Preservation and interpretation of intangible cultural heritage in sites associated with cultural significance. A case study of Robben Island Museum/ World Heritage sites.

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In 1994, South Africa received its first democratically elected government. The Robben Island was declared a National Museum in 1996 and officially opened its doors to the public in January 1997. Robben Island Museum (RIM) was declared the World Heritage Site in 1999 by UNESCO. As a site of living heritage and a national and international symbol of political imprisonment, Robben Island holds strong symbolic associations for humanity. The site is a universal symbol of hope, solidarity and transformation, a site of spiritual reflection, healing and pilgrimage to the majority of people of South Africa and international people who were touched by its notorious history. The island has come to symbolise to the entire universe, the resilience and the triumph of human spirit over adversity. The memory of what happened on the island over centuries shall be preserved. The conservation of intangible significance requires the use of oral histories and personal/collective recollections to inform our understanding of the island as a whole and to interpret and conserve the physical elements that relate to these memories. Oral history is a powerful tool especially in societies where suppressive governments have not allowed free speech in the past, like South Africa, where those on Robben Island prison were banned and could not be quoted in all media forms. It is for those reasons that, for a site like Robben Island, one cannot genuinely write a history of the Island without taking into consideration the people’s memories.

In this paper I will first discuss the preservation mechanism that RIM used to conserve the intangible heritage as well as challenges thereof. Following the preservation approach, I will discuss various interpretative techniques used by the museum to tell the story of Robben Island cultural and natural site.

Definitions (adopted from ICOMOS)

**Interpretation** - refers to the full range of potential activities intended to heighten public awareness and enhance the understanding of cultural heritage sites. These can include print and electronic publication, public lectures, on site and directly related off – site installations, educational programmes, community activities and ongoing research and training and evaluation of the interpretation process itself.
Representation – more specifically denotes the carefully planned communication of interpretive content through the arrangement of interpretive information, physical access and interpretive infrastructure at a cultural site.

Intangible cultural heritage - means the practises, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills and it manifested in oral traditions expressions, including language as a vehicle of intangible cultural heritage; performing arts, social practises, rituals and festive events.

Safeguarding means measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particular through formal and non-formal education, as well as revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage.

How research unit preserves aspects associated with the intangible heritage

• In order to maintain the unique political and universal symbolism, RIM introduced the Memories Project aiming at documenting memories of political imprisonment (ex warders, ex prisoners, families, support groups such as lawyers, priest and other national and international organisations who fought against apartheid (e.g. International Council of Red Cross, International Defiance Aid Fund South African Council of Churches).

• Consolidated database/ archive of political prisoners, including photographs, newspaper clipping, materials from court, prison records, maps and other available historical material.

• Consolidated 1200 updated address database of political prisoners for interacting on regular bases

• Life history interviews mostly from ex political prisoners. To date approximately 300 personal interviews

• Site based interviews from various groups such as ex political prisoners, families, ex warders, common law ex prisoners, WW2 veterans, families of mental health patients who were on the island. To date more than 100 site base interviews had been conducted

• Ex political prisoners’ reference group discussion project aimed at documenting memories and experiences about different sites on the island from the collective stories

• To date 26 reference group discussions had been conducted; two women reference group under the theme called the journeys of hope and sorrow and one lawyer’s reference group.

• The museum has introduced a new approach via recording of any ex political funeral
• The original mini disk tapes and other forms of recordings used are stored and preserved at the Mayibuye archive and copies are kept on the island for research purposes.

**Interpretative techniques used by museum in communicating the story of political imprisonment**

The product generated from the research process is used for various purposes namely:

- improvement of prison tour narratives;
- island tour narratives;
- conservation of the built environment;
- marketing purposes;
- development of the educational materials;
- dissemination of information via conferences or publications
- Development of exhibitions.

The Robben Island cultural and natural landscape had been used and re-used over more than five hundred centuries. Due to its history, the site has many values namely symbolic, environmental, religious, sacred, historical, and spiritual values. For the purpose of my presentation, I will focus on the spiritual value of the site and demonstrate how ordinary people have used the site for healing and finding personal closure in dealing with their painful past. For these groups of people, they find the journey to Robben Island as pilgrimage, more than just a visit to the site.

**Case study - Families of some ex political prisoners using the island as the departure point in searching for the graves of their loved ones who died whilst incarcerated on Robben Island**

The use of memories as the tool to conserve, promote and interpret the story of Robben Island has benefited the museum to a larger extends. It’s been over 45 years (since 1963-) that many families were in the dark about the whereabouts of their loved ones who died whilst incarcerated on Robben Island prison. Some of these families were amongst the thousands who made application as victims of gross violation of human rights through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), but due to limited time and specific mandate given to the TRC, not all the application were investigated.
Through interviews with some ex political prisoner who were not in leadership section especially during the early 1960s, we have discovered an untouched, suppressed and marginalized side of political imprisonment namely “Deaths of prisoners”, which is not popular in the autobiographies and other published materials. From many life history interviews done thus far, only few transcripts talk about deaths, namely Fihla (1998); Tyutyu (1998); Phetla (1999) and Musi (2001). Another ground breaking research about deaths in Robben Island prison was disclosed during some reference groups’ discussions namely outronk (2002); stone quarry (2002); zink tronk (2005); bamboespan (2005) and bougroep (2005).

According to an ex political prisoner Mr. Jantjie (2009), Jimmy Simon was the first political prisoners to die on the island in February 1963. As early as May 1963 Jimmy’s brother by the name Siyeta (also a political prisoner), had already made some inquest when he discovered that his brother died soon after arriving on the island, but in vain. Since August 1964, the family of the late Mvalwana (who also died on the island during incarceration), had attempted in vain to search for the whereabouts of their loved ones body, after being denied by the prison officials to bury him at his (Mvalwana) home ground. Parents, wives, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters and relatives died in grief searching for the whereabouts of the graves of their loved ones.

**Inquest from Robben Island Museum**

The need to locate the graves of family members was also taken to RIM museum management since 1997. The names such as Jimmy Simon and Wilson Mqalu, Lameki Kula were the first names to be put forward by the family members. As early as 1998 RIM researchers recorded memories from ex political prisoners. Out of more than two hundred interviews conducted through memories project, only few transcripts talks about deaths in prison, maybe the question about deaths was not always asked by the interviewers. By searching through RIM’s, F Buntman, and Wits History Workshop’s transcripts, it was discovers that many questions asked were around general prison conditions, labour, political discussions, education, sport and culture. Some people talk about deaths only in detention period. In many of his interviews conducted on behalf of the museum Adrian made the following comment:
Describing things that you will never forget from RI that sound very sad and I must say that it’s actually disturbing because a lot of people don’t know of these deaths. It is the first time that I do an interview with a person that actually speaks about people dying on Robben Island.  

Mr. Tyutyu had the following comment about those who died in prison.

I will remember, I won’t mention comrade that died during my absence on the island, I’ll mention only those, though I know them, but I will only mention those when I was also there. First comrade at 1965 was in our group to Robben Island, an old man somewhere there 50 something there died on Robben Island. His name was Frank Mani of Port Elizabeth. Followed by another comrade of Port Elizabeth, Reuben Maliwa. Followed again by another comrade from Port Elizabeth, Fezile Stemele. Followed again by another comrade from Port Elizabeth, David Pasela. Now in 1967 at Robben Island at time would be some flu, which wasn’t treated when people were having flue, by Nel at the hospital. And the doctor was also vicious. There was only one doctor, van der Bergen, he was a vicious chap from Cape Town coming only on Thursday on the island and not care with the people, taking care anything of the people, of the complaints the people.

And then 1967 you find Headman Ncapayi died, Solomon Makisi died, John Poni died, and these two were my co-accused, John Poni and Solomon Makisi. Followed by Charlie Mkhele also from Port Elizabeth. So many people who died there were our comrades from Port Elizabeth. And one chap late from the PAC, he was from the Transkei side but working at Paarl, Lameki Kula the PAC chap. And followed again by a comrade, I’ve mentioned George Gibe. Followed again by a comrade from the Transvaal, Lameki Luabile. Those were comrades who died on the Robben Island. As a result we were feeling bad of this situation, the medical treatment, but we could do nothing. It became better when Helen Suzman was trying to raise things about Robben Island in Parliament. She was the only voice who was trying to be sympathetic with us under the party then.

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1 Adrian. 1998. Interview with D Tyutyu. Robben Island Memories Project
2 Ibid. 8
Solomon Phetla also witnessed several deaths on Robben Island especially during the 1960s.

And one day I accumulated these files - of those people, those who have died negligence... which I know. Because you know that doctor as Tshepo was telling you, if you say when you are sick, he say: "Want ja, jy wil nie werk nie." "You don't want to work. You are not sick. Go away.. I don't know how to take this files away", because (indistinct) to pin the South African government of that time. Those files - those people - those who have died³.

In 1965, a letter was smuggled out from RI and printed in “The Guardian” in England, complaining about “poor medical treatment”. The letter mentioned deaths on the island caused by neglect and that ‘TB and Asthmatic patients were forced to work in the quarry’ and the ‘food quality was extremely poor’. General J C Steyn and Minister P Pelzer reacted angrily and predictably denying the charges. In relation to the deaths supposed due to neglect, they trotted out medical histories of the men concerned, denying all culpability or neglect. Upon recommendation from the mainland doctor, that Mr. Mumbai be released on compassionate grounds due to his terminally illness, proposal was not acted upon until he died in prison hospital several weeks later⁴. Racial discrimination in terms of prison diet, where African prisoners were issued for example less sugar, no bread at all as compared to Indian and coloured prisoners, as a result Africans were more vulnerable to deaths.

Solomon Musi also had some recollection about political prisoners who died from the island

Also in the passage of time we had one prisoner who died in the island, it was 78/79, and it was the comrade from the Vaal. There were two deaths in the island when I was there, one is the one I just mentioned who was a student, and the other one was SWAPO comrade, comrade Jonas.⁵

Recovery of Robben Island political prisoners graves

It was around August 2008 when the museum received a telephone call from the grandson of the late Z. Mvalwana by the name of M. Takayi, requesting the details about the death of

³ Phetla S 1999. Interview with Adrian. RIM Memories Project
⁴ Ross. The island history p250.
⁵ Musi S 2001. Interview with Noor. Wits History Workshop.
his grandfather. This research was made in collaboration with T Maanyapele of the NPA Missing Persons Task team (NPAMPTT). Records from various government departments were consulted by the four people (N Tongo-Cetywayo, T Manyaapelo, M Takayi and T Mvalwana) but none of those reflected the burial site.

This prompted a need for an intense research in order to help the families to find the graves of their loved ones, which in return will help them towards healing, reconciliation, peace and finding closure to their suffering. This research is also in line with what the museum is aiming to communicate to its million visitors–namely truth, reconciliation, peace, transformation and nation building.

**Pilgrimage visits to Stikland Cemetery via Robben Island**

On the 27th May 2009, public consultative process took place in a form of pilgrimage where families from various areas of Eastern Cape i.e. Port Elizabeth, King William’s Town, Stutterheim, Mdantsane, Uitenhage, Ngcobo and Queenstown were invited to the island, for a spiritual journey in order to be reconnected spiritually with their loved ones. Some former political prisoners were also invited to the pilgrimage to give contextual background about the possibilities of deaths in prison. Bellville Municipal office, particular the Stikland Cemetery officials were amongst the guests.

**The resilient and ultimate death of political prisoners on Robben Island.**

As mentioned in the previous quotations from political prisoners transcripts regarding death in prison, many witnesses told the TRC of difficulties in receiving proper medical treatment while in prison. H Mokgothi for instance described the difficulties he encountered in receiving treatment for tuberculosis on the island.\(^6\) The overall picture obtained by the Commissioner after hearing all testimonies was that, medical services often failed prisoners badly. According to the former political prisoners who gave their recollections about the deaths of their fellow prisoners, during pilgrimage period (i.e. S Isaacs, S Ncapayi, J Ngqondela, D Tyutyu, T Jantjie, M Mkunqwana, V Nkabinde, S Petla, A Makatesi and M Dyantyi) mentioned the following—poor medication, exposure to extreme cold conditions, malnutrition, harassment and humiliation from the medical officers.\(^7\) As a suppressed and

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\(^7\) Ex political prisoners who attended the pilgrimage process from May 2009-March 2010. RIM.
marginalize prison subject, Mr. Ncapayi confirms that it was the first time that families of those who died in prison were called together to mourn and celebrate the recovery of the graves, that talks to the heritage aspects of this museum

**Restoration of human dignity**

In terms of Births, Deaths Marriages Act, in order for the person to be declared dead, the legal process has to be followed, in that the qualified doctor must examine the patient. He must do the post mortem to determine the cause of death and then issue the certificate stating that the patient is dead. The corpse must then be sent to mortuary, and the close relatives of the deceased will be given the death certificate only by the Department of Home Affairs. Our research has discovered that the Prison Authorities of Robben Island or the Department of Prisons never followed that standard procedure because according to Department of Home Affairs there is no record relating to death of any of those people. This therefore means that in the eyes of the law all these people are still alive.

The second point is the cultural approach to death. In the African society death is not regarded as the end point of the relationship between the living and the dead. It is a continuation of the cultural bond that demands that the living should give even more respect to the dead. At this juncture the dead are even referred to as the Ancestors.

The third point is the burial process or procedure. This is about where the grave should be, who must lead the process and how the relatives should mourn. It is a standing practice that after receiving the news of death in the family, a word goes out to all members of the family and relatives. It would take one or two weeks of mortuary so that as many people as possible can come to the funeral. The procedures differ from one religion to another, however all human beings mourn for the deceased of the beloved ones.

In spite of the above observations and processes, this paper tells about people whose status was reduced to the cells of Robben Island Prison, no proper medication and care and ultimately their untimely deaths that made them simply vanish in thin air with the wardens who cannot even bear testimony of the route to the cemetery. Their process is an exceptional one because no mortualisation, meaning doctors did not certify, burial process was not carried out, ‘they were thrown like dogs in the so called graves’ that anyone visiting that cemetery can only describe as dumping holes. Furthermore they were buried as paupers,
meaning three coffins in one grave. In addition their death was not disclosed to their family members, as the result the cultural aspect of family mourning was denied to them. This from their cultural view means that the souls and the spirit of those people are still hanging in a restless manner which needs to be corrected by proper burial services. This is where the relatives of those fallen comrades actually need assistance from the Missing Persons Unit of the NPA, in terms of exhumation.

**Commemoration for political prisoners who died in Robben Island.**

Following the will to receive the human remains, is the call from families and former political prisoners to RIM to have a commemoration within the heritage landscape, so that people from all walks of life can remember those who were unable to triumph but rather shared their soul in order for me and you to have a free democratic country. According to the prison registers, more than 20 political prisoners died on Robben Island, mostly during the 1960s when the treatment was extremely barbaric and inhumane. The last recorded death occurred in 1980 when one elderly prisoner died after serving 17 of his 25 years sentence. The need for the establishment of the memorial has been shared strongly by those who witnessed the trauma that each went through in investigating the whereabouts of their loved ones. Death of political prisoners enhances the intangible significance of the island, which needs to be conserved for future generation. The shrine on Robben Island is a symbol of struggle for the establishment of Islam.

**Robben Island Political Prisoners graves recovered in Stikland Cemetery**

1. Jimmy Simon  10/63  
   died in 1963  
   UN 7452A bottom
2. Zincwasile Mvalwana  271/64  
   died in 1964  
   UN 6961A top
3. Sipho Khalipha  426/64  
   died in 1964  
   UN 6959C bottom
4. Mountain Langben  297/64  
   died in 1964  
   UN 6959C centre
5. Marthiens Batyi  107/63  
   died in 1965  
   UN 6970 B top
6. Frank Mani  55/65  
   died in 1965  
   UN 6893B bottom
7. John Poni  81/65  
   died in 1966  
   UN 7404 C bottom
8. Mlungisi Mqalu  869/64  
   died in 1966  
   UN 7304 A top
9. Reuben Maliwa  34/66  
   died in 1967  
   UN 7446 B botton

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8 Tau Matarah. Cape Mazaar Society –Guide to the Kramats of the Western Cape. Page 1
As part of preserving and interpreting this painful history and hardship that the above comrades endured on Robben Maximum Prison, through the guidance from family members and various stakeholders, a memorial was erected at Stikland cemetery in Bellville in March 2013. The erection of the memorial was the implementation of one amongst other resolutions that were taken in the public consultation meeting on the 12 September 2012 in East London at the meeting called by the MEC of Sport, Recreation, Arts and Culture in East Cape. Some of agreements include renaming the schools, or public halls, roads or something in a place where the fallen comrades grew up- for their contributions in the struggle to not be forgotten. To some extent, the families welcomed the resolutions as part of closure as they could not receive the remains of their loves ones. The families also requested that the names of those who died during incarceration should be listed in the wall of remembrance at Robben Island.

Figure 1 pilgrims in a meeting at East London
Figure 2 former CEO, RIM Mr Mkhize addressing the pilgrims

Figure 3 E.C officials signing the resolutions for the project
Figure 4 Hon Masuale, addressing the pilgrims at unveiling ceremony in Stikland Cemetery

Figure 5 Ms Sunduza (former Chairperson of arts and culture portfolio) Mrs Abdullah (RIM council member)
Challenges associated with conservation of intangible cultural heritage

- At the strategic level, the biggest challenge that the museum is facing towards the conservation and interpretation of the intangible heritage is around the issues of intellectual property rights particular on the usage of the material recorded during the ex-political prisoners reference group project. (Intellectual property means all present and future intellectual property rights of whatsoever nature anywhere in the world, whether registered or unregistered, including (without limitation) patents, patent rights, designs, design rights, invention rights, know-how, confidential information, trade secrets, rights of copyright, trademarks, trade names and service marks, together with applications for any of these intellectual property rights, and including all rights to recover damages for the breach, infringement, or misappropriation of any such intellectual property rights); Ex political prisoners placed certain conditions in the usage of the material e.g. information can be used for all internal RIM purposes, but cannot be used by external people. As the owners of the information ex political prisoners wanted to know how they can benefit from any proceeds accrued from the reference group projects. The museum has sought legal advisers to assist in the finalization of the Use Agreement between EPP’s and RIM and the negotiations are still ongoing.

- At the operation level, the museum is still battling with developing biographies from the life history interviews and broader analysis of the theme generated from all reference groups projects. The museum is attempting to address this matter through the development of the strategic research agenda – which will focus at holistic research agenda for the entire cultural and natural landscape and coordination thereof.
• The aspect of the museum as the living heritage will one day come to an end when all ex prisoners passed on and will not be around to tell the authentic experience of the prison. The museum is addressing this aspect by continuing recording the ex political prisoners stories, planning to developing the standard prison narrative so that the future tour guides can take over and tell the story of political imprisonment.

To conclude, in order for the heritage professionals to conserve, preserve, promote the intangible cultural heritage, one needs to work closely with communities as they have the knowhow of the heritage needed to be preserved. Heritage professional should also consider addressing the issues of intellectual property rights with sensitivity.