Questioning Cultural Heritage and Memory[1]

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The launching of a special exhibition on the Tana Baru burial site in September posed a unique opportunity to reflect on the status of our cultural heritage in the Western Cape. The exhibition is housed at the Bo Kaap Museum, which is within walking distance of the Tana Baru. My strong association with the District Six Museum and my involvement in the struggles over the memory of District Six determine a great deal of what I will be reflecting on.

Many years ago, when I was a teacher at Harold Cressy High School, my students and I had a history project which brought us to the Bo-Kaap, and almost inevitably, to the question of the Tana Baru graveyard. Having grown up in apartheid communities where our own spatially and physically defined histories in the new townships and suburbs (places such as Kensington, Walmer Estate) were often just decades old, encountering an OLD history within our midst, was profoundly unsettling. We were hearing stories told by residents, but more strikingly, we were in the physical presence of *this place*. The place stood as an enormous question mark, much as the empty space of District Six operates in relation to the city of Cape Town today. But we didn't know what to do with our discomfort. We were neither skilled enough nor, at that time, patient enough, to work more seriously with the issues that Tana Baru threw up for us. This is why initiatives such as the exhibition are so important.

It is important for the opportunities it offers us, as well as the larger community. These opportunities to be sure, are often seen as income-generating ones. This cannot simply be dismissed. Tourism is clearly an area of social and community investment whose importance we cannot overlook. But we have to move beyond turning our cities and towns into large outdoor museums. Museums, as they have come to develop in many parts of the world, are large display cabinets that celebrate, to put it crudely, class, racial, religious and other forms of domination exercised by the powerful over subordinate peoples. New and supposedly innovative forms of representation, taking the museum outdoors, play this role too. Such, for example, is the significance of the

District Six displays at the Grand West Casino. The danger that cultural tourism presents is that it offers poorly informed, miseducated and often downright ignorant people the opportunity to confirm their prejudices. This is where we want to go beyond the limitations of traditional cultural tourism. The opportunity that this exhibition offers is for us to use heritage as a moment of real education, of using our local environments to pose big questions; questions about our immediate environment but, critically, also, about the larger world in which we live.

It is at this point that I would like to use District Six as a point of reference. In the District Six Museum we have reached the point where we have come to realise that heritage work is not simply about placing a few photographs on display, recording a few interviews and mounting exhibitions. It is about using these activities to facilitate, to help all of us ask questions about how the city works, how ideas circulate in social spaces and how power operates. The District Six Museum, of course, remembers the evil of apartheid, of forced removals, it celebrates the lives of ordinary people, it mourns the destruction of families, but it also continually raises questions. It seeks to constantly pose the large question of what makes people so evil; what drives them to treat their fellow human beings as less than worthy and it also poses questions about ourselves.

The way in which these questions have arisen has everything to do with the way in which the museum is structured. The museum is a place in which people with different understandings and different conceptions of their realities work alongside each other. These people include ex-residents, activists, politicians, academics, observers and so on. They have much to talk about and much to debate. They argue all the time. But these arguments are profoundly generative because they constantly open up new ways of seeing. Old stories take on new dimensions. Nobody is able to claim that they know the full story or that they have the truth in their own hands, and that they alone are the guardians of those truths. Everybody learns. And often the learning is small but equally often it is intense and life-changing. So we regularly leave the museum feeling good, but equally often somewhat uncomfortable about something new we have learnt.

A new lesson we are learning in the museum right now, for many of us, is that of recognising how the experience of living in our apartheid prisons in the last thirty years, has shaped and conditioned our memories, particularly our memories of a time before apartheid. We are finding, for example, that we are remembering District Six through our more recent social experiences, those of the "coloured" experience of Bonteheuwel, or the African experience of Langa or the Indian experience of Rylands. Much of what we have remembered about District Six has been racialised through the Apartheid Township. This is, of course, often how memory works. Memory is seldom uncontaminated, or, to use the terms of the academy, unmediated by who we are now. In thinking back it is hard for us to put aside the present. This is a complicated lesson to have learnt, because it has made many of us stop to ask where what we are saying comes from, and what the value is of what we are saying. Forcing us to stop and think about those many things we felt comfortable about has, to my mind, been one of the triumphs of the District Six Museum. We have had to accept, in subjecting our memories to some scrutiny, that isiXhosa was as much a language of District Six as were Afrikaans and English and that District Six was not a *coloured* place, where the "happy" culture of coloured people thrived and grew. We have had to work hard in the museum to make these reflections possible. We have had to throw aside notions about expertise, in particular, that expertise provides the last word in a debate. We have had to learn that different people bring forms of expertise and knowledge to any situation and that we need to work critically with all forms of knowledge. We have to work and challenge the idea that experts know all the answers or that only academics could lead, or that those whom we might sometimes call "community people" by definition understand issues on the ground better, or have an exclusive purchase on "community" truths. We have had to embrace the idea that the community and the historians and the sociologists have to build spaces in which they can argue and debate and that the answers for the questions we seek might come from strange and unexpected places and people.

From what I can gather, this exhibition reflects this ideal of bringing together, in a partnership, members of the community and academics from the university. It is a central moment of remembering injustice in the city, of the struggling of holding on to the land here on the slopes of the mountain, but it is central also in thinking what this community means to the larger community of Cape Town. The partnership that is

being built is therefore very important. Bringing people from different experiences and backgrounds together is immensely difficult, and even threatening. But it does help us realise that there are always other ways of seeing the world. These other ways aren't of course, always right, but they will, hopefully, force us to pause and to think. If an exhibition does anything, it should be this.

[1] This article is an edited version of a lecture delivered by Professor Soudien at the Bo-Kaap museum to launch the Tana Baru Exhibition. The exhibition opened in September this year (Ed.)