



I have just returned from my first trip to South Africa. I went to Cape Town to do some work on the South African parliament for the Leverhulme Trust programme on Gendered Ceremony and Ritual, which I direct. Together with Georgina Waylen, who is leading the South Africa team for the programme, I interviewed several parliamentary officials – the Sergeant-at-arms of the National Assembly, the Secretary to the Assembly, the Administrator and the executor for the parliament's art collection, the director of a civil society group that monitors the working of parliament, the Parliamentary Monitoring Group. As the premise of the programme is that ceremony and ritual are co-constitutive of politics – they reflect as well as frame politics of a country, the idea was to understand how the parliamentary space and symbols are being transformed in the post-apartheid era and what they tell us about the complex politics of South Africa's transition to democracy. The insights developed through this work would allow us to compare the transitions in India and South Africa.



Before I went, I knew broadly about the recent political history of the country – the Boer Wars, the establishment of the Republic of South Africa, the discrimination and apartheid and the



struggles against it – from Gandhi's non-violent protest against the South African Indian Congress against the Pass Laws to the ANC's mobilizations and armed struggle for the overthrow of the apartheid regime - and had, together with millions across the world, celebrated

the release of Mandela which also marked the demise of the hated apartheid regime and the beginning of a new 'rainbow nation'. In preparation for my visit I began reading Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*. While this history framed my anticipation, I had also heard a lot about violence and insecurity on the streets of South African cities. The popular press made sure that security was one of the key themes to the build up to the Football World Cup! The bed and breakfast I stayed in seemed to symbolize this fear – there were two gates – one to the front garden and the second to the house - both centrally locked, all day. We were told on arrival that we should not walk around in the evening and that we should not take public transport. That this fear was racialized (not explicitly but implicitly definitely so) made the whole issue of security most problematic. To live daily in a 'prison', to suspect one's co-citizens, to view others with suspicion on a day to day basis seemed to me to diminish everyday life. Cape Town also remains a segregated city – not formally, not in apartheid terms but in terms of class/race overlap. There might not be apartheid laws keeping communities separate, but there are definitely social boundaries that are still not being crossed – whites owned the houses in the area we stayed in and blacks worked in these houses.

And yet. I looked around the parliament, the restaurants that we ate in, the shopping arcades that we visited, parliamentary tours, the tour to Robben Island, where Mandela and the ANC leadership was incarcerated for long stretches, on the streets in the area we stayed – everywhere the apartheid boundaries on grounds of colour had broken down. It is true that the black middle class, so talked about in the Mbeki period, is as yet miniscule; it is also true that there are no barriers to black faces appearing in still overwhelmingly white spaces. It only struck me half way through my visit that Georgina and I could not have done this trip together twenty years ago – she and I could not have entered parliament together, sat on Company Garden benches together and definitely not occupied the same hotel. It gave me a strange feeling of unease, slight humiliation and also of huge relief that the momentous changes in South Africa had allowed me to overlook this fact until then. Thinking of only twenty years ago, I had to take a deep, exhilarating breath every time I saw this – not a mingling of people, but definitely breaking of formal, legal barriers even though social barriers still remained in place.



Our visit to parliament was a case in point. Like in the broader economy, there now exists a programme of affirmative action for recruiting black people in jobs in the civil service and in institutions of learning – University of Cape Town has now more than fifty per cent non-white population. To meet the 'coloured' Sergeant-at-arms and the 'Indian' Secretary to the National Assembly (the lower house) and to know that the 'black rod' at the National Council of Provinces (the upper house) was indeed black, was also to reflect upon the changes that have been achieved in this country.



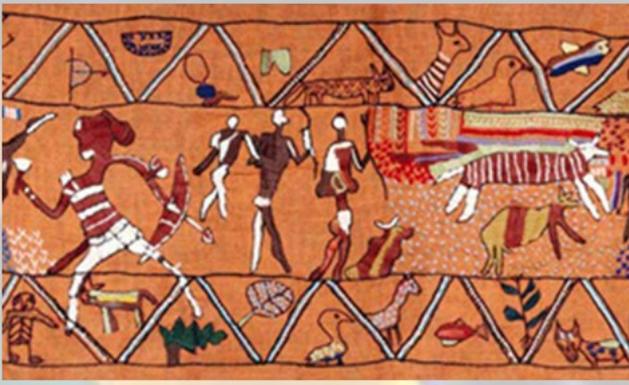
We took a parliamentary tour with a group of Africans; the guide repeated many times that this group could not even enter parliament much less take a tour of it before 1994 – black South Africans were not even thought to be good enough to work within the precincts of the legislature! Now, most of the MPs are black.

This change has also been reflected in the symbols of the new South Africa – in the context of the parliament, in its redesigned emblem, mace and

the black rod. The parliament is now called the 'people's parliament' so these symbols of post-apartheid democratic South Africa need to reflect this new phase in their political history – of unity as well as diversity, of democratic governance and of an 'Africanization' of their public rituals and symbols.

A delicate balance between the various provinces, cultures and races is depicted through these redesigned symbols of state and democratic power. But this is most clearly evidenced in the new mix of faces in parliament. The art on the walls also tells the story of change. The Keiskamma tapestry (120m long embroidered panel made by a women's collective, depicting the history of South Africa) now adorns the walls, and the portraits of white apartheid parliamentarians and the British monarchs now hide in the store rooms.



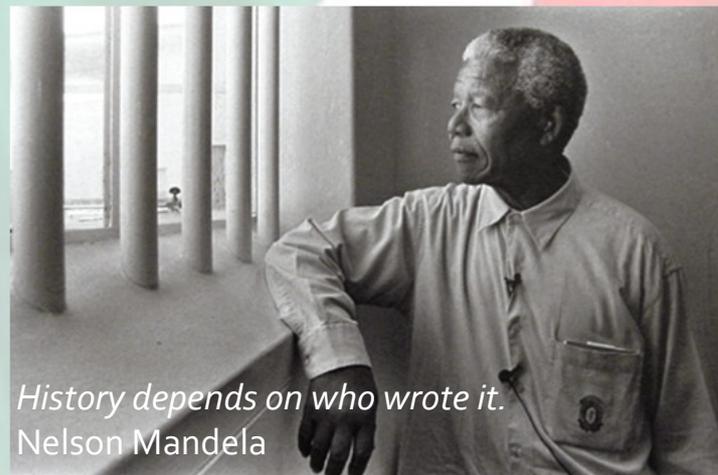


So, art and craft, symbols and ceremony tell us a lot about politics and the changes in the country. We need to look closely to see how space is reconfigured in times of change to reflect the momentous shifts that take place in political life of nations. One early decision taken by the ANC members and the first Speaker of the National Assembly, Dr. Frinie Ginwala, was that there should be no portraits of Nelson Mandela and the ANC leadership in parliament. One form of state portraiture should not be replaced by another; while Mandela was the face of the anti-apartheid struggle, it was the people as a whole who fought apartheid. A 'people's parliament' should be free of personality cults. Instead, we have in parliament large photographs that are less permanent, transient and largely composite – not focused on individuals but showing 'moments' in the parliamentary transition. The dining room in the National Assembly shows Mandela and De Klerk walking to parliament together, rather than heavy framed portraits of parliamentary notables. Also on display were large plastic footballs, celebrating the World Cup – not entirely aesthetically pleasing but topical and resonant with what was occupying the nation outside parliament!

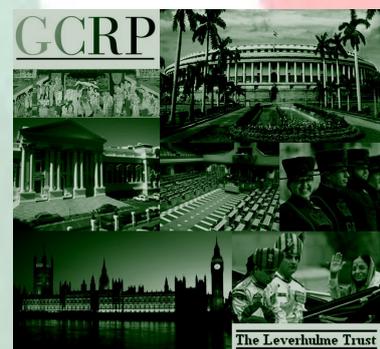


On this trip, while I saw so much that was positive, I also witnessed a lot of anger – of young black people who think the pace of change is too slow; of older Africans who feel that their sacrifices have not resulted in a redistributive politics that they struggled for; of Indians and 'coloureds' who think that they are being sidelined by the new regime and by whites who feel that they are being dispossessed by (perhaps) an undeserving majority. The politics of this country seems to be teetering on a precipice – between populism and dictatorship, trying desperately to bridge the gap between hope and despair. And all this is visible in the symbols, spaces, art and architecture of this nation. To paraphrase Dr. Stander, the head of Protocol of the South African parliament convincing Dr. Ginwala to order a new symbol for the parliament, "every time you give your card to someone with the old symbol, you are publicizing apartheid".

So, I heard and saw a lot in five days – of hopes and disappointments, change and stability, sacrifice and aggrandizement, patience and impatience and the reconfiguring of old spaces through new faces, fabrics, paintings and symbols. I noticed that when political struggles succeed they do so with histories that cannot be erased, that structure and agency clash and that the gap between the two makes for uncomfortable times.



*History depends on who wrote it.*  
Nelson Mandela



The Leverhulme Trust