

Chapter Seven

Final Thoughts and Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

To conclude, it was once again Sello Moloto who brought the curtain down on the project when he declared in his state of the province address in 2007 that:

Our work of honouring all warrior traditional leaders who fell in the course of the struggle against colonial dispossession has been completed (Moloto 2007).

Moloto also expressed happiness that SAHRA had finally approved the declaration of four provincial heritage sites in terms of section 27 of the National Heritage Resources Act (Act 25 of 1999). The sites would include Tjate in Sekhukhuneland, Dzata in the Vhembe district, Soutini Baleni in the Mopani district, and Malebogo-Boer War Battlefields in the Capricorn district. Indeed, in the same speech Moloto disclosed that the next chapter was going to be that of erecting Heroes Acres in memory and honour of those who fought in combat.

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We are aware about the outcry in various communities, particularly by those who have lost their loved ones and their remains are lying in different parts of the country and some even in the frontline states. These heroes and heroines of our liberation struggle deserve a proper send-off and we therefore implore on our Department of Sport, Arts and Culture, the Freedom Park Trust and the post Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) unit to find ways of assisting the families concerned. We however, maintain that our liberation struggle was a people's war against apartheid colonialism and no amount of compensation can replace the lost lives... (Moloto 2007).

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7.2 Discussion

Commemoration of past wars has been an area of increasing public interest since World War I. In Limpopo province they take the form of monuments that commemorate warrior traditional leaders. These monuments are intended to be the physical points of collective remembrance and stand in the public spaces in Limpopo province as permanent reminders of the “Wars of Resistance against Colonialism and Imperialism”. These monuments seem to also serve as symbols that carry meaning about the reasons for the wars and the nature of the role of the individual traditional leader’s participation in the nations and provinces’ wars. This study draws out the war discourses buried within the monuments’ material semiotic resources and written inscriptions; describing and analysing the communicative resources used in the construction of the monument to reveal the discourses buried within them.

188 South Africa’s nine new provinces were challenged by the national government after 1994 to commemorate wars of resistance. A concept document entitled “*Eastern Cape House of Traditional Leaders Commemorates Wars of Dispossession*” provides perhaps the most explicit rationale behind these commemorations. As background, it needs to be explained that the Eastern Cape House of Traditional Leaders, in 2002, resolved to embark on a programme that aimed to commemorate the wars that were fought in the Eastern Cape area which were spearheaded by the traditional leaders in the resistance of land dispossession by the British colonial authorities. The House seemed to have been aware of the void in promoting the historical past of the province by giving publicity to its rich history of wars of dispossession. The House had also noted that other provinces were ahead in terms of marketing the wars of resistance to the spread of colonialism. Also, of concern was that the present generation was not being educated on the role played by traditional leaders in the liberation struggle. Western influence and enculturation seem to have distorted their perceptions about traditional history and their indigenous past (South African History Online n.d[b]). Limpopo province in turn, chose to commemorate the “Warrior Traditional Leaders who fought Wars of Resistance against Colonialism and Imperialism” as their theme.

In a way, the commemoration of wars of dispossessions is also perceived as a tribute to the ‘fallen sons and daughters of the African soil and this will seek to address the idea of promoting African Renaissance (South African History Online n.d[b]). This rich historical past is therefore portrayed by remembering the wars that were fought against colonial advancement. The criteria used to select a particular war was that the war was between the colonialists and the indigenous Africans;

that the war reflects unity amongst tribes; that the war's impact was felt across river boundaries; and that the war was an expression of great resistance from the part of the chieftainships (South African History Online n.d[b]).

These war commemoration project initiatives were had on a national level to support strategic priorities of the House of Traditional Leaders, such as the promotion of nation building and of the spirit of reconciliation, the restoration of historically disadvantaged chieftainships, redressing imbalances of the past in the portrayal of its history, and last, promotion of social cohesion. In its implementation, the project would be in line with national, provincial, and local growth strategies as PGDP, IDPs, ASGISA, JIPSA, and Expanded Public Works Programmes.

The DSAC in Limpopo province viewed involvement in projects of this nature as an opportunity to contribute to the African renaissance in line with former President Thabo Mbeki's vision, namely of instilling an awareness of South Africa's common heritage and nationhood. Moreover, this would help to promote and to invest in a South African cultural diversity through heritage and common nationhood, while at the same time building a strong sense of South African unity. More importantly, this project was significant in that it took place at a time when traditional leadership and African heritage was being challenged by the influence of modernisation. It was also aimed at unifying the province and the nation by way of showcasing the past experiences which in turn, would be part of agencies of social change and social cohesion (South African History Online n.d[b]).

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Throughout the study, the "Wars of Resistance against Colonialism and Imperialism" theme seems to have been intended to condense the war history of the Limpopo province of the second half of the nineteenth century into a single, complex symbol with a unified narrative.

The study also explored the extent to which monuments and statues that relate to issues of provincial and national conflict can lead to the construction of shared memories or narratives of the past. The findings demonstrate that even though rhetorical integration is elusive, monuments/memorials can, through aspects of form, function, symbolism, and location, provide space, motivation, and intentional resources for continued engagement.

The focus in this study has been on how the Limpopo province hoped to develop a sense of provincial identity as a part of national identity. It was with this objective in mind that emphasis was placed on the efforts to utilise the statues in the processes of inventing ritual and creating landscape spectacles to build up provincial identity and to develop an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991: 199-201). Sanford Levinson (1998: 10) proposes that states always promote privileged narratives of the national experience and thus, attempt to form a particular kind of

national consciousness. Organisers of the new regime must decide which, if any, of the heroes from the past deserve to occupy public space, and if these heroes might serve as potential symbols of resistance for adherents among the population, who must at least from the perspective of newcomers, ultimately acquiesce to the new order (Levinson 1998: 10).

Kirk Savage (1994: 135-136) reminds us, 'Public monuments do not rise as if by natural law to celebrate the deserving; they are built by people with sufficient power to marshal (or impose) public consent for their erection'. 'A public monument represents a kind of collective recognition—in short, legitimacy—for the memory deposited there.' (Savage 1994: 135-136)

The warrior traditional leaders' statues and other dynamic monuments of their time reinterpreted the Wars of Resistance and suggest that perceptions of the event changed in the first years of the twenty-first century. These new interpretations can be understood within the context of cultural, social, and historical contestation in South Africa as well as through an examination of Limpopo province's awareness of, and relationship to, other provinces. Such examination reveals that verbal, written, and sculptural images of the Wars of Resistance were invoked with recent frequency in demonstration of the role played by African leaders in defence of their land possessions and protection of their chiefdoms. These images also depicted the Wars of Resistance not as isolated, unfortunate incidents receding into the distant past, rather as a test of both provincial and national strength needing continuing renewal if Limpopo province was to take its place among South Africa's great provinces. As images of peace and reconciliation, these monuments might also help to forge a renewed sense of provincial unity as well as contribute to Limpopo province's developing role in traditional leadership and local governance.

The Warrior Traditional Leaders' Monuments should be understood on several levels. At the most basic level these statues impart information or knowledge about the "Wars of Resistance" led by traditional leaders in Limpopo province. They depict reality, or versions of it, in an accessible way. They give the wars recognisable human faces, pictures for the mind to hold onto as the second half of the nineteenth century fades into oblivion and the distant past. On another level, monuments of the Wars of Resistance shape the past as much as they record it. A dominant theme of material representations created in the years after the wars is that of heroism. Kinsell (1992: 434-435) insists that 'battlefield photographs are sometimes grim, but in paintings and sculpture there is less room to question the validity of the war or splendid heroic efforts of the men who fought it'. The traditional leaders' statues serve as lasting tributes to heroism and sacrifice. Such tributes are recognitions and validations of these sacrifices (Kinsell 1992: 434-435).

Through institutionalised remembrance, governments want to ensure that selected individuals

or collective memories are incorporated into cultural memory. 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’ (Marschall 2005a: 20-21). Monuments and other “products” of the heritage sector are means of visualising these myths. Much has been written about how images of the past commonly serve to legitimise a present social order. Monuments and memorials are means of literally casting in bronze or carving in 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 perceptions of the contemporary socio-political order. National monuments, or those initiated by the state, contribute to forging a new national identity by presenting key themes of a country’s myths of origin (Marschall 2005a: 8). The Warrior Traditional Leaders’ Monuments in Limpopo province was established to visualise and institutionalise the memory of the “Wars of Resistance”.

The tradition of selective remembering (and historical fabrication) contributes to the shaping of belief that the “Wars of Resistance” were spontaneous, yet well-organised, consolidated events. The celebration of the Wars of Resistance—through monuments and rituals—functions as a powerful unifier and assists in attempts at forging a coherent identity in Limpopo province, specifically and generally in South Africa. In his new year’s message in January 1968, former ANC leader O.R. Tambo, acknowledged that the African people were conquered since the Europeans had the guns and were better organised:

In addition, our forefathers fought separately and divided. In this way the Whites were able to defeat our people one by one. Therefore, we had to concentrate first on moving the divisions among ourselves and creating a single African nation owing allegiance to one organisation, the African National Congress (Tambo 1968).

Marschall (2005a: 26) contends that in the current post-Apartheid era, the challenge lies in creating a convincing new foundation myth and inventing a new, inclusive past that can be shared by all, or most, Limpopoans or South Africans, to form the basis of the new province and nation. 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” 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. Paralleling the function of the Afrikaner myth of the “Great Trek”, the foundation myth of the “struggle” is intended to forge people of widely diverse origins and experiences into one nation (Marschall 2005a: 26). Monuments are there to represent the story—as chosen for remembrance by the now dominant political forces—to the people. Monuments are lasting, public, 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 remembering for the purpose of provincial/nation-building (Marschall 2005a: 34-35).

It is through elaborate monuments, solid memorials, and bronze statues on pedestals—imitating colonial and apartheid era commemorative practices—that the post-apartheid state chooses to virtualise, nurture, and disseminate its newly constructed identity. New heroes are being worshipped in post-apartheid monuments, sometimes in the form of bronze statues on pedestals—such as the Warrior Traditional Leaders. The dramatic story of the event and the complex narrative of these traditional leaders’ lives are condensed into one succinct, catchphrase label: Wars of Resistance against Colonialism and Imperialism (Marschall 2005a: 27-30).

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In the final analysis, the invention of the Limpopo province through a war theme on the one hand and the (manipulative) use of symbols based on “collective memory” as well as the specific importance of public monuments on the other, are key issues discussed in (recent) literature on nationalism. For example, research on the history of European nationalism in the nineteenth century has long advanced the study that the concept of a nation emerging from a war was one of nationalism’s most powerful legitimising myths. The triumphant progress of nineteenth-century (European) nationalism has essentially been attributed to a “national memory” that is both genuinely developed and skilfully advertised. Both the nature of the nation as an “artefact” and the procedures involved in commemorative nation-building have received ample attention. In both contexts, various *loci classici* apply: From an ‘invention of tradition’ perspective, nations basically result from inventive ‘social engineering’, and symbols like flags and hymns serve as tools of ‘national invention’ (Rausch 2007: 7-101). Such findings are readily compatible with the concept of the nation as an ‘imagined community’ that needs personification—chiefly through memorial or allegorical monuments—simply because it would otherwise be wholly abstract. Emphasis has been placed on the construction of a ‘*mémoire collective*’ at specific ‘*lieux de mémoire*’ where national societies rally round to assert a common identity. It is, however, often difficult to see the actual origins of the populations’ affinity for the national core (Rausch 2007: 7-101).

The practice of erecting monuments in Limpopo province, like everywhere else, consisted of a now familiar sequence of events. The process began when government commissioned monument committees and started subscriptions to elicit wider participation. What followed was the search for appropriate sites in what was usually an already highly contested public space. The resultant iconographic shape of the individual statues and the prominence of such visual symbols was in effect the casting of a political vote in favour of a specific notion of what the province was meant to be all about.

The subsequent inauguration ceremonies had become a third constituent part to the process in all five districts of the province. The additional symbolic and musical elements included in such ceremonies aimed at creating a set of sensory experiences and impressions designed to back up official rhetoric and to attract a wider audience through related activities. The sequence of events leading to the erection of monuments to what one can describe as provincial cult figures, came to a temporary close with the public reception of the statues. They were, however, likely to reappear on the agenda of provincial debate during days of remembrance, such as national Heritage Day (24 September) or with the subsequent development of the heritage site in their vicinity as a tourist attraction. Thus, the aesthetic appearance, the ceremonial unveiling, the official rhetoric, and perhaps even journalistic and political topography of these statues, were all vitally important to the expression of the provincial objectives associated with them. These were, in fact, part of an extremely didactic used to pass on a provincial message, that of unity, yet this was also a didactic that could not, of course, ever wholly anticipate its public reception.

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7.3 Conclusion

This study contends that the cultural combination of provincial community and war was obviously and visibly expressed in the erection and commemoration of the traditional leaders' statues as heroes in Limpopo province during the first decade of democracy in South Africa. Defeat against white powers delegitimised African traditional leadership. More than one hundred years after the wars, the province of Limpopo witnessed one of the most outstanding efforts to memorialise the experience of the years of defeat and subjugation of the latter half of the nineteenth century between 1850 and 1900. The government celebrated the successful inauguration of the theme commemorating the "Wars of Resistance against Colonialism and Imperialism" with official

unveilings of statues in honour of traditional leaders, Sekhukhune, Malebogo, Ngungunhane, and Makhado.

The unveiling ceremonies were always lavish. The Premier of the province appeared, together with several high-ranking guests. During the official speeches, the political programme of the “Wars of Resistance” monument was articulated quite bluntly.

By repeating the same message made since 2004, the Premier illustrated the considerable objective to arouse a sense of provincial, if not national unity and thus, an attempt to avoid divergent memories of the wars, hence the expectations and projections into the future for the different ethnic groups were the same for the BaPedi of Sekhukhune, the BaHananwa of Malebogo, and the VhaVenda of Makhado to mention just these three as reflected in the Premier’s speeches. The theme “Wars of Resistance” in Limpopo can conclusively be said to have been meant to show that the provincial black communities are becoming a homogeneous community through shared suffering, loss, and deprivation. Official statements were thus aimed at demonstrating some sort of moral primacy that would foster provincial regeneration under the ANC-led provincial government.

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Aside from being visible attempts to galvanise provincial public opinion, these remarkably monumental projects appeared to some insignificant extent, to be symptoms of an overweening and ambitious propaganda. This became quite clear when the Premier continually had to warn against vandals in his speeches. Indeed, as has been indicated, both the Makhado statue and the Sekhukhune monument have been the target of vandals. Among other things, the Premier’s warning brought to light a vague unease about the ostentatious excess characteristic of both the province and war myth and its attended symbols. It also furthered convictions, at least among those on the political left, that provincial greatness was less a matter of military bravery than of economic strength and socio-political modernisation.

A combination of factors including official rhetoric, ceremonies, and iconography in the analysis of the Limpopo province’s Warrior Traditional Leaders’ Monuments offered useful evidence for a cultural history of the wars of resistance in that region. Elevated military figures representing the selected traditional leaders eloquently show how experiences of war were meant to leave deep impressions in public memory. In the same breath, they testify to the eagerness of official governments to shape a conception of war based on heroic figures, not on moral revulsion. In conclusion, the study argues that the examination of commemorative war monuments’ potential to communicate discourses of war, sacrifice, and nationalism is only achievable when taking the whole phenomenon, including representation, inscription, location, and other vehicles, for example celebrations/rituals, into account.
