Defining national identity with heritage: The National Legacy Project

Around the time of the first general election, the Presidency and the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology were reportedly flooded with thousands of letters by individuals and organisations concerned about matters of heritage. They expressed a request for official forms of tribute to those who had made sacrifices for the fight against apartheid and encouraged the acknowledgement of significant sites and events reflecting the history and experiences of previously marginalised communities. The GNU understood such broadly shared sentiments as a mandate to make an urgent, high-profile intervention aimed at facilitating the construction of new monuments, memorials and museums, as well as encouraging the re-interpretation of existing commemorative markers and their associated historical narratives. In 1997 the Cabinet adopted the National Legacy Project, developed by the DACST in consultation with social historian Luli Callinicos.

The Legacy Project comprises a selection of nine high-priority heritage developments spread throughout the country, namely 1. the commemoration of the Zulu warriors at the battlefield of Blood River/Ncome near Dundee in KZN; 2. the Monument for the Women of South Africa at the Union Buildings in Pretoria; 3. the inclusive commemoration of the Centenary of the South African Anglo-Boer War; 4. Constitution Hill (the site of the Old Fort and the new Constitutional Court in Johannesburg); 5. the commemoration of Nelson Mandela’s home and sites associated with his youth through the Qunu Museum in the Eastern Cape; 6. a memorial to former Mozambican president Samora Machel on the rural site where his plane crashed near the border town of Mbuzini; 7. the Albert Luthuli project focused on the restoration of his home in Groutville, KZN; 8. a Khoe/San heritage route situated mostly in the Western Cape; and 9. the ambitious Freedom Park outside Pretoria.

Drawing its legitimacy both from above and below, i.e. from the ‘flood of requests’ from grassroots-level and from its endorsement at the highest level of the democratically elected government, the National
Legacy Project appears to truly encapsulate what South Africans value about the past. However, this chapter retraces the genesis of the National Legacy Project based on archival records and illustrates how the popular requests for memorialisation were carefully condensed and channeled into a few high-profile projects. I consider how these projects were selected, what their symbolic significance was perceived to be and how they reflect cornerstones of a newly defined foundation myth. It will become evident that most of the nine components became ‘part of the list’ not as a result of critical debate, consultation and conscious selection, but rather due to specific circumstances, pragmatic considerations, political compromises and technocratic processes of decision-making. I argue that the assembly of a panel of academics tasked with critical discussion and ‘consultation’ was largely a token gesture and that a very different memorial landscape could have emerged, had their recommendations been considered seriously. Ultimately the Legacy Project is not necessarily a reflection of what ‘the people’ value about the past and how they would like to see their heroes memorialised, but a highly institutionalised form of commemoration sponsored and directed by the national government in pursuit of specific aims and intentions.

**Foundation myth of the post-apartheid nation**

Contrary to the popular notion that memories inevitably fade, some memories are nurtured and intensify with the passage of time, argues Assmann (2003: 15). This applies for instance to the memory of the Holocaust, which is currently marked by an increased awareness that the living memory (Erfahrungsgedächtnis) of those who witnessed the events must not get lost, but must be transferred into cultural memory and passed on to future generations. In South Africa, I argue, it is the memory

---

1 This chapter makes extensive use of archival material sourced at the DAC in Pretoria. Although I’m very grateful that the department eventually made these documents available to me after many unsuccessful attempts over several years, it must be noted that department officials have remained very uncooperative. Since so many new monument projects in South Africa are in one way or another endorsed by the DAC, I was keen to obtain the department’s official perspective on specific heritage initiatives or official explanations for certain questions or contradictions. Despite numerous attempts, this has remained impossible, because department officials are unwilling to be interviewed or answer questions posed to them in writing. There appears to be a great sense of fear ‘to say the wrong thing’ and academic research appears to be perceived as a threat, not as an opportunity to assist or improve the government’s efforts. Hence in this and other chapters the department’s ‘voice’ is regrettably absent, apart from archival sources.