Reordering the Past: Monuments and Architectural Heritage in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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Référence électronique

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 1 février 2017.

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Introduction
In any society, it is a shared heritage (language, traditions, leaders, a mutual experience of the past) that imparts a sense of group identity. Every new political order forms a group identity through a process of selective remembering and invention of usable pasts. The most significant aspect of this process is the forging of a compelling foundation myth, which traces the roots and defines the beginning of the new nation. It provides the framework into which events, artifacts, and sites can be embedded and from which they derive meaning. By drawing on current discourses around heritage and memory, notably with respect to their role in identity formation, this paper focuses on monuments as tools for forging a new national identity in post-apartheid South Africa.

The context of this paper is provided by the strongly expanding heritage landscape in present-day South Africa: new museums and interpretation centers are being built all over the country; new urban and rural spaces are declared heritage sites and equipped with commemorative monuments and memorials; various buildings and other types of structures are identified for official protection, conservation or upgrading. All these interventions in what can be referred to as the symbolic landscape of memory, this paper argues, are guided by a particular set of new values and criteria, which are closely tied up with the post-apartheid nation’s foundation myth.

Foundation Myth
In any society, certain memories are valued, because they are linked to that society’s present sense of identity or a new identity it intends to foster. Through institutionalized remembrance we want to ensure that selected individual or collective memories are incorporated into cultural memory. This can and often does include painful or traumatic memories. Jan Assmann points out that, contrary to much talk about memory loss, some
forms of memory are not at all fading, but indeed being nurtured and intensified with the passage of time. For instance, the memory of the Holocaust has tremendously gained in significance in recent years. There is an increased awareness that the living memory [Erfahrungsgedächtnis] of those who witnessed the events must not get lost, but transferred into cultural memory and passed on to future generations. As will be shown below, in South Africa, it is primarily the memories of apartheid, colonial oppression, and resistance that are preserved for transferal into cultural memory; they form the basis of understanding “who we are and where we are coming from.”

The concept of “foundation myth” is linked to the notion that every story has a beginning. This idea, Lambek and Antze explain, is deeply engrained in our consciousness and imported unnoticed into memory and practices of commemoration. The search for the foundational moment for the establishment of the self can be found in individuals and in nations alike. “Even the currently popular notion of an early trauma that explains everything, has its roots in narrative conventions running back to the myth of the Fall.”

What distinguishes modern myths, such as foundation myths or myths of (revolutionary) origin, from ancient myths is that the latter are all-encompassing and taken for granted, while modern myths can be re-evaluated, changed, and adapted. Being subject to conscious addition and invention by contemporaries, they belong more precisely to the realm of ideology, rather than the realm of religion into which the myths of ancient societies can be placed. Yet what links the two, thus justifying usage of the term “foundation myth,” is that they tend to be generally believed in and are beyond the need for verification.

As Graham et al explain, myth is not something necessarily untrue, but something that is true in a special sense. The fact that a great many people believe in it, gives this “truth” a contemporary validity. Assmann goes further by insisting that the popular tendency to view myth in contrast to history—associating the latter with objective fact and the former with fiction—is no longer tenable. Just as history is now widely acknowledged as being a social construct, frequently subjective, purpose-driven, and containing elements of fiction, so the definition of myth has changed. Myth, according to Assmann, is any past that has been (or is being) fixed and internalized as foundational history—no matter whether this past is fictional or factual. In the process of remembrance, says Assmann, myth and history are largely indistinguishable.

One of the most important theoretical analyses of myth was produced by Roland Barthes, who explains:

Myth is depoliticized speech. . . . Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. . . . [It] abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences . . . it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth. . . . [It] establishes a blissful clarity.

It is this blissful clarity—as opposed to the confusing opacity of gradations and ambiguities, which tends to characterize historical reality—that attracts people to myth. Monuments and other “products” of the heritage sector are means of visualizing these myths. Much has been written about how images of the past commonly serve to legitimize a present social order. Monuments, memorials, and heritage sites are means of literally casting in bronze or stone such images of the past, thus solidifying and preserving carefully selected memories for the future. Since the experience of the present...
is intricately connected with the memory of the past, public monuments serve to control and guide people’s perception of the contemporary sociopolitical order. National monuments, or those initiated by the state in particular, contribute to forging a new national identity by representing key themes of a country’s myth of origin.

Forging a new foundation myth

In the current post-Apartheid era, the challenge lies in creating a convincing new foundation myth and commemorating an inclusive past that can be shared by all or most South Africans as the basis for a new nation. At a recent conference on “foundation myths of the new South Africa” scholars emanating from a range of disciplinary perspectives presented different views about the salience of various myths and compared the South African situation with that of other countries. For instance, some highlighted the “Rainbow Nation” as a foundation myth—a term first introduced into the South African context by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the 1980s, describing his vision for a new state. Usage of the term is however not unique to South Africa (e.g., Reverend Jesse Jackson introduced it in the United States in 1984) and it was pointed out by Catherine Boudet that the “Rainbow Nation” served as a foundation myth for Mauritius in the 1960s.

Based on the emerging “heritage products” as evidence, it appears that the function of foundation myth is currently performed by the meta-narrative of the “Struggle,” or the fight for liberation. Virtually all new monuments and cultural heritage sites, built and proposed in post-apartheid South Africa, are in one way or another linked to the notion of struggle or resistance. This refers not only to resistance against apartheid, but against colonial domination and all forms of disenfranchisement of the non-white population and negation of their value systems.

A range of “massacre memorials” has been built throughout the country, including the Hector Pieterson Memorial in Soweto, the Sharpeville Memorial, the Bisho Massacre Memorial, or the Langa Massacre Memorial in Uitenhage, to name but a few. In emotionally charged images, symbols, and texts, all these structures tend to recount slightly different, locally specific, versions of the same story: a group of innocent people, protesting peacefully, is brutally slaughtered by ruthless security forces. The Hector Pieterson Memorial is the epitome of this type, with its emphasis on children as symbols of innocence and vulnerability. Heritage sites such as Robben Island and Constitution Hill represent the suffering of those who fought for freedom, while at the same time serving as symbols of triumph over adversity.

New heroes are being worshipped in post-apartheid monuments. The modest homes of several struggle icons have been preserved and turned into a museum. This includes the Mandela residence in Soweto, Albert Luthuli’s house in Groutville, or John Dube’s house in Inanda. Bronze statues on pedestals are proliferating throughout the country (e.g., of Nelson Mandela; Steve Biko; Gandhi; Albert Luthuli; Solomon Mahlangu; John Dube, etc.). Group memorials are dedicated to those who sacrificed their lives—usually young, always male, political activists whose death is associated with a tragic event and brutal murder by the security forces. The dramatic story of the deathly incident and the complex narrative of their lives are condensed into one succinct, catchphrase label: the Gugulethu Seven, the Cradock Four, the Pebco Three. The quest for freedom is reflected in such heritage sites as Freedom Valley in Inanda, Freedom Square (recently renamed Walter Sisulu Square of Dedication) in Kliptown, the planned Freedom Statue in Port Elizabeth, Freedom Square in Pietermaritzburg, and most notably Freedom Park, this eminent...
African counterpart of the infamous Afrikaner Nationalist Voortrekker Monument outside Pretoria.

Not only are new monuments being erected and new heritage sites identified and developed all over the country, but many existing ones are currently being (re)interpreted to fit in with the new meta-narrative. Old buildings associated with past humiliation and suffering have been appropriated and their identity redefined through a conscious, symbolically meaningful inversion of their original function. In Johannesburg, for example, a hostel building in Newtown, formerly housing black migrant workers under most appalling conditions, was turned into a Worker's Library: a site of former oppression has become a site of potential empowerment. In Durban, the former headquarters of the Department of Native Administration, where rural Africans had to submit to humiliating administrative procedures and medical examinations for their application to work and live in an urban area, now houses the KwaMuhle Museum. This new museum is dedicated to preserving and representing the history, experiences, and acts of resistance, of precisely those previously urban black communities, thereby validating their lives and making their voices heard.

Heritage and policy

The value of a heritage site is not intrinsic; it becomes valuable by definition, through selection, through an act of designation, or proclamation. It is through the act of proclamation —by those official structures empowered to perform it—that a heritage site acquires its status and significance. On a national level, the official structure empowered to determine what counts as heritage in South Africa today, is the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA), which replaces the National Monuments Council (NMC) of the previous era. It is through policy and legislation, that the foundation myth is translated into practice and tangible reality.

With the advent of fundamental changes in the political arena following Nelson Mandela’s release from prison in 1991, discussions about the need for a radical democratization and multicultural adjustment of the South African heritage landscape—extremely skewed towards the historical experience of the white minority—ensued. After the first General Elections of 1994, it was decided to completely restructure the existing body of legislation and administration, dissolving the National Monuments Council in the process. The National Heritage Resources Act (NHRA), adopted in 1999, protects not only “monuments” in the sense of the previous legislation, but much more broadly “cultural heritage,” which includes intangible forms of heritage in acknowledgement of African traditions and value systems. As the term “monument” implies solid, built structures, the almost exclusive focus of the old National Monuments Council on the historical remnants of the white population minority was virtually justified by definition. “Heritage” now opened up the field to include a broad range of objects and sites—not necessarily containing any built structures—of which many were related to the history and culture of Africans and other previously marginalized population groups.

In line with the foundation myth of the new South African state, particular attention was devoted to sites associated with the liberation struggle. In this case, the so-called 60-year rule (sites are protected only if older than 60 years) was implicitly waved. Furthermore, the act explicitly mentions that “The graves of victims of conflict and those associated with the liberation struggle will be identified, cared for, protected and memorials erected in their honour.” Paradoxically, the new heritage legislation encourages us to think of heritage in broad, inclusive terms, allowing even for the inclusion of intangible aspects,
while simultaneously pushing for the erection of memorials and monuments as solid, permanent markers, imitating conventional (colonial/Western) practices of commemoration. Significantly, in the minds of many ordinary people and political officials alike, a burial place or heritage site is not “properly” recognized without a memorial or monument.

The new Heritage Resources act furthermore provides for the future assessment and possible re-evaluation of all monuments, which will subsequently be classified in a three-tier grading system based on their perceived significance (i.e., national, provincial, or local relevance). The future of these buildings, statues and memorials—i.e., their further development, maintenance, financial support, possible relocation, etc.—will depend on that assessment and classification. The criteria for significance, especially for sites of national interest, will likely be closely tied up with the post-apartheid nation’s new value systems and foundation myth. A new symbolic identity is thus being constructed not only through the development of new heritage sites, but also through the reconsideration of existing ones, which may be upgraded, downgraded, relocated, or reinterpreted.

Conclusion

In a democratic society, where freedom of expression is enshrined in the constitution, all narratives—including those essential to the foundation myth of the state—are open to public scrutiny and potential contestation. While academics and politicians may negotiate the disputed content of such narratives, monuments are there to represent the story—as chosen for remembrance by the now dominant political forces—to the people. Monuments are public, lasting, visual expressions of narratives; they interpret history for the people.

Ambiguities and complexities are rarely acknowledged and indeed are often more comfortable to suppress in the current process of selective public remembering for the purpose of nation-building. Foundation myths tend to capture the popular imagination and tend to persist with amazing tenacity, even if the invented nature of certain traditions and the distortion of some versions of the past have been exposed. But as a strongly remembered past turns into mythic memory, it can become ossified and a stumbling block to the needs of the present, warned Andreas Huyssen. As then Deputy Minister of Defense, Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge so aptly put it: “In approaching new public heritage sites, we must surely move a considerable distance away from the apartheid state’s concept of a linear unrolling of a quasi-religious destiny.” Is there reason to believe that precisely this process is already underway?

NOTES DE FIN


5. “It may contain elements that are unhistorical, or ahistorical, but it adds up to a cultural truth. It may indeed contain a great deal of historically accurate and factually testable material, but this is transformed into a touchstone of national, local and even individual identity.” B. GRAHAM, G. J. ASHWORTH, and J. E. TUNBRIDGE, *A Geography of Heritage*, Arnold, London, 2000, p. 18.


10. A conference on foundation myths of the new South Africa was held at the University de la Réunion, Reunion Island in March 2003, organized by the Groupe Recherche de l’Afrique du Sud (GRAS).

11. Reverend Jesse Jackson, one of the United States’ foremost civil rights, religious, and political figures, founded the National Rainbow Coalition in 1984. This national social justice organization, based in Washington is devoted to political empowerment, education and changing public policy. Jackson is known for his promotion of inclusiveness across lines of race, culture, class, gender and belief. See www.rainbowpush.org/founder/


13. AS M. LAMBEK AND P. ANTZE, “Introduction. Forecasting Memory”, in M. Lambek and P. Antze, eds., *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, p. xxi, have observed with respect to North America, issues of memory are so prevalent today, because memory is deeply implicated in concepts of personhood and accountability. Memory is part of the current fascination in North America (and elsewhere, one might add) with the allocation of responsibility and the politics of blame.


This paper considers how the current drive to expand and reassess the symbolic landscape of memory contributes to the construction of a new national identity in post-apartheid South Africa. Every new political order forms a group identity through a process of selective remembering and invention of usable pasts. The most significant aspect of this process is the forging of a compelling foundation myth, which traces the roots and defines the beginning of the new order. This paper argues that the key myth of origin of the post-apartheid state and the basis of present-day South African national identity is the “Struggle” for liberation, which includes resistance against all forms of colonial oppression. This underlying grand narrative forms the basis for the identification of new heritage sites, the selection of buildings to be protected, and the selection of events and persons commemorated through the construction of new museums, memorials, monuments, and public statuary.

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**Index chronologique** : XXᵉ siècle, XXIᵉ siècle, époque contemporaine  
**Index géographique** : Afrique du Sud, Durban, Johannesburg, Pretoria  
**Mots-clés** : KwaMuhle Museum, National Monuments Council, foundation myth, heritage site, memory, monuments, national identity

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