

## **Liberation Struggle Narratives in South Africa: Museums, Memorials and Monuments**

**Noel Lungile Zwelidumile Solani**  
Ditsong Museums of South Africa  
Cultural History Museum  
149 Visagie Street, Pretoria, 0001  
South Africa

### **Abstract**

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*The 1990s seems to have experienced historical raptures in the world. These raptures produced their unique dynamics and memories. The first historical rapture was the fall of the Berlin wall in 1990 signalling the end of the cold war. In South Africa, the legalisation of liberation movements signalled the end of apartheid. The abolishing of the apartheid system brought with it the transformation of society in all its facets. This transformation also affected the field of memory work such as museums, memorials and monuments. This change also was extended to the renaming of towns and cities or looked at differently restoring the indigenous names of those towns, cities, rivers, airports and other memory sites. This change, it could be argued was influenced by the dictum that, culture is a weapon with great influence and impact in the lives of citizens. This essay is an examination of the auto/biography of the liberation struggle, its memory as well as the representation of that memory through the construction of new memorials, statues and museums.*

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**Keywords:** Autobiography, Liberation Struggle, Memory, Museums, Memorials, Monuments, History, Legacy, Culture, Representation

A national culture is not folklore nor an abstract populism that believes it can discover the people's true nature. It is not made out of the inert dregs of gratuitous actions, that is to say, actions which are less and less attached to the ever present reality of the people (Frantz Fanon, 1963).

### **Introduction**

It is now a well recited fact that the struggle for liberation in South Africa was fought on many fronts, in what the ANC called four pillars of struggle, i.e. mass mobilisation, armed struggle, international mobilisation and sanctions. Each pillar of struggle was aimed at contributing to the defeat of the apartheid system. In this struggle, culture as a human endeavour played a critically important role in the mobilisation of the masses. This culture was rooted in the struggles of the people, and indeed as Fanon says, the people produced this culture to serve them in the struggle for national democracy. In his address to the ANC National Consultative Conference at Kwabe, Zambia in 1985, Oliver Tambo analysed the importance of culture in the struggle for liberation and how it could contribute in the mobilisation of the masses when he said that culture should be used as a weapon of struggle. On the other hand, the apartheid regime under the National Party also had realised that sport and culture were important terrains in which to mobilise both citizens and subjects in defence of apartheid. It is from the premise of the contestation over culture and its use and usefulness in the mobilisation for the total liberation of the oppressed that I want to trace its genealogy in what I call the auto/biography of the liberation struggle. It should also be mentioned that this genealogy could not be told in the absence of the understanding of the national question.

In other words, the autobiography of the liberation struggle is based on the national question. To understand the national question is to understand the memory of the liberation struggle and how this has impacted in the post-apartheid South Africa in how we memorialize; the choices that are made in creating new monuments, museums and other memory sites. This essay does not seek to argue for any form or against any method of memorialisation. It however seeks to understand how in the post-apartheid South Africa the state chooses to memorialise and the priorities that are made in the memorialisation of South African history, which is a history of conflict caused by colonialism, segregation and apartheid.

### **Liberation struggle narratives**

In order to understand how the narratives of the liberation struggle are framed, the starting point of this should be the understanding of the “nation” and the debates on the “native question” in South Africa. The debate on the “native question” focused on the place of blacks in this country (Peter Nielsen, 1992). This concern about the place of blacks in South Africa continued to be an issue beyond the colonial period up until the first democratic elections in 1994. During the long period of struggle, the liberation movements and especially the African National Congress (ANC) framed the “native question” as the “national question (Martin J Murray, 1995). In the first instance, the “native question” is the results of the defeat of Africans in the battlefield by the colonial powers that resulted in the dispossession of their land. The discovery of diamonds in Kimberly and gold in the Witwatersrand intensified this divide. This then became the preoccupation of successive white parliamentary politicians in South Africa to attempt to structure the relationship between blacks and whites, especially the Africans (Harold Wolpe, 1995, Nigel Worden, 1994). This was done through a string of laws that both separated normal relations between blacks and whites, as well as ensuring that there was a huge gap between the salaries of white workers and black workers in the mining industry for example, and through this, ensuring the quality of living standards for whites was superior to that of blacks. It is these laws that culminated to the Group Areas Act that each generation of progressive organisations sought to oppose from the colonial period to the formation of the Union of South Africa with its segregation laws that were enhanced by apartheid legislations. However, the national question is also characterised as the relations of the white population to one another (e.g. Afrikaner and English) and the relations of the white population to those that were characterised as “non-whites” and as natives. In real terms this meant that South Africa was balkanised into different racial and ethnic groups with well-resourced parts of the country under white minority rule where Africans were only welcomed as migrant labourers. On retirement, the African labourer had to return back to the homelands - old, sick and dying (please see, Alan Jeeves, 1985). This balkanisation of state extended to labour practices and every sphere of life such as family and marriage.

Contrary to the forces that advocated for the separation of people through laws such as the Colour bar, African opinion makers sought an inclusive society and the removal of the colour bar in politics, education and industrial fields. This desire for an inclusive society is encapsulated in Oliver Tambo’s interview with Sechaba (April 1996), when he said, “we fight for a South Africa in which there will be no racial discrimination, no inequalities based on colour, creed or race, a non-racial democracy which recognises the essential equality between man and man... to abolish the machinery whereby a few live and thrive on the exploitation of the many.”

In this case, the national question is seen as having been based on the “relationship to the means of production which is a crucial agent which produced a system of racial exclusion” as Dan O’Mera Writes (1973), which Tambo argues had to be corrected.

In the final analysis, it could be argued that, the national question within the liberation movement was understood as a struggle between two antagonistic groups, one group representing white minority privilege and hegemony and the other group representing black majority interest and their desires and aspirations. The ANC and other liberation movements saw both groups as South Africans, belonging to the same country, with a shared history of conflict. In other words, they were countrymen and women. The second layer of this struggle was the liberation of workers from capitalist exploitation in a country where the working class was divided according to privileges granted to them by their racial classification. The third layer of this was the liberation of all women from gender oppression and black women from race and class exploitation. The ANC came to characterise this conflict as colonialism of a special type (CST). The CST meant that the South African social formation was based on a “system of internal colonialism” where the white minority government was the coloniser with state power and had designated unto itself the status of citizenship, where blacks as the colonised people were allocated the status of subjects.

In appraising the national question and the construction of a new national identity and institutions that reflects this new ethos, in the 1994 democratic breakthrough that assisted in ending the long conflict, the new South Africa was characterised by Archbishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu as the “rainbow nation.” Instruments for the construction of this “rainbow nation” have been in place for decades, henceforth Joe Slovo could write, (M Van Diepen, 1988: 150) “it is clearly in struggle that we will succeed in forging our one South African nation which is already in the making.” If the national question had to be resolved, the construction of this nation had to result in the “winning of the objectives of the national democratic revolution and deepening national unity on all fronts, economic, political and cultural” (M Van Diepen, 1988: 151). It is in the context of the cultural roam that I examine how the national question is executed and represented in post 1994 South Africa.

This brief introduction clearly shows that I do not intend to problematize nor draw any complexities on what is meant by the nation, whether it is an “imagine community” or not. By this, I mean that in this paper I am not engaging with theories of nation and nationalism and their existence. This mean that in this paper I accept that the post-apartheid state is a national state and note that both the governing party and opposition parties have embraced that there is a South African nation and this nation is also defined by the Constitution.

### **The evolution of the national question in South Africa: A brief historical background**

In his book, *The Struggle for Liberation in South Africa*, Govan Mbeki (1992) traces the national question to the time in which racial antagonism came to define the South African landscape. As already mentioned, this was the result of the land dispossession, racial conflict, discovery of diamonds and gold, resulting to a “massive inflow of capital, largely British, for investment in gold mining” (Govan Mbeki, 1992). The epitome of this conflict was the Anglo-Boer war, which resulted to the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910. The Union excluded the majority of the population in South Africa as citizens. Shortly after the Union was formed, in 1913 the first salvo of ensuring that Blacks and in particular Africans were relegated to the status of serfdom was the 1913 Native Land Act (Act 27 of 1913). About this Act, Solom Plaatje wrote (2007), “awakening on Friday, 20 June 1913, the South African native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth.” This meant that Africans found themselves without land and that their livelihood, which was based on livestock, was threatened by this Act. They would forfeit 75% of arable land in the process. These actions led to an auto/biography that talked about loss of land, loss of family ties due to dispersal, and loss of values that adhere to the basic principles of justice, and loss of peaceful co-existence.

When DF Malan and the National Party came to power in the 1948 elections, the made certain that this process cannot be easily reversed and pass laws such as the Population Registration Act (Act 30 of 1950) that allocated each individual to a particular ethnic and racial group. The Mixed Marriage Act, (Act 55 of 1949) was aimed at cementing these racial categories. These Act and many others such as the Bantu Building Act, the Native Labour Act, the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act and the Master and Servants Laws contributed in the authoring of a South African auto/biography that was based on race and was racists in nature and outlook.

### **The representation of the national question in post-apartheid South Africa**

In 1998, Thabo Mbeki (2000: 184) in a parliamentary national debate argued that, “nation building is the construction of the reality and the sense of common nationhood, which would result from the abolition of disparities in the quality of life among South Africans based on the racial, gender and geographical inequalities we all inherited from the past.” The objective of this debate was to highlight the need for transformation and the extent to which South Africans have travelled in reversing the effect and impact of racial laws in all works of life and in practical ways. The heritage sector also experienced demands for transformation that began to intensify with the writing and production of the White Paper for Arts and Culture. In these debates, Bridget Mabandla (1995:2356-2357) argued that in the arts and cultural sphere, the aim was to “enable South Africans to reclaim their heritage and to develop their language and cultural identities. To provide resources for previously neglected communities and to create conditions for their economic empowerment, since nation building is essentially a cultural issue.”

This shows that, major issues that needed to be immediately looked at to address the aspirations of the people confronted the post-apartheid government. There are at least four factors that had to be taken into account with speed, (1) the redressing of the legacy and imbalances of the past while building a stable and developing economy that could create jobs and bring prosperity to the majority of the people. This meant that the government had to focus on economic development.

The (2) second factor, the state as a whole had to deal with the process of building a “new” nation where all citizens would feel that they belonged. Thirdly (3) in order to build a nation, this could be achieved through a process of promotion of reconciliation where past atrocities were confessed (testified) and a process of healing was allowed to take place. Fourthly (4) was the building of sustainable democratic structures such as Chapter 9 institutions. These institutions support the RSA Constitution as the cornerstone of the countries existence.

In other words, the objectives of the post-apartheid project was to build a non-racial, non-sexist and democratic South Africa as was proclaimed in the Freedom Charter, which was the guiding document of the ANC. The key principles of the Freedom Charter also found expression in the Republic of South Africa Constitution of 1996, (Act 101 of 1996). In the case of the arts, this was to be achieved through arts, culture and heritage institutions. The creation of legacy projects in the post- apartheid state was one of the ways in which the government sought to address the transformation of the cultural and heritage landscape.

### **The creation of legacy projects by the post-apartheid state**

The creation of new sites of remembrance in the form of museums and monuments and which Gabi Dolff-Bonekamper (2008: 135) says that their creation is “often [the results] of conflict, not harmony” gives “expression to people’s changing needs in relation to what they want to remember and how, and what they feel they can forget and for how long,” argued Angelika Bummer (2003). Thabo Mbeki (1979) stated it slightly differently when he argued that, “all societies bear the imprint, the birth marks of their own past... the imperative of [their] epoch [which] has charged [them] with the task of transforming [themselves] from the status of objects of history to that of masters of history.” It would seem that, the creation of legacy projects was aimed at giving voice to those that official history had marginalised. This was in addition to the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which stated that there should be memorials created to remember those that suffered under the hands of the apartheid regime. This request was first made by the widow of Matthew Goniwe of the Cradock 4 in her testimony that took place in East London. I should point out that, the creation of new institutions has not been the prerogative of the national government only, local government and non-governmental organisations also created institutions of memory, sometimes based on local experiences. Some of these institutions are the Red Location Museum in the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality and District Six Museum in Cape Town for example.

The Red Location Museum is meant to remember and commemorate the social conditions and resistance of the people of Port Elizabeth. In the orientation space which also doubles as a reception area, the reason for its establishment is captured in the following words:

Red Location seeks to remember the past in many ways. It plans to depict the notion of memory, portraying both the horrors of institutionalised racism and the heroic methods of the anti-apartheid movement. The museum seeks to serve as stimuli for upgrading the destitute living conditions of the Red Location shack settlement, while celebrating those who fought to end apartheid. It is therefore designed not only as a tourist attraction for foreign and local visitors, but also as an internal part of the surrounding community, regarding education, arts and cultural activities, and also a space for heritage practitioners in the metro.

Here we find the twin strategy of community development and memory coming out clearly. Here, community development means that the museum should be able to stimulate the local economy through tourism and be able to facilitate for both formal and informal job opportunities. In this way, there is produced an auto/biographical material that could continue to be sold for public benefit. In other words, museum and memorials alone and viewed separately from other benefits they may have are of no significance to ordinary people who are struggling with bread and butter issues. However, when they are able to contribute to the fight against poverty, they could perhaps contribute to spiritual satisfaction. Stated differently, the post-apartheid South Africa, while it seeks that the majority experiences also be imprinted in the landscape, cultural and heritage projects also had to prove their use value by contributing to economic development.

The use of memory projects to facilitate development and access to the markets through the selling of mementoes to tourists and export of such internally produced products to other countries is one of the ways in which state planners think they could leverage heritage to create opportunities for local communities where these projects are established.

In addition to the demands made on heritage to contribute to economic development, cultural and heritage institutions are also charged with the responsibility to significantly contribute to nation building and social cohesion. This demand on cultural and heritage institutions to play a significant role especially in the light of the renewed attacks on foreign nationals that mainly took place in parts of KwaZulu-Natal and of Gauteng.

Briefly, each institution established by the new state had to contribute to addressing the national question; and those that were created by the colonial and apartheid state had to transform and address new imperatives confronted by the new state. It could be argued that the investment on new legacy institutions is a clear illustration of the desire to wards economic development and nation building as the state seeks to build a new society and new morality. A society informed by the ideals of a non-racial society and moving away from racially based polity.

### **Representation of liberation legacies through museums**

In his thesis, *Art and the Struggle for New Civilisation*, Antonio Gramsci (1988) argues that, “a given socio-historical moment is never homogenous [and] on the contrary it is rich with contradictions. It acquires a personality and is a moment of development in that a certain fundamental activity of life prevails over others and represents a historical peak, but this presupposes a hierarchy, a contrast, a struggle.” Recent events in South Africa and in the heritage fields have shown that competing needs and contestations over memory, and with debates around transformation of the South African memory landscape, there is a constant struggle that is taking place between those that want to preserve a particular memory for their own objectives, and those that want to replace that memory for other objectives and those that hold border line positions. At the centre of contestation over this memory is that, for centuries the memory that was commemorated by the South African state was the memory of the white population, and the memory the new state wishes to commemorate is the memory that is inclusive. This is the point, which I repeatedly return to. The reality of Gramsci’s statement and that of Fanon that each epoch brings new demands and objectives and our response to those demands reflects the contradictions of the South African auto/biography and how historians interpret events as they seek to represent them. The production of these histories in the public sphere possess challenges on different levels, first at the sphere of interpretation, secondly, at the level of what is represented and what is silenced in the murky period of the struggle for liberation.

At the Nelson Mandela Museum, the liberation legacies are represented through the use of the auto/biography of Nelson Mandela and his contemporaries. The life of Nelson Mandela from his village where he was born and the use of his father’s responsibilities within his community are taken to show the impact in which colonialism had on the lives of Africans. This is particularly so when one considers that by the early 1900, in practice chiefs and their subjects had long lost real power, they governed on the behest of the colonial governments. Magistrates actually had more power than them and chiefs acted as advisers to the local magistrates instead of visa-versa.

Secondly, the museum situates the auto/biography of Nelson Mandela at the centre of education institutions in the Eastern Cape, which were established by the missionaries with the support of the colonial governments to convert the native to Christianity and make him/her a subject of the colonial government stripped of all real power. Thirdly, the museum locates the autobiography of Nelson Mandela in the industrial towns of the Transvaal, the mines, the townships and the struggle for survival to demonstrate the oppressive nature of the colonial and apartheid governments.

The main aim of this is to locate the auto/biography of Nelson Mandela within the broader struggles of the African people and their response to the colonial and apartheid governments that shaped the ideology in which they later ascribed to and in which some of them were “prepared to die for”. In essence the museum narrative does not only seek to portray the auto/biography of Nelson Mandela as that of his experience after imprisonment when he preached reconciliation. It seeks to show that the struggle against segregation and apartheid has always been a struggle for equality and a non-racial society. The 1996 Constitution has been the crystallisation of all these struggles.

The location of the auto/biography of Nelson Mandela in broader struggles by the Nelson Mandela Museum is also demonstrated by its outreach exhibitions. The museum has an exhibition on Nelson Mandela and Albert Luthuli. The starting point of the exhibition is a narration of the story when Chief Albert Luthuli received the Nobel Peace Prize on the verge of the ANC entering the armed struggle and when Nelson Mandela received the Nobel Peace Prize on the verge of the resolution of the South African conflict.

The exhibition is titled: “In Conversation, Albert Luthuli and Nelson Mandela”. As per the exhibition, the two leaders are in conversation with each other and with their contemporaries.

The other exhibition that locates Nelson Mandela within broader struggles is that of Nelson Mandela and Rosa Parks: children’s letters, Global lessons exhibition. The exhibition is based on letters that were written to both Nelson Mandela and Rosa Parks by children. This exhibition seeks to show that the national democratic struggle in South Africa required the effort of South Africans to mobilise the international community to be part of that global effort to defeat the apartheid regime by isolating South African apartheid government. It however also showed that it was a human struggle hence apartheid was declared by the United Nations as “crime against humanity”.

In many museum circumstances, its exhibitions and education programmes would be sufficient to demonstrate that the museum is actually fulfilling its mission. However, as we mentioned earlier, in the post-apartheid South Africa, this would not be sufficient especially for museums situated in rural areas like Nelson Mandela Museum. In addition to this, they would have to demonstrate that they really indeed contribute to facilitating job creation. To respond to these developmental issues, the Nelson Mandela Museum established a craft project, which is called Ithemba (hope) for young people of the area. The craft project attracts young people prepared to work with their hands in various crafts and it provides them with a venue, machinery and material for the first 6 months. It also trains them in quality management of their products as well as business skills. In short it trains them to become entrepreneurs and to use their skills to sell quality products that would help them to generate funds. As a rural institution, the Nelson Mandela Museum is not unique in this; other rural museums such as Ncome also have similar projects.

I think in doing this, legacy museums took seriously the call that was made by Thabo Mbeki (2006) in the opening of the Luthuli Museum, that legacy projects should “ensure that as South Africans we capture, remember and celebrate the totality of South African history, particularly those aspects of our history that were deliberately neglected, falsified, denigrated, ridiculed and presented in a manner that sought to entrench the anti-human ideology of racial superiority and inferiority”. As we know the ideology ensured that black people, especially the educated class looked down on their cultures in terms of way of life, including fashion and cultural practices. The response by cultural institutions in promoting indigenous fashion both serves to affirm the historically oppressed groups that there was nothing wrong with how they chose to wear, their jewellery and other forms of expressions, and that other nationalities could also be attracted to their own fashion and way of life.

Similar to the Nelson Mandela Museum, the Luthuli Museum seeks to “let the spirit of Luthuli Speak to all” and whose mission is to “conserve, uphold, promote and propagate the life, values, philosophies and legacy of the late Chief Albert Luthuli against apartheid oppression” and with the values that seek to be the “catalyst for social change, diversity, community development and the promotion of a non-racial and non-sexist democratic South Africa” (Luthuli Museum Annual Report, 2008/9).

In examining the objectives of the establishment and the missions of legacy institutions of the post-apartheid period, one would notice that they take seriously the call to respond to socio-historical as well as economic issues. To illustrate this, the Luthuli Museum in addition to representing the legacy of Albert Luthuli, it also aims and engages in projects that are aimed at “encouraging a culture of learning as well as economic independence among the youth” and they do this by “utilising partnerships towards skills development and employability for surrounding communities”( Luthuli Museum Annual Report, 2008/9) In examining many post-apartheid museums or what in their establishment was called legacy projects, a similar trend would emerge, whether one looks at Freedom Park or Samora Machel Memorial Project. The legacy projects are one terrain in which the promotion of a non-racial society is done and through the promotion of auto/biographies of certain leaders and personalities and institutions that symbolise the nature of the national democratic struggle. Memorials and monuments is another terrain in which these struggles and contestations on and over memory takes place.

### **Memorials and Monuments**

The construction of statues and memorials dates back to time in antiquity, it is the result of the need by humanity to remember those events or individuals that had an impact on their lives, or symbolise an impact that they had in human history. In South Africa, especially in the Eastern Cape, there seems to be three types of memorials, i.e. those that are carefully planned, constructed, presented to the public through a unveiling and where key political figures are invited to present them, they are in other words representations of events or people.

The second one is a memorial that is a product of an unfortunate incident where graves of the martyrs of the liberation struggle form parts of the memory of the struggle, among these are burial sites (Cradock Three for example), sites of massacres (Queenstown Massacre for example). The last one is an unplanned and unrecognised memorial to a system that was rejected by the population and which was defeated in the elections of 1994. This kind of memorial is found in the form of ruins. Since I have to some extent dealt with museums as part of memory projects that are carefully planned and constructed, let me not labour this point except to state the fact that, in the many massacres that took place in South Africa, the evidence of those massacres are graves littered in burial sites with tombstones of those that fell in the struggle for liberation. Graves themselves have become sites of memorialisation where people go to remember certain events in their locality. In localities where there is limited budget to invest on grandstanding memorialisation, cemeteries become sites of remembrance. Thus, the auto/biography of the liberation struggle could not be complete without these alternative sites of recollection.

### **Conclusion**

This essay was an examination of the auto/biography of the liberation struggle and analysed this auto/biography by looking at museums, memorials and monuments dedicated to this memory. Secondly, it looked at these from the prism of the creation and construction of legacy projects such as the Nelson Mandela Museum and how they represent the memory of the liberation struggle and for what purposes. In this regard, it makes two points. The first point is that, the auto/biography of the liberation struggle is found in the broad landscape of South Africa, including graveyards as the most significant sites where this auto/biography is narrated. The second point it makes is that, the landscape on which this auto/biography is tattooed, is also communicating the auto/biography of the living where the living use these pointers as part of their history and tradition. Further to this, the argument that is made is that, most of the post-apartheid legacy institutions are created to facilitate local economic development and job creation through the attraction of tourists to the areas in which they are situated. In addition to this, the essay also examines how the story of the liberation struggle is told through memorials, by referencing memorial in the Eastern Cape as examples. It notes that through these granite stones found nearly in each town of the Eastern Cape, especially the Karoo, the voices that comes out from these graves communicating the wishes of the dead to the living is that of community development and desire for a prosperous society. As some stones clearly put it, "*your blood will nourish the tree of freedom,*" and "*for a better life for all.*" Whether infused with the wishes and desires of the living, this is what they seem to communicate. It would seem that the living seem to also promise through these memorials to fulfil the objectives of the liberation struggle, by inscribing their own words on the grave stones and statements that, "*your sacrifice will not be in vain.*" Perhaps when heritage practitioners talk of living museums, they express this form of interaction between the living and the dead and what should be achieved through these cultural institutions such as museums, memorials and monuments.

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