when they arrived in prison. The statistics of individual education level on release can also not tell us much firstly, because they fail to identify individuals level of education when they were imprisoned. Secondly they do not take into account “informal” academic education that took place inside the prison cells, which was not certified by the formal education authorities. Therefore, glancing at the official records, we are handicapped in evaluating the success of the education program.

Most political prisoners testify that academic education was held in high esteem but at the same time political education was also very strictly administered. All members of different organisations had their political education classes. Some former prisoners who served in the political education committee recall with pride the important role political education played and how it changed some of the inmates understanding and broadened their outlook on many political matters. For the ANC some of the syllabus of political education is reflected in Govan Mbeki’s book, *Learning from Robben Island: The prison writings of Govan Mbeki* published by Mayibuye-UWC. In the foreword of the book Harry Gwala recalls,

⁸⁵ RIMMP (Masondo-1997)

In the ANC we had a syllabus of political education. When comrades were incarcerated on Robben Island, a crying need was felt for a theory that would correctly interpret the world. To organise this theory for our comrades required material, which we lacked, consequently we had to rely on memory.⁸⁶

These are dominant memories about Robben Island prison that one hears from former inmates when commenting about education at this prison.

In any community or society while education is important, cultural activities and sport are held in high esteem. When one examines the prisoners' records at the UWC RIM Mayibuye archive, one is overwhelmed by the importance that was given to sport by the prisoners. The archive reveals the efficiency and the professionalism with which the prisoners administered sport. The records also show that each summer prisoners competed in what was known as Olympics. Some prisoners take pride in narrating in which sports they were good. Kader Hassim remembers that he thought he was one of the best chess players. However Masondo undermined this belief,

In one year I was pitched against Andrew Masondo and he just demolished me and totally demoralised me and I never played chess again. I let my team down and I was badly demoralised but I played table tennis, tennis and bridge.⁸⁷

This aspect about Robben Island prison has not only captured those who are interested in its history but also the general public. As a result one can argue that it has become part of popular memory-M-Net television produced a documentary about sport at Robben Island in 1998 which was also used as part of the Olympic bid advertisement. D. Skott and G. Joffe directed the Television documentary. Such memories will naturally dominate in peoples' memories because they are some of the few highlights about imprisonment that people are proud of. It is not surprising when former inmates go so far as to compare the role of sport at Robben Island to how sport is viewed

⁸⁶G. Mbeki, *The Prison Writings: Learning from Robben Island*, Mayibuye-David Phillips publishers, Bellville (1991) p. vi

today by the new South Africa. They argue that the state has learned from Robben Island that sport can reduce tensions and unite people across ideological and political differences. In short the role that was played by sport at Robben Island reconciled the two old liberation movements at least to the extent that people developed friends across the political spectrum and through those friendships they began to understand and tolerate each others politics. In narrating these stories, prisoners are in many ways advocating that through sport and culture the reconciliation that is advocated by the government can succeed.

One also needs to note that most of the memories I have discussed so far are those of the political prisoners imprisoned between 1963 and the mid1970's. Most of this group of prisoners came from the old liberation movements. However, by post 1976 a new crop of prisoners started to arrive at Robben Island. This was a new generation that had a different political approach to the old generation. The ideology, strategy and tactics that each group followed also influenced the different political approach. The new group of political prisoners were young and were schooled in radical approaches while the old generation was schooled in the struggles of petitions and defiance campaigns and saw a radical militant approach as a last resort to achieve their objectives. The new generation of prisoners was mainly schooled in the black consciousness philosophy, which is symbolised by Steven Bantu Biko in South Africa. The BCM philosophy started at universities when black students decided to break away from the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) which was predominantly white. The South African Student Organisation was then formed and it organised in black colleges and universities. White students were constitutionally

⁸⁷ RIMMP (Kader Hassim-March 1998)

prohibited from joining SASO which, was BC inclined. Some of their slogans were “black is beautiful” and “black man you are on your own.” They preached pride in blackness and they also started self-help organisations and literacy classes.

The prison authorities were confronted by this young generation that believed they had cultivated fearlessness against whites and the system. Depending on which side of the political spectrum one is talking to, this group is either seen as people who added some new impetus in the life of Robben Island and contributed to fighting for changes, or alternatively as a group who did not want to listen to senior comrades and were a law unto themselves. Strini Moodley who arrived at Robben Island prison in 1975 remembers the light incident that made them notorious especially in the isolation section with the old generation of prisoners.

One of the highlights of B-section was to watch a movie, normally on a Saturday morning the movie would come. This one Saturday the movie did not come, of course we soon discovered that some of the older generation was so accustomed to the routine, if it were slightly altered their blood pressure would shoot up. When Harding was called [head of prison] he stated that he was punishing us because some of us do put our lights off at night when we sleep that is why the movie is withdrawn. This resulted in a major uproar with organisations holding their own meetings. The major question was what was to be done with this? We in the BCM just said we are putting the lights off finish.⁸⁸

In the case of the Moodley scenario we also observe how the authorities used differences between political prisoners to quickly frustrate prisoners and humiliate them. Added to that this example also shows us how political prisoners resolved their differences or could not resolve some of the differences. This system of resolving issues through committees and structures seems to me to have also been adopted by the new South African government in terms of how it resolves issues.

Most importantly, it seems to me that these stories are told so that we can understand the benefits of listening to each other and reconciling ideas’, which ultimately lead to

the reduction of conflict. The former political prisoners' narratives, shows that through debates, sharing of facilities and sport they were able to reconcile as people from different political organisations. In the manner in which they narrate their stories, they show that because they had similar experiences in terms of treatment they could unite on those issues while they continued to differ ideologically. The interviews also seem to illustrate that sport was important in terms of reducing tensions between the inmates and that sport also played an important role in unifying prisoners across the political spectrum. The narrative that is presently revealed by the interviews there is clearly influenced by the present political discourse of reconciling the different racial groups in South Africa. Sport and Culture are seen as one of the avenues in which people can begin to understand each other. However, it would seem to me that when the South African political discourse changes in the future the dominant Robben Island narrative will also changed.

⁸⁸ RIMMP (Strini Moodley-March 1998)

Chapter 2

Biographies and autobiographies of Robben Island

The 1980s ushered a proliferation of struggle biographies and autobiographies in South Africa.⁸⁹ Most of these biographies and autobiographies were produced to conscientise the world about apartheid and to bolster the image of the struggle through certain individuals. The anti-apartheid movement and the International Defence and Aid Fund in particular played a significant role in popularising the South African liberation struggle through the publication of speeches, short biographies and the dissemination of leaflets. Parallel to that many in the academia, media and the liberation movement itself began to publish volumes of books and biographical documentary films through certain establishments. In this chapter I seek to understand how were the histories of former Robben Island prisoners represented and/or communicated through this medium. In that regard I am going to examine the biographies and autobiographies of ex-political prisoners who were jailed at Robben Island prison. In order to show this I will discuss three autobiographies: those of Indres Naidoo, Moses Dlamini and Neville Alexander. I will also briefly touch on the biographies and autobiographies of Nelson Mandela in order to show how this medium was used in the South African liberation struggle. Further than that, later on I will briefly examine Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* in order to show how Robben Island stories have changed and for what reasons. In this chapter I will also show that in the first two biographies i.e. that of Naidoo and Dlamini, their content is mostly concerned with the promotion of their respective political organisations. While on the one hand, Alexander's dossier is concerned at exposing

⁸⁹ C. Rassool, *The individual, Biography and Resistance in South African Public History* (Unpublished paper) history depart. and Institute for historical research, UWC, no: 72. Rassool argues in this paper that the 1990's the field of political biography as a mode of negotiating the past has experienced a boom.

prison conditions at Robben Island prison and less concerned in promoting his party ideology and stance on many issues that took place at Robben Island prison.

Many political memoirs were produced about the struggle against apartheid. One of the most important of these published in the 1980s is that of Indres Naidoo, *Island in Chains: Ten Years on Robben Island by Prisoner 885/63*, published by Penguin in Great Britain. *Island in Chains* as told by Indres Naidoo to Albie Sachs was the work of two South African exiles. Both Naidoo and Sachs were members of the African National Congress holding prominent responsibilities within the liberation movement. It is claimed that the book, *Island in Chains* was used both inside the country and outside the country as part of political education. This book was not just a memoir of prison experiences but an educational political document. They presented to many young people possible scenarios they had to face when arrested by the police. This prepared them psychologically.

Naidoo and Sachs came from different backgrounds that were shaped not only by class differences but also by Apartheid legislation, which was meant to cement this difference based on the colour of their skin. They were not meant to meet as equals and friends but to meet as master and servant. However, it was due to the rejection of such policies that both of them found themselves in a foreign landscape united by their political beliefs in a united and non-racial South Africa. Back in South Africa, political organisations and civic structures were increasingly formed to oppose apartheid.

In the same period *Island in Chains* was published, African World Press, the book by Moses Dlamini, *Hell-Hole Robben Island* by prisoner 872/63, also published another book. It is also important to note that, the book *Hell Hole Robben Island* was published a year before the tricameral parliament whose formation was also opposed to by the newly formed United Democratic Front.⁹⁰ Indres Naidoo and Albie Sachs dedicated their book to Nelson Mandela in these words, “To Nelson Mandela and all other political prisoners, and in memory of all those who have given their lives for the coming liberation of South Africa.”⁹¹ In his book Dlamini wrote, “dedicated to Sobukwe, to all Azanian patriots who are languishing in prison, and to those who died at the hands of the police and in prison in their noble struggle for a free Azania.”⁹² The book was distributed free of charge in Europe while *Island in Chains* was smuggled into South Africa through MK soldiers who came into the country and was used for political education in ANC cells and in UDF structures. It is clear that both books were used to communicate the voices of the liberation struggle in an environment of repression or to communities whose governments were at times hostile to the South African liberation struggle. The messages and the style in which the books are written reflect that.

The biography, *Island in Chains* starts the story of Indres Naidoo, not in the dusty streets where he was born nor on the campaigns of the resistance movement in the 1950s and years before that. The book starts at an unusual space, in the countryside 12 miles outside Johannesburg. Naidoo and his comrades are there on a mission to blow up a signal box. This was 1963 the beginning of sabotage by selected members of the Congress Alliance who joined Mk. In this part of the book Naidoo details his arrest,

⁹⁰ The United Democratic Front was formed in 1983 at the Civic hall in Mitchellsplain. On its formation its largest affiliate was the Congress of South Africa Students that was banned in June 1985. When South African Youth Congress was launched in 1987 it became its largest affiliate. Shortly after its formation the UDF adopted the Freedom Charter as a guiding document in its struggles. When it adopted the Freedom Charter it clearly aligned itself with the Congress Alliance tradition.

⁹¹ I. Naidoo, *Island in Chains: Ten Years on Robben Island by Prisoner 885/63*, Penguin, London (1982) p. 4

interrogation, trial and their transfer to Robben Island prison. In each space he narrates a story of what happened and his reaction to the events. He also details the contradictions of the South African situation. When he was captured on the scene, those who arrested him were white policemen who not only were privileged in South Africa but were determined to defend those privileges. The police regarded him as a terrorist who had to be badly treated and denied medical care when he was in need of it. The biography starts at the scene of the sabotage act where Naidoo was shot and taken to Marshall Square without being sent to the doctor to examine his wound. In detention a sympathetic white prisoner helped him.

The pain was dreadful, I couldn't help it. I started kicking the door and screaming, help, help. I found the door opening and saw a white hand opening and saw a white hand coming through the grille. 'What is wrong friend?' [Naidoo pleaded for painkillers] 'I can't help you there but do you smoke and have you got blankets' [at which the prisoner brought the blankets and gave him a cigarette].⁹³

Naturally the colour of the prisoner at Marshall Square would not have been important but the act would have warranted some mention, but under apartheid, which taught its citizen racial superiority and inferiority such acts, had their significance in showing the human bankruptcy of apartheid.

Indres Naidoo take us through these spaces of his trial and his internment at Leeuwkop prison while he was awaiting trial to show the reader the confrontations that took place between those who had authority and those who were deprived of such authority. In court those who had authority sought to display it while those who opposed the state's authority sought to justify their actions.

This was demonstrated in their first appearance in court. Our lawyers were shocked by our appearance

⁹² M. Dlamini, *Hell Hole Robben Island*, Africa World Press, Trenton, p.5

⁹³ I. Naidoo, *Island in Chains: Ten years on Robben Island by prisoner 885/63*, Penguin, London (1982) p. 19

and made strenuous protest to the magistrate, while our supporters cried shame as details of our torture were mentioned. The prosecutors replied that we had been injured first in the explosion and then when trying to resist capture.⁹⁴

Further than that the court was used by the accused to explain and to justify to the world the reasons for their actions. It should be remembered that by 1963, the ANC and PAC had been banned and there was a national state of emergency. Effectively mass protests against apartheid were silenced. In attempts to justify their actions, Indres Naidoo and his co-accused did not deny the charge but sought to explain the reasons behind their actions, Naidoo explained that he grew up in a,

Political atmosphere selling newspapers from door to door from the age of 10, and how, when legal protest had been outlawed after the shooting at Sharpeville in 1960, we had felt there was no alternative but to go in for organised and disciplined violence as a means of securing our rights.⁹⁵

Dlamini starts his book with their arrival at Robben Island prison. For Dlamini the boat journey was made more difficult by the attitude of the prison authorities. The attitude of the authorities was like that of masters towards their captured slaves.

The two books i.e. Dlamini and Naidoo present us with some similarities especially as regard to the attitude of the prison authorities but they also present us with some differences. These differences are noticeable, considering that, both prisoners arrived at Robben Island in 1963. In his book Indres Naidoo is concerned to show how the ANC and its leadership showed responsibility and political insight even in prison. Dlamini on the one hand is concerned to show that the PAC was a fearless organisation in prison that led and protested against injustices by the authorities.

⁹⁴I. Naidoo, *Island In Chains* P. 28

To show how the two biographies remember certain events, the second hunger strike which, took place in 1966 and started at the stone quarry will be used as an example. Both Naidoo and Dlamini worked in this quarry during this period. Dlamini's memory of the hunger strikes is presented in the following manner:

In the second week of April 1966, there was a hunger strike at the island. It began on Friday at the quarry span during lunchtime. After the failure of the first hunger strike by PAC comrades in April 1965, we analysed our mistakes and prepared for another one. There had been mass mobilisation since then, preparing all the comrades in all the cells for the need for a hunger strike in order to bring about far reaching reforms in the whole prison machinery. The aim of the hunger strike was to improve first, the food situation, then the clothing and shoes, followed by the working conditions, the punishment at work for having failed to satisfy a certain quota, the treatment by warders, tauza and many other grievances which we had often raised with the prison authorities since 1963 to no avail.⁹⁶

While Naidoo agree with Dlamini on the demands of the hunger strike, he however sees it as having occurred spontaneously. Naidoo remembers the strike in the following manner:

It was head warder Delpoort who precipitated our first major act of defiance. It started quiet spontaneously. A common law prisoner was dishing out the food as normal-laying out the plates and filling them up with their portions. The food had arrived late –there was not enough the food ran short. About a hundred plates stood empty, and the prisoner went to Delpoort, expecting, as usual, to be sent back to the gaol for more. [Delpoort instructed him instant to] ‘Reduce the F-diets.’ Two prisoners went back to Delpoort. ‘Sir we wish to...’ ‘Get back, you either take your food or leave it.’ That remark incensed us and brought us all closer together.

⁹⁵ I. Naidoo, *Island in Chains* p.29

⁹⁶ M. Dlamini, *Hell Hole Robben Island*, African World Press, Trenton, p. 181

[After discussions]...The general view was that, come what may, we had to take stand sooner or later, and this was the time. Our political feelings far outweighed our personal reservations and we prisoners in for ANC activities decided firmly to lead the hunger strike from then on.⁹⁷

The manner in which both Dlamini and Naidoo remember this event shows how memory functions. There has been consensus for some time among social scientists who study memory that, memory is selective and changes according to present historical circumstances. While memory pretends to invoke the past it however serves the present. Benedict Anderson states it slightly differently:

all profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesia. Out of such oblivion's, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives.⁹⁸

Robben Island biographies written in this period, it would seem, were not only meant to narrate ones experiences but also served party political education. For various reasons it would seem Naidoo had forgotten the work done by the PAC since the failure of the first hunger strike and subsequent to that failure their mobilisation in all cells for the need for a hunger strike. If, it is not Naidoo's memory that fails him, it is therefore Dlamini's memory that remembers the origins of this hunger strike in this manner, perhaps influenced by a need to bolster his organisational image? All this depends on how people remember and for what reasons they choose to remember and what they remember. These present challenges for Robben Island Museum of how they represent their narratives and how they construct their exhibitions of the political prison period. This challenge is also enhanced by the increasing Robben Island

⁹⁷ I. Naidoo, *Island in Chains*, P. 165-166

⁹⁸ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origins and spread of Nationalism*, Verso publishers (London) P. 204

literature either from the academy or memoirs in the form of biographies or autobiographies.

Other Robben Island literature

The Robben Island biographies and autobiographies that proliferated in the 1980s followed some clandestine work that has been written by former political prisoners. The dossier by Neville Alexander is but one example. The Robben Island Dossier 1964-1974,

Was originally written as a report to various international organisations to highlight the harsh and inhumane conditions on Robben Island at the time of his incarceration.⁹⁹

The book was written shortly after Alexander was released in 1974 and put under house arrest. The manuscript was published 20 years after it was presented to international bodies including the United Nations Organisation. Alexander's manuscript is less concerned to advance party politics and ideology but is concerned with the living standards at Robben Island prison. Unlike other auto/biographies dealing with Robben Island prison, this book looks extensively at other places of imprisonment in South Africa. While there is recognition of Robben Island prison's peculiar status, which he outlines in detail, Alexander also locates and draw parallels between prison life and that of South African society at large. He argues that prisons in South Africa replicate what happens in society.

In commenting about the authorities, Alexander represents the prison warders as a group of people who have low esteem and are unemployable in any other sector. The prison was the only place that could employ them and give them status in society

especially in white society. It is this group of people that had to look after prisoners at Robben Island prison. According to him most of these warders insisted on being called baas (boss). Those warders who became civil, he argues, was a result of prisoner agitation.

Warders have become more civil, though this civility is really a very thin disguise which, is dropped as soon as some real or imaginary crisis situation develops in the prison. It remains one of the greatest diversions to the prisoners to have to educate new warders, young and old. They have to be taught ordinary manners, the basic equality of human beings, the prison regulations, with special reference to the limits of their power, English in most cases and the real history of South Africa.¹⁰⁰

In this representation it is clear that Alexander does not have high esteem of the prison warders at any point. When he recognises some changes in their attitude, he quickly puts that in a specific context as a veneer or as a result of political education.

The book continues to deal with apartheid within prison, the food crisis, clothing and physical violence by the authorities towards prisoners. The narrative is an attempt to provide the reader with the bad conditions in prison. When it looks at issues of food, it shows how racism was applied in the supply of food. Also when he examines clothing, he shows how racial stereotypes played themselves in how clothing was supplied. For example he says African prisoners were given short pants to wear while Coloured prisoners and Indians were given long pants. This dossier differs from Robben Island biographies of the 1980s and those of the post apartheid period in that it does not want to advance party politics nor does it attempt to communicate reconciliation. What the book does is to communicate a message that will result in the reader becoming an agent of change. As it was aimed at the UNO officials, it was also

⁹⁹ N. Alexander, *Robben Island Dossier 1964-1974*, UCT Press (1994)-see back cover of the book

¹⁰⁰ N. Alexander, *Robben Island Dossier 1964-1974*, UCT Press (1994) p.16

an attempt to lobby the international body to understand the plight of political prisoners in South Africa and intervene on their behalf on certain humanitarian issues like the provision of proper clothing, food and better treatment by the authorities.

The Post Apartheid Robben Island Literature

The post apartheid period brought tremendous changes in the politics of South Africa. It also influenced how people remember, what they select to remember and how they privilege certain memories over others. There are two significant books of former Robben islanders published after the South African democratic dispensation. The first one is the autobiography of Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* published by Abacus in 1994. There had been biographies of Mandela previously. In 1986 and 1988, Penguin Books published biographies of Nelson Mandela. The first biography that was published is by Mary Benson, *Nelson Mandela* and another one by Fatima Meer, *Higher than Hope*.¹⁰¹ It is interesting to note that the book by Fatima Meer was dedicated to Chief Albert Luthuli, Dr. Monty Naicker and Bram Fischer.¹⁰² In this way what Meer was doing was linking the events of the 1980s to this period and thus showing that the struggle for liberation did not start now, it has a long history. This was also an attempt to foreground the tradition of the Congress Alliance of non-racialism to popular memory at the time. In the same year that Benson published her biography of *Nelson Mandela*, the International Defence and Aid Fund published a book of speeches, writings and historical documents of Nelson Mandela in a book

¹⁰¹ C. Rassool, *The Individual, Biography and Resistance in South African Public History* (Unpublished paper) History depart. And Institute for historical research, UWC, no. 72

¹⁰² Chief Luthuli was the President of the African National Congress until his death in 1967, Dr. Naicker was the leader of the Indian Congress while Advocate Fischer was the leader of the Congress of Democrats and the Communist Party of South Africa. The mentioned organisations had an alliance known as Congress alliance up until the ANC was banned.

called *Nelson Mandela: The Struggle is My life*. What is common about the biographies of Mandela in this period is that they portrayed him as a symbol of resistance and a champion for revolutionary change. Before this Chief Albert Lutuli, a Nobel Peace Prize Winner and President of the ANC from 1952 until his death in 1967 symbolised the struggle of the African people against white domination. Nelson Mandela's symbolism followed that of Chief Lutuli. That symbolism was enhanced and represented through the speech he made in 1964 at the Rivonia trial, "if needs be I am prepared to die" before he was sentenced to life imprisonment. These words were used to show the determination of those who participated in the revolutionary struggle as led by the ANC and symbolised by Nelson Mandela.

According to popular notions, the autobiography published in 1994, was written by Mandela while he was in prison and the manuscripts smuggled out of prison by Mac Maharaj and ultimately sent to the ANC in exile. However, when Mandela was released the manuscript was revised with the help of an anonymous writer who wrote some of the chapters. The less well-known story is that one autobiography that was started by Mandela while he was in prison was sent to Oliver Tambo in Lusaka. When the ANC was unbanned the manuscript was not found and it could still be somewhere in the ANC archives. *Long Walk to Freedom* as we know it today has been written by an academic to whom Mandela narrated his story and who perhaps also included the last chapters about Mandela's activities after he was released from jail.

Long Walk to Freedom is a departure from the angry stories told by Indres Naidoo and others. In all auto/biographies published before this one, there is a sense of anger and a clear objective of promoting party political ideologies and the advancement of

the struggle. In his autobiography Mandela does highlight some of the difficulties they had to face when they arrived in prison, he also shows that they were determined that they would not tolerate such indignities.

Apartheid regulations extended even to clothing. All of us except Kathy received short trousers, an insubstantial jersey and a canvas jacket. Short trousers for Africans were meant to remind us that we were 'boys.' I put on the short trousers that day but I vowed I would not put up with them for long.¹⁰³

For Mandela and his group the fight against short trousers was a continuation of the struggle under different circumstances as he said, "we fought injustice wherever we found it."¹⁰⁴ In this autobiography Mandela attempts to show the difficulties of prison life but also shows the humility of some prison warders. This humility of course was the result of the prisoner's efforts to eliminate hostility on the part of the prison authorities. This was important to break the monotony of the penal system.

The relationship between prisoners and the authorities in post apartheid Robben Island narrative/s is meant to show that, progressive ideas always triumph over reactionary thinking. In most Robben Island auto/biographies the prison warders selected to work at the prison are always presented as the most hardened Afrikaners. It is these Afrikaners that had to look after those they despised. If political prisoners could convert such conservatives, the biography seems to argue then that the new government would be able to change those who were regarded as civil. Indeed *Long Walk to Freedom* presents not only a reconciliatory narrative but also a triumphant narrative. This is well captured by Nuttall:

in Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*...as much as it is an address to black freedom fighters, Mandela's text is an attempt to open an intercourse with a still resistant white

¹⁰³ N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Abacus(1994) p. 455

¹⁰⁴ N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Abacus (1994) p. 482

world, autobiography itself in Mandela's text comes closest to being a collective form.¹⁰⁵

In the autobiography, Mandela shows how patience and proper tactics can also change people's opinions rather than hostility.

We had one warder at the quarry that seemed particularly hostile to us. I asked a certain comrade to befriend this fellow so that he cannot interrupt our talk. The strategy worked because this fellow became less wary among us and he began to even ask questions about the ANC.¹⁰⁶

By 1966, prisoners in the isolation section who worked in the lime quarry talked more than they worked such was the relationship established between them and some prison authorities. The significance of that incident however does not lie in the relative freedom they achieved in the presence of this person, it lies in the eagerness of the person trying to understand those whom he looked after. It is in the creation of that understanding, that political prisoners, according to this narrative, could change the thinking of the authorities.

This form of narrative about Robben Island post liberation struggle is also evident in Eddie Daniels book, *There and Back*, published by Mayibuye Books in 1998. Daniels was the only member of the Liberal Party on Robben Island prison. Sentenced to 15 years for sabotage he found respect among ANC, PAC and SWAPO comrades for his stand against apartheid. This was noticeable as many members of the liberation movement had generally regarded the Liberal Party as a toothless body that collaborated with the state.

¹⁰⁵ S. Nuttall, "Telling 'Free' Stories? Memory and democracy in South Africa autobiography since 1994" in S. Nuttall and C. Coetzee, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town (1998) p. 76-77

¹⁰⁶ N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Abacus (1994) p. 498

This book narrates the story of Robben Island as that of pain and ill treatment by the authorities. However the political prisoners were in a position to change the thinking of some warders, which led to better treatment. In this book Daniels relates numerous assaults on both political prisoners and common law prisoners by the authorities. He also goes into detail, mentioning some of the warder's names and the acts of terror they committed. While detailing such acts in the same breath he somersaults and writes as if to appease someone,

Not all warders were bad and brutish though. Some actually showed a kind face to us. Once or twice warders had sidled up to me and told me it would not be long before we would all be released. As it turned out they were mistaken, but it was good of them to say so. Another warder once invited Joe Gqabi (12 years) to the office to listen to a tape of Mama Thembu, a popular song at the time.¹⁰⁷

What is interesting about these gestures by the authorities, is that, they are described as humane within prison conditions. While Daniels describes the warder's gestures as good, they are full of the misinformation that characterised the apartheid regime. However, one wonders how would Daniels have written his biography if he did so before Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*. This is clearly summarised in Mesthrie's review of the book, *There and Back*. Mesthrie writes,

One wonders to what extent what has already been written about the prison by others -not least that by Mandela himself – now determines how others will tell their story.¹⁰⁸

In this case "others" include those former prisoners that were arrested for political reasons either at Robben Island or elsewhere and public historians who engage with the public past. One of the books that has been published after the publication of *Long*

¹⁰⁷ E. Daniels, *There and Back*, Mayibuye, UWC (1995) p.170

¹⁰⁸ U. Methrie, Book Review, *There and Back: Robben Island 1964-1979*, *Kronos, Journal of Cape History*, No 25, Pre-Millennium issue, 1998/99 p. 296-297

Walk to Freedom, was H. Deacon, *Robben Island: 1866-1994*, published by Mayibuye books and David Phillips in 1996. This book is more comprehensive than many books published on Robben Island. Another book which was also published under the Mayibuye series was written by B. Hutton. This book was mainly targeted at high school learners. In 1999 C. Smith a journalist also published a book on Robben Island which was also part of the Mayibuye publications. Smith's book is not different from the one's written by Deacon and Hutton except in the style in which the book was written. Among the proliferating Robben Island literature, one also finds autobiographies written by former prison warders, for example Gregory wrote his autobiography titled *Goodbye Bafana: Nelson Mandela My Prisoner My Friend*.

In examining the former Robben Island prisoners' autobiographies one observes a changing pattern in which the Robben Island story is told while the core facets of the story remain the same. The pre-liberation autobiographies one observes were concerned with encouraging the masses to participate in the liberation struggle, they were also concerned to politicise the youth especially in the 1980s. Most of these biographies were also concerned with connecting the struggles of the 1980s to the events that happened prior to that. For example Fatima Meer in her book *Higher than Hope* is concerned to connect the mass defiance of the 1980s in South Africa to the struggles waged by the ANC in the 1950s. The autobiographies written after the South African liberation struggle are concerned with reconciliation. These autobiographies are exemplified by Mandela's autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*.

At this point it will be productive to examine how Robben Island Museum represent the anti-apartheid struggle and the history of political imprisonment at Robben Island prison. As already stated in the beginning of this work, Robben Island tour narratives

and exhibitions will be examined to look at the type of narratives they narrate to the public.

Chapter 3

Robben Island Museum Tours

The Passage Narrative

The Robben Island Museum is situated at Robben Island which, is at the outskirts of Cape Town in the Western Cape Province. The only mode of transport used by visitors to the museum is through a boat trip. The tourist boat used regularly takes 30 minutes to Robben Island. The old boats that are sometimes used in times of crisis take 45 minutes to the Island. Most former prisoners went on these older boats to Robben Island prison in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The old boats that were used by the Prisons Department are named after prominent Portuguese explorers and Afrikaner nationalist personalities. The Diaz is named after Bartholomew Diaz who was the first European explorer to round the Cape of Good Hope. The Susan Kruger was named after the wife of Jimmy Kruger who was a Minister of Prisons under the National Party government. Most people remember Kruger as the man who in 1977 said that Biko's death leaves him cold. He was at this time the Minister of Police who detained and tortured Biko until he suffered from brain injury that killed him.

Today, those who visit the museum travel this route with the new boats equipped with television monitors. The new acquired boats are named after prominent indigenous leaders who led resistance against colonialism in their times. The first boat is the Autshomato-who was known to the colonialist as Herrie the Strandloper or in even more derogatory terms as Herrie the Hottentot. Some historians claim that

Autshumato first collaborated with and then resisted colonialism.¹⁰⁹ He is also claimed to be one of the few people who managed to escape from Robben Island. The second boat is the Makana. Makana (Makhanda or Nxele) 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 was drowned when he and the others attempted to escape from the Island. His remains have never been found. Many of his followers believed that he was going to return very soon and when that did not materialise, this resulted to a Xhosa idiom which says '*Ulinde Ukubuya kuka Nxele,*'¹¹⁰ whenever some body fails to return. The naming of these boats after these leaders feeds into the post apartheid reconstruction of a new South African nation and reconciliation. The naming of boats after resistance leaders is in line with the Robben Island message of putting the history of the colonial and apartheid period on the same scale.

The 12 minute video documentary played in the boat narrates a brief history of Robben Island. This documentary is a summary of a 90 minutes video documentary by Jurgen Schadeberg made in 1994 *Voices from Robben Island*. There is also a book version of this documentary film published by Ravan Press in the same year. The documentary, *Voices from Robben Island* is a typical expository¹¹¹ text. This form of documentary narrative is characterised by the narrator's voice and subtitles that are directed towards the viewer with images serving as illustrations. This is done to

¹⁰⁹ N. Penn, Robben Island 1488-1805 in H. Deacon (editor) *The Island: A History of Robben Island 1488-1990*, Mayibuye books-David Phillip publishers, Cape Town (1996) p.17

¹¹⁰ The idiom simply translated to English means you are waiting for the coming of Nxele, something that will never happen.

¹¹¹ The concept expository is borrowed from B. Nichols, in *Representing Reality*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington (1991) to explain two forms of documentary film i.e. the expository and the observational mode.

accommodate elements of interviews, which are subsequently subordinated to an argument offered by the film itself via the camera, which speaks on behalf of the text.

This type of documentary renders the interviewer invisible. Thus the documentary gives an illusion of reality and “unlike fiction that claims a certain access to reality.”¹¹² It is in that context, that, we must view *Voices from Robben Island*. *Voices from Robben Island* uses at least five narrative voices i.e. Lionel Davies, a former Robben Island prisoner and now a prison tour guide at Robben Island Museum, Kwezi Kobus, Hein Lottering, Richard Port and Brian Tindleni. The documentary starts with a voice of an invisible narrator who is suppose to give the illusion that the film speaks for itself. This voice informs the audience, “this is Robben Island, this one is a blue hell, prisoners are not allowed to sing” and other prison related restrictions being read. The voice over is juxtaposed with images that explain the event. To show the “authenticity” of the issue, former prisoners like Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Steven Tshwete, Neville Alexander, Ahmed Kathrada, Kwedi Mkalipi and others are used to authenticate the event. For example when the narrator speaks about the hospital, it is at that point that the narrators’ voice is silenced and allows Govan Mbeki to take over. Mbeki is quoted as saying,

One occasionally got off the Island to see a medical specialist at Cape Town hospital. When you got out to the outpatients department there was 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 doesn’t like.

This is juxtaposed with footage of a prisoner in leg irons accompanied by a warder with what seem to be the prisoner’s records in his hand.

The importance of this background is not in the technicality of how documentaries are made but to show that the author in order to communicate a particular story or theme has mediated what they represent. I share the opinion that *Voices from Robben Island* was meant to contribute to the process of nation building and reconciliation through a documentary history of Robben Island. The images of the past juxtaposed with the new images and the narrators' voice expresses this. By starting the film within the political discourse of the immediate post-apartheid period and moving back in time, the documentary captures the minds of the viewers not only to listen to the story of Robben Island but also to seek to transform their thinking.

The importance of this documentary for our purposes is to see how an edited version is used by the Robben Island Museum in the passage trip to Robben Island. The passage trip video departs from the original one in that it only has one male voice that narrates the story. In Maingard's observation such

documentaries are characterised by a strong narrational presence in the form of an omnipotent off-screen male voice speaking in what is perceived to be a white English accent representation of South Africa¹¹³

In this documentary, the male voice personifies the Island. It starts with these words,

Millions of years ago I did not stand alone in the salty rivers as I do know. I was a hill amongst the hills.

Immediately one observes that the film is situated within the South African context especially its geographical link with Cape Town. The starting words in the film are juxtaposed with waves and Table Mountain. The video continues to outline the history of the Island from being a refreshment station to a British prison via its status

¹¹² J. Maingard "Trends in South African Documentary film and Video: Questions of identity and Subjectivity," *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Volume 21, Number 4, December 1995. P. 658

as a medical institution to its military role back to its role as a prison in the 1960s. The documentary communicates the history of Robben Island as a consistent place of punishment save its military period between 1939-1945, which is seen as a time of “confident growth”.

In examining how the documentary represents the modern prison period, it is interesting to note that it is also affected by the discourses of the liberation struggle and nation building. There is an episode where Terror Lekota¹¹⁴ reads a letter to his daughter. In that letter he outlines the role played by chiefs in the fight against colonialism. He informs his daughter that these were men who would not compromise the freedom of their people. He concludes by saying that they follow in the footsteps of such leaders.¹¹⁵ The connections Lekota makes are attempts to link the revolutionary struggle he was part of to a long struggle of the African people against colonialism and later apartheid.

The narrative is then moved to the lime quarry. In narrating about the lime quarry the voice emphatically states that it was discussions that took place in the lime quarry that resulted in the new constitution. In his voice, “the new South African constitution was moulded by men chipping stones [t]here.” The lime quarry is represented as a space

¹¹³ J. Maingard, “Trends in South African Documentary film and Video: Questions of Identity and Subjectivity,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Volume 21, Number 4, December 1995. P. 658

¹¹⁴ Terror Lekota was one of the leaders of the Black Consciousness Movement in the 1970s. He was arrested and sentenced to Robben Island prison in 1975. When he was in prison converted and joined the African National Congress. In 1983, he was one of the people who launched the United Democratic Front in 1983. He became the Chairperson of the Senate in 1994 after the first democratic elections in South Africa. After the second democratic elections, he was appointed as the Minister of Defence, a position he still holds.

¹¹⁵ Note of interest: The documentary juxtaposed this letter first with a photograph of what I perceive to be Lekota’s daughter. But also when Lekota speaks about the uncompromising nature of chiefs in whose footsteps they follow, the video is juxtaposed with a picture of chiefs and what is suppose to be their voices pleading with the colonial photographer to plead for them to the government so that they could be released has they are no longer prepared to fight and thus willing to compromise. One of the

where the political direction in which South Africa took originates. In the same light the documentary continues to juxtapose prisoners wearing pyjamas in prison cells studying, and the invisible voice of the narrator stating that “I heard Nelson Mandela say, ‘we are going to turn Robben Island into our University.’ Prison cells became a place of learning. University degrees were received by men wearing chains here.” In the manner in which this is stated one would vow that Robben Island did indeed become a University. This narrative is characterised by what Ahmed Kathrada, a former Robben Island prisoner and a chairperson of the Robben Island Museum calls a “triumph of the human spirit over adversity.”¹¹⁶ Of course the documentary perpetuates the triumphant narrative that is characteristic of Robben Island Museum narratives.

The video documentary concludes by stating that “the warders were transformed by men wearing chains here. The restoration of the nation was shaped here. 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 representation of the prisoners as having played a role in transforming warders attitudes and bad behaviours is an attempt to show the determination they had for an equal just society and the absence of revenge that they possess. One is left with a feeling that if those who were at Robben Island prison in what was perceived as an enemy space could forgive and succeeded in changing the authorities behaviour what then could defeat South Africans in changing their attitudes towards each other. The warders are used as an example of people who were fed with propaganda by the state to hate terrorists. With that the narrative is concluded by Nkosi Sikelela iAfrika (God Bless Africa), and

chiefs is represented has asking pardon as he was not prepared to fight anymore. Thus contradicting what Lekota is saying.

the visitor is introduced to the history of Robben Island, what the museum is in relation to the national agenda and the type of narrative package presented by the museum.

The highly edited version of *Voices from Robben Island* into 12 minutes is meant to give a brief history of Robben Island in the shortest possible time. However, in doing so it continued to perpetuate the narrative of victory and reconciliation in an unproblematic way. At the end of the video we see animals that run freely without hindrance and a voice commenting “I too at last could be free to sustain life.” In this shorten version of *Voices from Robben Island* visitors are given a glimpse of what prisoners used to do without historicising their situation. In Schaderberg longer video this is at least put in context by prisoners themselves who participated in the documentary.

Robben Island Tour Narrative/s

In showing the significance of the history of Robben Island the Western Cape Tourism Board summarise the Island’s history in its guide as

Started out as a quarantine station, leper colony and place of exile for black political prisoners like Makana. In the 20th century it became a high security prison, a Cape equivalent of Alcatraz, until it gained dubious fame for housing Nelson Mandela and many other leading South Africa resistance leaders. The guides are Ex-Robben Island inmates.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ This quotation is found in all Robben Island Museum brochures, folders and booklets.

¹¹⁷ *The Official Travel Guide of the Western Cape Tourism Board, 2000/2001*

In marketing Robben Island Museum to the international tourist, the Western Cape Tourism Board in this guide represents the history of South Africa as centred on Robben Island and Nelson Mandela. This is placed alongside Table Mountain, Cape Point and the Cape Winelands as a key tourist destination. The Mandela name is used as synonymous to reconciliation. “For many South Africans and visitors, the most significant part of recent South African history centres on Robben Island, the release of Nelson Mandela and a peaceful transition to a new South African democracy,”¹¹⁸ declares the Western Cape Tourism Board.

In the two statements by the Western Cape Tourism Board, it is interesting to note that the Robben Island Museum is represented as a place of repression, suppression and oppression. However, in the language used to represent this past, a separation in the choice of words is made. Mandela is credited for making Robben Island famous because he was “*housed*” there. Here we need to note that according to the Western Cape Tourism Board Mandela was housed not jailed or imprisoned while others, like the present tour guides were jailed in this prison because of the use of the word inmate which is synonymous with imprisonment. Secondly, the guide represents the Robben Island Museum as that of Nelson Mandela and the new nation building project (‘peaceful transition to the new South African democracy’). By implication according to the Western Cape Tourism Board, Nelson Mandela, who was housed at Robben Island and not jailed, has delivered the new South African democracy. It seems to me the brochure is reluctant to represent Mandela as a former prisoner and therefore seeks alternative words to represents his presence at Robben Island. Perhaps it is difficult for some to represents a person of Mandela’s stature as a former inmate.

¹¹⁸ *The Official Guide of the Western Cape Tourism Board, 2000/2001*

In its own brochure the Robben Island Museum represents itself as, “one of the most world’s potent symbols of freedom, sometimes described as ‘humanities sacred shrine’.” The brochure continues to quote Ahmed Kathrada’s statement when he declared that, “while we will not forget the brutality of apartheid, we will not want Robben Island to be a monument to our hardship and suffering. We would like Robben Island to be a monument...reflecting the triumph of the human spirit against the forces of evil.”¹¹⁹ According to the information in the brochure the museum positions itself as a museum of the liberation struggle and resistance to apartheid. It is that positioning that situates the museum within the nation’s vision of a new society. It is therefore not surprising when the chairperson of the council of Robben Island Museum who is also a former inmate of Robben Island, Ahmed Kathrada, envisages the museum as an embodiment of the state project of nation building and reconciliation.

The Robben Island narrative/s are not only reflected in adverts and speeches made by its representatives, the tour guides on Robben Island Museum also shape the narratives. The tour narrative/s are structured into two ways. There is a “village” narrative presented by the general tour guides who are employees of the museum and certified by the South African Tourism Board (SATOUR). The tour takes tourist around the island, starting at the prison to the village and the quarries and ends at the security maximum prison. This narrative takes into account the significance of certain sites within the museum. The village tour better known as the bus tour takes tourists to the Sobukwe house past the leper graveyard and into the lime quarry. From the

¹¹⁹ Visitors information, Robben Island Museum brochure 2000

lime quarry visitors are taken to the WWII sites via the village (the residential area)¹²⁰, lighthouse and past several shipwrecks. In all spaces I have mentioned their historical importance is narrated to the visitors. Some of the tour guides do take tourist to the stone quarry depending on the time available. My interest here is in two sites, the Sobukwe house and the lime quarry.

In the Sobukwe house¹²¹ I have observed that the way the space is put in context depends on the guide concerned. The Sobukwe house is the structure where Robert Sobukwe was imprisoned when he was at Robben Island prison. Sobukwe completed his prison term at Pretoria Central prison in 1963. When he completed his prison term, the South African parliament passed a special clause known as the Sobukwe clause that gave the Minister of Prisons extended powers to keep any person even if they have completed their sentence if the minister deemed fit. Because Sobukwe was no longer a convicted prisoner, he was kept in isolation in this space. He was allowed to wear his civilian clothes and his family could visit him in this house.

There are some guides who do not contextualise the space at all except to mention that “this is the Sobukwe house who, was a leader of the Pan Africanist Congress.”

There are also guides who will spend some time here informing the visitors about the role Sobukwe played in the national democratic struggle. These guides also inform

¹²⁰ The Robben Island Museum Research Unit is busy with a site register which it is hoped will identify the historic significance of the houses that are in the village. The village dates back as far back as the 17th century. But most of the houses that exist now have been built during the WW II period. Once the research on the site register is completed, a comprehensive data will be available on the dates when the structures were constructed and for what purposes.

¹²¹ Today in front of the Sobukwe house there are dog kennels. Those kennels were not there when Sobukwe was a prisoner at Robben Island. We have not yet uncovered when were the kennels built but it seems they were built after Robert Sobukwe was released from prison and exiled to Galeshewe Village a township in Kimberly in 1967. According to one of the guides Danile Cetywayo, the dog Kennels were built in 1976 in the same year as the student uprising in Soweto against the use of Afrikaans as the medium of instructions. This information is also supported by a former prison warder Mr. Moolman who was also a warder that guarded Robbert Sobukwe during his stay at Robben Island prison.

the visitors why Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe was kept separate from other political prisoners who were incarcerated at Robben Island prison. A popular story that is told about Sobukwe is that he was the only person the apartheid regime regarded as a political prisoner. This was the reason why he was kept in isolation from other inmates. The soil story, is also one popular narrative that is told by guides about Sobukwe in this space. One would hear some guides proudly informing the tourist that, "Sobukwe would pick up soil when prisoners were passing his house and slowly letting it slip down between his fingers. This is how he encouraged his followers to continue fighting for the land." In this space visitors are not allowed to get off the bus to view the house because there is no exhibition that is developed as yet. There has been criticism from inside the museums and outside about the state of the Sobukwe house. Those who level this criticism have felt that the history of Robert Sobukwe and the PAC is marginalised in the museum in favour of the history of the ANC and Nelson Mandela. People who expressed this opinion tend to equate Sobukwe's stature with that of Mandela. Recently the museum has made some efforts to reconstruct the house, however this is at the preliminary stage.

After the Sobukwe house the tourists are then taken to the lime quarry. The lime quarry is the space where prisoners who were in the isolation section worked. Most of the prisoners who were in the isolation block were in leadership positions before they were arrested. For example Walter Sisulu, one of the Rivonia trialists, was the General Secretary of the banned African National Congress when he was captured at Lieliesleaf farm in Rivonia just outside Johannesburg. It would seem that the authorities also regarded the prisoners in this section as leaders. All prisoners they regarded as a threat or who challenged their authority was transferred to the isolation

block. The narrative in the lime quarry seems to be influenced by this background. In the Robben Island Museum tour narratives the lime quarry is presented to the tourist as a place where the leaders worked. Names of people such as Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Neville Alexander are mentioned.

One of the stories told in this space, is the reason why Nelson Mandela did not shed tears when he was released in February 1990 from Victor Verster prison. One often hear tour guides informing the visitors that Nelson Mandela and others worked here for most of the 18 years that he was a prisoner at Robben Island before he was transferred to Pollsmoor prison. They continue to inform the visitor that the working conditions were so bad especially in summer because of the glare that it affected their eyes. "That is why the former Presidents eyes had to be operated," guides would tell the visitors. Some would further state that it was in the lime quarry that Nelson Mandela also provided leadership to those who were in the stone quarry. In this space the manner in which its context is presented, leaves one with an impression that its significance lies with Mandela having worked there, the way he led the struggle from this space and the relationship he developed with the prison authorities.

The lime quarry is presented to the tourist in glowing terms. It is spoken of as a space where people were not only politicised but also obtained academic qualifications. The hole that exists in the lime quarry, which, the authorities used as a toilet and a kitchen is referred to as a classroom by the tour guides. They state that that is where prisoners taught each other how to read and write. It is also the space where people like Eddie Daniels, Ahmed Kathrada and Dikgang Moseneke, were assisted by other prisoners in their studies for their degrees. Some of the guides will further state that even the

warders were helped and encouraged by prisoners to continue with their education. This representation of the lime quarry is in line with the Robben Island Museum dominant narrative of triumph.¹²²

When visitors have completed the village tour narrative, so called because people are taken around the village and to distinguish it from the prison tour, they are driven to the Maximum-security prison. The narrative starts at the door of the maximum-security prison where a guide is a former political prisoner. The stories told by the guides in prison are personal testimonies and they are recalled from memory as no script exists of how they should tell their stories. In the absence of a written script, there are efforts made for the guides to share information with each other. Some of the stories they tell are accounts they have heard told by others while they were in prison or after they were released. In addition the former political prisoners who are now guides also share information with each other. Some of the information they get through reading other former political prisoners auto/biographies.

Like all oral accounts, the guides also depend on the stories of others to fill the gaps in their memories especially of the spaces and periods that they were not in prison. Standing below the censor office, the tour guide informs the visitor how their lives were affected by the censor's office. The censor office was responsible for censoring prisoner letters from the outside and to the inside. In this office only white Afrikaner prison warders worked who were at least fluent in one African language (other than Afrikaans). The interaction with this space by former prisoners is that of pain and

¹²² For further reading and understanding of the implication of Robben Island Museum narratives as a World Heritage site see H. Deacon, *Memory and History at Robben Island*, paper presented at Remembering, Forgetting, Forgiving: Memory and the search for Reconciliation and Justice International Conference, Cape Town, South Africa, August 09-11, 2000

deliberate isolation from their families and communities. As Patrick Matanjana says, “it was because of the censors office that many marriages broke. The security forces would spread lies to your wife and visa. versa to cause confusion. The inmate was in no position to verify the information given to him. Some of the wives were not political and could not properly analyse the situation, which made things easy for the special branch.”¹²³

The tourists are then requested to move to the isolation section courtyard, sometimes via the hospital and the hospital courtyard. In the courtyard there are two photographs that occupy the space. The first photograph is that of Nelson Mandela speaking to Walter Sisulu. The second photograph is that of prisoners sitting in two rows, the first row is a group of prisoners breaking stones and the second row is a group of prisoners mending clothes. The two photographs were taken when there was a group of foreign journalist who visited the prison. Some political prisoners believe that the authorities allowed the journalist to take the photograph for propaganda reasons since, according to prison legislation, prisoners were not allowed to be photographed.

In the courtyard the tour guide continues to inform the tourists about the conditions in which they found themselves in prison. In telling a personal account the guide also relates other stories of what happened when he was still in jail and beyond that period. Their personal accounts are enriched by the accounts of others. However, here again the tour guides usually put emphasis on the role played by Nelson Mandela in the lives of other political prisoners. Mandela and Sisulu are singled out for providing that leadership and encouragement to other prisoners, with Sisulu taking more fatherly like

¹²³ Patrick Matanjana, Verbatim, June 2000

responsibilities. Added to that it is in the courtyard that visitors are informed about the Mandela autobiography, which was referred to in chapter 2.

Most tour guides represent the role of Nelson Mandela as a unifier. Lionel Davies a former member of the Yu Chi Chan Club, an offshoot of the Unity Movement likes to inform visitors that while there was divisions ideologically, people such as Mandela and Sisulu played a significant role in uniting prisoners. He quickly reminds the visitors that in jail all prisoners faced a common enemy and that enemy was the authorities and therefore, one quickly learned to stand together with others irrespective of political affiliation. After their presentation, the guides would ask the tourists to go inside the isolation section and view the prison. They would be informed of cell number 5 as the cell that belonged to Nelson Mandela without being asked by the tourists. They would further encourage the tourists to take photographs of the cell.¹²⁴ The manner in which Mandela is represented at Robben Island Museum is not unique to the museum. Shortly after his release in February 1990 from Victor Verster prison, the media represented Mandela as a nation builder and reconciler. The media also represented Mandela as the one who was responsible for the democratic breakthrough in South African politics. In doing so, the media attempted to separate the ideas in which Mandela stood for from those of the organisation he was a member of, the African National Congress. This thinking is clearly evident in an article in the *Irish Times*, while they recognised Mandela's insistence that he is part of the

¹²⁴ In their narratives I have noticed that some tour guides like Siphiso “Speech” Sobuwa are consciously making it an effort to be inclusive of a broader prison population in their narratives about the isolation section. When I later asked him why he does not emphasised the role played by Mandela like most tour guides, he informed me that Mandela played an equal role in the life of prisoners like all other leaders. For him, it was just fair to history that he mentions the role played by every person on an equal footing. He further stated that it was immoral to raise the name of an individual above all others when they led as a collective did. It is in that context that he presents the story of the leadership. Siphiso Sobuwa was captured in Angola in 1977 and was sent to Pretoria where he stood his trial. He was sentenced to Robben Island in the same year.

collective, they also insisted that he represents the aspirations of the people of South Africa as a person. The *Irish Times* wrote: “For all his insistence that he is part of a collective, [however] it is Mandela himself who embodies the aspirations of the black majority.”¹²⁵

In examining the Robben Island Museum tour narratives one will observe that the narratives are consistent with other dominant Robben Island Museum narratives. They border on the narrative of victory, nation building and reconciliation. This is evident in how tour guides narrate stories about education and highlighting some people who graduated at Robben Island with degrees. In this process Nelson Mandela is seen as being in the centre of nation building and reconciliation and thus continuing the unifying role that it is believed he played at Robben Island prison.

¹²⁵ *Irish Times*, May 7, 1994

Chapter 4

The Cell Stories Exhibition in A-Block

In the summer of 1999 (November) the Robben Island Museum opened a new exhibition known as Cell Stories as part of the prison experience. The Deputy Minister of the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology and the Chairperson of the Robben Island Museum Council officially opened this exhibition. The exhibition was aimed at expanding the voices of former political prisoners beyond those who are guides. It also sought to bring the voices of those whose stories and experiences might not be heard because they do not have the audience to tell their stories. Above all this was a response to visitors' needs to have an exhibition in the prison complex. Often visitors would ask 'where is the museum'? equating a museum with a set of exhibitions.

The Cell stories exhibition is similar to the Frankfort Junction exhibition in New Zealand¹²⁶ that was constructed in 1996, because both exhibitions use oral narratives as a tool of communication. The Frankfort exhibition, however, communicates its message through oral narratives only rather than visual forms. The Frankfort project was a result of an oral history project by graduate students at the University of Waikato. When this group of students completed their research on the history of Railway workers, they desired to plough back their knowledge into the community.

¹²⁶ This project was based on oral history project that was done by graduate students in 1996 at the University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand. For reference, please read, A Green, The exhibition that speaks for itself: Oral history and Museums in R. Perks et al Oral History Reader, Routledge, London 1998

The design of the exhibition that was solely based on oral interviews was the result of that research.

The Cell Stories exhibition is "innovative in the ways in which prison cells have been turned into multimedia memory spaces which connects personal media mementoes to prisoners' oral histories."¹²⁷ The Cell Stories exhibition that is located in A-section¹²⁸ in the Robben Island prison, consists of forty exhibition cells, which, contain fragments of ex-prisoner interviews, and objects, which they have made, used or acquired. Many of the interviews described in chapter two of this work form the basis of this exhibition. Visitors interact with the space in a self-guided tour of this section in the maximum-security prison.

The exhibition also uses the traditional method of exhibiting material objects accompanied by an explanatory text as well as more modern visitor-control audio clips. Each cell has a photograph of a former inmate and a text. The A-section cells have an old prison intercom, which is used to provide a voice-over from an ex-prisoner interview. The visitor can listen to a clip of a voice of a former prisoner by pressing a button on the intercom. The multimedia presentation provides the visitor with many choices: read the text, see the objects, and/or listen to the audio clips. The use of oral narratives and material objects in the exhibition gives it the illusion of authenticity. This feeling is hastened by the use of the prisoners' voice. This also creates a feeling as if the person is listening to the original voices that were recorded during the prison period and are just played over the intercom to give the visitor a taste of how life used to be inside the prison. This is despite the fact that the cells have

¹²⁷ *Mail and Guardian*, November 26 to December 2, 1999

¹²⁸ A-section is made of single cells. During the prison period this section was used to punish those who committed certain offences as described by the authorities.

undergone some changes since the political prisoners were incarcerated there, especially with the walls being painted.

The name Cell stories seems to suggest that the stories are the stories that took place in the cells. However, the narrative told in the exhibition is that of the prison experience as a whole through the lens of the designers. In situating the Cell Stories exhibition in A-section, issues of the use of the section in the past were perhaps not taken into serious consideration. The authorities used A-section as a punishment section and later it was also used as an observation section. However, today the section does not reflect its notoriety, a place where people were denied their human rights and human dignity. Secondly, if we take into consideration what memories people hold of the section, it then becomes questionable whether the space used was an ideal place to contextualise the prison experience in that particular way. Siphiso Sobhuwa tells a story of how prisoners would be punished and made to sleep in a straight jacket. A straight jacket is a system where prisoners would be made to sleep on something similar to a wooden ladder covered with a canvas sleeping bag, handcuffed and leg ironed. After that they would be fastened with belts to the jacket. During meal times, a warder would come and say, "gevanginis hier is jou kos as jy dit kan eet, eet maar, as jy kan nie eet nie loos dit maar."¹²⁹ The authorities said this knowing very well that any prisoner in a straight jacket was not in a position to eat no matter how hungry they were. In the construction of the Cell Stories exhibition it is such contexts that are lacking, but perhaps such stories are not in line with the dominant discourse of reconciliation that dominates the narratives of Robben Island Museum, where former prisoners and warders work with each other.

¹²⁹ Prisoner here is your food, if you can eat, you may eat but if you cannot eat do not eat. Thanks to Siphiso Sobhuwa for this explanation.

In analysing the exhibition Rassool concluded that,

Cell Stories signifies the implicit acknowledgement of the need for debate and contestation over the historical meaning of political imprisonment for South Africa's public history."¹³⁰

There is no doubt that the way in which oral narrative has been used in the Cell Stories exhibition is clearly a breakthrough in South African museums because of its representation of formerly marginalised stories. However, the story line of the Cell Stories exhibition reinforces rather than challenges the dominant narrative of triumph and reconciliation narrative and perhaps has not yet begun to seriously question let alone challenge the meaning of political imprisonment in South Africa.

The use of oral narratives in the exhibition gives the impression that the exhibition is authentic and unmediated. The authenticity of the voice that speaks through the intercom enhances this illusion. What, is usually forgotten are the processes that takes place before the exhibition is mounted. In the construction of an exhibition there are processes of selection. When selection takes place there are issues that are included, excluded or silenced because they do not fit the narrative. The cell stories exhibition is no different from this. As has been seen in chapter one the first selection took place during the interview process because of the research methodology that was used and the type of questions that were asked. The result of this was that the answers that were solicited through this process shaped the results of the exhibition. For example informants would be asked, what is the most important lesson they have learnt from prison? Answers to this question would range from tolerance of others opinions and how that tolerance was created through sport and recreation. Further as discussed in chapter one of this work, prisoners also learnt how to deal with the authorities and

¹³⁰ C. Rassool, *Mail and Guardian*, November 26 to December 2, 1999

stand together. The Cell Stories exhibition in their selection selected those parts that tended to deal with creativity, education and transformation in prison. For example, the story of Henry Fazzie illustrates this. In Fazzie's interview the narrative about how prisoners changed the attitude of prison warders is juxtaposed with his trade diploma that he received from prison. Within that narrative Fazzie talk about how South Africans need to heal the wounds of the past.

This process however was also influenced not only by the questions asked but also by what informants chose to remember. As discussed elsewhere, the manner in which people remember cannot be divorced from the broader political context in which the country finds itself. This is also evident in some people's interviews, for example, some of them in commenting about their present status in society would go to pains to explaining that things cannot be changed over night we all need to be patient. According to these types of remarks South Africa is till in a transitional period and there is a need for everybody to co-operate with the government in the consolidation of democracy.

In the Cell Stories exhibition the "social history of the object"¹³¹ became important. The importance of objects in this exhibition lies in the fact that visitors want to see objects in the museum. On the other hand the use of objects served to illustrate the type of skills and activities that took place in the prison. In that way, the meaning that gets attached to the objects changes relevance. Some might argue that the object interpretation that was narrated by the owner is maintained in the interpretation. However, what that argument would fail to recognise is the fact that when any object

¹³¹ Ames M, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums*, UBC, Vancouver (1993) p.141

is used for a different purpose either than that it was initially used for by the previous owner its use and meaning changes radically. This is particularly so in museums where certain meanings get attached to objects when exhibited with the whole range of others to construct a particular narrative. Depending on how these objects termed artefacts in museums are exhibited, they have tremendous power to change and influence tourist perception of the social dynamics that took place in any community. To illustrate this, a key that was constructed by some prisoners in B-section and which was found with Seddick Issacs by the authorities is used in the Cell Stories to illustrate the skills that Jafta Masemula had. While it might be true that Jafta Masemula was a handy person, the purpose of the key now has changed its original meaning. According to popular stories about Jafta Masemula, he always wanted to escape from prison. Perhaps for him the key was the object that could facilitate his escape.

The Cell Stories exhibition broadens the Robben Island Museum narrative and includes the stories of political prisoners who were not kept in isolation where the main Robben Island tour narrative is told. But it still reinforces the narrative of triumph. In a corner cell at the extreme end of A-section is a display based on the material objects of Geneva Morake. Morake was sentenced in 1984 for acts of sabotage, belonging to an unlawful organisation and possession of illegal and terrorist firearms. He left South Africa for Lesotho in 1980 to join the African National Congress and its armed wing Umkhonto weSizwe. He is among those who received amnesty as a result of the Pretoria minute. The Pretoria minute was an agreement signed between the ANC and the National Party government in 1990 to allow exile to return to South Africa and the release of all political prisoners. In this cell a

photograph of Morake is displayed and on top of it is engraved Geneva Morake 1984-1990 indicating the years that he effectively served in prison. There is also a painting of his wife and a text that explains the reasons he drew it. In that text he explains how he managed to gain contact again with his wife just when he was learning fine art in prison. This exhibition space is meant to show us that while prisoners were jailed and the government had intended to isolate them, they did overcome isolation and found ways to make contact with the outside world. In Morake's case, he wished to make contact with the girlfriend he last saw before he even received military training. It was more than five years since they had had contact. However, he managed to find her and they resumed their relationship and today they are married. This is also meant to show that there is no obstacle that can prevent a person from achieving their objectives.

In another cell, there is a display that shows how education took place in the early days at Robben Island prison. Sindile Mngqibisa who was arrested in 1963 and was released in 1978 reconstructed a exercise book from cement paper as an illustration of how they used cement paper to make books because the authorities would not allow some of them study material.

In another cell, Neville Matlabakwe is depicted as a hard working student who was outstanding in African history. A reconstructed cabinet where prisoners used to store their belongings is used to display the certificate of merit in African history he received from the University of South Africa. Neville Matlabakwe is a product of the 1980 strikes at Galeshewe in Kimberley. A son of a policeman, together with other students he was sentenced in 1982 for his role in the 1980 unrest in Galeshewe. He was sent to serve his sentence at Robben Island. Although when he was sentenced he

did not belong to any political Party he joined the PAC at Robben Island. He was given amnesty in 1990.

Ntoyakhe Tshalimela in another display is portrayed to show the creativity of prisoners at Robben Island. Tshalimela served two sentences at Robben Island, one in 1965-1970 and the other one in 1978-1986. In “his” cell the belt that was given to Tshalimela by another prisoner is displayed in a cabinet. With it a text that explains how the belt was made out of fishing lines from the sea is mounted on the wall just next to the cabinet. This display is meant to show how prisoners overcame the limits forced upon them by imprisonment and is an illustration of refusal to succumb to imprisonment.

Many former Robben Island prisoners say different stories when asked whether they ever attempted to escape. In his book Eddie Daniels says he always planned to escape but most of his plans seemed to be impossible.¹³² In *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela narrates a story where he, Mac Maharaj and Wilton Mkwayi planned an escape but when they had to carry it out realised that it was actually a trap.¹³³ On the other hand some prisoners contest that at Robben Island the issue of escape was never entertained. Kwedi Mkalipi argued that the reason that they did not entertain thoughts of escape is because they were freedom fighters and they knew why they were in prison. However, it would seem there were those who planned escape perhaps without the knowledge of others. After all in another cell there is the reconstruction of the key that was confiscated by the authorities from Seddick Isaacs’ cell during a strip search. Inside the cell is mounted an explanation of how in the original key several prisoners

¹³² E. Daniels, *There and Back: Robben Island 1964-1979*, Mayibuye Books, Bellville (1998) p. 211

¹³³ N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Abacus (1994) p.

collaborated in its making. The readings of the names suggest that they came from different political organisations.

In Henry Fazzie's "cell" a trade diploma he received while on Robben Island is displayed. The designers from his interview chose a text next to it that borders on reconciliatory tones. The text reads,

When the authorities abolished quarry work they started teaching us trade. [In commenting about the authorities] All those youngsters co-operated once they started to understand. They were shocked when we started to play rugby. Rugby brought us closer and they started even to put a strand of trust in us.

In all these displays, the main message that they communicate is a positive one. The dominant narrative seeks to explain how Robben Island became a place of learning, a University where people acquired different skills. Cell Stories continues the legacy of triumph by visually and textually displaying people's achievements while they were imprisoned without really problematising the contradictions and the difficulties in which people achieved these. Like all Robben Island Museum narratives the exhibition is a celebration of success and the silencing of the memories of those who did not have the opportunity to succeed.

In examining the history of the museum, as a national project of the new South African government, could it tell a story that is challenging of the dominant narratives that is prevalent in the country? If it could to what extent could it escape the grand narrative that is so dominant in the country? South Africa is a country in transition, part of the project of the state and the new government is to build a new nation from the fragments of "nations" that existed. What is underlined by the project of nation

building is reconciliation. The project of reconciliation has dominated many peoples' lives in South Africa and Robben Island Museum as part of that broader community is also greatly affected. I think it is in that context that we must view the dominant Robben Island narratives. Perhaps in future as the country consolidates its new democracy a multidimensional narrative will be possible at Robben Island Museum also. This does not necessary mean we need not look at the silences within the museum narrative in a critical way.

The emphasis on positive aspects by former political prisoners is pervasive, but it is not solely due to the imposition of a narrative of triumph from above. Ex-prisoners themselves often talk about their pain in positive ways. It would seem to me that Rioufol's theory that the notion of "remoulding from above of the public representations of the South African past"¹³⁴ does not take into account how the ordinary membership of the liberation movement contributes to this discourse. To argue that the masses that participated in the South African liberation struggle are passive participants to the views expressed by the leadership in the person of Kathrada and Mandela is to liken them to puppets that do not have views and thus passively perpetuate what the leadership says. Contrary to this, most people interviewed in the Robben Island Museum Memories project¹³⁵ often talk about their pain in positive ways. Some of these former prisoners are people who still stay in the rural villages of former Transkei, Ciskei, Bophuthswana and Venda where newspapers are not easy accessible, where case one could have easily dismiss the possibility that their ideals are influenced by popular discourses. However, what

¹³⁴ V. Rioufol, *The Making of the new past for a 'new' South Africa: the commemoration of Robben Island M.A dissertation*, UCT (1999) P. 183

¹³⁵ The individuals interviewed come from all political persuasions that existed at Robben Island prison e.g. ANC, PAC, AZAPO, APDUSSA AND 1 MEMBER OF LIBERAL PARTY.

clearly comes out from their narratives is the pride they have unto themselves for making their contribution in the liberation struggle and their continued struggle when they were released from prison. It seems to me that they view the dawn of the post-apartheid South Africa, as a victory that they always said would come. In talking about the dawn of democracy some former political prisoners would be at pains to explaining that while they suffered in prison, they always knew that victory would be certain whether in their life time or in the next generations. It is thus not surprising to hear them speaking in glowing terms about their suffering and the need to reconcile. Reconciliation in some instances is not only talked of in abstract terms, but is seen as necessary for stability and development. It seems to me that part of the seemingly homogenous narrative is also influenced by the political mood in the country, a sense of accomplishment and perhaps an idea that political maturity has been achieved.

It seems to me it is also in this light that the Cell Stories exhibition has been constructed. The exhibition uses the grand narrative of triumph and reconciliation, which is dominant in the interviews to perpetuate the dominant Robben Island Museum narrative that is evident in the tours. By using visual objects like certificates, books, belts and other visual material the exhibition has enhanced the narrative of triumph over adversity so espoused by Ahmed Kathrada.

Conclusion

This work has looked at how the discourse of memory and memorialisation has been used in South Africa in the project of nation building. The work has argued that this has been perceived as necessary since South Africa has been divided into segments of nationalities based on tribal and ethnic origins. In the process of building settler nationalism, the National Party divided South Africa into two entities, one constituted as black subjects who mostly lived in rural homelands in dire poverty and the other constituted as white citizens who had material privileges. I have argued that in order to forge a new national identity the new South African regime used sport and culture as a tool to achieve that. Museums were called upon to transform and reflect the new society. The new government also established new memorial sites to commemorate the dawn of democracy. The Robben Island Museum, the work argues has been established to accomplish that goal.

When the new Robben Island Museum was opened it had a formidable task of becoming a showcase of the new South Africa democracy. When tourists were allowed to come to the Island they are told a story of reconciliation. At the new Robben Island Museum, the tourist could also see the practical achievements of the new South Africa as former political inmates worked alongside former prison guides and were part of the same team that had to transform the former prison to a successful museum.

In examining the dominant Robben Island Museum narratives I have noted that they advanced the narrative of reconciliation that was immediately espoused by the government of national unity post elections in 1994. I have particularly looked at three narratives i.e. the boat video during the passage to Robben Island, the narrative by former political prisoners in the maximum-security prison and lastly the Cell Stories exhibition that took two years to be completed. I have argued that each of these narratives borders on the reconciliatory notions characteristic of the Robben-Island Museum narratives.

In my attempts to understand how the Robben Island prison narratives have been used and how they have changed, I examined biographies and other publications of former Robben Island prisoners. In doing so I came to the conclusion that during the pre-liberation period in South Africa, Robben Island biographies mostly were aimed at popularise the national liberation struggle and to conscientise other South Africans about the ills of apartheid. In addition to that they were aimed at conscientising the international community about conditions in South African prisons. Some of them were directly a vehicle to propagate the role of the military formations in the national democratic struggle. However, the Robben Island post-liberation literature is concerned with the project of reconciliation and nation building. This I argue started with the production of *Long Walk to Freedom*, an autobiography of Nelson Rholihlahla Mandela. In that context I have also argued that while people like Mandela and Eddie Daniels write about the ills of apartheid and the role played by the prison authorities, they do so in a manner that educates the reader that the prison authorities were also victims of circumstances. They further attempt to show us that

when the prison authorities understood their objectives they became friendly and treated them like human beings.

I have further argued that when the Robben Island Museum started it was almost a given that it would follow this trend and indeed it did so. However, in examining the Robben Island tour narratives this work has not looked at how the dominant narratives are received by the public. Some serious study and analysis still needs to be made in that regard. Again in my attempts to understand imprisonment in South Africa, the work has not made any serious attempt to understand how were prison conditions in other South African prisons. A comparative study of prison conditions in South Africa and how it affected prisoners, especially political prisoners under the period under review must be made at some point. Needless for me to say, this study was not aimed at that, the aim of this project was to understand how political imprisonment and the struggle for liberation in South Africa is represented at the new Robben Island Museum.

The question that we need to ask ourselves is whether the Robben Island Museum can tell alternative Stories that do not at the present moment dominate former political prisoners narratives. To what extent can the museum tell a narrative that is dominant without compromising the painful history of the institution? I think, in the continuous reconstruction of the Robben Island history through exhibitions and other texts these questions and others need to be carefully interrogated. In addition to that in the representation of Robben Island Museum narratives as we continue to review our narratives we also need to ask at what point will the narratives of triumph and reconciliation not dominate the stories we tell. However, I suspect as we pass the

transitional period and the political field changes, Robben Island narratives will also take a different emphasis. When that happens the museum will be compelled to take into consideration new dominant narratives that will emerge. Perhaps the emphasis will then shift from the present dominant narratives of reconciliation to the narratives that begin to bring light and stimulate debates about South African imprisonment at large.

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