

Touching memory: The use of the Robben Island Memories Project to contextualise artefact collections

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Abstract

Robben Island Museum has created a memories project to record the intangible heritage of its artefacts that is attached to a site. This particular paper will explore how memories of former residents and prisoners were used to contextualise artefacts that have not been well documented.

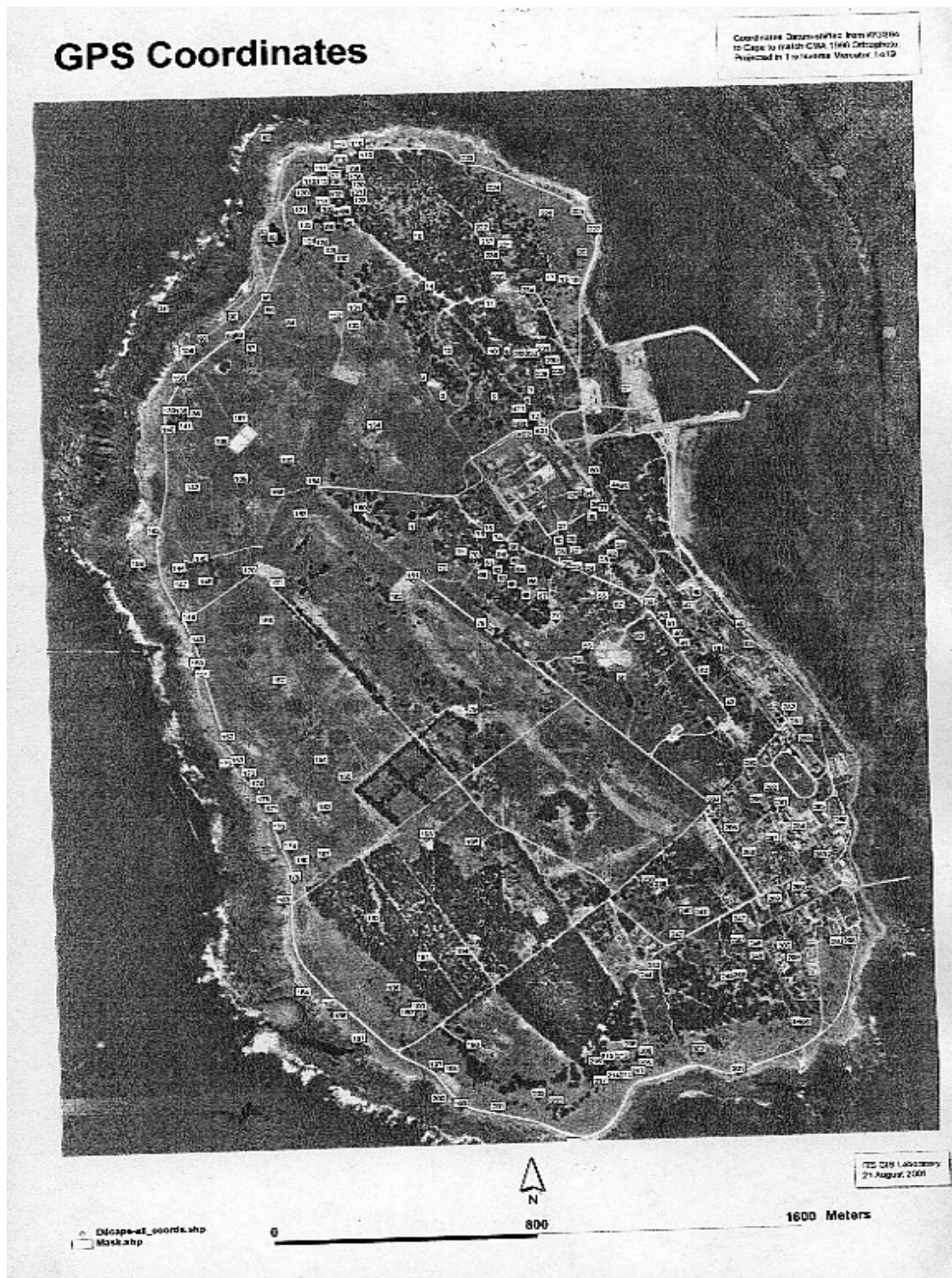
The bulk of the paper will draw on footage which will illustrate some of the ways in which memories and artefacts can be combined to give meaning that highlights the inextricable relationship between the tangible and the intangible aspects of heritage.

Background and origin of the RIM artefact collection

Robben Island is well known for its history as a place of banishment and it is worldwide known as a place for the imprisonment of political prisoners of South Africa's pre-democratic state. The cabinet of the first democratically elected government in South Africa made the recommendation to declare Robben Island a national monument and a national museum on the 4th September 1996. The museum officially opened to the public on the 1st January 1997. The collections of the Robben Island Museum (RIM) comprises of movable and immovable material. The movable includes all artefacts that were left behind by Correctional Services during their reign of managing the Island as a prison and the immovable material comprises of all the buildings that is built on the site.

All objects that were left behind by Correctional Services were considered as the museum's collection. Artefacts were collected from all possible sites on the island and this specifically led to one problem that the museum experienced with reference to its

artefact collection, i.e. the background information relating to these collections in storage was not well documented. For the museum this meant that the object- or artefact is viewed in isolation, creating thus a sense of evidence detached from its possible cultural significance.



This picture above indicates the different sites where artefacts were collected.

The role of the artefact and memory within the museum

An artefact according to Hooper-Greenhill (2000:106) is defined as a thing made by people, something which demonstrates skill and human intervention". Within the museum context artefacts are referred to as collections. These collections are an accumulation of objects that are gathered for study, comparison or for exhibition. Kavanagh (2000:109) concludes that artefacts within a museum play a significant role but, "...museums find themselves with stores that are nearly full of collections, often lacking in documentation, ...[which] makes the prospects for museum work that lifts meaning and facilitates new forms of understanding somewhat...depressing."

Solani (2000:26) furthermore states "museums portray the past through narratives/exhibitions and communicate the public memory visually by using artefacts/objects, photographs which they authenticate as carriers of the past". The usage of memory in museums is about recording oral tradition and using it for the museums documentation, educational, informative purposes. Often museums refer to making use of memory as oral history, oral testimony or audio-visual records. Literature on the subject refers to memory as oral testimony or history, but for the purpose of this paper these concepts will be used interchangeably.

Memory as a concept can be defined from many subject angles and for paper, memory will be defined within the context of the Robben Island Museum. I am specifically focusing on Vygotsky's theory on human memory that reveals that two types of memory exist, namely, natural and social memory. Natural memory according to him is the kind of memory, which dominates in the behaviour of people, as it is "close to perception because it arises out of the direct influence of external stimuli upon human beings". He however says that other kinds of memories can coexist with natural memory. This is demonstrated "through simple aids such as the tying of a knot, the beginning of writing

and simple memory aids...” known as social memory. Social memory according to Vygotsky (1930) makes use of “external aids for memory where the stimulus response process is replaced by a mediated act where the external self-generated stimuli modify the individual behaviour”. This is also referred to as collective memory where groups of people engage with artefacts and talk about past experiences, probing one another’s memory.

The RIM Memories Project

The Memories Project was established in 1997 as part of RIM’s Development Plan. The Development plan of RIM focuses on the development of Robben Island as a museum strategically and therefore foresees certain projects that needs to be done within medium to long term. This plan in its development framework defines Cultural Significance pertaining to Robben Island as:

Interrelated historical, social, political, technological or spiritual values for past, present and future generations; meanings embodied in the place itself, its fabric and setting, its use, associations, meanings, records and related places; the meanings associated with objects and artefacts that reflect people’s memories of the island.

(The Robben Island Conservation and use Plan policy document (2002: 33).

Research into the history of Robben Island Prison and those incarcerated forms part of the RIM development plan. Because RIM continually strives to do research on the history and expanding collections, the “memories task” is made even more urgent by the fact that ex-political prisoners want to see their contributions acknowledged as comprehensive as possible, and because the old people who are our libraries will not be around forever” (Robben Island Memories Project, 2001).

The RIM memory project is aimed at documenting relevant information that applies to artefact, site and testimonies of ex-political prisoners in accordance to the Museum’s mission. The Heritage Resources and Environmental Department intends at the

development and implementation of formal structures of recording history so that the past of Robben Island can be researched. In order to do this, different baseline studies were conducted on the site (Robben Island) to determine any activity that took place on Robben Island that might have any impact on the movable –or immovable collection. These baseline studies provided the foundation for further research if future developments of the sites on the island are to be made. One example is the renovation/restoration of the Maximum-security prison, which is viewed as an important site of memory. This site is part of the RIM, memories project and involves “reference groups of ex- political prisoners who share their experiences and memories of the various sites and “spanne” or work teams they were part of” (2000). Any renovation/ restoration to this site should factor in any past activity that took place, to avoid the deletion of any historical layer.

The RIM memories project embraces 3 outcomes. These are

- 1) An ex-political database, which holds, collected information on the biography of ex-political prisoners that served a political prison sentence on Robben Island.
- 2) A site register which serves as a means to collate and to interpret the information of Robben Island sites to protect the island’s significance and to provide appropriate and meaningful experiences to visitors and to collate information to the layered history of the island. The site register is a database that contains information about the sites on Robben Island.

These sites refer to places on Robben Island where activities have been conducted in the past and the register describes more than 700 sites including sites, buildings, routes, quarries, etc.) The site register has “analysed sites individually in terms of a description, its chronology, its context and linkage as well as its significance and vulnerability” (2002: 10)

- 3) Information to the artefact collection that is based on the recorded memory with reference to the village and the ex-political prisoners experiences is to be collated to any artefact that forms part of the museums permanent artefact collection. This

information will then be captured to the artefact collections management database, which is to become online in the near future.

How RIM Memories Project is used to contextualise its artefact collections

For RIM integrating information with regards to sites, artefact and memory would look like the following: (a) the artefact, (b) the site and (c) the memory.

(a) The site, e.g. The Maximum prison, will have much information gathered going back to what era it was built, for what reason and who used it.

(b) The Artefact refers to objects, which is included in the inventory document of RIM, a document that lists all artefacts found on sites on Robben Island.

(c) Memory refers to the recollection of an individual or individuals past experience(s) with the site and or artefact(s), which thus puts a narrative to the tangible (the prison and the artefact), through linking the intangible (the individual's memory). The significance of the artefacts in this site is determined through memory, based on the interviews that were conducted with people who engaged with the site over time.

In an interview with a key member of the RIM memories team the question of whether the presence of artefacts would have made the remembering process easier reflected that "...They sometimes explain/ draw something for which there is no artefact. However the presence of the artefact reveals more information". Tongo (2003).



B-Section Reference Group

The photograph above shows how ex-political prisoners demonstrate and reminisce around objects and shows how the artefact was used. (In this case, a prison cup)

In the following videoclip Napoleon Letsuko, an ex-political prisoner, talks about the “piano”, a fingerprint pad that were used to record the fingerprints of ex-political prisoners the moment they entered the Records Room. After their fingerprints were recorded they were registered in the prison books before they were issued their prison card and allocated to a cell. His memory talks us through what they called the artefact and how it was used. The ex-prisoner(s) talks about their experiences when they were incarcerated in the prison and recalls information which are prompted through the object(s) by identifying the artefact and shows how it was used and through this, significance is placed around the artefacts. One can see how memory are prompt through artefacts and sites which serves as “triggers”. Significant information are sourced which can be linked to the artefact and –or site of the Robben Island Collection.

The information that is researched and recorded, is entered onto different databases, (site register and collections management database) and can be integrated with the help of an GIS system-or linking the different databases so that whenever research is done the system can search over different database to retrieve relevant data.

The Memories Project is found to be very useful to RIM, as it is a way to put context to the museums’ artefact collections. However, RIM recognises, that many of the ex-political prisoners, as well as ex-warders and villagers have already reached old age and the loss of their stories to the museum could mean, loss in information, especially to the artefact collection. The quality of information that is produced is also of great importance because poor quality of information gathering may lead to the creation of a backlog and the waste of resources. Memory however is subjective and one need to remember that each artefact speak of the memory of the person(s) that was interviewed. The above mentioned reflects some of the problems one encounter when working with memory and memory related work

The memory of the ex-political prisoners and ex- warders adds significance to the artefacts in the context the museum archivist, the written record, the exhibition writer, the museum guide and the visitor. The RIM memories Project is the methodology of recording people's memory about past events so that it is used for the museum's documentation and educational programmes and it enrich RIM's artefact collection that lacks important information within the context the object finds itself.

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