Africanising the symbolic landscape: Post-apartheid monuments as ‘critical response’

Introduction

Although the elimination of a contested commemorative object may eventually curb public awareness of the person or event it represents, as Zeller (2000: 214-5) shows with reference to German colonial monuments, public memory cannot be erased by removing statues and memorials. Iconoclastic measures also inevitably and usually permanently erase the opportunity for the public to critically engage with the respective monument, its one-sided representation of the past and its political message. In this chapter, I want to elucidate the post-apartheid strategy of balancing the existing heritage landscape in South Africa and interrogating biased historical narratives through the establishment of new monuments placed in deliberate juxtaposition with existing markers. One important consequence of the new heritage legislation and the cautious, conservationist approach towards colonial and apartheid era heritage is that the continued presence of ‘white’ monuments and the effective limitations of their adaptation to the symbolic needs of the new order justified and indeed encouraged the installation of new symbolic markers. Official pro-monument discourses insinuate that if the overwhelming bulk of commemorative markers erected by the old order cannot be replaced, it must be complemented with new statues and monuments representing previously marginalised groups, which will ‘correct’ or counter the biased historical discourses espoused by the old markers.

This chapter begins with a detailed discussion of the Blood River/Ncome monument and museum,1 tracing its genesis and establishing its

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1 In archival records, the Ncome project is referred to in various ways, e.g. as a ‘Wall of Remembrance Monument’, a ‘Monument of Reconciliation’, and the ‘Battle of Blood River/Ncome Monument’. The museum is sometimes referred to as an interpretation centre.
significance as a model and trend setter in the region and indeed in the country for the principle of countering existing, often contested monuments. The Ncome project has not only attracted extensive media interest but also considerable local and international scholarly attention (e.g. Dlamini 2001 and 2008; Girshick 2004; Schönfeldt-Aultman 2006). Dlamini and Gershick have closely analysed this monument and museum in the context of the Legacy Project and the coalition politics of the time, notably the tension between the ANC and its national agenda of reconciliation and nation building versus the IFP and partisan Zulu nationalist aims. I want to take a step further back in the genesis of the Ncome project and add another dimension to the complex interplay of political forces that in my opinion have played a key role in the emergence of Ncome. It will become evident that the dynamic which unfolded over the commemoration of this famous battle several years before the Legacy Project came into being had a defining influence on the wider politics of memory in post-apartheid South Africa and particularly in KZN up to the present day.

When it became clear that the newly established museum at Blood River would not sufficiently represent the Zulu perspective on the famous battle, Ncome was implicitly developed as a counterpoint or a ‘critical response’ to the existing Blood River monument. Although the concept of the monument as a ‘critical response’ differs from the conception of the ‘counter-monument’ (as defined by Young), both types of commemorative intervention share a crucial dependence on the ideologically charged narrative of a specific existing monument as reference point. Unlike the counter-monument, monuments as critical response are also inspired by the physical presence and aesthetic appearance of the existing monument, which they emulate, often literally imitate, despite claims to originality and ‘difference’.

This observation leads me to a consideration (in the second half of this chapter) of other examples of new monuments in KZN and elsewhere in the country. I want to highlight the complex and contradictory relationship between the desire to Africanise the symbolic landscape, which one might expect to include a search for African models of memory practice and African-based creative formats or visual languages, and the compelling power and anxious tenacity of the Eurocentric model and Western-dominated conventions of monument design. I argue that the continued presence of existing monuments not only impacts on the ideological meaning of the new commemorative markers, but also on their design.