

# Music and Dance Make Me Feel Alive: From Mandela's Prison Songs and Dances to Public Policy

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## Abstract

How is it possible for song and dance to exist in political incarceration and manifest itself later as public policy responding to apartheid atrocities? Examining the body of songs, oral history accounts, and eye-witness reports provided by fellow-prisoners of Mandela on Robben Island prison, I uncover a psychological environment mediated through music and dance - within the confines of a political prison. This source of prison music-making by political prisoners in detention, provide us with the artistic expressions of revolutionary songs, parody songs, praise songs, laments, etc. These music genres reflect ontologies embedded in Mandela's juristic imagination.

My framework for explaining these ontologies is a theoretical framework I call an aesthetic of function: internal ontologies that speak to the African cultural ground against which external ontologies are expressed in the jurisprudential redress to apartheid atrocities.

Examining his external (jurisprudential) ontologies through song and dance, one realizes that the best way for him to have solved the unprecedented public redress of apartheid atrocities is evident in the songs he sang in Robben Island prison. Retribution could have been a logical solution for him. Instead, he turned to truth-telling and

reconciliation as public policy. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's unprecedented breaking of social and jurisprudential boundaries, the claim of agency for both victims and perpetrators, and public policy of South Africa's first democratically elected black president, lie deeply embedded in cultural practices he testified to in his autobiography, "The Long Walk to Freedom". These cultural practices in prison were singing and dancing.

This paper complements the music-as-torture trope: here music in detention carries ontological agency. Musical evidence of stylistic features, text, and contextual analyses, and related literary criticism devices, expose Mandela's embedded internal and external ontological cultural practices. Here, song and dance have agency to influence public policy despite the constraints of political detention.

*Any suffering we experienced was made more real by song and rhythm which leads to a culture of defiance, self-assertion and group pride and solidarity (Steve Biko, tortured and died in Pretoria Prison)*

*Singing is part of the cultural life of South Africans, especially black South Africans, singing is part of our very rich culture. ... Every facet of our life is celebrated through music. So when you go to jail the tradition continues ... When you are down, music uplifts the spirit, gives you hope. ... You cannot stop a political prisoner from talking, you cannot stop an African from singing*

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*(Lionel Davis, Robben Island prisoner 366/64)*

*Ironically, it is in jail that we have closest fraternization between the opponents and supporters of apartheid. ... We have eaten of their food, and they ours; they have blown the same musical instruments that have been 'soiled' by black lips (Ahmed Kathrada, Robben Island prisoner 468/64)*

*It was not the searing pain that seemed to come as an explosion that took my breath away and had the greater impact, but rather the thought that fellow human beings were doing this to me in a completely cold blooded manner. The effect was dehumanizing and the anger generated was difficult to control (Sedick Isaacs, Robben Island prisoner 883/64)*

*Singing with your heart [in silence], it sustains you, it composes you, because you are alone, you remember the songs that you used to sing and the songs that were sung during the times of the wars of resistance among Zulus ... those songs that they used to sing when they go for war are the songs that gave me power to face the enemy when I was all alone and knew that here [in detention] they can kill me. So those songs will give you power ... My body will just be a stone upon other stones to build the castle of tomorrow (Grant Shezi, Robben Island prisoner)*

*Janie Cole being awarded the 2010 Janet Levy Prize from the American Musicological Society. Her website states: "This moving story will be told via a multi-media book, a documentary film, a double album of music and a unique archive of South African oral history."*

*All quotes with one exception (Biko) – first-hand accounts of song and dance on Robben Island shed light on the chapter discussed below—are taken from the website of Music Beyond Borders. For more information, see <http://www.musicbeyondborders.net>*

**Key words:** Mandela, song, dance, truth and reconciliation commission, ontologies, apartheid, torture

## **Introduction**

When Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela said "Music and Dance make me feel alive" during an unidentified interview, I knew that the statement was a matter of cultural embeddedness, not simply a frivolous comment of mere entertainment. This chapter attempts to explore that deeper meaning behind his words.

The purpose of this chapter is to shed light on cultural practices that can be overlooked in discussing public policy positions taken during political transitions. I examine the role of song and dance as cultural practice in the context of political imprisonment during apartheid (1948-1994) on Robben Island, the infamous prison eight miles outside Table Bay, South Africa. Furthermore, I posit that one has to take cultural practice into account when examining the legacy of one of the world's most significant statesmen of modern times, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela.

From the numerous quotes at the top of this article, the role of music on Robben Island (except for the quote by Steve Biko) shed light on identity formation through defiance, endurance of brutal inhumane treatment, and the therapeutic role of singing and dancing among political prisoners on Robben Island, where most of South Africa's black celebrated male political prisoners were dehumanized by white prison guards. In his autobiography, Mandela attests to this fact, saying "[N]o one truly knows a nation until one has been inside its jails. A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens but its lowest ones—and South Africa treats its imprisoned African citizens like animals."<sup>1</sup> (pp 174,175) The humanizing expressions of song and dance while being treated 'like animals' as Mandela says, point to sophisticated ways in which intellectual/artistic/cultural abilities were marshaled

by political inmates in prison. I argue that the use of song and dance was of far greater significance than at first meets the eye. Song and dance formed the cultural grounding for public policies that Mandela could use during his presidency of South Africa.

In order to examine the shift from cultural grounding to public policy, I argue that a significant marker of Mandela's identification with the lowest citizens is through songs and dances. This identification with the common people through song and dance, practiced during his youth and his adulthood in prison and in public, is a significant tenet of his belief system. 'A nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens', he declared, 'but how it treats its lowest ones'.<sup>1</sup> (pp 174,175) Nation-building and his resultant public policy positions during his presidency rest in large measure on the fact that he believed the moral strength of a nation to be in the way it treats the least of its citizens. After discussion of the songs and repertoire of political prisoners on Robben Island, I examine the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), instituted by Mandela, during 1995–2002. The reason for mentioning this commission is that it serves as an example of a public policy accomplishment of Mandela's term as president of post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>a</sup> A consequence of using this public policy accomplishment produces a significant by-product; Mandela's emphasis on

reconciliation, not retribution.<sup>b</sup> This public position was by no means insignificant for a new South African government transitioning from an undemocratic police state to a new democracy.

Naturally, certain questions arise, given the premise of this chapter. What makes a political prisoner, imprisoned for 27 years, of which a significant part was spent breaking rocks by hand on an offshore penal island, emerge as a man of reconciliation? Was it a strong internal moral compass? Was it a belief in truth, honesty and human dignity? Was it the mores learned during his royal upbringing? Was it the stimulating companionship of his fellow political prisoners? Yes, it was all these factors and more. I argue that a strong internal cultural grounding, expressed through song and dance, not least of which experienced during imprisonment, provides us a clue to the unconventional public policies enacted by Mandela when he became the first president of a democratic South Africa in 1994. I refer to this internal cultural grounding expressed through song as an internal ontology.<sup>c</sup> By contrast, I refer to the practical implementation of his public policy ideas as his external ontology. Together, the examination of the internal ontology(/ies) combined with the external ontology(/ies) constitute a theoretical framework which I call an aesthetics of function.<sup>d</sup> Therefore, I contend that the theoretical framework of the aesthetics of

<sup>a</sup> The charter of this commission was promulgated by an act of the South African Parliament: Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, No. 34 of 1995. For more information, see the United States Institute of Peace. Available from: <http://www.usip.org/publications/truth-commission-south-africa> 19 October, 2013.

<sup>b</sup> The TRC's concentrated on 'gross violations' of human rights such as 'killing, abduction, torture or severe ill-treatment of any person'.

<sup>c</sup> Every time the word 'song' is used, it is understood to include dance as well.

<sup>d</sup> I use the terms ontology and ontologies interchangeably, referring specifically to the nature and relations of being, by extension ways of discussing the nature of being and the knowledge that such discussion would yield.

function consist of first, internal ontologies (African cultural ground) and second, external ontologies (visible, jurisprudential ground).

Why focus on the role of singing? Unlike the rich drumming cultures of West Africa, accounted for by the tropical forests, in the grasslands of Southern Africa in general – and South Africa in particular, it is singing that occupies the central role of music-making in cultural life. Therefore, singing is a primary cultural expression in that country.

To illustrate the salient role of singing in the context of imprisonment, I shall reference a moving account of a political prisoner, Thandi Modise, who was heavily pregnant while in police detention at John Vorster Square (the infamous secret police headquarters in Johannesburg).<sup>2</sup> Driven to suicide due to the brutal torture visited upon her, her symbolic interpretation of the unborn child's kick was astonishing. Suspending her suicide attempt, Modise came to the realization: 'They do not want you to sing!' This counter-intuitive answer speaks of the high value political prisoners placed upon singing as a life-affirming practice. Singing is by its very nature an expression of a human virtue, a virtue upon which the prisoner set high value. It did not matter what songs Modise sang after coming to this realization. It mattered that she sang 'anything and everything' as she says in the documentary. Song brought defiance, but song also brought hope. It is this two-pronged feature, both defiance and hope, that gives the agency

of song particular value in the political prisons during apartheid in South Africa.<sup>e</sup> Such seemingly contradictory roles of the act of singing affirm an internal ontology that is invisible, deeply rooted in the cultural web of memories, private and communal utterances, and a marker of an identity that responds to the effects of torture through song.

This first-hand account illustrates the centrality of song in coming to terms with incarceration through defiance and encouragement through hope, but there is another feature of singing that is valuable to consider: spontaneous song formation in Black South African musical culture in general, a common practice of structuring song phrases that reference daily occurrences. Through repetition of song fragments, the pre-composed formulas generate new songs that might only be two or three sentences long. These short songs would become the chorus for improvisatory verses alternating with the leader who is nearly always the creator of the song. This explains why there exists a body of songs extolling the living leaders of the apartheid struggle. Indeed, Mandela was often present when his fellow prisoners would sing songs in praise of him.

### **The Problem Examined**

We shall examine the formation of songs in the political prison context and establish why song and dance are cultural expressions of an internal ontology. Political prisoners in apartheid South Africa (1948-94), and particularly those on Robben Island, used singing as

<sup>e</sup> To this day foreigners often remark on the stunning phenomenon that singing is ubiquitous in urban and rural areas in South Africa. Traveling in buses, trains, and vans, in the factory, and even humming along with Muzak in public places is a common occurrence.

<sup>f</sup> A fascinating historical article on the question of exclusion and isolation from the 16th through 20th centuries on Robben Island appears in "Patterns of exclusion on Robben Island, 1654-1992" by Harriet Deacon. Appearing in the same source, is an article "Beating the system: prison music and the politics of penal space" by Ethan Blue in which the subversive role of music in a prison context is explored. This chapter is drawn from a collection of essays by Strange C and Bashford A.<sup>3</sup>

I. religious practice, II. to overcome rivalries, III. to invert the power structure through parody, IV. in an educational context to lighten the workload, and V. to reinforce a cultural and socio-economic identity.<sup>f</sup> This exploration will eventually answer the following question: how is it possible for song to exist in political incarceration and manifest itself later as the seedbed of public policy responding to apartheid atrocities?

Criminologists Haney, Rodley, Ojeda, and others, have documented the traumatic effects of imprisonment on the human psyche.<sup>4-6</sup> Therefore, it is natural to expect psychological regression among political prisoners, especially the South African intellectuals on the infamous Robben Island. Contrary to such expectations, evidence I present in this article confirms the opposite. Now we extend the argument: ‘Can song and dance, as markers of internal, invisible ontologies, later function as the seedbed of public policy to address apartheid atrocities?’ To answer this question, my primary focus is on the body of songs that Mandela cites in his autobiography, “Long Walk to Freedom”. In addition, I use recordings of songs made by his fellow-political prisoners, the Robben Island Singers (RIS) as source material to establish an understanding of the repertoire of political prisoners on Robben Island. I argue that the artistic expressions in their revolutionary songs, parody songs, praise songs, laments, nostalgic, ironic, and even love songs, further reflect internal ontologies that were embedded in Mandela’s juristic imagination. I uncover the internal psychological fortitude of political prisoners, making song and dance markers of internal ontologies,

within the confines of a political prison.<sup>g</sup> Political prisoners were, until 1976, primarily the leading intellectuals who advanced the role of organizations such as the African National Congress, the South African Communist Party, or the Pan Africanist Congress in countering the apartheid government. These political activists advocated the overthrow of the South African apartheid regime whether by organizing public protests, burning the hated passbooks, advocating sabotage against government installations or similar activities. At the Rivonia Trial Mandela received a life sentence in 1964. At that trial he made a now-famous statement: ‘I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons will live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to see realised. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.’

This psychological fortitude is not unlike the concentration camp prisoners who held out hope. In the cases where hope predominated, it seemed that such concentration camp prisoners were more resilient than those who gave up hope. Viktor Frankl’s logotherapy is the discipline that emerged out of this World War II concentration-camp phenomenon. Two famous tenets of his perspective are insightful in understanding Mandela’s prison triumph: ‘When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves.’ And ‘Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.’<sup>8</sup>

<sup>g</sup> For arguments regarding the use of music in prison, see ‘Harmony behind bars: evaluating the therapeutic potential of a prison-based music programme’ by Léon Digard and Alison Liebling. By contrast, the current situation of South African prisons and the issue of human rights in a new democratic country, see ‘Awaiting justice in South African prisons: performing human rights in a state of exception’ by Aylwyn Walsh. Both chapters appear in “The Arts of Imprisonment: Control, Resistance and Empowerment.”<sup>77</sup>

My point of departure for explaining these ontologies is a theoretical framework I call the aesthetics of function. This formulation has two components. First of these are internal ontologies that speak to the African cultural ground. Against these internal ontologies functions the second component of my aesthetics of function; the external ontologies that express the public, visible, and jurisprudential ground seeking redress from apartheid atrocities. Mandela's internal/cultural ontologies, enhanced by African song and dance strategies of social realities (such as syncretism and spontaneous song formation), consolidate an African worldview and cosmology. These internal ontologies are evident in the songs he sang and danced to in prison. Public display of Mandela's spontaneous dancing during his term as president, is an external manifestation of such an internal (cultural) ontology carried forward from childhood and imprisonment, through to his days as a world statesman.

### **Nelson Mandela's Accounts of Singing and Dancing in Prison<sup>h</sup>**

Far from making an examination of song and dance culture within the Robben Island prison an homage to Mandela, it is my intention to examine his personal perspective on song and dance. This examination yields insights into the varied repertoires as expressions of cultural ways of knowing that shaped his internal ontology. Others have documented his enormous sense of dignity, but that dignity, I argue, is also grounded in a cultural identity that is based upon artistic sensibilities. One of the most impressive observations, regarding his dignified presence, came from an unexpected source: a Minister of Justice of the apartheid regime

that Mandela fought against. Kobie Coetzee, meeting Mandela in a hospital during 1985, remarked: 'He came across as a man of Old World values. I have studied Latin and Roman culture, and I remember thinking that this is a man to whom I could apply it, an old Roman citizen with dignitas, gravitas, honestas, simplicitas.'<sup>10</sup> Beyond the 'Old World values' of dignity, honesty and simplicity was a cultural grounding of which song and dance were significant constituent parts. In order to marshal evidence for my position, I have to cite Mandela's own accounts of his song and dance participation and observation. It is therefore imperative to examine first-person accounts by Mandela himself to illuminate his prison experiences of singing and dancing. These accounts are revealed in his autobiography "Long Walk to Freedom".<sup>1</sup> Complimenting these accounts, as further source material, are recordings of the RIS. These recordings were made by the RIS, three former prisoners on Robben Island whose CDs are titled *Songs From South Africa's Freedom Struggle*. These political prisoners were incarcerated with Mandela during the latter part of his stay there, from 1976 to 1982. Combining Mandela's autobiographical accounts and the RIS recordings, I categorize the songs below in an attempt to give perspective on the internal cultural ontologies that song and dance reveal.

### **I. Hymn-Singing during Christian worship services on Robben Island**

Perhaps the most deeply-held internal ontologies are those that reveal religious sentiment. Associations with memories of repertoire, emotional sensibilities expressed in worship practices, and linguistic expres-

<sup>h</sup> One of the fascinating autobiographies written by Mandela's contemporaries on the Robben Island prison is "The Mission: A Life for Freedom in South Africa."

sions, contribute to religious songs taking on meaning that is different from recreational songs. In the case of the oft-sung song on Robben Island prison, *Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika* [God bless Africa], this song's prayer-like supplication ('God bless Africa, may her glory be lifted high, hear our petitions', etc.) was transformed into a song of resistance. John and Jean Comaroff have written on the significance of this religious song being transformed into a song of resistance in their work *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*.<sup>11</sup> The post-apartheid national anthem of South Africa contains two anthems: *Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika* [God bless Africa], and the apartheid era anthem *Die Stem van Suid Afrika*. This 'reconciliation' of two highly contested anthems at Mandela's inauguration in 1994 was later officially accepted as the nation's national anthem, a kind of public manifestation of conciliatory tendencies of the Mandela era.

Mandela does not reflect upon the religious songs sung in Robben Island prison, but instead he points to the agency of a Welsh priest who enlivened the singing in an unusual way. Mandela describes those occasional moments as follows: 'We always sang hymns at the end of services, and I think Father Hughes visited us so frequently just to hear us sing. He brought along a portable organ, and he would play for us.'<sup>1</sup> (p 452) Almost as an afterthought, Mandela reports a compliment the priest gave the prisoners, saying that their singing 'was the only singing that matched the choirs in his native Wales'.<sup>1</sup> (p 453) Full participatory communal singing is a means of building deeply meaningful internal communal ontologies.

The RIS did not sing any religious songs in their commercially-available collection of 19 tunes (see [robbenislandsingers.com](http://robbenislandsingers.com)). However, two laments that they have recorded, show a

deep sense of the internal ontological world reaching for transcendence in their search for answers to painful questions. Here we examine 'Sikhalela Izwe Lakhiti' [We Are Crying for Our Country That Was Taken By the Colonizers] and 'Singoban' Thina' [Who Are We?]. Both are laments that reinforce the internal and communal ontology of the imprisoned community.

A quick breakdown of the categories of the RIS songs, younger singers during the latter part of Mandela's stay on the island after 1976, is insightful. Looking at the selection of 19 songs, one notices a single ironic song, a single love song, a single nostalgic song, and a single praise song. The selection further includes two parody songs, two laments, and no less than eleven revolutionary songs. Among the revolutionary songs are references to Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution, and songs marking the sabotage of a South African oil refinery in protest of the apartheid government.

## II. Singing to overcome rivalries

It should not be forgotten that Robben Island, a penal island with slate quarries, held common criminals as well as political prisoners during Mandela's incarceration. He provides a fascinating account about gangsters taunting the political prisoners in song. He writes:

One day, they [the gang members] began singing what sounded like a work song. In fact, it was a famous work song with their own adaptive generics: 'Benifunina eRivonia?', which means 'What do you want at Rivonia?' The next line was something like 'Did you think that you would become the government?' They sang exuberantly and with a mocking tone. They had obviously been encouraged by the warders, who were hoping that the song would provoke us.<sup>1</sup> (p 407)

Setting up markers of internal ontology

to incite conflict is a pernicious way to bait two communities that shared the same cultural markers: language, song, dance, and communal memories. This is the musical equivalent of dog-fighting.

The solution would identify the intellectual high ground that the political prisoners would have to defend. Mandela describes the moment as follows:

Although the more hotheaded among us wanted to confront them, instead, we decided to fight fire with fire.

Within a few minutes, we were all singing the song 'Stimela', a rousing anthem about a train making its way down from Southern Rhodesia (currently Zimbabwe). 'Stimela' is not a political song, but in the context it became one, for the implication was that the train contained guerrillas coming down to fight the South African army.<sup>1</sup> (p 407)

Clearly, the covert transcript of performing a favorite song that spoke of miners coming from many parts of the African sub-continent, got turned into an overt transcript of threat. In this context, the political prisoners sang that the freedom fighters, not the miners, would have been on their way to South Africa. This musical counterpunch done through parody also revealed an intellectual sophistication. The sparring match of sorts was an attempt by the black political prisoners to outwit the white prison guards who tricked the less sophisticated black criminals into subservient compliance. The internal ontology of the criminals being manipulated by their jailers is in itself an undignified joke played on a group of violent criminals who feign power, but became lap dogs for the jailers who had power over them.

### III. Singing to Invert the Power Structure through Parody

One of the strongest markers of the power of

internal ontologies is the use of parody. Exercising intentional manipulation of a text for the purpose of inverting the power of words is a strategy that Mandela and his political prisoners used frequently. He mentions how they added new songs and changed lyrics as the political prisoners sang and worked. He describes the situation as follows:

Our repertoire increased, and we were soon singing overt political songs, such as 'Amajoni', a song about guerrilla soldiers, the title of which was a corruption of the English slang word for soldier, Johnny.<sup>1</sup> (p 408)

He goes on to reference another popular song 'Tshotsholoza', ['Shoshloza'] which he describes as 'a song that compares the struggle to the motion of an oncoming train. (If you say the title over and over, it mimics the sound of the train.) We sang a song about the freedom and another about the Transkei whose lyrics said "There are two roads, one road is the Matanzima road and one road is the Mandela road, which one will you take?"<sup>1</sup> (p 408)

There is a fine line between improvising text for parodying and creating songs referencing current events. Mandela does not mention what it felt like for him to hear a parody deriding Chief Matanzima, a government 'puppet', and hearing his own name valorized in protesting the apartheid regime. Perhaps it was like Handel walking past his own statue in the Vauxhall Gardens in 18th century London. Here, yet another aspect of the internal ontologies arises: spontaneous song formation of social realities. The song ascribes power to the seemingly powerless prisoner, Mandela. Here, power reversal functions at its best when parodies empower the prisoner in the midst of the political prisoner community.

Was this shining moment to last forever? It could only last if the communal linguistic



ontology kept the jailers ignorant and the political prisoners acutely aware of the subtle layers of meaning in the parodies. The rivalry between the criminals (what Mandela calls the gang members) and the politicians was one form of ontological power inversion. Once the indigenous linguistic barrier was crossed by a white jailer who had knowledge of the internal communal ontologies, a drastic exercise of power created a situation of draconian power enforcement. The story ends in this manner:

The singing made the work lighter. A few of the fellows had extraordinary voices, and I often felt like putting my pick down and simply listening. The gang members were no competition for us; they soon became quiet while we continued singing. But one of the warders was fluent in Xhosa and understood the content of all songs, and we were soon ordered to stop singing. (Whistling was also banned.) From that day on we worked in silence.<sup>1</sup> (p 408)

Parody which emphasized song power dynamics now resulted in the silencing of singing and whistling, an internal ontology of immense power.

The RIS draw attention to one of the most humorous parodies that political prisoners sang on Robben Island. Sung in English, this parody on the tune 'Oh My Darling Clementine'. 'What a System' (What a Crime) builds on texts that enforce a wry sense of humor on the apartheid system. In this case, testing the safety of linguistic unfamiliarity of the jailers with this song is a brazen attempt at challenging the jailers' power dynamics in a language that the jailers understand. It would be instructive to know if

the song was sung in secrecy out of the hearing of the jailers, or not.

#### IV. Singing in an Educational Context to Lighten the Workload

'Robben Island University' is the name popularized through the intentional system of daily 'lectures' by more learned political prisoners to those less educated among them. This expansion of the knowledge base reinforces an internal ontology that fundamentally redefined the nature and contents of the knowledge dissemination for a society beyond apartheid. Fran Buntman has drawn attention to the fact that 'antiapartheid activists and organizations used prison to train, recruit, sustain morale, cultivate leadership, and educate their members with important consequences for the nature and strength of apartheid's opponents....'<sup>12</sup> This building of conventional and unconventional knowledge emphasizes growth potential of the repository of cultural and intellectual knowledge in broadening the internal ontologies of the prison community.<sup>1</sup> The topics they covered were physical training, history of the ANC and the history of African-Americans, African traditional healers, and African music. Describing the importance of the latter topic, Mandela says:

*Every day, Vuyisile Mini, who years later was hanged by the government for political crimes, led the group in singing freedom songs. One of the most popular was: 'Nans' indod' emnyama Strijdom, Bhasobha Nans' indod' emnyama Strijdom' [Here's the black man, Strijdom, beware the black man, Strijdom]. We sang at the top of our lungs, and it kept our spirits high.*<sup>j, 1</sup> (p 201)

<sup>i</sup> For expanded reading on several related topics, see "Studies in Symbolic Interaction."<sup>13</sup> Examining the role of prisons, the author studies topics such as 'justifying persecution; consciousness, resistance, and collective action; justifying protection; reflected resistance and modernity'.

<sup>j</sup> Here Strijdom's name was later substituted for Verwoerd, his successor.

Here the covert threat to the apartheid enforcer Prime Minister Strijdom, substituted by his successor Verwoerd, – is hidden by a jovial, dance-like external appearance and a Xhosa threat not known to those who do not speak the language. To such aims came the inclusion of local and universal importance, an expanding of the community's cultural ontologies, internally.

To this broadening of the knowledge base belongs a substantial body of revolutionary songs. From Cuba comes a song in Spanish, never heard in South Africa at that time: 'Avante Popular'. Awareness of the Zimbabwean situation at that time came to the attention of political prisoners on Robben Island in songs like 'Bulawayo' (The Enemy Appears from Around the Corner?) and 'Sihole We Mqabuko' (Lead Us Joshua Nkomo Into Zimbabwe) sung in a South African Nguni language.

The song 'Sasolburg' valorizes the sabotage efforts of the freedom fighters working under cover. Thandi Modise, referenced at the beginning of this article, was one such freedom fighter who was assigned sabotage activities. From this song comes a distinctive valorizing of the public, external working of the internalized cultural song manifestation.

### **V. Singing to Reinforce a Common Cultural and Socio-Economic Inter-Ethnic Identity**

One of the most remarkable events that illustrates the universality of a common cultural ontology bears reading as an entire account. The context of the prison as a rhetorical space is illustrated in an account of inter-ethnic solidarity. Mandela recounts this moment that transcends ethnic differences, distinctively emphasizing the public expression of a shared internal ontology.

One time Masabala Yengwa (better known as M. B. Yengwa), the son of the Zulu labour and the provincial secretary of the Natal ANC, contributed to a lecture on music by reciting a praise song in honour of Shaka, the legendary Zulu warrior and king. Yengwa draped himself with a blanket, rolled up a newspaper to imitate an assegai [spear], and began to stride back and forth reciting the lines from the praise song. All of us, even those who did not understand Zulu, were entranced. Then he paused dramatically and called out the lines 'Inyon' edl' ezinye! Yath' isandl' ezinye, yadl' ezinye!' The lines liken Shaka to a great bird of prey that relentlessly slays its enemies. At the conclusion of these words, pandemonium broke out. Chief Luthuli, who until then had remained quiet, sprang to his feet, and bellowed, 'Ngu Shaka lowo!' [That is Shaka!], and then began to dance and chant. His movements electrified us, and we all took to our feet. Accomplished ballroom dancers, sluggards who knew neither traditional nor Western dancing, all joined in the indlamu, the traditional Zulu war dance. Some moved gracefully, others resembled frozen mountaineers trying to shake off the cold, but all danced with enthusiasm and emotion. Suddenly there were no Xhosas or Zulus, no Indians or Africans, no rightists or leftists, no religious or political leaders; we were all Nationalists and patriots bound together by a love of our common history, our culture, our country, and our people. In that moment, something stirred deep inside all of us, something strong and intimate, that bound us to one another. In that moment we felt the hand of the great past that made us what we were and the power of the great cause that linked us all together.<sup>k, 1</sup> (p 202)

This inter-ethnic cultural expression lies

<sup>k</sup> Consider here the song 'Luthuli Bambiza e Oslo' (Tribute to Chief Albert Luthuli – Nobel Prize Winner).

at the heart of developing public policies after incarceration. Apartheid functioned on the basis of legalizing ethnic division; this inter-ethnic expression of solidarity erased ethnic division and expressed a common humanity, as Mandela states there were ‘no Xhosas or Zulus, no Indians or [indigenous] Africans’. In his essay on ‘The Rhetorical Space of Robben Island’, Richard Marback draws upon Roxanne Mountford’s definition of rhetorical space as ‘the geography of a communicative event’ which amplifies the significance of Mandela’s account.<sup>14 (p 7)</sup> Marback quotes Harriet Deacon who explicates the rhetorical space of Robben Island by saying that, ‘Seldom has one small piece of land been so heavily imbued with a symbolism which remains, like understandings of its past and hopes for its future, so deeply contested’.<sup>14 (p 7)</sup> In the above-mentioned incident, the contested symbolism of Robben Island now regarded as a cultural heritage site, functioned as a significant rhetorical space for singing and dancing during Mandela’s imprisonment. Therefore, this rhetorical space functioned as a kind of inter-ethnic ‘reconciliation’ enacted through song and dance as public and corporate embodiment of the internal cultural concepts of inter-ethnic embrace.

### **Transition from Internal Ontologies to External Ontologies of Public Policy**

I build my argument that Mandela identified with the lowest citizens through the songs and dances that he interpreted during his youth and during his adulthood on a significant tenet of his belief system. Nation-building and his resultant public policy positions of his presidency rest on the fact that he believed the moral strength of a nation rests on the way it treats the least of its citizens. In his own words, he declared the central tenet his public policy as follows: ‘A

nation should not be judged by how it treats its highest citizens, but its lowest ones.’

An important part of making public policy from his inner convictions is Mandela’s capacity for empathy. This capacity for understanding his enemies forms an important part of his private and public outlook. Commenting on ‘the most callous and barbaric commanding officer (CO)’ at Robben Island, Mandela wrote: ‘Ultimately, Badenhorst [the CO in question] was not evil; his inhumanity had been foisted upon him by an inhuman system. He behaved like a brute, because he was rewarded for brutish behaviour.’<sup>15</sup> This empathy is remarkable given the brutal inhuman treatment of prisoners on Robben Island. In his 1984 memoir, *Hell-Hole: Reminiscences of a Political Prisoner*, Moses Dlamini provides a stark first-hand account of human rights violations. Writing in his review of Dlamini’s book, Richard Marback states: ‘The arbitrary and sadistic brutality of the warders, or white prison guards, and the self-destructive violence of the Big Fives, a gang of [black] criminal convicts complicit in the brutal treatment of political prisoners, are presented as intensely focused depredations of an apartheid system that dehumanizes everyone, black and white, who comes in contact with it.’<sup>14 (p 16)</sup> Such were the conditions in which non-political gang members were made to dance the ‘tauza’ to amuse the guards. Political prisoners, like Mandela, refused to yield to such humiliating actions.<sup>14 (p 16)</sup>

The internal cultural ontologies, among them dancing and singing, had to find expression in his life among the Thembu maidens of his youth and the songs he and his friends sang and danced on Robben Island. Singing and dancing in prison served as analogs to identify with the lowest citizens. In turn, these internal ontological practices

shaped his decisions as president. He became a performer of indigenous cultural practices, the common expressive modes of the lowest citizens and as a result implemented public policies that could withstand public judgement.<sup>1</sup> One example of an unprecedented public policy that he implemented was the institution of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). His embrace of song, dance, language and cultural riches of the 'lowest citizens', as he called the indigenous downtrodden population of his home country, revealed jurisprudential ontologies of enormous substance.

### Conclusion

As one examines Mandela's external jurisprudential ontologies (e.g. establishing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission) through song and dance, one realizes that the best way for him to have solved the unprecedented public redress of apartheid atrocities is evident in the songs he sang and danced to in Robben Island prison. Retribution, a kind of Nuremberg trial's juristic answer, could have been a logical solution for him. Instead, he turned to truth-telling by creating an unprecedented public policy solution: a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In so doing, Mandela draws upon confession, amnesty, and reconciliation as redress for human rights violations perpetrated in the name of the apartheid government system. The breaking of social and jurisprudential boundaries, the claim of agency for both victims and perpetrators, and the brilliant mind of South Africa's first democratically elected black president, lie deeply embedded in cultural practices he testified to in his autobiography, "Long Walk to Freedom". These cultural practices in prison were singing and dancing.

We have lingered substantially on formulating the internal ontologies of my aesthetics of function. To recapitulate: the theoretical framework of the aesthetics of function consist of first, internal ontologies (African cultural ground) and second, external ontologies (visible, jurisprudential ground). Therefore, the internal ontologies (African cultural ground) in this examination are manifestations of defiance and hope, cultural web of memories, private and communal utterances. In addition, song types: revolutionary, parody, praise songs, laments, nostalgic, ironic, love songs display strategies of social realities (e.g. syncretism, spontaneous song formation). Additional features of this internal ontology reveal religious sentiment, the use of parody, the role of communal linguistic ontologies, and the nature and contents of knowledge.

The second component of the aesthetics of function is what I call the external ontologies (visible, jurisprudential ground). These external ontologies find expression in the public display of Mandela's spontaneous dancing and his jurisprudential public policy (e.g. Truth and Reconciliation Commission).

This article complements the music-as-torture trope: here music in detention carries ontological agency. In this article, musical evidence of stylistic features, text, and contextual analyses, embodiment and related literary criticism devices expose Mandela's embedded internal and external ontological cultural practices. Here, song and dance have agency to influence a public policy despite, or perhaps because of, the constraints of political imprisonment.

In her perceptive analysis of the blurring of contested political lines during late apartheid (1980s-1994), Ingrid Byerly draws attention to the central role that music

<sup>1</sup> It became common practice at frequent public events that Mandela would invariably break into spontaneous dancing.

played in South African history. Speaking about the 1960s until the inauguration of Mandela as president of South Africa, she says ‘These are the 10,900 days of complex human drama that went from despair to euphoria; from the funeral dirges of the Sharpeville victims in 1960 to the triumphant anthems of Mandela’s inauguration in 1994. Musically, the 1960s reflected the debilitating effects of the new broadcasting policies. They were also marked, however, by the persistent efforts of artists who refused to bow out of the struggle.’<sup>16</sup> I would argue that political leaders, like Mandela, who refused to give up the struggle for freedom, used song and dance in ways that were less visible, but infinitely more useful in cementing a cultural grounding, their internal ontologies, to (i) identify with the common person, and (ii) to implement public policies (for instance the Truth and Reconciliation Commission) to define a new transitional political reality.

In the interest of giving a summation of the end of the Robben Island context, I close with an overview that highlights the role of music at the end of apartheid, the closing of the imprisonment era of Mandela. Byerly provides this analysis: ‘Music created for symbolic purposes (for the re-assertion of identity) was presented through four objectives: cultural renaissance, historical review, cultural critique and cultural elevation. Music created for practical purposes (for intercultural communication) was presented through four forms: collaborations between individuals, fusions between songs or anthems, combinations of genres, and collaborations between groups. Music created for tactical purposes (for political mobilizations and social change) was presented through dynamic dialogues exploring political issues of a confused past, an unstable present, and an envisioned future.’<sup>16</sup>

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