Monumental complexity: searching for the meaning of a selection of South African monuments

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In this article I will try to answer two basic questions concerning a selection of representative South African monuments erected by different groups adhering to various ideologies. Firstly, what truths and values did patrons and designers intend to express in the Rhodes Memorial (Cape Town), the Afrikaans Language Monument (Paarl), the Women's Monument (Bloemfontein), the Voortrekker Monument (Pretoria), the Samora Machel Monument (Mbuzini), the Heroes' Monument (Durban) and Freedom Park (Pretoria)? Secondly, how did their meaning change over time on various issues such as gender, language, ethics, site, historiographry, the dialectics between different monuments, the problematics of heroism, as well as ethnic difference, especially when viewed from a postcolonial vantage point? However, the notions of "truth" and "values" in the ideological context of monuments are ambiguous, as can be ascertained from a brief survey of the methodologies applied and conclusions drawn by researchers representing those disciplines that most often deal with the subject matter of monuments. These are: art history, architectural history, cultural history, history, postcolonial studies, and occasionally also practitioners of other disciplines such as philosophy and anthropology.
Key words: South African monuments, postcoloniaism

Monumentale kompleksiteit: 'n soek na die betekenis van geselekteerde Suid-Afrikaanse monument
In hierdie artikel poog ek om twee basiese vrae te beantwoord rakende 'n geselekteerde groep verteenwoordigende monumente wat deur verskillende groepe wat verskeie ideologiee aanhang, opgerig is. Eerstens, watter waarhede en waardes wou die borge en ontwerpers in die Rhodes-gedenkteken (Kaapstad), die Afrikaanse Taalmonument (Paarl), die Vroue-monument (Bloemfontein), die Voortrekker-monument (Pretoria), die Samora Machel-monument (Mbuzini), die Helde-monument (Durban) en Vryheidspark (Pretoria) uitdruk? Tweedens, hoe het hulle betekenis ten opsigte van kwessies soos geslag, taal, etiek, terrein, geskedskrywing, die dialektiek tussen verskillende monumente, die problematiek van heroisme, asook etniese verskille oor tyd verander, veral vanuit 'n poskoloniale standpunt betrag? Die begrippe "waarheid" en "waardes" bly nietemin in die ideologiese konteks van monumente dubbelsinnig, soos afgelei kan word uit 'n oorsig van die gevolgtrekkings, gegrond op verskillende metodologiee, van navorsers wat verskillende dissiplines verteenwoordig en in die algemeen meer dikwels oor monumente skryf, te wete kunsgeskiedenis, argitektuurgeskiedenis, kultuurgeskiedenis, geskiedenis, postkoloniale studies, en af en toe ook die beoefenaars van ander dissiplines soos wysbegeerte en antropologie.
Sleutelwoorde: Suid-Afrikaanse monumente, postkolonialisme

A consistent slogan that appears on memorials is "Lest we forget". Remembering and forgetting are both faculties of our imagination which make humanity creative and enable us to produce art. Unfortunately, it also enables us to churn out non-art and kitsch. The function of memory is complex - it can be personal or communal - and in both cases it can be highly selective and misleading regarding the truth of the events recalled. However, when discussing what monuments and memorials are intended to remind a society or nation of, we are dealing with communal memory, defined so aptly by I Hacking (1995: 200): "Memory has always had political or ideological overtones, but each epoch has found its own meaning in memory." Memory influences the interpretation of history and therefore it is not surprising that the past keeps on changing as Stanford Levinson (1998) attests. D Thelen (1993: 119) also reminds us that "A memory is not a fixed or fully-formed record of past reality but an invention that can be assembled with many contents and styles." While these comments on memory are psychologically true, especially in our post-colonial epoch, the designers of monuments inevitably cast a specific memory in stone. The structure as such cannot be modified constantly, but its meaning can be reinterpreted, even completely negated by future viewers who do not share the identity of the designers. I concur with Krystyna von Henneberg (2004: 41) that "Even more than buildings, monuments and public spaces are the least defensible and

least easily concealed statements of official intent. They are open to reinterpretation by the literate and the illiterate, the custodian and the vandal." They cannot escape being an integral part of an ongoing cultural discourse and being left to the tender mercies of societal change.

The objective of my paper is to establish, from a postcolonial[1] vantage point, how various South African societies with various cultural and ideological identities have tried to establish their political faith in their monuments and memorials, designed - presumably - in the hope that they will be images around which the tribes for which they were intended would cohere. A selected group will be discussed here from the point of view that the concept "meaning", as referring to these monuments and memorials, would also be an umbrella term for the "truth" and "value" they are supposed to embody symbolically.

Even though monuments and memorials, as architectural structures, may have some crude or naive exterior symbolic value, they cannot be seen as an artistic genre or specifically as func-tional architecture, even though they may sometimes have an interior function as a museum or even a place of worship. It is actually a political genre with propagandistic intent which would make it futile to discuss them as art, or architecture. It serves a better purpose to view them as a cultural resource with a bias toward a propagandistic intent for influencing the remembrance of a patriotic group of a past event or heroic figure(s) in a prescribed way.

Rhodes Memorial, Cape Town

Figure 1
Rhodes Memorial, Cape Town
(Photo: EA Mare)

Besides three lesser statues of Cecil John Rhodes (1853-1902) in Cape Town, the Rhodes Memorial on Devil's Peak (figure 1) is a most impressive memorial to this English-born South African politician (1853-1902), designed by Sir Herbert Baker. As described by Paul Maylam (2002: 144) this memorial

> would surely have satisfied [Rhodes'] yearning for immortality. Its prominent site and high visibility
> gives Rhodes an enormous, looming presence over Cape Town. It is a thoroughly imperial monument,

embodying a conjunction of architecture and distance. In Watts' statue the rider, reigning in his horse , peers into the distance. And like so many statues of Rhodes he faces northeast - the gaze of the empire-builder seeking further opportunities for colonisation on the road to Cairo.

Figure 2
Cartoon of Rhodes striding the continent of Africa
(Source: Wikipedia)

A cartoon reveals better what Rhodes' intentions in Africa were. It shows him rather brutally striding the continent of Africa (figure 2). If ever there was a colonial metanarrative, this is it, embodied in the ideal of the British empire as victorious from the Cape to Cairo.

How should we remember the man and his deeds? According to the idealised neoclassical architectural setting by Baker, or in terms of his deeds that are surely loathed by people who call Africa their home? Maylam (2002: 145), a professor at Rhodes University, states that

> the brand-name of Rhodes [has] become increasingly separated from the historical figure of Rhodes. It is interesting that when in 1994 there was a debate in Senate about changing the name of Rhodes University, nobody as far as I know defended the name on the grounds that Rhodes was a heroic figure. The case for the defence rested on the brand-value of the name.

The brand-name is also identified with the sexist bursaries that Rhodes bequeathed to Oxford University scholars. Quite convincingly Maylam (2002: 145) concludes: "In many respects he was an enigmatic, paradoxical figure."

Afrikaans Language Monument, Paarl

The first language monument was erected at Burgersdorp, Cape Province. The constitution of this province which was granted self-government in 1854 stated that only English may be used in its parliament. Many petitions were submitted to parliament to allow the use of Dutch. Jan Hendrik Hofmeyer succeeded only in 1882 to have the necessary language amendment made to the constitution. Since Burgersdorp played such an important role in the recognition of Dutch, a language monument was unveiled there on 18 January 1893 - of which the sculptor remains

unknown. It shows a young woman standing on a solid granite pedestal holding a tablet in her left hand to which she points with a right finger (figure 3). The inscription on the tablet reads: "De overwinning der Hollandse Taal". However, during the Anglo-Boer War the monument was vandalised several times and then pushed off its pedestal in 1901. After the war Lord Milner had it removed completely and buried in a secret place in King William's Town where it was found in 1939. In the mean time a replica of the sculpture was erected in Burgersdorp in 1907 (see Oberholster 1972: 187-88).

Figure 3
The first Afrikaans language monument erected at Burgersdorp
(Source: Oberholster 1972: 188)

Obviously the use of Dutch has lost its meaning as an ideological or political issue in South Africa. Not so the rise of Afrikaans during the twentieth century. Thus, when it was decided to honour the language with a monument a much more abstract structure, based on a strict geometric grid was erected, masculine in appearance and not an easy prey for vandals even though the enemies of the language described it in insidious terms that were equal to the physical violence that the Burgersdorp sculpture suffered (figure 4).

What did the designer, architect Jan van Wyk, wish to symbolise? Clearly more than just the language because the symbolism pertains to all ethnic groups that ever spoke the language. A museums web page (explains the symbolism:

> A COLONNADE of three elements to the left or west of the approach symbolizes the languages and cultures of the enlightened West. These structures, closely juxtaposed, begin at a height and diminish in size and then descend in a curve to ascend again into the main upward sweep.
> A PODIUM with three semi spheres to the right, or to the eastern side of the approach, represents magical Africa with its indigenous languages and cultures, and develops into a lesser curve which joins the main upward movement. The confluence of these two curves forms a bridge which is the base of the main hyperbola.
> This, rising up into space, signifies the coming into being and the development of Afrikaans. A language and culture neither western nor African, but Malayan, is represented by a low wall in the middle third of the main steps to add to the general scale.

> Together with the main column, placed in the same life-giving pool with bubbling fountain, rises a structure symbolising our Republic: free, yet encompassed by and open to Africa; free in form and reminiscent of the west, whose cultures helped to establish it. It symbolizes two languages and two mutual enriching cultures, yet one nation, facing the future with courage and resolution, deeply conscious of the presence of an Omniscient Being, guiding us to our destiny in the turmoil of our time.

So what is "our" destiny at the present time? It seems that Afrikaans, which is acknowledged as one of the eleven South African official languages, has lost its status as being equal with English.

Figure 4
Afrikaans Language Monument, Paarl
(**Photo:** EA Mare)

Women's Monument, Bloemfontein

Like monuments all over the world, all existing South African monuments have been criticised in one way or another. A notable example is the Women's Memorial in Bloemfontein which was dedicated on Dingaan's Day, 16 December 1913 (figure 5). It commemorates the Boer women and children who died in concentration camps during the Anglo-Boer War. Quite cynically Liz Stanley (2002: 5) remarks: "State commemoration of women are very rare - the state in whatever country rarely bothers with commemorating women." However, her assessment of the value of the monument is only partial an in her article. Her focus is:

> Two silences in commemoration from this War - a partial one concerning children and a more total one concerning all black people [...] in relation to the Vrouemonument built in 1913, the Gedenktuin or Garden of Remembrance constructed during the 1960s and 70s, and some post-1994 initiatives, and also related to ideas about citizenship and belonging.

This monument is representative of only a part of the suffering caused by the war, as Johan Snyman already explained in a well-argued 1996 article (not mentioned by Stanley). In this case the problem is not aesthetic (since it is artistically probably our best monument), but ethical.

Figure 5
Women's Memorial, Bloemfontein
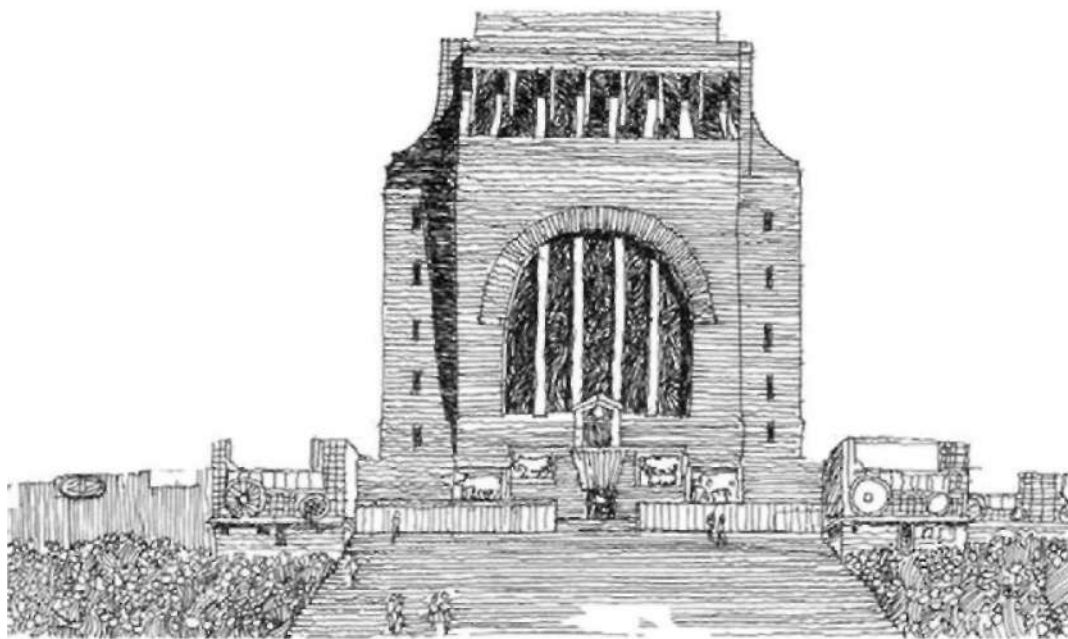(Drawing by A Rapanos)

Figure 6
Voortrekker Monument, Pretoria
(Drawing by A Rapanos)

Voortrekker Monument, Pretoria

This monumental edifice, which is a very prominent landmark that stands out on the Pretoria skyline, was designed by architect Gerhard Moerdyk, an exemplary Afrikaner nationalist (fig-

ure 6). When it was inaugurated in 1948 it basically symbolised two important events: the Great Trek which freed the Dutch settlers from British rule at the Cape and the Day of the Covenant which was celebrated on 16 December, the day of the Voortrekker victory over Dingaan's warriors at Bloedrivier. The latter is the crux of the interior design because on that day a ray of sunlight shines onto the symbolic sarcophagus at lower floor level from an opening in the dome.

This monument, adjacent to the old Pretoria-Johannesburg road and elevated on one of the ridges of Pretoria (see Mare: 2006) has been declared a "heritage site". This means that, according to the National Heritage Resources Act, a site will be effectively considered a heritage site purely on the strength of a declaration made to that effect by a provincial heritage resource authority (National Heritage Resources Act 1999: 8).

What does this monument mean today, after the collapse of British colonialism and Afrikaner nationalism? Kruger and Van Heerden (2005: 237) discuss it in terms of a "heritage site" which is defined as "the chief focus of patriotism and a prime lure for tourism." This statement seems to invert the dignity of the Voortrekker Monument which has been privatised and turned into a museum with few of its connotations as an Afrikaner shrine.

The question remains: how can a site such as the hill chosen for the Voortekker Monument be a heritage site if nothing of historical importance ever happened there. It was simply chosen for its strategic position and high visibility from the southern entrance roads into the city (Mare 2006).

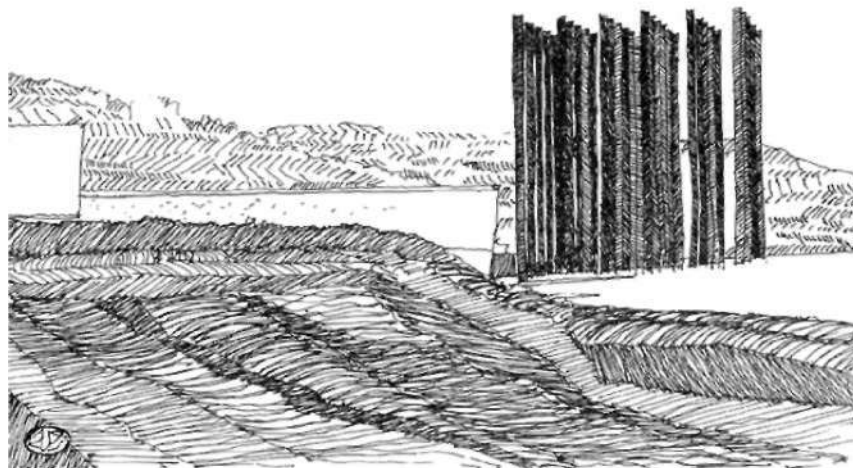**Samora Machel Monument, Mbuzini**

Figure 7
Samora Machel Monument, Mbuzini
(Drawing by A Rapanos)

The Machel Monument at Mbuzini, is situated in the RSA-Mozambique-Swaziland corner where an impoverished community lives (figure 7). On the night of 19 October 1986 a Russian plane transporting President Samora Machel of Mozambique crashed in this remote Lobombo mountain area. While some pro-RSA government media speculated about the possibility of a pilot error, most antigovernment voices joined in the chorus claiming South African sabotage. However, the Margo Commission which was appointed to investigate the accident found no

evidence to lend substance to the allegations that the apartheid regime was guilty of wrongdoing (see http:/www.polity.org.za/govdocs/commissions/1998/trc/2chap6a.htm). Nevertheless a monument to Machel was erected in Mbuzini, serving as one of the examples of the new history-making process in SA, since the inscription in three languages on the monument blames the apartheid regime for the catastrophe. In this regard Chris van Vuuren (2003) states in a paper read at the AASA Conference in May 2000:

> The debate on the need to evaluate and redress imbalances on monuments and museums [in SA] has been continuing for some time. An example was the Wits History Workshop, entitled "Myths, monuments and museums", held in July 1991. The Southern African Museums Association has also debated the issue of colonialist paradigms in museum exhibits and policy. The issue involved art history, anthropology, archaeology and history in particular. The table is set for new representations and ideologies ....

Heroes' Monument, Durban

The winning entry of the 2006 competition for a Heroes' Monument was by an Architects Collaborative team, led by Paul Mikula (figure 8). According to Sabine Marshall (2003: 83-4) the monument

> is conceptualized not as an object, but as part of a larger urban context, upon which it is envisaged to make a positive impact - a trigger for urban renewal. The design draws on local African traditions, specifically Zulu traditional spatial formations, albeit into a modern idiom. The jury rejected Eurocentric designs outright as inappropriate in view of the multicultural diversity of the local population ....

Figure 8
Heroes' Monument, Durban
(Source: *South African Journal of Art History,* 2003)

The design shows an oval shape, suggesting the layout of a traditional Zulu homestead, its boundary demarcated by a series of tree-like columns with lighting from above and below to suggest a ring of fire. Instead of a cattle kraal in the centre there is an amphitheatre for 8000 people. A granite Wall of Remembrance encloses the seating area. On top of the wall it was proposed to place a sculpture by Hilton Gaza, entitled "Bones unite", suggesting that all people are

equal in death. More controversial still was the idea of removing the nearby statue of General Louis Botha by Anton van Wouw from its pedestal and placing it on the ground. The Heroes' Monument is dedicated to "heroes", the black people who died in the struggle against apartheid. Juxtaposing it with Botha's image, lowered from its status as a hero in a colonial age, would lead to a jarring dialectic.

Freedom Park, Pretoria

Since the African National Congress (ANC) came to power in South Africa there has been talk of appropriating the lower level of the Voortrekker Monument in Pretoria, built by the Afrikaners to commemorate their ancestors' trek from the Cape to escape British rule, for a permanent exhibition to commemorate the party's struggle against white minority rule. This would mean that the ANC intended to appropriate for themselves the very thing they oppose, that is Afrikaner domination as denoted by a monumental fortress which still draws more visitors than any other monument or museum in South Africa. Indeed, if that had happened the spaces of Afrikaner and the ANC's struggle would have coexisted in one monumental structure, the hegemony of either remaining unresolved. Instead, the ANC decided on planning a new monument to the freedom South Africans obtained by the struggle against apartheid — and other ideological struggles (figure 9).
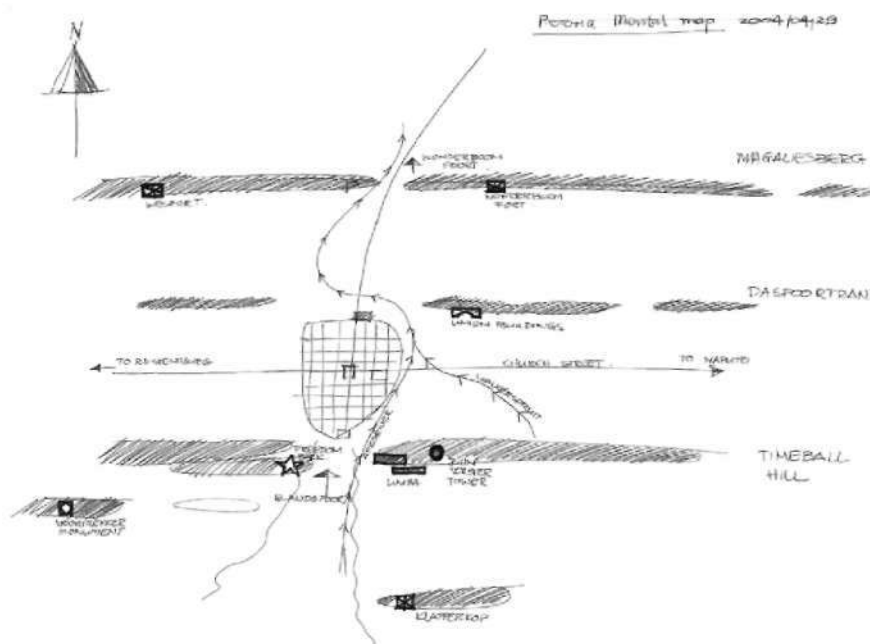

Figure 9:
A mental map of Pretoria showing the ridges cluttered with monuments and monumental structures such as Freedom Park.

A dialectic nevertheless seems to inform the postcolonial ethos in that post-apartheid monuments should be in the proximity of - if not physically inside - a "colonial" monument, as is clearly the case of the choice of the Freedom Park site on a Pretoria ridge, from which the Voortrekker Monument is in full view.

More than the Afrikaans Language Monument, which represents the triumph of a suppressed language, the Women's Monument, which symbolises the suffering of Boer women and children in British concentration camps, and the Voortrekker Monument, which celebrates the Afrikaner Volk, Freedom Park - one may say - is intended as the ANC's national therapy for the

anti-apartheid struggle's traumas. Its physical layout was awarded a design prize, but it seems strange that the design in the form of an indigenous garden with African symbolic features should be constructed on one of the sensitive ridges that constitutes Pretoria's sense of place (see Mare 2006). No "garden" layout can compensate for either the scars caused by the costly entrance road or the brutal retaining wall of reinforced concrete constructed to hold the filling necessary to level a large enough site on the naturally sloping ridge. Now, with dozens of poles bristling in line on top of the ridge the image of destruction of a natural site is complete.

While the physical and ideological design of Freedom Park has been generally praised - most probably in line with post-colonial political correctness - a critical voice is that of Rodney Warwick (2007: 10) who states: "From the beginning, Freedom Park's official rationale is a confusing bundle of historical non-sequiturs, inconsistencies. Myths and blatant political bias. The R716 million price tag is markedly unjustified, particularly when paid from our taxes."

After a concise review of the various freedoms celebrated at the park, he states:

Does Freedom Park really justify its title when so much of what it portrays as "freedom", still constitutes the subject of considerable historical debate?
Does the park in any way serve a purpose of reconciliation? If so, how, when its interpretation of events is clearly so skewed towards the ANC's twisted version of recent history?
Our tax money would have been far better spent on a "reconciliation Park" underpinned by a consistent and historically accurate theme.

Many questions remain unanswered, but a final one for this article is appropriate: Who are the "heroes" of freedom in South Africa? In connection with Freedom Park a more escalated controversy than in the case of the Heroes' Monument rages concerning the names to be inscribed on the Wall of Remembrance. If Cuban soldiers who died in Angola merit the honour, what about white South African policemen who died keeping law and order and protecting civilians during the years when states of emergency were declared by the previous government?

Colonial rule in South Africa alienated many of its citizens, but postcolonial commemoration, as in the case of Freedom Park, leaves many with the feeling of no longer being at home in their country.

Coda: Indigenous rock art sites as real heritage sites

While colonial attitudes towards the Bushmen, who created the rock art of Southern Africa, have changed, TA Dowson and JD Lewis-Williams issue a new challenge to us at this juncture in South African history, not only to ask ourselves what, "when the hitherto bowdlerised colonial past is being re-thought, is the art saying?" (Dowson and Lewis-Williams 1993: 58). They argue that

rather than deal with an exclusive, distances "ethnic" history, Bushmen exhibits should, at present, deal with the *principles* of first, colonial conquest and denigration and, secondly, the rehabilitation of *all* oppressed communities. Very few viewers today say, "Those were my people", but many can see oppression and the definition of inferiority in what happened to the Bushmen and their art (Dowson and Lewis-Williams 1993: 58).

Since the Bushmen culture is memorialised in the slogan of the South African national coat of arms, why can we not preserve real natural heritage sites without erecting monumental artificial structures on them? Why can we not preserve sites where even, or especially the Bushmen can also feel at home? The Bushmen should be especially honoured in our day and age because they are the one group, par excellence, who never left a heritage of environmental degradation to remind us of their presence. However, those who forcefully destroyed the context of their

artistic heritage by dislodging their rock art to cart the stones to museums destroyed its meaning (figure 10).

Figure 10
Removing rock engravings under the supervision of Emil Holub (date unknown)
(Source: Oberholster 1972: 199)

Now that the past is being rethought, evoking the question by Dowson and Lewis-Williams quoted above, the last word in the matter of the meaning of monuments is that heritage sites cannot be created artificially, but those that exist can be destroyed. Postcolonial discourse has rightfully problematised the righteousness of colonial rulers who, as an alien force, appropriated foreign territory. However, the discourse about the injustice done to subjected indigenous peoples who have since regained their freedom and self-rule does not make sense when waged on the level of monuments: by degrading existing ones and erecting new ones. Ideological structures and statues of rulers and heroes merely symbolise the power of the political patron, not any nuanced historical truth. I therefore repeat my previous argument about monuments:

> Since monuments can never rise directly out of a context which merits remembrance, they are planned in retrospect according to ideas that hindsight makes meaningful. Therefore, monuments need to be replaced by memorials, and memorials could most profitably be replaced by libraries. Alberto Manguel (2000: 259) [infers that] the living memory of the Holocaust [...] could not be made of dead stones. "Such a monument would simply be a library," he states. History contained in books could indeed be a lasting memorial to an event which defies representation. The substitute library building could be both a functional and an aesthetic asset in the life-world where the events to be celebrated or remembered took place. (Mare 2002: 23)

My plea is finally for South Africans to stop wasting resources by building monuments for propagandistic purposes which polarise people, and to turn to the more worth-while pursuits of art and culture as a way of healing ideological divisions.[2]

Notes

1   Joseph Childers & Gary Hentzi (1995: 234) define postcolonialism as a historical phase: "Postcolonialism refers to a historical phase undergone by many of the world's countries after the decline of the European empires by the mid-twentieth century. Following the dismantling of the empires, the people of many Asian, African, and Caribbean states were left to restore their precolonial culture, assess the cultural, linguistic, legal, and economic effects of colonial

rule, and create new governments and natioanl identities. Postcolonial literature*centers on the conflicts and contradictions, as well as the advantages and sense of liberation, that accompany life as an individual in a postcolonial state."

Postcolonialism is also applied as a theory as defined by David Macey (2001: 304): "[Postcolonialism is] a broad tendency in literary [and related] studies which seeks to analyze the global effects of European colonialism. The term 'postcolonial' can be slightly misleading. In general, it refers not, as might be expected, to the period following the independence of the former colonies, but to the period that began with colonization itself."

One could argue that both definitions quoted above above are correct and should not be seen as mutually exclusive: Postcolonialism is an historical phase on the one hand and a growing and diverse field of questions, refusals, resistances and analyses since the very first critical response

from the colonised under conditions of colonisation.

The present article is being written within postcolonialism as a historical phase in South Africa. It questions colonial manoeuvres in the period before that phase and thus contributes to the field of critical response to colonialism. The first definition above only thinks of postcolonialism as an historical phase, i.e. in linear fashion as if colonialism is at some point over once and for all. But it is never over and will always continue, often with the colonised becoming somebody else or something else, since it seems a normalcy of civilization to be imperial. The second definition above understands that to some extent, postcolonialism is already present alongside and as its critique in the very first instances of colonialism.

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