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Nelson Mandela and the politics of representation in Robben Island Museum, South Africa

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Abstract

In the post apartheid South Africa, Nelson Mandela emerges as the chief icon of political imprisonment in the narration of Robben Island Museum. The predominating conception of Mandela as the former prisoner emeritus of Robben Island continues to attract public discourse and as a matter of fact has become the narrative iconography of Robben Island in the eyes of international visitors. This article examines how and why such narratives persist. This is done by analyzing how the Jetty 1 exhibition has attempted to engage this dominant ideology.

The making of Nelson Mandela

1948 was a remarkable year in the history of African National Congress in South Africa. The African National Congress Youth League was formed in 1948 followed by the adoption of the Youth League Programme of Action against the white led apartheid government. Nelson Madela was elected the Secretary General of this Youth league. This position attracted wide publicity to Nelson Mandela especially with his new visibility and responsibility on the national level. The 1948 Youth League Programme culminated in Defiance Campaign against unjust laws in 1952. During the defiance Campaign, Mandela was appointed national volunteer in chief. As a chief volunteer, he was a spokesperson of the volunteer. This made him popular with the media as he dealt with them on a regular basis.

Mandela's popularity rose with his new position in the Defiance Campaign. His personality and decision to spearhead a group that was most vulnerable to incarceration became the subject of public discourse and widespread publicity. Already hundreds of volunteers in the Defiance Campaign headed by Raymond Mhlaba in Port Elizabeth were being incarcerated. Leaders of the campaign were banned and restricted in the provinces. Mandela was restricted to the province of Johannesburg with Walter Sisulu who was the then Secretary General of the African National Congress (ANC). In 1956, 156 people were charged for treason in South Africa. These people included many high profile political leaders of ANC including Chief Albert Luthuli who was the first African to win the Nobel Peace Prize (Bernstein, 1999), Walter Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, Robert Resha, Nelson Mandela himself, among others.

The trial of the above named lingered for four years after which they were acquitted for lack of substantial evidence against them. Following their acquittal Nelson Mandela went underground, escaped from South Africa into foreign countries, soliciting for support for an impending armed struggle against the apartheid state. During this period, Mandela became the most wanted man by the apartheid state. This period marked the beginning of his popularity with the media. The South African state dubbed him the "Black Pimpernel" (Solani, 2000, p. 43). On his return, Mandela was apprehended and sentenced to five years imprisonment for leaving the country without valid documents (Solani, 2000). After the pronouncement of his five-year jail term by the apartheid state in 1963, a group known as *Release Mandela Committee* was formed to agitate for his release. The group was led by

Ahmed Kathra who was eventually accused with Mandela in the Rivonia trial.

The Rivonia trial was an aftermath of the capture of the commanders of ANC armed group known *uMkhonto we Sizwe*. These members, captured at a farm known as Lielieslie farm, include Walter Sisulu, Ahmed Kathra, Govan Mbeki, Raymond Mhlaba, Rusty Bernstein and Goldberg. Mandela, who as at then was already serving a jail term in Robben Island was recalled to join the *uMkhonto we Sizwe* in the Rivonia trial as accused number one. This is because his diary was found at Rivonia during the raid of *uMkhonto we Sizwe*. Mandela's label as accused number one made world headlines. 'Accused number one' eventually became the ranking that would eventually launch him into a powerful and influential media industry.

All the accused were sentenced to life imprisonment in 1964 except for Rusty Bernstein who was discharged. It was after 1964 that what Solani (2000, p. 44) calls the "Mandela Legend" began to emerge. Mandela's speech at the Rivonia trial became widely publicized. Booklets were published based on the speech. Subsequently his speeches were collected in a volume titled *Struggle is my life*.

The construction of Nelson Mandela as an icon of political struggle was underway. This was heralded by the publication of the first biography of Mandela titled, *Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress* by Mary Benson. Benson's book was followed by Fatima Meer's book titled *Higher than Hope*. These books were timely interventions: *Higher than Hope*, in its efforts towards reshaping the thinking of the youths in the 1980s, became a classic example of how the print media made Mandela. By this time Mandela's popularity was not in doubt especially as constructed by the print capitalism as a leader who fought for South Africa's freedom behind bars. The United Democratic Front, which was formed in 1983 to oppose the introduction of the Tricameral Parliament under P.W. Bortha elected Mandela as one of its patrons. Furthermore, the ANC contributed in perpetuating the Mandela myth by organizing Mandela's birthdays in exile and thus popularized the continuous incarceration of Mandela in Robben Island. One wonders why the ANC saw Mandela's birthday as the most important among all other prisoners that were incarcerated alongside with him.

What was remarkable in the above media publicity is how Mandela's contemporaries were downplayed. In fact, little was known of other ANC high profile figures who were sentenced to life imprisonment with Mandela. Not only that, little was also known of others who underwent severe human conditions in the prison more than Mandela, including those who died in prison. In what Ciraj Rassool (2004, p. 34) describes as "the cultural production of Mandela's life through medium of biography" and "the cultural production of Messianic Mandela" (1) print capitalism emerges to entrench Mandela as a symbol of hero in the annals of South African political history. I draw a parallel with Benedict Anderson's rise of nationalism through print capitalism (Urban and Lee, 2001, p.21), in the same way to show that print capitalism emerges during this period to change the conditions of textual production, dissemination, consumption, and conditioned the taste of readers towards the realization of the Mandela legend. For example a retinue of the following print items suggest my line of argument: his autobiography, *Long Walk To Freedom, Nelson Mandela-His Life in the struggle*, a photographic exhibitions by the Mayibuye Center, *Nelson Mandela* by Mary Benson, *Nelson Mandela: His Speeches and Writings, 1944-1990*, *Nelson Mandela: The symbol of a Nation*, a CD-ROM, *Madiba: The Authorized Biography* by Anthony Sampson, *Madiba: The Rainbow Man* by Lionel Maxim, *Nelson Mandela: a Life in Cartoons*, a cartoon collection, *Nelson Mandela: Man of Destiny. A Pictorial Biography*, by Peter Mugubane, films and numerous other print and visual productions were testimonies to the Mandela myth. Solani's observes the near universalist perpetuation of the Mandela myths by the agencies of the media, authors, the U.D.F. and the ANC through various strategies. The conundrum of such myths derives from the public's stark oblivion of the human elements in Mandela of which Solani's essay ex-trays through his family weaknesses.

Robben Island Museum and the monumentalization of Mandela

The Robben Island Museum is popularly known as a place where Mandela was incarcerated for 18 years by the apartheid government in South Africa. This incarceration narrative of Mandela has overshadowed every other history in Robben Island Museum and has indeed become the most important weapon of marketing for the Museum at the international scene.

Solani (2000, p.50) remarks that "tourists who came to the island were better informed about Mandela than about other prisoners who spent the same time as Mandela on Robben Island." Thus, the Mandela narrative was so

domineering that Mandela became synonymous with Robben Island and tourists who came to Robben Island were curious to see the Mandela cell.

I was also affected by this myth such that when I visited Robben Island in 2008, I became curious to visit the Mandela cell – in fulfillment of a long anticipated dream. The tour guide who took us round the Island heightened the mythic curiosity around Mandela by putting the visit to Mandela cell as the last point of call for us and other tourists. By doing this, hundreds of tourists hoping to see the Mandela cell on arrival would have something to sustain their curiosity from the beginning of the tour to the end. Fran Buntman (2000, p.19) argues that “every dignitary who tours Robben Island must be photographed in Mandela’s cell, inevitably to marvel – as indeed we should – at his lack of bitterness”. We had a bus tour round the Island. The important sites where the tour guide narrated his stories include the leper gravesite, the Church of the Good Shepherd, the John Craig Hall, the Lime quarry site, among many other sites. We saw the Robert Sobukwe House. Robert Sobukwe was a leader of the Pan Africanists Congress (PAC) from 1958 till the time PAC was banned. Sobukwe was arrested, tried and sentenced to jail in 1960. On completion of his jail term he was detained in Robben Island Prison from 1963 to 1968 under special detention clause known as the Sobukwe clause. Another important site we visited was the Stone Quarries site where majority of the political prisoners engaged in hard work. Solani argues that “while Mandela never worked in this quarry tour guides insist in calling it ‘the Mandela quarry’ under the pretext that he gave advice to those who worked in it” (Ibid, p.51). Solani’s statement sounds more matter-of-factly than the story of the Lime quarry. As a witness, on getting to the lime quarry during my tour of Robben Island, I heard our tour guide shout at the top of his voice, “this is the quarry where our former president Mandela and others used to work.... He used to guide struggles in the stone quarry from this place, hence the stone quarry was called the Madiba quarry.” He continues: “as you are looking at the space you can see the glimmer of the lime, it had an effect on prisoners’ eyes and that is why our president’s eyes had to be operated on”. From this narrative it is obvious that there is an emphasis on Mandela and not on any other figure. For example, why is it that the political prisoner such as Patrick Matanjana who spent 20 years in Robben Island prison while Mandela spent only 18 years never got such publicity?

In the isolation section court yard of Robben Island or what is known as B-section, in addition to the Mandela cell highlight, tourists are informed about Mandela's activities while in Robben Island prison. For example, Mandela's photograph features most prominently in strategic locations in the court yard. This is done to the diminishment of other prisoners' photographs even though some of these prisoners might have spent more years in the Island than Mandela did.

My visit to Jetty 1 Exhibition and the downplaying of the Mandela legend

Mandela was presented as a saint in the Robben Island Museum. 'Mandelaisation' of Robben Island Museum detracts from an objective historiography and suggests a deliberate or unconscious discredit to the numerous past prisoners who may have undergone worse ordeals than Mandela. Harriet Deacon (2000) has referred to ex-prisoners of Robben Island as being doubly silenced first by their imprisonment and secondly by the system of apartheid. Fran Buntman (1999) argues that "there are many examples in which political prisoner experience is reduced to an emphasis on one man, rather than the thousands of men (and women) who were incarcerated" (Ibid, p.19). He further argues that this "accentuation is a slight on the history of collective resistance and inter- and intra-organizational cooperation that emerged on Robben Island" (Ibid, p.19). I can argue that the exclusionary narrative of Robben Island after independence in 1994 amounts to multiple silence of this group whose existence has been literally cast to insignificance and whose voices have been muffled by the Mandela image. This, Deacon (2000) further argues, tends to conceal the trauma of ex-political prisoners whose lives were devastated by the horrors of the prison and who remain silenced by the wild and dominant proclamation of Robben Island as site of healing, reconciliation and success. Again the emphasis placed on the lime quarry because Mandela worked there as against the stone quarry which has been described as the site of "the harshest human right abuses by warders" (Deacon, 2000, p.7) breeds more questions than answers. Perhaps these virtues are propagated through the singular image of Mandela and which ironically misrepresent the excluded majority. While Mandela's achievements are remarkable, the dominant focus on them diminishes the history of thousands who also served sentences in Robben Island. This obviously does a great disservice to their families and relatives.

My visit to Jetty I exhibition at the Nelson Mandela Gateway, Cape Town in 2008, however, opened vistas for a reappraisal of the Mandela legend especially in relation to the history of Robben Island Museum.

Although it is not the focus of this study to highlight the curatorial lapses of this exhibition, it will be, nevertheless, apt to pinpoint a very obvious lack of visibility which is in fact, more important than all other curatorial framework put together. Despite that, the exhibition went a long way to show that Robben Island Museum is a site with a multi-layered history of struggle and incarceration beyond the image of Mandela. One wonders the reason for the obliteration of such salient component of the Island's history from public view. Perhaps in recognition of the need to reconstruct the museum's idea, the Jetty I exhibition rejects those practices which are found discriminatory and sought to fill the gaps. The exhibition is seen as an effort to change the "post apartheid individualization of political imprisonment in the figure of President Nelson Mandela" (Buntman, 1999, p.18).

From the exhibition, I was able to understand that the history of Robben Island dates back to 1600 when the Dutch used it as a place of banishment for recalcitrant Xhosa chiefs. It was also used as a convict station and place of banishment by the British when they ousted the Dutch from the Cape in 1809. By 1891 the *Cape Leprosy Repression Act* was enacted. This act said that all people suffering from leprosy must be isolated and segregated from society. Because leprosy was seen mainly as a 'black disease' most blacks suffering from leprosy were isolated in Robben Island leprosarium such that by 1892 the leprosarium was overcrowded. Robben Island also served as a place of imprisonment for Prisoners of War during World War II. On March 24 1961, the South African Navy handed control of Robben Island to the Prison Services. In March 1960 the apartheid state responded violently to protests against 'pass laws' in various provinces. This was the period when thousands of people were massacred in Sharpeville (south of Johannesburg), Langa (in Cape Town), and Pondoland (in the Eastern Cape.) The Eastern Cape revolt formed part of a concatenation of uprisings in response to the imposition of Bantu Authorities and control over land. The apartheid state met the uprisings with brute force and a number of people were arrested and imprisoned in Robben Island. These people were the first political prisoners of Robben Island.

I learnt, from my visit to Jetty I exhibition that Dimitri Tsafendas was the only 'white' prisoner held on Robben Island after he assassinated Verwoerd,

Prime Minister of South Africa and architect of apartheid. Tsafendas was classified as 'white' even though he had a 'black' mother.

Apart from the Khoikhoi, Xhosa, Korana and many other indigenous leaders who were banished there at different times, political prisoners at different epochs in South Africa were banished in Robben Island. For example, the displayed pictures of numerous prisoners like Govan Mbeki (1964-1987), Robert Sobukwe (1963-1969), Irene Mahlongo, Heleo Shityuwete (1968-1984), among others, and the dates of their imprisonment also emphasized their long term incarceration just like Mandela. The display of other pictures like those with leprosy also shows that the narrative of the island did not start and end with Mandela. The marriage of Irene Mahlongo and political prisoner Wilton Mkwayi in the Island extends the narrative further beyond official political narration to expose private happenings. As this exhibition tries to capture the complex history of Robben Island, Harriet Deacon suggested that if the Dutch and English slavery escapades were to be included in the Robben Island narrative, the majority of the visitors who are from Europe, America and Japan, and not from South Africa would feel bad about their ancestors' complicity in the acts thereby jeopardizing the tourist potentials of the Island.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that first, Nelson Mandela was a product of print capitalism in pre and post-apartheid South Africa, second, that his figure was made more heroic by Robben Island Museum through its narrative techniques and thirdly, that recent Jetty I exhibition attempted to explore the deeper historical narratives of Robben Island beyond the exclusive image of Mandela. In conclusion Solani notes that one of the efforts made to "downplay the Mandela myth at Robben Island" over the past years came with Cell Stories exhibition in 1999. The exhibition which is about oral interviews gathered from ex-Robben Island political prisoners established, in words of Ciraj Rassool (2004, p.12) "a need for debate and contestation over the historical meaning of political imprisonment for South Africa's public history" in a way that may also generate discourse around critical heritage in South Africa. This is expedient even as Buntman urges us to "be more attentive to hidden histories, and... reveal political prisoner secrets as conscious acts of claiming the politics they involve" (Ibid, p. 29).

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