

Human Rights Day

by Adv Sonwabile Mancotywa

Message of the ceo of the National Heritage Council, Advocate Sonwabile Mancotywa delivered at the memorial service of the victims of the Maseru Raid, East London, 21 march 2011

Distinguished guests

Families of the fallen heroes

Ladies and gentlemen

The National Heritage Council of South Africa is highly privileged to be part of such an important gathering to remember and honour the fallen heroes of our liberation struggle. They fell in pursuit of the noble objectives of freedom. Moulded by some of the most advanced political commissars and commanders, such as Chris Hani, these dynamic young men were ready and available to occupy the frontline to advance the cause for national liberation. They responded, during the most difficult times, to the clarion call for all youth and students to swell the ranks of the broad liberation movement including the liberation armies. It was because of their affiliation to the broad liberation front that they perished. They envisaged a future free from racism, oppression, repression and economic exploitation. Today, their vision of a liberated South Africa has been achieved with all the attendant challenges of transforming a complex political and economic system.

Let me take this opportunity to salute these fallen heroes. Freedom was not free, many contributed with their lives as they faced the savage assault of the apartheid regime. We extend a word of appreciation to the Amathole District Municipality, the military veterans associations (MKVA and APLAVA) in ensuring that their memory is not obliterated by the passage of time. We encourage all municipalities and provincial governments to follow the good position adopted by the Amathole Municipality. The liberation movements are the main carriers and preservers of this type of memory. The principled agenda to preserve national memory demands complimentary of efforts, sharing of strategies, knowledge and resources. We treasure the role of the families of these martyrs. To retrace the road towards freedom demand that we revisit the pain. The families were bold enough to walk with us as we repatriated the human remains of their loved ones from Lesotho. As the NHC, we strive to accord respect and affirmation to freedom fighters that died in the liberation struggle. Many individuals from the East London, Mdantsane and King Williamstown areas played a meaning full role culminating in this memorial service. This distinct space of South Africa gave us these gallant fighters.

In our midst are the representatives of the Lesotho government. As we will all recall that the South African liberation struggle got a strategic push from international solidarity, the geographical parameters of the theatre of struggle extended beyond South Africa. Lesotho, for many years, became a space of intense engagement of the apartheid regime. The citizens of that country found themselves having to make choices and decisions in support of our national cause. This came with risks and immense sacrifices, but the people of Lesotho remained resolute and firm in their collective expression of solidarity with the people of South Africa. Our mode of social and political consciousness and our growth as a people has been shaped by our interaction with fellow Africans in different countries such as Tanzania, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Zambia, etc. This connects African countries as they have a common history, common road to independence and even now as economic emancipation has become the focus.

We say thank for your solidarity and (African) humanism. As we consolidate our nation building agenda we will always be inspired by countries that were liberated before us, who were prepared to avail their land and resources in support of the fight against the apartheid regime. As recipients of internationalism and global solidarity, South Africa, in the post-liberation era, is playing a progressive and constructive role across the world, particularly in Africa and the developing world.

The importance of liberation heritage has been endorsed in multinational formations such as the African Union and SADC. In South Africa, the National Heritage Council is leading the implementation of the Liberation Heritage Route, as the main platform for the preservation of this type of cultural heritage. The Liberation Heritage Route is about the recognition of people, communities, icons and the recording of epoch-making stories and memories which had a significant impact in the South African struggle for liberation.

What evidence does South Africa have of the sacrifice and courage that went into opening the doors of the Victor Verster Prison and hoisting Nelson Mandela onto the presidency of the inaugural non-racial republic? Are there any signposts showing the footsteps or trails of our mothers, sisters and wives marching in disgust at Hans Strydom's insistence that they carry passes? What of the innocent youth that rose up in 1976 only to be mowed down by a merciless, apartheid police force? Are there any places of remembrance, where former freedom fighters take their offspring who refuse to believe their now elderly and conservative parents were once agents of change? It would be fool-hardy to suggest that nothing has to be done to memorialize our past. Most would agree, however, that a lot more still need to be done.

The National Heritage Council (NHC) works nationally to advance conservation and encourage the preservation and understanding of the heritage in its diversity in the Republic of South Africa. This includes, but not limited to, coordinating the identification, documentation, presentation and promotion of living heritage, (which includes the liberation heritage), co-ordinate the activities of public institutions involved in heritage management in an integrated manner to ensure optimum use of mobilised resources, monitor and co-ordinate the transformation of the heritage sector, with special emphasis on the development of heritage projects; promote an awareness of the history of all our peoples.

National memory is an indispensable building block and a core element in ensuring social cohesion and a common national identity. Soundly etched on the national imperatives of nation building, the Liberation Heritage Route will point out those aspects which foster a positive national identity.

History demands that we explore the uniqueness of the South African liberation struggle so that it is treasured by generations to come. The Liberation Heritage Route seeks to capture the historic narratives which will be expressed in different but networked liberation heritage sites across the country. The core elements which characterize the current implementation of the LHR are:

- Accessing the memory through research and community consultation
- Exploring possibilities of translating the rich heritage resources into economic capital
- Integrating the LHR in the planning systems of state institutions
- Ensuring profiling and strategic visibility of the project

World Heritage Site nomination process It will be a register of the multi-layered experiences. A lot of oral evidence about what preceded and what transpired during the Maseru raid is in the memory of many people. We need a more narrative writing about this experience. The storyline of the struggle should be told with all its elements. Such elements should capture the movement and continuity of the liberation struggle, the continuity of actions, exchange of ideas and critical reflection on the road traversed the dialogue across the country and the trans-national co-ordination of the liberation struggle. Rigorous and objective research is, therefore, required to ensure the credibility of the Liberation Heritage Route. Expert knowledge has to be utilized as we map out the trail. But, we will also implore the experts not to rely solely on existing literature and archival material, but also go out onto the field and interview communities and individuals that were involved in our heroic struggles. There are a lot of stories out there that have been written down. Some of the existing written accounts are inaccurate because they were compiled with the purpose of serving an oppressive political project. It is incumbent on researchers to tell the truth as it manifests itself.

The NHC is profiling the Liberation Heritage Route at an international level. Our work towards the inscription of this route as a World Heritage Site is part of our contribution to global memory. Within SADC we intend collaborating with all countries to realize the vision of the African Union of a continental liberation heritage route and properly researched and documented experiences of Africans of their quest for freedom. The fallen heroes we are remembering today are a symbolic representation of what is possible when governments co-operate to preserve and protect our liberation heritage.

The National Heritage Council would like to re-affirm its unwavering support to this initiative by the municipality and their expressed association and commitment to the Liberation Heritage Route. This project invokes the essence of our patriotism.

The announcement of the Liberation Heritage Route by the State President in this year's State of the Nation Address marks a major step forward by national government. As a consequence, various organs of the state and civil society will pay special attention to the growth of this previously marginalized type of cultural heritage.

The NHC is leading the discourse on the need to address the fate of heritage sites in private hands. The primary value of these sites is their symbolic significance to the nation. A site such as Waaihoek in Bloemfontein, which is closely associated with the formation of Africa's oldest liberation movement, the African National Congress is a case in point. In the last two years that the National Heritage Council has embarked on recording the anti-apartheid history, new challenges have also risen. Primary amongst which is the historic tension between economic development and heritage. Often-time heritage suffers because the dominant convention is that it does not yield tangible benefits. It's just history, people often claim. This is the attitude that threatens to erode the historical significance of Mupungubwe, a site of one of Africa's ancient civilization. Business-people seem determined to open up a coal mine near-by. They've silenced objections and rallied support from the community, by citing the economic benefits that will accrue from the mine. This argument is persuasive especially to an economically depressed community.

Heritage and economic development, however, are not mutually exclusive. Heritage is a major tourist attraction, and tourism itself is increasingly emerging as a key contributor in our economy. Most importantly, heritage sites such as Mapungubwe give us more than just revenue. They're an invaluable source of education, making us a lot more knowledgeable about our potential. That knowledge can spur us on to achieve even more. We are arguing that this requires a major national government intervention, and in that regard we have made a submission to the National Minister of Arts and Culture, Paul Mashatile.

The banning of freedom songs in South Africa is a major problem. Our pattern of remembering as Africans is through song, poetry/praise singing and dance. There are liberation songs that are simply sacred as rituals. Every epoch of the liberation struggle is represented by a song or set of songs. Just listening to those songs one is taken through a journey of the long history of the liberation struggle, through all its twists and turns. Songs are a repository of our history. These songs, however, uncomfortable, are our defence against forgetting. We have registered our opposition to the banning of songs. It is foolhardy to ban liberations songs that remind us of an uncomfortable past.

Lastly, we call upon certain members of our communities to desist from vandalizing sites and symbols of historic significance. Many sites such as the grave of the late PAC Robert Sobukwe have been vandalized; the site of the Duncan Village Massacre, Emlotheni in Port Elizabeth and other sites have suffered a similar fate. Fifty years from now these sites of significance must remain intact through active protection by government and communities.

The National Heritage Council pays tribute to these freedom fighters who paid with their lives in order for us to be free. We will never forget the inter-connectedness and unity of purpose of the struggle for the liberation of the entire African continent and why South Africans are one with the rest of the peoples of Africa in their common yearning for a better life for all.

Their souls should rest in everlasting peace.

I thank you.