

CHAPTER 5

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

Currently there are eight hundred and thirty (830) heritage sites, both cultural and natural, across the globe that have been accorded World Heritage Status because of their outstanding universal values. Eighty-two (82) of these sites are island-based. They are all considered to be heritage sites for all humanity and therefore their protection is the responsibility of all. All these sites are unique and while some may share some similarities they also have their differences.

The purpose of this comparison of Robben Island to other World Heritage Sites enhances our understanding of its outstanding universal values. It further enhances our understanding of common and shared experiences among humanity in different parts of the globe and how this could impact on the management of the heritage.

Three approaches to the comparative analysis have been adopted:

- The first approach used is to compare Robben Island with heritage sites and place of commemoration that relate to imprisonment or the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa.
- Secondly Robben Island is compared and contrasted with other prisons and islands that have served similar purposes in the past and that have a cultural heritage similar to Robben Island. A few of these sites, for example Auschwitz and Dachau, are already on the World Heritage List because they serve as a reminder to humankind 'not to forget' the atrocities and cruelty that have been meted out to others and to ensure that it does not happen again.
- The third approach used is to compare Robben Island with other sites that have unique symbolic significance in a universal context. Ellis Island (popularly known as Liberty Island in the United States of America) is one example of a site that also symbolises freedom.²

Opponents of apartheid were detained and imprisoned in a wide range of prisons throughout South Africa. Many of the hardships and harsh practices suffered by political prisoners on the Island were also experienced by prisoners in a wide range of prisons throughout South Africa and by other prisoners elsewhere in the world. Although many of these sites have not been accorded WHS, remarkable similarities between them and Robben Island can be drawn. Thus, before comparing Robben Island to other World Heritage Sites, it is useful to first compare it to other heritage sites in South Africa.

COMPARISON WITH SOUTH AFRICAN HERITAGE SITES

There are a few local heritage sites that can be compared to Robben Island. These include the transitory prison, the Johannesburg Fort, which was listed as a national monument in 1965; Red Location Landscape; Hector Pieterse Memorial (Soweto); Freedom Square (Kliptown; Freedom Charter); and Sharpeville Memorial.



Women played a central role in the fight for freedom in South Africa and similarly suffered at the hands of the apartheid state. Above is a group of female protesters marching in downtown Johannesburg in 1960.

The Johannesburg Fort Prison (Constitution Hill)

The Johannesburg Fort Prison (Constitution Hill) now forms part of the Constitution Hill heritage site. Constitution Hill is located between the high-density residential area of Hillbrow and the commercial trading centre of Braamfontein. This important heritage site was home to three prisons:

- 'The Fort' or 'Ekhulukhuthu' (The deep hole or isolation cell), where white inmates were kept from as far back as 1896;
- Section Four and Section Five or the so-called 'Natives' Gaol' built in 1902;
- The 'Women's Gaol', constructed in 1909.

The Fort incarcerated hundreds of thousands of common law and political prisoners over time, such as Mahatma Gandhi, General Christiaan De Wet, Alex la Guma, Nelson Mandela, Ellen Kuzwayo, Winnie Mandela, Debs Matshoba and Barbara Hogan. The same prison held nearly the entire leadership of the Congress Alliance during the Treason Trial from 1956 to 1961. In contrast to Robben Island the prison population and personnel cut across racial and gender divides, although in line with segregationist and apartheid policies, prisoners were housed in different sections of the prison.

The experience of imprisonment at the Johannesburg Fort Prison was very similar to that experienced by Robben Island's political prisoners. Prisoners formulated ingenious methods of communication, and resistance to prison conditions in the form of hunger strikes became a central feature of prison life. Many prisoners were held at the Johannesburg Fort and Leeuwkop Farm Prison before being transported to Robben Island. Many women political prisoners were held at The Fort and Kroonstad Prisons. Pretoria Central was used as the place of imprisonment for white male political prisoners.

Both Robben Island and Johannesburg Fort held political as well as common law prisoners. It is also evident that they share a history of holding political leadership of the various political parties and people who later took leadership in their respective countries. However, unlike Robben Island, the Fort was more of a transitory point where awaiting trialists were held. Unlike Robben Island which is now a museum, National Heritage Site and WHS, the Fort is a museum and also houses the Constitutional Court. Both prisons, however, are examples of living heritage, representing human rights and freedom.

Red Location Museum

The Red Location Museum located in New Brighton Township, Nelson Mandela Bay in Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape, is one of a number of local heritage sites aimed at foregrounding the struggle against apartheid and honouring anti-apartheid activists. In the struggle against oppression, racism and apartheid, people of Red Location were at the forefront of civil disobedience, boycotts, and anti-apartheid violence. The location (township) was also a home and hideout for many Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) and African National Congress (ANC) activists, such as Govan Mbeki and Raymond Mhlaba. Despite strict laws in force restricting social gatherings in certain places, Red Location, as part of the ANC Defiance Campaign (against Unjust Laws), continued to host political and social meetings in open defiance of apartheid laws. A significant protest against the apartheid government's oppressive pass laws on 26 June 1952, led by Raymond Mhlaba, took place in Red Location when thousands of people offered themselves for arrest.

Raymond Mhlaba was later sentenced to life imprisonment in the Rivonia Trial and spent eighteen years on Robben Island.

This museum shares similarities with RIWHS in that it focuses on honouring the contribution made by the people of Red Location and their leadership in the struggle against apartheid.

Freedom Square Memorial

Freedom Square Memorial, located in Kliptown on the outskirts of Soweto, outside of Johannesburg, is the historic site where the Congress of the People was held in 1955. After a mass campaign by the ANC and its allies, a meeting of almost three thousand delegates met to agree on the final draft of the Freedom Charter which was adopted on 26 June 1955. The Charter has had a significant influence on the writing of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa which is regarded as one of the most progressive Constitutions in the world today. The site pays tribute to the thousands of people from all over South African who gathered in Kliptown to produce a Charter that emphasises principles, among others, of democracy, freedom, non-racialism, equality and individual rights. The site shares common symbolism of RIM because it reflects on the struggle for and encourages the promotion of democracy, human rights and social justice.



Mass march to Freedom Square in Soweto prior to signing the Freedom Charter in 1955

The Sharpeville Memorial

The Sharpeville Memorial, in Sharpeville, near Vereeniging, south of the City of Johannesburg, is another local heritage site that marks the site where 69 peaceful demonstrators protesting against the unjust pass laws were shot dead and at least one hundred and eighty (180) were injured by the police on 21 March 1960. The Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) led by Robert Sobukwe called for a nation-wide protest in which African men would leave their passes at home and present themselves for arrest at police stations. This site commemorates the sacrifices made by those who died at the site and the many others who fought against the apartheid system in search of justice and equality. Similarly, RIWHS brings to the fore the brutality of the apartheid government in its attempts to curtail freedom and justice for all and the triumph of those who fought against apartheid.

After three years' imprisonment in Pretoria Gaol, Sobukwe was banished to Robben Island for six years.

Hector Pieterse Memorial

The Hector Pieterse Memorial located in Orlando West, Soweto, outside of Johannesburg, is another local heritage site that demonstrates the multifaceted nature of the struggle against apartheid by honouring the role played by youth in fighting against apartheid. The site pays tribute to the youth of Soweto and many others who died during the 1976 student uprising as a result of their opposition to the apartheid Bantu Education policy of using Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in schools. This site shares a common symbolism with Robben Island in that it captures the struggles of the people of South Africa against apartheid. Some of the youths arrested as a result of this uprising served prison terms on Robben Island. After their release, some of these activists played an active role in creating a democratic South Africa.

COMPARISON WITH INTERNATIONAL SITES

A Symbol of Inhumanity and Oppression

As a symbol of inhumanity and oppression, Robben Island can be compared to sites like Haifisch (Shark) Island, Goreè Island, James Island and Lamu because of the brutal, oppressive institutions that they were – institutions which also practised the systematic repression of the mind and body through hard labour, the denial of basic human rights, long-term confinement, and non-repatriation of the dead.

Haifisch (Shark) Island

A notorious island of imprisonment that bears testimony to abuse, suffering and death in southern Africa is Haifisch (Shark) Island, which forms part of Lüderitz harbour in Namibia. This island was used as a prison from 1904 to 1908 during the anti-colonial wars against German

occupation (it was classified more as a concentration camp than a prison). Thousands of Herero and Nama combatants and non-combatants were incarcerated in concentration camps during these wars, including the camp on Haifisch (Shark) Island.

The extreme cold and malnutrition experienced on Haifisch Island by the prisoners, resulted in the death of approximately 80 per cent of the two to three thousand prisoners. However it is difficult to establish if any graves on the island still exist, as many burials took place in the shallow sand of the barren island and the bodies were washed away by high seas. While there are no reported cases of malnutrition during the later period of Robben Island, the experience of malnutrition is reported during the Infirmary period when at times patients were reported to wade into the sea to collect food that was dropped there for them.

The prisoners of Haifisch (Shark) Island were forced to build a railway line to Aus, a new harbour, and much of the old town of Lüderitz. Robben Island authorities also used forced labour to construct its roads and some of its buildings, including the MSP, as well as to quarry lime and stone. It is therefore evident that in both places prisoners experienced harsh conditions.

Goreè Island

In Africa, islands have been used as places for holding enslaved Africans before being transported to other parts of the world. In West Africa for example, the tiny island of Goreè, situated a short distance from Dakar, was used for three centuries for this purpose. The island has an enduring history of occupation dating back to 1444 when the Portuguese explorer Dinis Diaz landed there. Colonial rule of the island changed many times between the Dutch, the English and the French. The *Maison des Esclaves* (Slave House) was constructed by the Dutch in 1776 and serves as a stark reminder of the development of the slave trade in Africa, as thousands of enslaved Africans passed through it.

The island was named by the Dutch. 'Goode-Reede' is Dutch for 'good harbour'.

This island shares with Robben Island the experience of confinement, denial of human rights and the capture, trade and use of human beings against their free will. They also share a common Portuguese, Dutch and English history in their occupation and subsequent development. However, of great importance is that they have become important symbols of resistance to oppression and denial of human rights, as well as reminders of the oppressive past.

James Island

Similarly, James Island, at the mouth of the river Gambia, in Gambia, is also significant for its relationship to the slave trade. Like Robben Island, James Island³ (and its related sites) was granted World Heritage status according to criteria (iii) and (vi).⁴ It shares similar characteristics with Robben Island, the same as Goreè Island does.

Robben Island was also a site of struggle between colonial powers, as well as a place of punishment and exploitation of slave labour. But as we know, central to Robben Island's history is that it was a site also of survival under adverse and harsh conditions, especially in the MSP period.

Lamu Island

In East Africa the town of Lamu, on the Island of Lamu, off the northern coast of Kenya, is an outstanding example of the role of Swahili towns in the slave trade. The town acted as middle ground between the African hinterland and the near and far East in the slave trade. Lamu Town also had a fort, later turned into a jail that held common law prisoners until the early 1980s. However in the case of the Island of Lamu, it is human suffering under the slave trade that is memorialised.⁵

Imprisonment, Resistance and Resilience

Experiences of political imprisonment, resistance and resilience that echo experiences on Robben Island occurred in two prisons run by Britain – the first, the Cellular Jail, an island prison on the Andaman Islands (in the Bay of Bengal, India), and the second Long Kesh in Northern Ireland.

Andaman Islands

The Andaman Islands are situated approximately 1 100 kilometres from Kolkata (Calcutta) and were originally used as a place of banishment after the uprising against British colonialism in 1857, when thousands were isolated there. A large prison was later constructed and used on the islands until the end of British colonialism in India.

Long Kesh / Maze Prison

Long Kesh, also known as the Maze Prison, was a Royal Air Force (RAF) base a few kilometres outside Belfast that was utilised from 1972 as a place of detention and imprisonment. Nissen huts were adapted to house members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) prior to prison H-blocks being constructed. Later loyalists were also detained and imprisoned there.

Similar to prisoners' experiences in Robben Island MSP, in both of these Indian and Irish prisons, a sense of revolutionary comradeship developed, hunger strikes against harsh conditions took place, and political education in the form of reading, discussion and debates occurred. One hunger strike that occurred on Robben Island was named after Bobby Sands who was the first prisoner to die from the hunger strike at the Maze Prison. Particularly the prisoners of the Maze Prison share with Robben Island the experience of resistance against oppression, and their resistance against the prison authorities and the imposed prison conditions.

Another common experience by prisoners in these prisons was the isolation they had to endure. The Maze Prison and Robben Island also share the common H-Block architectural features, although The Maze Prison only had single cells compared to the general cell design of the Robben Island H-Blocks.

Rottnest Island

Rottnest Island off Australia's west coast, is another island that Robben Island can be compared to. It has a layered history of being a convict station from 1838 to 1931, followed by a period of military use, and the construction of gun emplacements prior to WW2. The site has multiple histories such as Aboriginal, European, colonial, maritime (thirteen shipwrecks), military, recreational and social heritage, which mirrors the broader history and evolution of the State of Western Australia.⁶

Between 1838 and 1903 Rottnest Island was used as an Aboriginal prison. Prisoners were forced to quarry stone, lime and salt. Akin to Robben Island, prisoners suffered from a poor diet and lacked warmth due to inadequate clothing and drafty cells. Many deaths occurred and up to 500 prisoners lie buried in unmarked graves on Rottnest Island.

St Helena

There are also some similarities between the historical development of Robben Island and that of St Helena, situated in the Atlantic Ocean some 1 950 kilometres off the African coastline.

The French Emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte, was held there until his death in 1821. Later, during the second South African War (1899-1902), the British military, fearing that Boer prisoners of war (POWs) might be freed by sympathisers in South Africa, detained around 5 000 POWs on the island.⁷ Like St Helena, Robben Island was also used earlier on to detain various local chiefs, other leaders from South East Asia, and French POWs during WW2.

Like Robben Island, St Helena has similarities in its development with Robben Island, in that it became an important stop-off point for sea traffic on its route to the east until the opening of the Suez Canal in 1870. It served a similar purpose to that of Robben Island during its time as a refreshment station for sailors rounding the Cape of Good Hope. St Helena also has had a similar history of occupancy, at times being held by the English, the Dutch East Indian Company and later the British Crown.

Devil's Island

Devil's Island, off the coast of French Guyana, was transformed into a prison by the French who used it as a high security prison for their most infamous inmates from 1852 until 1946, a period of just under a hundred years. Like Robben Island the inmates included political and common law prisoners. The majority of the more than eighty thousand prisoners sent to the harsh conditions at Devil's Island never survived. Very few prisoners ever managed to escape because the only way to escape was by boat or swimming.

Alcatraz Island, a rocky outcrop just off the coast of San Francisco in the United States of America, has always enjoyed notoriety as one of the world's most famous island prisons. Opening in the late nineteenth century, it was finally closed in 1963 and is now used as a prison museum. Over one million tourists visit the site each year.

Like Devil's Island, it was nearly impossible to escape from Robben Island because of the harsh conditions. Only a few cases of escape have been reported, such as the cases noted of, Autshumato and Stuurman, among others. There is only one reported escape of a common law prisoner during the apartheid era use of the Island.

A Symbol of Freedom

The examples cited above, document the way in which many islands were used to isolate and detain political and common law prisoners, and some of these islands have come to symbolise freedom. In the United States of America two sites may serve as useful comparisons – the Statue of Liberty off New York City and Independence Hall in Philadelphia.

Statue of Liberty

The Statue of Liberty off New York City was a gift from the French on the centenary of American Independence. Standing at the entrance of New York harbour she welcomed refugees from many parts of the world, and symbolises the spirit of freedom offered to those who fled from oppression, poverty and religious intolerance in the countries of their birth.

In 1984, at the start of the Statue's restoration, UNESCO designated the Statue of Liberty as a WHS. The newly restored Statue opened to the public on July 5 1986 during Liberty Weekend, which celebrated her centenary. Today – like Independence Hall – it is a symbol of liberty and freedom, of tolerance and respect for religious freedom – the same values reflected in Robben Island.

Independence Hall

Independence Hall in Philadelphia (WHS criteria (vi) 1979) was declared a WHS in celebration of the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution that were signed there in 1776 and 1787 respectively. The universal principles set out in these two documents continue to guide lawmakers all over the world and set out the fundamental principles that guide the American system of justice.

Robben Island differs significantly from these two sites in that the significance of the Island transcends a narrow nationalism that, it could be argued, applies to these examples from the United States of America. Rather, Robben Island appeals to the broader humanity in a similar manner to that of Dachau and Auschwitz.

A Site of Human Suffering

Dachau

Auschwitz and Dachau are two of the eighty-five prison museums in the world that demonstrate an example of human suffering. Soon after the Nazis took power in 1933, Dachau Concentration Camp was constructed to accommodate 'enemies of the state'. It was soon transformed into a slave labour camp for Nazi industries. The entrance to Dachau had the Nazi slogan *Arbeit mach*

frei, translated as, 'Work will make you free'. Tens of thousands died as a result of illness, executions and dire living conditions in Dachau.⁸

Aushwitz

Aushwitz, in Poland, (chosen as a WHS under criteria (vi) 1979), is one of the most infamous of the Nazi concentration camps of WW2. It has been preserved as a reminder and symbol of humankind's inhumanity through the holocaust and extreme terror and genocide, and to serve as a lesson of intolerance and oppression in its worst form.

It was established by the Nazis in the suburbs of the city of during WW2 and on June 14 1940, the first group of Polish political prisoners arrived there. It is comprised of three main parts: Auschwitz I, Auschwitz II-Birkenau, and Auschwitz III-Monowitz, and over 40 sub-camps. It was used to incarcerate and kill Polish and Soviet POWs, Gypsies, Jews and prisoners of other nationalities. In 1942 the camp was the site of the largest mass murder committed against European Jews as part of Hitler's plan for their extermination. Most of the Jewish men, women and children detained at Auschwitz were sent to their deaths in the Birkenau gas chambers almost immediately after arrival.

As a museum illustrating this cruelty and injustice, similarities to the recent prison period of Robben Island can be drawn. Like Robben Island there was also a local stone quarry that was worked by the prisoners. On Robben Island early convicts, the mentally ill and later, political prisoners, were forced to work in lime and stone quarries under arduous conditions. Both sites are symbols of humankind's inhumanity.

While Robben Island shares some similarities with the aforementioned sites, it is its iconic status of forgiveness and largeness of spirit from former prisoners to their former incarcerators, that separates Robben Island from these sites.

A Symbol of World Peace

Hiroshima Peace Memorial

The Hiroshima Peace Memorial, Genbaku Dome in Japan, is another example of the profound destruction that can be inflicted by humans on humans, in the name of war. The Genbaku Dome is the ruin of the former Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall that was destroyed when the first nuclear atomic bomb was dropped by an American air force bomber on August 6 1945. The walls of the building were partially spared from destruction, and the characteristic form of the building remained, with the iron frame of the dome.

The remains of this building represents the people of Hiroshima, whose city was the first to fall victim to nuclear bombing. It stands out as a testimony to an event that must never be repeated. The memorial is registered as a WHS, and is a stark and powerful symbol of prayer for world peace and the elimination of nuclear weapons, following the unleashing of one of the most destructive energies

channelled by humankind. Today it stands out as a testimony to an event that must never be repeated.

CONCLUSION

There are only a few World Heritage Sites that memorialise heritage with negative experiences, for example, Auschwitz: Birkenau Concentration Camp (Poland), the Island of Goree (Senegal), and Robben Island (South Africa). These sites are registered on the World Heritage List to remind humanity of the tragedies that occurred and to prevent the recurrence of such incidents.⁹

Robben Island is the one example that has shown that humankind may rise triumphantly from overwhelming injustices and still show a true desire for reconciliation with those who have served such cruelties upon them. The Island is indeed an outstanding place as it exemplifies the resilience, struggles and fighting spirit of the people of South Africa – interwoven with those of Africa and the world.

Today many of the sites mentioned in this chapter are visited as places of pilgrimage, reflection and remembrance. Further they have become places of education, research and tourism, with some attracting thousands of visitors every year. Robben Island is one such site.

ENDNOTES

- 1 - Bernstein, R., *Memory Against Forgetting: Memoirs from a Life in South African Politics, 1938-1964*, Johannesburg: Penguin Books, 1999.
- 2 - For more details on how Robben Island gained its World Heritage Status see: H. Deacon, 'Memory and History at Robben Island', Robben Island Museum, 2000 and 'Intangible Heritage in Conservation Management Planning: the Case of Robben Island, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 2004; and J.P. Makhurane, 'Robben Island – Developing an Integrated Environmental and Heritage Management System' presented at *Place-Memory – Meaning: preserving intangible values in monuments and sites*.
- 3 - 'James Island and its related Sites', the Gambia, Ministry for Culture and Tourism, National Council for Arts and Culture, Management Plan, 2001-2005, p. 10.
- 4 - For more details see 'James Island and its related Sites', the Gambia, Ministry for Culture and Tourism.
- 5 - Young, L., Lamu Kenya: Conservation of an East African Sea Port, <http://web.mit.edu/akpia/www/AKPsite/4.239/lamu/lamu.html>.
- 6 - For more details see P. Limb, "'of deeds most Foul and Vile": A Short Comparative History of Robben & Rottneest Penal Islands', <http://www.lib.msu.edu/limb/a-z/az.rob.html>.
- 7 - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Helena.
- 8 - Hollow, R. and Spenneman, D., 'Managing Sites of Human Atrocity', <http://crm.cr.nps.gov/archive/24-08/24-08-12.pdf>
- 9 - 'Hiroshima Peace Memorial (Genbaku Dome) and Hiroshima Shinto Shrine', National Tourist Organization, 2006, www.jnto.go.jp/eng/indepth/featuredarticles/worldheritage/c_10_hiroshima.html