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# *“Lest we forget”: the “struggle for liberation” as foundation myth*

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## **Introduction**

It is well known that images of the past commonly serve to legitimate a present social order (e.g. Connerton 1989). Monuments and memorials 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 are a means of controlling and guiding people’s perception of the contemporary socio-political order, as well as shaping community and national identity.

This paper considers how the ubiquitous and increasingly popular erection of new monuments, memorials and heritage sites in South Africa contributes to the construction of a new South African identity. This identity is based on the “Struggle for Liberation” as foundation myth of the new state. Although developed in marked contrast to the exclusive meta-narrative of the Afrikaner Nationalist’s version of the past, this paper will highlight striking parallels with the Afrikaner foundation myth of the “Great Trek” and its associated monuments.

## Myth

Myth, as Graham *et al.* (2000: 18) explain, 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. One of the most important theoretical analyses of myth was produced by Roland Barthes (1973: 58), 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.

Myth always plays an important role in the process of defining and maintaining, as well as re-defining national or group identity. The source and vehicle for myth is heritage (Graham *et al.* 2000: 18). 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 nation forges a new 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. It provides the framework into which events, artefacts, and sites can be embedded and from which they derive meaning; it also provides the framework for a newly identified set of heroes, who become characters that act out the national story.

Every story has a beginning. This idea, Lambek and Antze (1996: xvii) explain, is deeply engrained in our consciousness and imported unnoticed into memory. 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” (Lambek and Antze 1996: xvii).

### **The “Great Trek” as foundation myth of the Afrikaners**

In the South African context, the prime example of the creation and virulent dissemination of a foundation myth has been set by Afrikaner Nationalists. Much has been written about the way in which the Afrikaner “nation” mythologized what later became known as the “Great Trek” and established rituals and structures — notably the famous Voortrekker Monument near Pretoria and an uncountable number of memorials scattered throughout the country—to institutionalise memory (Bunn undated; Graham *et al.* 2000; Coombes 2000). Many of the actual facts of the Trek are uncertain or contested (Welsh 2000), and historical evidence suggests that the Voortrekkers were a much more diverse and heterogeneous group of people, speaking different languages, and having different socio-cultural roots, than commonly portrayed. It was primarily in the context of the Centenary celebrations of 1938 and the period leading up to these events, that a systematic process of selective remembering intended to define the Afrikaner nation took place. A major role in this process was played by Gustav Preller — researcher, writer and cultural entrepreneur—who spent much of his life writing and publishing books on the history of the Afrikaners.

This tradition of selective remembering and historical fabrication has shaped our ideas of the Great Trek as a spontaneous, but well-organised, consolidated event. It was the shared heritage of the Voortrekkers, construed as divinely ordained, that constructed the Afrikaner nationalist identity. The celebration of the Great Trek—through monuments and rituals—functioned as a powerful unifier and assisted in forging a coherent group identity.

### **Post-apartheid foundation myth**

Given that the new, inclusive South African foundation myth has been established in deliberate contrast to the old, exclusive, Afrikaner myth, one might be surprised to note a long series of

parallels between the two. This applies both to the major themes and tropes selected or foregrounded for public remembrance and to the concrete means (rituals, monuments) with which this is achieved. Even a cursory glance at some major Afrikaner nationalist monuments—for instance the Voortrekker Monuments at Pretoria and at Winburg, the Blood River Monument near Dundee, or the National Women's Monument in Bloemfontein—illustrate the predominant themes of Afrikaner identity and the Great Trek as foundation myth. They are marked first and foremost by the idea of constant struggle. Associated with this are notions of deprivation and suffering, a quest for freedom, the humble desire for land and a modest home, the enemy's maltreatment of the innocent (especially women and children), relentless resistance, heroic, male-dominated leadership, and women as courageous assistants to their fighting men.

This is exactly the range of topics and values that recur in the new South African foundation myth, and it is through elaborate monuments, solid memorials and bronze statues on pedestals—imitating colonial and apartheid era commemorative practices—that the new South African state chooses to visualise, nurture, and disseminate its newly constructed identity.

### **Post-apartheid monuments and memorials**

A range of “massacre memorials” have been built throughout the country, including the Hector Pieterse Memorial in Soweto, the Sharpeville Monument, the Bulhoek Massacre Monument near Queenstown, or the Langa Massacre Monument in Uitenhage. 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 Pieterse Memorial with its emphasis on children—symbol of innocence and vulnerability—is the epitome of this type. It closely parallels some Afrikaner memorials, notably the National Women's Monument in Bloemfontein, commemorating the death of innocent Boer women and children in British concentration camps.

New heroes are being worshipped in post-apartheid monuments and memorials, sometimes in the form of bronze statues on pedestals, such as Nelson Mandela in Hammanskraal or Steve Biko in East London, at other times in small group memorials. The latter are dedicated to those who sacrificed their lives for the "Struggle"—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 Guguletu Seven, the Cradock Four, the Alexandria Three.

Any violence associated with the "Struggle" features only on the part of the apartheid regime. The other side is engaged in peaceful protest action, driven by a quest for freedom. This quest for freedom serves as a motivating force driving the grand narrative of the "Struggle," just as it drove the Afrikaner narrative of the 'Great Trek'. It is reflected in such monuments and heritage sites as Freedom Valley in Inanda, and Freedom Square (recently been renamed Walter Sisulu Square) in Kliptown, but first and foremost in the proposed Freedom Park outside Pretoria, this eminent—and very expensive—African counterpart of the Afrikaner's Voortrekker Monument.

### **Re-interpretation**

Not only are new monuments erected to visually represent the foundation myth, some older monuments are being re-interpreted to fit in with the new meta-narrative. In fact, during the immediate post-Election period, attempts were made to disinvest the Voortrekker Monument's symbolic power and address its by now objectionable exclusivity by promoting an inclusive reinterpretation. This reinterpretation represents the Voortrekker monument as a general, South African symbol of struggle and quest for freedom. In other words, in a partial inversion of its originally intended meaning, the struggle of the Afrikaners is appropriated and incorporated into the new foundation myth.

Yet these attempts have largely failed to convince: they've been unsatisfactory to black Africans, because they don't go far

enough (for instance, no physical alterations have been done or proposed) and to conservative Afrikaners, because they are going too far. The decision to build Freedom Park as an alternative monument representing “the other side of the story” is a tacit acknowledgement of this failure.

### **Resistance voices**

The erection of monuments often constitutes the final part of a larger and long process of reworking memory and rewriting history, which is currently under way everywhere from community level to academia. Particular emphasis is being placed on oral history, and on recording “resistance voices,” often with a sense of urgency attached, aimed at capturing the precious memory before it is too late. There appears to be an underlying assumption that one can establish a collective memory of the “people” by recording their leaders’ voices and that this memory will invariably be one of resistance. Heritage is often associated with a sanitised past (e.g. in Hewison’s writings), but as Graham *et al.* (2000: 40) remind us, heritage can also promote “the burdens of history, the atrocities, errors and crimes of the past.” Recollection of such heritage always legitimates the present order, in fact, it can even legitimate certain atrocities of the past and even of the present.

Psychoanalytically informed identity theory stresses the important role that trauma (suppressed or commemorated) plays in the way nations construct a past for themselves (e.g. Lambek and Antze 1996). A chosen trauma may become the basis of a new group identity, as for instance the Nazi Holocaust for the Jews (Ross 2000: 1015). The process of remembering trauma may be necessary and empowering, but the danger—as Lambek and Antze (1996: xxiv) point out—is that “such an identity politics can subjugate and immobilize victims in the very act of recognizing their suffering.” What the authors mean is that people’s sense of identity and their lives are shaped by the remembered stories about themselves. People identify with various narrative types—hero, survivor, victim, or guilty perpetrator—and there is a danger of constructing an excessively determined story, in which individuals

over identify with a particular character or get stuck in a role (*ibid.* 1996: xviii).

Minkley and Rassool (1998: 98) have made similar observations. The currently fashionable emphasis on the history of the marginalized, they argue, often has the ironic consequence of deepening these peoples' marginalisation and perpetuating their special status. But there are other dangers posed by the current politics of remembrance. As much as the foregrounding—or as some call it—inflation, of resistance appears to be a valid prerogative in post-apartheid South Africa, historians must beware of essentialist representations of the past as a simple, good-and-evil-type dichotomy. As Minkley and Rassool (1998: 94) succinctly state, "apartheid did not always produce resistance, and... resistance was not always occasioned by apartheid." Others have focussed on the spaces in-between the dichotomous realms. While racial segregation was demanded by law and implemented through various spatial arrangements, the everyday life reality of ordinary people—in the house or in the prison, for instance—was not seldom marked by contact, and proximity—if not intimacy—between "oppressor" and "oppressed" (Nuttall & Michael 2000: 12).

### **Conclusion**

Such ambiguities and complexities are rarely acknowledged and indeed 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 some traditions and the distortions of some versions of the past have been exposed. For some conservative Afrikaners today, the story of the "Great Trek," for instance, still counts as Gospel. But as a strongly remembered past turns into mythic memory, it can become ossified and become a stumbling block to the needs of the present, warned Andreas Huyssen (1994: 9).

As Deputy Minister of Defence, Nozizwe Madlala-Routledge (2001) so aptly put it recently: "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?

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