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Title: Continuing and Extending Resistance and Struggle: The
Role of Robben Island 1963-1976.

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.INTRODUCTION

Resistance and anti-apartheid politics in South African are generally considered to have been greatly diminished in the aftermath of the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 and the Soweto and student uprisings from June 16, 1976. One useful way of thinking about Robben Island' from 1963-1976 is in light of these dark days of struggle. On the one hand, the emergence of Robben Island as a political prison was a consequence of state power and repression, and the ability of the National Party government to suppress most of the opposition in the country. On the other hand, Robben Island was an important area where resistance against oppression and struggles against apartheid were both continued and extended, often under the most difficult conditions.

The idea that a serious and intense political struggle against apartheid and its attendant racism, brutality and inhumanity continued on Robben Island prison is the argument framing this paper. It is necessary to begin by looking at the broader political context of the 1960s. One can then elaborate on the nature of the political prison, and the responses to it.

POLITICAL CONTEXT

The African National Congress (ANC) had been founded in 1912, but from the late 1940s and particularly in the 1950s, it became increasingly militant in its opposition to the worsening racism that increasingly defined the country. In part the ANC's regeneration was a response to the beginnings of the implementation of apartheid, following the victory of the National Party in 1948. The growing opposition of the ANC (and others) was met with ever greater repression on the part of the government.

The ANC (and its allies) did not, however, represent the only organization that opposed apartheid. Out of the ANC a split developed and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) - an organization with an Africanist ideology as its name implies - emerged in 1959. Both organizations, and indeed the country,

¹ I refer to Robben Island meaning the maximum security political prison. As will become clear below, this prison also housed common-law or non-political prisoners until about 1970. The literature and interviews with former Islanders give different dates as to when the common-law prisoners left and/or were housed in a separate prison on the Island. Dlamini (1984) says the hardened criminal gangs were removed in 1965, although, as discussed below, there were still other non-political prisoners. Alexander (1994, 13) puts the date the common-laws prisoners were put into a separate prison as 1970. When the non-political prisoners were removed from the political prison, they were later housed in a separate, medium security prison on the Island. This latter prison will not be considered in this paper.

were to fundamentally re-evaluate the nature of South African politics and the strategies called for when, on March 21, 1960, police fatally shot sixty-nine protesters, mostly in the back, as they were protesting the cruel and racist pass-laws. It was a turning point in South African history. In the wake of the massacre, the government was to ban the ANC and PAC, and they in turn were to turn to armed struggle.

Organized oppositional violence soon did begin. In the wake of Sharpeville, the ANC and PAC "both produced insurgent offshoots. These were both dedicated to revolutionary transformation of society, and both were prepared to employ violent measures to attain this... (Lodge 1985, 231)". The two organizations were Umkonto we Sizwe, the ANC's military wing, and "the PAC-oriented POQO movement". The relationship between Pogo and the PAC was complex. Tom Lodge (241) describes Pogo as "inspired by the PAC", and notes that in some ways members directly identified with the PAC, although in other ways they represented a departure from the organization. Whatever the differences between Pogo and the PAC, on the Island they appear to have been treated as one group, within the prisoner community and by the state. The differences within the PAC and the further distinctions between the PAC and Pogo no doubt were crucial to the differences within the PAC on Robben Island, as is discussed below.

From the perspective of the state, the early sixties saw a rapid increase in repressive legislation designed to suppress the newly-banned organizations, all violent protest, and most opposition to apartheid. The laws and their violators marked a new phenomenon in South Africa: political prisoners en masse. Hundreds of these were black men who were sent to Robben Island.

By the mid-1960s, the National Party government had, for the short term, quelled much of the dissent, both violent and non-violent. This ushered in a period of relative political quiescence until the student uprisings of 1976. There was, of course, resistance, including important strikes and labour unrest by workers in Durban in the early 1970s, and the growth and increasing influence of the predominantly student oriented black consciousness ideology and movement. Furthermore, the establishment of the banned organizations in exile, and especially the ANC, meant that South Africa would become an increasing focus of world attention. This would prove invaluable for the prisoners on the Island, for the absence of scrutiny boded badly for prison conditions. Within the country, levels of repression and fear were extraordinarily high. One of the implications of this was that prisoners who were released were banished, banned and otherwise harassed. This would limit their continued activism when they were released from prison. But it would not stop them continuing their struggle.

By 1963 and 1964 hundreds of men from around the country were

sent to the Island. They had been sent for furthering the aims of the now banned ANC and PAC, engaging in organized acts of violence and sabotage against apartheid, and, in many cases had only got as far as planning armed opposition to apartheid. In some cases, like that of the Yu Chi-Chan Club and the National Liberation Front, four men were sentenced to ten years each of imprisonment for merely discussing and reading about armed struggle! (Alexander 1994, VII; Bam interview; Alexander interview).²

Large numbers of political prisoners joined the smaller non-political prisoner population from 1963. There were "well over 1000 political prisoners (Alexander 1994, 40)"³ in the early years. Initially, most of the men were members and supporters of the PAC and Pogo. In time, more and more ANC members and supporters arrived, including those who had begun to be active in the Umkonto we Sizwe. Babenia (mans 182) notes that "[w]hen we arrived [in March 1964] there were only eleven ANC chaps on the island. We brought the number to fifty one. Within six months of our arrival there would have been well over eight hundred of us ANC." Over time the numbers first evened out and later there were more ANC than PAC members (Naidoo 1982, 228-9). As well as the PAC/Pogo and ANC prisoners who together formed the overwhelming majority in the prison, there were also the above mentioned non-political prisoners and other political organizations. Eddie Daniels was the sole representative of the Liberal Party on Robben Island. The National Liberation Front (or Yu Chi-Chan Club) with its NEUM origins had seven men on the Island. Later on in 1972 members of the African People's Democratic Union of South Africa (APDUSA), which had been affiliated to the NEUM, came to the prison. In 1974 Mosibudi Mangena was the first black consciousness person to arrive on the prison, though many more black consciousness adherents were to be sent to the Island, especially in the wake of the 1976 uprisings. Numbers of political prisoners declined over the period under consideration. In 1974, for example, the population of the political prison was 399 inmates (Hansard 1974: 52, 6296)

OVERVIEW: 1963-1976

The story or historical narrative of Robben Island as a

² This organization arose from a group of members of the Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM). NEUM however rejected consideration of the armed struggle, and expelled Neville Alexander, one of the chief protagonists. He notes that they were known on Robben Island "not as Unity Movement but as National Liberation Front (Alexander interview)." Many of the Robben Islanders do, however, refer to this group as 'Unity Movement'. According Fikile Bam (interview) the NLF/Unity Movement grouping did not organise as a formal political affiliation on the island.

³ See also Naidoo 1982, 72

political prison properly begins in 1962.⁴ This is when the first political prisoners, overwhelmingly if not exclusively Pogo and PAC supporters, joined the non-political prisoners already on the Island. (The non-political prisoners were probably there from 1961, as the South African Prisons Service officially took control of the Island on April 1, 1961 (South African Prisons Service, 8).)

There is not very much information about 1962, when political prisoners began inhabiting the prison. Zwelonke (1987, 14) said that the first prisoners who were on the Island from 1962 "really had it tough". In part this is supported by the experiences of Nelson Mandela, who was one of the first political prisoners on Robben Island, and who spent two weeks there before the Rivonia Trial (Kathrada interview).⁵ His long-time cell mate, Michael Dingake (1987, 217), writes that Mandela said that "[i]n those days...the conditions were mixed. Bad and not so bad." One of the main reasons things were really bad was because two notorious members of the Prisons Service, the Kleynhans brothers, were already there and were terrorizing the prisoners. But, at least in 1962, there were some coloured warders who mitigated some of the hardships and abuse.

By 1963, these coloured warders were removed. From then on, all warders and prison department personnel were white, and all the prisoners were black (African, Indian and Coloured) men. Neville Alexander, who was on the Island from 1964 to 1974, argues that this led to Robben Island having a "peculiar status", where state policy sought to heighten racial prejudice and abuse of prisoners, and prevent sympathetic 'non-white' warders helping political prisoners.

It is important to understand clearly what this "peculiar status" of RIP [i.e. Robben Island Prison] is and what it entails...RIP must be the only prison in the country where in spite of a[n]...exclusively[] Black prison population, the staff is exclusively White. This undisguised recourse to the racial prejudice of the Whites as a reinforcement of the maximum security measures...is one of the major factor in the hardships suffered by prisoners at RIP (Alexander 1994, 12). Indeed, prisoner after prisoner identified the warders⁶ as one of the most important reasons for the appalling conditions and brutality of the early years.

⁴ Little information exists as to the conditions before 1963, however.

⁵ This first incarceration on Robben Island was as a convicted prisoner. He had received a five year sentence for inciting African workers and leaving the country illegally.

⁶ The literature is filled with discussion about the warders, an important topic, unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.

Aside from the deliberate and exaggerated racism of the prison, where white warders had been taught to demonize their black charges, many prisoners explain that criminal or non-political prisoners were used to brutalize and terrorize the political prisoners. Accounts differ significantly as to the importance of the non-political prisoners in making Robben Island a 'hell-hole' (Dlamini 1984). Dlamini suggests the criminals were critical to the terror of the early years. They were hardened criminals and members of vicious and notorious gangs, who were "hand-picked by the enemy from the most notorious maximum [security] prisons of South Africa to come and demoralise and humiliate us with the assistance of the uncouth, uncivilised, raw Boer warders so that we would never again dare to challenge the system of apartheid colonialism (Dlamini 165)." When they left, there was, for example, "a blossoming of cultural activities throughout all the cells in the island (Dlamini 170)." Dlamini argues the criminal prisoners, or at least the hardened gang members', were removed from the Island in 1965.

The early years, up until approximately 1966, were exceptionally harsh for the political prisoners. The crucial turning point in the gradual improvement of conditions, was a mass hunger strike by the almost the entire prisoner population, of over 1 000 men. Slowly brutality decreased, food improved, and cultural, academic and political activities were organised by the prisoners. There was a regression in conditions in the early 1970s, with the arrival of Colonel Badenhorst, when a reign of terror was re-established.⁶ After Badenhorst left the Island in 1972, conditions once again began to slowly improve. In summary, Alexander (1994, 13-14) explains the overall pattern of regression and improvements as follows:

At RIP itself the years 1962-1966 were years of hell...From 1967 onwards, any objective observer would have to admit that major improvements...were made...Thus the general picture that emerges is one of extreme harshness and physical pressure on prisoners from 1962 until December 1966 with peak of inhumanity and brutality in 1962-1963 and again from August 1966 onwards...Then from 1967 until 1970 inclusive there followed a period of relatively civilized treatment and a much more relaxed

⁷ Dlamini (1984, 164) notes: "When they [the hardened criminals and gang members] realised that...the date of their departure [from Robben Island] was getting nearer, the gang warfare began again. While they were at each other's throats, a draft of short term criminal convicts arrived. It was obvious they had come to replace them."

⁸ Accurate periodization is often difficult. For example, Naidoo (1982) does not mention Badenhorst, and instead he implies a slow, gradual improvement up until the end of his sentence in 1973.

atmosphere. 1971-1972 saw a relapse with the harshest treatment concentrated in the first nine months of 1971. From 1973 (April) onwards all overt physical pressures were eliminated, treatment became relatively humane again but...other problems were manufactured by officialdom in order to harass the political prisoners.

Conditions in the prison were always a product of the interaction between state designs and prisoner struggles for improved treatment and conditions. The state could and did worsen or improve conditions as it saw fit": "there was no linear progress [but i]nstead a deliberate zig-zag policy (Alexander 1994 13)." The arbitrary change of conditions for the worst had a very destabilizing effect on the prisoners' lives. "This pendulum policy", noted Alexander (14), represents an extreme injustice and is a source of insecurity that plagues prisoners, who never know when things will revert to "normal".

But what were these hellish conditions, and what was 'normal'? An answer to this takes one to the conditions of Robben Island in the 1960s, many of which continued into the seventies, and some of which continued into the 1980s. The argument of this paper is that combatting some of the worst physical conditions that literally threatened the survival of the prisoners was a necessary first form of resistance the prisoners had to and did engage in before being able to extend their resistance to personal development as individuals (for example, through academic education) and to political renewal for organizations. The next section will therefore examine the nature of the prison, the conditions first encountered there, and how these were improved.

FIRST STAGES OF STRUGGLE - HORRIFIC CONDITIONS AND THEIR OVERCOMING

The prison and its population

Much of the physical political prison was actually built by the prisoners in the early 1960s. Most prisoners were housed in the general sections, and a few prisoners were housed in a single-cell section which is often identified as the 'leadership section'. (It was of course the state that defined who was to be in this single-cell or leadership section.) Although its composition changed over the 1964-1976 period under consideration, its population included amongst

* Understanding state perspectives is largely a matter of speculation as, at least at the time of writing, access to state archives and related sources has been denied. More broadly, the question of the relationship between the prison authorities and the state more broadly is also largely a matter of speculation, and is beyond the scope of this paper. There is no doubt, however, that incarceration on Robben Island was monitored by the police and security branches of the State, as well as the Prison's Department.

others the ANC's Rivonia group (Nelson Mandela, Elias Motsoaledi, Govan Mbeki, Ahmed Kathrada, Andrew Mlangeni and Raymond Mhlaba)¹⁰, the PAC's John Nyati Pokela and Zephania Mothopeng, the NLF's Fikile Bam and Neville Alexander, Eddie Daniels of the Liberal Party, and Sonny Venkatrathnam and Kader Hassim of APDUSA. There were other men, widely considered as leaders, who were not in this single cell section. They include Harry Gwala and Johnson Mlambo.¹¹ Although Andimba Toivo Ya Toivo was in the single cell section, the Namibians were for the most part housed in a separate portion of the general section.¹² As well as the general sections and single cell sections, there was an isolation or punishment section, as well as a hospital, kitchen and administrative section. The general sections cells were designed in an H-block shape, with four sub-cells in each larger cell block. The single-cells were, as the name suggests, individual cells for a prisoner. The men in single cells were locked in their cells for much longer hours, and had far less (legal) contact with their fellow prisoners than the men in the single sections. The different sections were designed to separate the prisoners and prevent their communication, especially as far as contact between the single cells and the rest of the prison were concerned. The prisoners soon found methods to overcome the divisions, and there always communication, although it was often slow and interrupted because of the illicit methods that had to be used.

Prisoner life was not only structured by the physical divisions the state imposed or by the ideological divisions of the various liberation movements and groupings in South African politics. Over time, an extensive committee structure evolved amongst the prisoners, to regulate non-organizational as well as intra- and inter-organizational relationships and activities that formed the substance of prison life. (These are examined below.) Like life outside the prison, there were

¹⁰ Because he was white, Dennis Goldberg was not allowed to be with the rest of the Rivonia Group, and was instead sent to Pretoria Central Prison.

¹¹ The role the state had in defining and creating leadership is itself a matter for debate and evaluation. It is ultimately a speculative question, beyond the scope of this paper, which would consider, inter alia, whether the political training and education that took place on Robben Island would have been different if all the men were put in general sections, or whether different people had been identified by the state as 'leadership'.

¹² The incarceration of the Namibians is not considered here. But see, for example, Helao Shityuwete, Never Follow the Wolf: The Autobiography of a Namibian freedom Fighter (London: Kliptown Books, 1990). Shityuwete was incarcerated on Robben Island, and discusses this in the book.

also differences - which were occasionally the basis of division - along lines of ethnicity, region, or generation.¹³ The state apparently intended to exploit some of these divisions although it seldom succeeded. Fikile Bam (interview) noted, for example, that at one point he was put in a cell where he believed the authorities had deliberately mixed Pedi speaking men from the Northern Transvaal who were predominantly ANC supporters, with Xhosa speaking men from the opposite side of the country who were predominantly PAC supporters, in order to precipitate fights and tension.

It was a deliberate policy of...the prison authorities that as long as...we were fighting amongst each other, their task was much easier of breaking us. And sometimes it did happen. But as a matter of fact it wasn't that regular that it happened. In this particular section, the relationships were just wonderful and I made friends with both groups. And you know, in fact, [we] spent a lot of time learning each others' languages, and [they] didn't care much about their differences (Bam interview).

Indeed, although Dlamini and others identify the state's use of criminal prisoners to undermine the political prisoners as partially successful, most prisoners felt the reason the criminal prisoners were removed was above all because the political prisoners had begun to politicize and even recruit them into the political organizations. Neville Alexander (interview) added that the state also realised that the non-political prisoners helped the political prisoners to get newspapers, and keep up-to-date with the news, as newspapers and radios were prohibited for the political prisoners.

Conditions

Racism overtly and covertly defined much of prison life. Mention has already been made of the fact that prisoners were all black and warders all white. Food and clothing¹⁴ was

¹³ Generational tensions were much more a product of the post-1976 period.

¹⁴ The discriminatory nature of food is discussed below. Regarding the racially discriminatory provision of clothing, Alexander summarizes the situation as follows:

Until approximately 1970 there was rigid discrimination in regard to the clothing worn by prisoners according to their official racial classification. Coloureds and Indians were given long pants, shoes and socks, besides a shirt, a jacker, and a jersey (in winter), whereas African prisoners were until that year given neither shoes nor socks, and were forced to wear short pants throughout the year...African prisoners were given sandals even in winter, but a very large percentage had to go barefoot most of the year...Whereas Coloureds and Indians were given black hats, which served a useful purpose...Africans were given a most inadequate cap... Finally, however, almost all discrimination was swept away

provided on a racially differentiated basis, and racial slurs were the hallmark of daily life, at least in the early years.

Apartheid 'logic' has ensured that prisoners of different races eat different food. Supposedly, this is to cater to traditional or cultural norms of the different races. However, 'culture' has nothing to do with the diet: It is based on racial discrimination. For example, the 1970 Survey of the South African Institute of Race Relations cited by Dingake (1987), notes that whites were fed four ounces of mealie meal or mealie rice per day, while 'coloureds'/Asians and Africans were given fourteen and twelve ounces respectively. When it came to meat or fish, whites received seven ounces daily, and 'coloureds'/Asians and Africans were fed six and five ounces respectively - but only four times a week.

The racially discriminatory diet apparently failed to create divisions between the prisoners; Robben Island's community was "politically conscious and enlightened" and therefore it only had "irritation value" (Alexander 1994, 36-37). Nevertheless, it was opposed for the racism it was. In the single cells there were enough non-African inmates for the better food given to coloureds and Indians to be fairly divided amongst all, in violation of the prison rules, but this could not be done in the general sections where Africans were far in the majority (Kathrada interview). Aside from racism, food has always been a complaint on Robben Island.¹⁵ The insufficient quantity and poor quality has been an almost universal complaint.

Food also had the potential for being a fiercely contested weapon. On the one hand, refusing food in the form of hunger strikes was perhaps the most powerful weapons of the political prisoners. This is discussed in more details below. On the other hand, until 1973, one of the methods warders would use to punish the prisoners was to withdraw their meal 'tickets' and thus to force them to starve for a day. The cry of 'drie

in the course of 1970. All prisoners now wear the same clothes except that until recently the differentiation between caps (Africans) and hats (others) was still maintained (Alexander 38).

Aside from the racially discriminatory nature of clothing, clothing was inadequate by any definition and was often filthy dirty. Lombard Mbatha (interview) and Martin Ramakgadi (interview) both describe how they were given clothes that were far too small, but that the clothes soon fitted when they were doing hard labour and eating far less than they needed.

¹⁵ Dingake (1987, 211) is the exception to this. He argued that after the preparation of food improved, food was no longer a point of protest except as regards racially discriminatory diets.

maale' or 'three meals' was an arbitrary edict imposed with regularity by warders who felt a rule had been broken or that a prisoner should be punished. Prison regulations allowed a prisoner who acknowledged culpability for a minor infraction to be deprived of between one and three meals (all on one day) by any officer with at least the rank of Chief Warder (Alexander 1994, 68). In theory, if the prisoner did not plead guilty, he would then be charged in a Prison Court or higher. In practice, however, "it was physically risky for almost all prisoners in 1962/4 not to "accept" meal-stops (Alexander 1994, 69)". The regulations were often abused by the authorities, and "there have been many instances where head-warders, and even ordinary warders, have had prisoners locked up without food for a day (and even longer) without so much as referring the matter to the head of the Prison, let alone taking the prisoner into the presence of the Head... (Alexander 1994, 69)." ¹⁶ Only later had the political prisoners sufficiently challenged the power relations in the prison that they were able to refuse to accept meal-stops, which invariably meant hiring lawyers for usually trivial cases, which of course not all prisoners were in a position to do.

It is difficult, and perhaps even inappropriate, to make a distinction between overt and explicit examples of racism, as described above, and the pervasive racial hatred that informed the brutality and inhumanity of the way the prison was run more generally. (Furthermore, it was obviously racism and more specifically apartheid, that caused the Robben Islanders to be imprisoned in the first place.) Indeed, the early years, with some repetition in the Badenhorst years, were marked by extreme brutality with attempts to humiliate and undermine the prisoners a pervasive feature of Island life. Three examples will underscore these attempts to systematically brutalize and humiliate prisoners.

First, a daily feature of prison life was the tauza, which was meant to prevent prisoners smuggling on, or in, the body. Indeed, the non-political prisoners proved incredibly adept at smuggling, including within the body's orifices. Dennis Brutus (1973, 55), for example, writes of knives that "suddenly flash- produced perhaps from some disciplined anus...". The apparent point of the tauza was to have the prisoner strip, and, once naked, jump around to dislodge any concealed object, and ultimately end the dance by having bent over naked to expose his rectum to the warders. Dikgang Ernest Moseneke (interview) recalls this perverse ritual:

Few things can be as degrading as that [the tauza]. With time, I suppose your sense of propriety gets weakened, you become less sensitive to it. But the truth is this

¹⁶ Alexander (69) notes further that "[i]n the early 'sixties there used to be at least forty to fifty prisoners serving meal-stops every Sunday, and in really bad periods there were many more."

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is one single harrowing thing that I had to go through each time. I was 15, and I was with people a little older than me ranging to sixty, or sixty-five. And being a product of the conservatism you would find in African society, and where age remained a very important factor...and therefore it was just a difficulty; every day you'd just have rows and rows of adult people who stand there stark naked, and they're made to tauza, and then they move around and they pick up their clothes at the side. And this whole process would be done by the warders who would be manning [us]...Somehow they seemed to have enjoyed it. They seemed so totally depraved, that they could live with this comfortably and find nothing wrong with it.

A second particularly extreme way warders attempted to humiliate prisoners was by burying them in the sand up to their necks while urinating upon them (Naidoo 1982, 83; Ramakgadi interview; Mlambo interview).

Mr Mlambo, a twenty-year stretch man, a short man, was made to dig a pit big enough to fit him. Unaware of what was to follow, he was still digging on when he was suddenly overwhelmed by a group of convicts. They shoved him into the pit and started filling it up... When they had finished, only Mlambo's head appeared above the ground. A white warder, who had directed the whole business, urinated into Mlambo's mouth. The convicts tried to open his tight-locked jaws, but could not...The warder pissed and pissed; it looked as though he had reserved gallons of urine for the purpose... When the warder had finished...vicious blows of fists and boots reigned around the defenceless head sticking out of the ground (Zwelonke 1987, 14).

Thirdly, brutality lay both in daily prison life and specific 'events'. Perhaps the most brutal aspect of day to day life was the hard labour the prisoners performed, and the abuse associated with it, especially in the early years. Most prisoners would work in the lime or stone quarries, quarrying lime and stone respectively, or shopping wood, crushing stone, "making or repairing roads with pick and shovel", or dragging seaweed from the beaches and the sea (Alexander 1994, 30). A very few political prisoners were allowed to work in more productive and less physically draining jobs like working in the hospital, kitchen, or offices. For the most part these jobs were left for the criminal prisoners, until the early 1970s.

Soon after arriving on Robben Island in 1964, Natoo Babenia was sent to the quarry as part of the 'quarryspan'. Before prisoners could actually work in the quarry, a dyke had to be built. Rubble had to be dumped into the sea to make a wall, and wheelbarrows were used to cart this gravel.

Us new drafts were told to take the wheelbarrows with spindly, creaky steel wheels...We had to push the barrows through the line of the [notorious] Kleynhans warders. As we moved along each of them would let fly with the

baton. At the end of the journey was a small incline where Karnakamp [a warder]¹⁷ waited for us...Baton flying around he would scream "Ek's nie jou Sir nie, ek is jou Baas!"...

Once you passed Karnekamp we had to tip the stones into the sea and go back for more. The 'Big Fives' would be waiting. Come slowly and they would leave their spades and beat us. Or they would overload the wheelbarrow so you could hardly push it. Shits like Teeman and Meintjies would then run to Jan or Piet Kleynhans and say "Baas! Baas! Daai kaffirtjie wil nie werk nie!" Piet and Jan will then sit on the wheelbarrow and ask us to push. If we tried and the wheelbarrow fell from our grip they would fall on us with their batons shouting "Julle wil ons seer maak! Julle wil ons dood maak!" We'd then get our cards taken away for [a] three meal stop.

As time went the warders got us to push faster. Inevitably you would push the wheel into the ankles of the comrade in front. Karnekamp, the sadist liked to see this... (Babenia mans, 179-180)

Although much of the barbarity was associated with work, the authorities certainly did not need such an 'excuse'. Another typical form of brutality was via a 'carry-on', when prisoners would be assaulted en masse by warders who surrounded them and beat them with batons and other objects (see for example Alexander 1994, 21 and Robben Island: Our University in Lodge and Nasson 1991, 296-7).

Resisting the oppression

The horror of the early years on Robben Island prison cannot be overemphasized. The appalling conditions and treatment described above merely scratch the surface as to how harsh and dangerous life on the Island was at many points between 1962 and 1972 or 1973. Indeed, one could comment on the frequent lack of medical care, or the harmful nature of the work itself,¹⁸ amongst a litany of the violations of the rights and

¹⁷ Babenia mentions Karnakamp earlier in his narrative: "At the dump hole stood a young warder of seventeen, well-built and with the ferocity of a wild animal. Before we threw stones or boulders [as instructed] he beat us with something sounding like all his might. His name was Karnekamp. I will never forget that man (Babenia mans 175)

¹⁸ Recent publicity has highlighted the damage done to the eyes of Nelson Mandela because of the years of working in the quarry without protection for his eyes (see for example Sunday Times, July 17, 1994). And in Dennis Brutus' "Robben Island Sequence", the abuse is all the more horrifying for its the eloquence of his description: neonbright orange/ vermillion/ on the chopped broken slate/ that gravelled the path and yard/bright orange was the red blood/ freshly spilt were the prisoners had passed;/ and bright red/pinkbright red and light/ the blood on the light sand by the sea/...where the

humanity of the men on Robben Island.

But Robben Island is known as much as a 'University' as a 'Hell-Hole'. There is good reason for this; for many and perhaps most of its political prisoners, the period of incarceration was used to advance the personal and political development of individuals and organizations. This is discussed below. The prior question is, how was this possible given the conditions described above? This paper argues that there was very little space for personal or political growth in these conditions. This is not to say there was no political life and academic study in these early years. Harry Gwala (interview), for example, said that "political education did not depend on the harshness of the authorities. It was a matter of do or die. It was underground work. We were subjected to underground work before we went to prison. Prison was a continuation of that, so we had no problem with the restriction imposed on us [in prison]." For most other people, however, survival and improvement in conditions was a necessary prior step to the Island being turned into a 'University'. "[I]n the first instance," Jacob Zuma (interview) noted, "we had to struggle to correct...the prison conditions which were appalling." Dikgang Moseneke (interview) similarly remembers that "there was no time then to focus acutely on political matters; strategies were directed at dealing with these conditions, and therefore were strategies of survival, and which inevitably would bring greater cohesion, between both the ANC and the PAC."

Arguably, the biggest reason for improvements in conditions was the resistance of the prisoners themselves. Many, if not most, political prisoners resisted the reign of terror of prison officials and criminal gangs. They had, however, to concentrate on survival before they could attempt to organize collective protest aimed at reform. Furthermore, there had to be sufficient changes in conditions so that, however minor and partial these improvements might be, they opened some sort of a gap for large-scale and effective prisoner resistance.

Exactly what these gaps were in to some extent a matter of speculation¹⁹ and perception. A first reason is given by

bright blade-edges of the
rocks/ jutted like chisels from the squatting rocks/... on the
sharp pale whitening edges/ our blood showed light and pink,/ our
gashed soles winced from the finely barely felt slashes,/ that
lacerated afterwards:/ the bloody flow/ thinned to thin
pink strings dangling/ as we hobbled through the wet clinging
sands/ or we discovered surprised/ in some quiet backwater
pool/ the thick flow of blood uncoiling/ from a skein to thick
dark red strands (Brutus 1978, 58-59).

¹⁹ This is an example where state records might prove useful. That is, intra-state communication might convey what the state felt its pressures for change to be.

Dlamini. He argued the removal of the violent criminal gangs who worked with the warders to victimize the prisoners was a critical precondition to the prisoners' capacity to struggle for change. (This is described below.)

Second, the importance of released prisoners highlighting the plight of their still incarcerated comrades is often stressed. Many of the prison sentences, especially those of Pogo members, were comparatively short. When their terms ended in 1965/6, certain released prisoners began exposing the conditions on the Island.

There has been very little said about those who left the Island during that time [the 1960s] who were mandated to go and speak to institutions like the United Nations, Amnesty International, Red Cross, to make representations, explain the reality of the situation on the Island...It has to be known that today the Island is what it is...as a result of bitter struggle on the part of those who were there... (Molala interview)

Dennis Brutus testified in 1967 or 1968 about prison conditions before the United Nations Special Committee on Apartheid, and there were subsequent hearings in London. Furthermore, his testimony was used in various publications, including in those of the International Defence and Aid Fund (personal communication to author, March 10, 1988). The need to expose conditions was an ongoing imperative. Alexander's Robben Island Dossier 1964-1974 was originally written secretly to publicize the plight of the prisoners. Alexander (1994, VII) notes that "[i]t was an unspoken injunction understood by all prisoners who were released from the island that one of the most important contributions they could make to the well-being of those they left behind was to let in the light of public scrutiny on the goings-on in that prison."

Closely related to this point, a third factor was that international attention was increasingly marshalled to focus on conditions on Robben Island. Mary Benson, who was involved in creating international pressure against apartheid, has argued that the incarceration of the (now convicted) Rivonia trialists heightened international attention on South Africa in general, and Robben Island in particular (conversation with author, March 9, 1994 Johannesburg). Harry Gwala (interview) similarly noted that "the limelight was on Rivonia [which was then] transferred to Robben Island." Another important dimension of international attention and pressure was that of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The first ICRC visit to Robben Island occurred in 1964. It is possible that this made the government increasingly aware of the potential for international concern and pressure. The ICRC also challenged general maltreatment on Robben Island. Mlambo (interview) is one of the Islanders who credits the ICRC with helping to improve conditions in the prison.

Fourth, in June and July 1965, the Rand Daily Mail published a series of articles on prison conditions in South Africa. These were based on the testimony of Robert Harold Strachan

following his own prison experiences. Although none of the Robben Islanders have mentioned the Strachan exposures, the timing combined with the perceptions of Hugh Lewin and others seem to suggest the Rand Daily Mail exposures had been important in improving prison conditions in general (Lewin 1981, 88-97; United Nations, 42).²⁰

Fifth, Helen Suzman is widely credited with her work to end ill-treatment of the political prisoners. Alexander (1990, 64) writes: "She is the one member of the South African Parliament whose name is inextricably linked with the only systematic attempt to get international standards implemented in the prisons in general and on Robben Island in particular. Her staunch insistence on the application of...humane provisions... became quite literally a bridge of survival and of sanity over which most of us could walk out of imprisonment without having been too deeply scarred and disfigured." Similarly, Gwala (interview) explained his understanding as to why conditions changed and emphasized on the one hand, "the struggle waged by the prisoners themselves", and on the other hand, "the visit[s], in particular by Mrs. Helen Suzman".

None of these changes or gaps would have had much effect unless the prisoners had made and taken up the opportunities they presented. Suzman herself emphasized the role of the prisoners in improving conditions. She said their efforts "should be emphasized. The fact that they were strong, and they were united, and they were organized and they were informed - that was important (Suzman interview)." The first major hunger strike was in 1966, and marked the turning point in conditions on Robben Island. Dlamini explains what events led up to the hunger strike to make it possible, first of which was the fall from power of the Big Fives and the prison officials who supported them. The second event was the removal of most or all of the criminals in January 1965 and the subsequent beginnings of cultural rejuvenation. The next occurrence was the change in prison official hierarchy, with a whole set of demands being acceded to. Finally, after an abortive hunger strike by 18 youth in April 1965, another one was held a year later.²¹

After the failure of the last hunger strike by PAC comrades in April 1965, we analysed our mistakes and

²⁰ None of the oral or written testimonies of ex-Robben Islanders mention the influence of the Strachan and Rand Daily Mail exposures in changing conditions on the Island. This may, however, be explained by the denial of newspapers to the prisoners, and the fact that the changes were gradual, so individual inmates may not have perceived any connection.

²¹ Naidoo's account also demonstrates the importance of taking advantage of gaps that have presented themselves, and thus the hunger strike is only possible once 'The chains [are] loosened'.

prepared for another one. There had been mass mobilization since then, preparing all the comrades in all the cells for the need for a hunger strike in order to bring about far reaching reforms in the whole prison machinery. It was necessary mostly because about half of the political prisoners were doing five years and less, and when the long-term prisoners remained, they would all have to carry the burden. We had to help our comrades before being released...The aim of the hunger strike was to improve first, the food situation, then the clothing and shoes, followed by the working conditions, the punishment at work for having failed to satisfy a certain quota, the treatment by warders, tauza and many other grievances which we had often raised with the prison authorities since 1963 to no avail (Dlamini 1984, 181).

Another example of resistance during the before 1976 was that of the challenge Sonny Venkatrathnam and Kader Hassim brought against the prison authorities in 1973 when they challenged the right of warders to put people in solitary confinement without a hearing and to arbitrarily withdraw a day's meal. They also contested the idea that study and recreational activities were rights rather than privileges as the prison authorities asserted. While they were successful in the former, the Supreme Court upheld the rights/privileges²² distinction. Like most events in prison, this one is revealing both of the conditions prisoners faced, the approaches that could be taken to the situation, and of the consequences and implications of resistance.

Venkatrathnam (interview) explained the environment which caused the protest to begin. When he waved hello to someone in another block (but the same section) as they were going to breakfast, the warder would promptly take away three meals. Furthermore, "there was no library. We could not borrow books. They would not allow us to study...It was...intolerable if you were accustomed to being a reading type of person." The environment was very tense, as the warders hated the prisoners, having been told they were terrorists. And to make a complaint, one had to apply for permission to do so, and then only on a Sunday during inspection.

It was therefore decided to write a petition. Paper was

²² The separation of rights and privileges is closely linked to the classification system. The prison authorities would classify prisoners according to their behaviour, and consequently reward or punish them by giving or withdrawing privileges like the opportunity to study, or in later years, buy food and newspapers. The classification system was always criticised by the political prisoners, but it is primarily in the post-1976 period where it becomes an important focus of debate in the community.

denied to them, so they used brown cement bags.²³ In addition, they decided not to request permission to make these complaints and demands.

We wrote this two page petition to the officer in command on Robben Island, addressing a whole lot of things. About the right to have a handbook [i.e. the prison regulations]. We said we had rights and obligations. And we wanted the right to study, we wanted an interesting prison library. We wanted recreation time. [We] complained about the food, the attitude of warders. We said we needed the right to legal representation. There must not be this arbitrary punishment. Even if it is an administrative [procedure], we still needed legal representation (Venkatrathnam interview).

The petition was handed over to the authorities on Sunday morning, and on Monday, in consequence, Venkatrathnam and Hassim were put into solitary confinement.

Solitary confinement on Robben Island was a pretty grim affair. [The cell]...was no bigger than the toilet...and [it was] damp, dark, cold. No flush[ing] toilet, just a squat hole there for you and a little water. That is all. You get about fifteen minutes to go and have a wash in the morning and that's it. Otherwise you spend almost 24 hours in that cell alone. And those cells, Robben Island being an island, when the tide comes in you can pick up enough water off the floor and walls [to]...at least have a decent wash... (Venkatrathnam interview).

They had begun to despair of the situation improving until they were able to smuggle out letters to their lawyers, explaining their predicament. The lawyers in turn knew they had no legal right to intervene, so they had the wives of the two men bring court urgent applications. This enabled the lawyers to come to take proper instructions from the men. Venkatrathnam (interview) concluded:

Basically we won. Ninety-nine percent of our application came through...I think life on Robben Island changed dramatically and permanently since that day. Not only for ourselves, but I think for the whole population of Robben Island. Because since that day no prisoner was arbitrarily sentenced to three meals [or] solitary confinement. Every time they had to charge a prisoner for anything they had to formerly serve him with a charge sheet...[For the first time now] they gave us the prison regulations [which Venkatrathnam emphasizes as one of the biggest victories].

In his perspective, their application to the Supreme Court "changed the power relationships between prisoners and warder tremendously." He also considered it a challenge to the prevailing means of struggling for improvements in the prison.

²³ Brown cement bags had been the major source of paper for literacy classes, probably as well as for other means, throughout the 1960s. This is mentioned frequently in both interviews and books on the period.

They had heard "through the grapevine that Nelson [Mandela]...felt that we did the wrong thing" in launching the application", and that his preferred strategy was negotiation. But certainly Alexander (1994 57, 67, 112 fn31) credits the application and subsequent judgement as making a significant contribution to improving life in prison.

Aside from illustrating the different forms resistance took against abuse, this protest is illustrative of an important theme running through the Island's history, namely that external attention on the prison was often critical to the success of prisoners' struggles. In this case, a smuggled letter to a wife was the crucial turning point. Often hunger strikes were specifically timed to ensure that visitors would learn of them, to ensure outside publicity was organized.

These first struggles were acts of resistance that sought to fundamentally change the conditions of their lives in prison. This quest by the Robben Islanders to improve the appalling material circumstances of their lives was a critical pre-condition for their being able to do more than 'merely' survive prison. A brief contrast with the rationale of most of the criminal prisoners they met is useful. The non-political prisoners sought first to survive prison, and secondly to improve the conditions of their existence. Hence they would smuggle food, work with the warders, or join gangs to provide protection or find ways to improve the material circumstances of their lives. While all of these acts represent a form of resistance, they do not attempt to fundamentally challenge power relations either within the prison, or in the broader society. In contrast, the political prisoners sought not just to protect themselves, but to do so in such a way as to challenge some of the power relations inside the prison, and, moreover, in a higher 'level' of resistance, to use their incarceration to challenge the power relations of apartheid South Africa outside, upon their release. It is to these forms of resistance that this paper now turns.

Before doing so, two important provisos are necessary. First, the argument advanced here is that ensuring survival and human conditions of existence was a fundamental pre-condition to the more far reaching resistance discussed below. It is critical to recognize, however, that improvements were not linear, and prisoners constantly had to resist regression in their treatment, and struggle for improvements. The Badenhorst regime and the regression it represented has already been mentioned, and the potential for, and actual loss of rights and 'privileges' was a constant factor in Island life, and thus required constant struggles by the prisoners.²⁴ Second,

²⁴ The post 1976 period is beyond the scope of this paper, but there are a couple of examples that illustrate this point of 'zig-zag' conditions. First, despite the fact that conditions had generally improved by this period, there were

the different dimensions of resistance - to overcome basic material deprivations and end physical abuse, the struggle for education and a sporting and cultural life, and the struggle for political organizing - are not linear, and all interrelate. For example, the success of prisoner resistance in the first major hunger strike speaks to the importance of forging cross organizational unity to ensure the success of the strike.

RESISTANCE BEYOND SURVIVAL: EDUCATION, SPORT AND CULTURE

In theory, imprisonment is meant to rehabilitate a prisoner, who has invariably broken not just laws, but social codes and mores in a society. In the case of political prisoners in South Africa, the state had little hope of 'rehabilitating' prisoners. This would have involved a recantation of the anti-apartheid struggle and an acceptance of the racist perspective of their jailors. Moreover, much of the treatment meted out to the political prisoners showed that not only was the state not concerned with rehabilitation, but with retribution. Once the worst physical abuses came to an end, retribution continued through the mental torture of prison. Crucial to resisting the state's attempt to destroy them mentally, the Islanders began and extended their cultural, academic and sporting efforts.

Before our enemy had been physical cruelty, now it was boredom, isolation, the psychological decay of an endlessly unproductive and confined existence; so the [mini-Olympic] Games were an important way of getting ourselves mobilized, using our inner resources to smash the routine and monotonous futility of prison life (Naidoo 1982, 248).

instances of gross inhumanity and brutality. Walter Sisulu (in Schadeberg: 27) recalls:

One unhappy incident occurred on 29th May 1977 when they raided our cells at night. Many prisoners were beaten. They stripped me and told me to put my hands against the wall. I was worried because I had flu. I thought their plan may be that I become ill and eventually die. I felt angry and bitter, it was one of the horrible invasions of our privacy. But my position was better than a man like Toivo ja Toivo. He fought back after a beating and his cell was full of blood.

Second, the late seventies and early eighties saw some apparently contradictory policies regarding improvements and regression from the state. On the one hand, there were improvements, like the end of hard labour, the beginning of legal news, and the prisoners receiving beds for the first time. On the other hand, this was also a time when study rights beyond matric level were withdrawn, and outside prison, in the 1978-1979 Bethal Trial, PAC leaders were being prosecuted for organizing the PAC on Robben Island.

Academic education

Political prisoners on the Island developed and sought to live by a code of conduct. This code called for prisoners to maintain their commitment to a changed society, ensure non-collaboration with the authorities, and to find and make positive things from one's imprisonment, that is, a demand for self-improvement (Moseneke interview). The demand for self-improvement, and using one's time on Robben Island as usefully as possible, is seen in the value placed on academic education. As Babenia (mans, 234) notes "[i]f you do not watch out prison can put your brain to death." Academic study was valued in terms of three criteria. First, it was important in maintaining morale. Moseneke, who graduated from Robben Island with a matric and Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and English, commented "many people have emerged to survive Robben Island largely because of their studying. Its one single thing that really keeps you together (Moseneke interview)."

Without study privilege many of the prisoners would have atrophied intellectually and bouts of demoralization might have superseded the general buoyancy of the community. Studies to a large extent played some diversionary role. It is true the majority of prisoners did not enjoy the formal privilege of study while they were in goal for a number of reasons, the principal one being lack of funds. Informally, no prisoner who had an interest in learning failed to benefit from the intellectual atmosphere that prevailed. The privileged students took risks, 'abused' their study privilege to help their less privileged fellow inmates (Dingake 1987, 183-4).

Second, academic education made a contribution to the community as a whole. Islanders always sought to increase educational standards of all prisoners, and formal and informal education was conducted across organizational line. One of the key areas of this effort was the attempt to ensure no man left the Island without reading and writing if he came there illiterate. Mbatha (interview), Moseneke (interview) and Babenia (mans, 238) all refer to the highly successful literacy campaigns held on the Island in the 1960s.

In a matter of three to four years we had actually wiped out illiteracy on Robben Island. Completely. Everyone could read and write, at least in his mother tongue. As we moved on, we issued little wonderful certificates for every step that he would have passed, the heading always being 'The University of Robben Island' (Moseneke interview).

Aside from literacy classes, there were also classes on a range of subjects from history to biology, and at all different educational levels. Very often these classes were held in the quarry as prisoners worked (see, for example, Robben Island: Our University in Lodge and Nasson 1991, 301).

Third, academic education was also seen as the basis of a

sound political education. In explaining the political theory classes that he and Steven Dlamini started on the Island, Harry Gwala (interview) explained that the people who were illiterate could not understand the abstract concepts they were teaching and using. "So we organised...literacy education."

Constraints on academic education

The issue of academic study highlights the important point made above: that is, although there has been an undoubted and enormous improvement in conditions on Robben Island over the years, it "still [remained] a prison (Suzman interview)." The inmates were at all point vulnerable to their jailers' edicts and controls.

That the form of psychological torture did not work as expected does not imply that it did not work at all. The fact that I underline it so much, means that I am still smarting under its effects. The common characteristic of torture whether physical or psychological is that it is painful to every sensitive victim. The psychological pain is more painful for, having to do with human dignity, it lingers in memory long after the physical pain has gone and as long as it has not found equitable redress (Dingake 1987, 203).

When political prisoners began arriving on Robben Island in the early 1960s the official Prison Department policy encouraged prisoner study. Many prisoners began to study, although it was very difficult to do so because of bureaucratic stumbling blocks and harsh physical conditions. If one could cope with this, study was not impossible. Before the advent of political prisoners the prison authorities, it appears, did not consider it a problem to encourage inmates to study. Before the 1960s, the South African prisoners were negative social elements as opposed to 'enemies of the state'. They also seldom wanted to study. By the end of the 1960s, the prison authorities had either wanted to cut down on their bureaucratic load (censorship and other 'necessities' of organising study) or they resented the boosts to morale study privileges gave the prisoners. Perhaps too, they were concerned with the fact that their political inmates were much better educated than their warders, something many former prisoners assert.

Thus, four things occurred to inhibit and limit studies. Prior to 1968 or 1969 prisoners who studied through UNISA were allowed to pay only half of the regular fees. Dingake (175) notes that prisoners did not know if this was due to UNISA's concern, or due to a prison department subsidy. Either way, this "much appreciated subsidy" was cut. Second, in 1969, post-graduate study was stopped. Whoever was doing a post-graduate degree at the time was given until February 1970 to finish, irrespective of when he was supposed to complete the degree. Third, soon after this, prisoners were prohibited from including History, Law and Political Science in their undergraduate curricula. (Fikile Bam (interview),

who was in his final year of his LL.B. before going to prison in 1964, said he was not allowed to study law and complete his degree even then. The exception was Nelson Mandela only because he had been imprisoned earlier and had already been given permission to study law.) Finally, censorship increased tremendously and the use of the library facilities became "a punitive weapon in the hands of the officials" (Suzman in Hansard 1974: 52, 6295).

Sport and recreation²⁵

The prisoners were acutely aware of the need to protect their physical and mental health. Sport was a key means of doing so. Steve Tshwete (in Schadeberg 1994, 38) notes that "[s]port was very important on the Island. It relieved the tension and anxiety about family, about home and about survival in prison itself." Furthermore, although when sport first became authorized in 1967 there was some division on organizational lines, in general sport was a means of uniting people irrespective of ideology or affiliation.

Sport was also one of the areas in which people learned or shared organizational skills, and in which collective norms were established and put into practice. The extensive documentation²⁶ of the sports (and other recreation) committees is indeed rather remarkable. Over time a complex network of sports organizations evolved, with detailed constitutions governing the rules and organizations of sport. For example, the following excerpt from the "Robben Island Political Prisoners Recreational and Cultural Committee", thereafter referred to as the "Recreational Committee", suggests the formality, careful thought, and extensive work that has gone into the Constitution. Section 9 (of a 16 sectioned constitution) deals with the Misconduct and Protest Committee.

9. MISCONDUCT AND PROTEST COMMITTEE (MPC)

(a) To settle disputes arising within the Assoc[iation], there shall be set up a MPC of five (5) members elected at the Special General meeting for 1 year of office; 7

(a) [which deals with meetings of the various levels of the association] shall apply mutatis mutandis. ...

(c) All matters of 'misconduct and protest' nature shall only be discussed by the MPC. Reports of misconduct and/or protest shall be submitted in writing to the secretary of the Assoc. who shall forward it to the MPC.

²⁵ Also see Cheryl Roberts, Sport in Chains (Cape Town: Township Publishing Co-operative, 1994)

²⁶ The Robben Island Archives 1966-1991, The Mayibuye Centre for History and Culture in South Africa, University of the Western Cape. Hereafter the documents from the collection are noted by 'Mayibuye' and their box and file number, for example, Mayibuye 1.3.

(d) When a member(s) of the MPC is/are a party to the matter under jurisdiction, such member shall recuse himself...

(e) When the presence of the members of the MPC is considered by the MPC to be prejudicial to the interest of one of the parties concerned, such member(s) shall duly recuse himself... (Mayibuye 1.1).

Similarly, most of the minutes dealing with sports club matters are meticulous, whether the issues are apparently mundane or serious. It was not just the structure of the sports and recreation committees that was formal, so was the discourse in which the administration of sporting affairs took place. If the prison authorities did not accord them with the respect they deserved, the prisoners would at least respect each other, and insure that sporting passions did not overwhelm decent behaviour. Thus, minutes and correspondence almost always referred to a community member as 'Mr.'. The following minutes of 6 February 1972 of the Ixhalanga Rugby Football Club are emblematic.

Informal Executive Meeting - 6th February, 1972

Venue: Behind Cell 'E3" and "C1"

Time: Exercise time in the Morning."

The Chairman declared the meeting open. The Executive was more [sic] concerned about the consequences of the friendly match staged by Egala RFC and our club. The unsportsmanlike and ungentlemanly conduct showed by some of our players was discussed. The names of Messrs A. Suze and Pole were mentioned. Mr. A. Suze left the field in the midst of the play without informing his captain. All the members of the Executive deprecate such unbecoming behavior [sic], saying it was lowering the dignity of the Club. They felt a stern action should be taken against Mr. Suze's conduct in the field.

Mr. Pole enlightened the Executive about the incident of his with Mr. Henge outside the field, where it was alleged that there was an exchange of words nearly accompanied by shots [sic]. He realised the mistake he committed and apologised.

The Executive further discussed an incident which resulted to [sic] injury of Mr Matsiliza who was playing a Full Back. They felt that a strongly worded letter should be addressed to Gqala R.F.C enlightening them about the disappointment our Club found itself in because they never expected such rough play in the field. But on second thought they felt that they should await for a letter of apology from Gqala.

The captain Mr Ndibi called, gave a report about the match [sic]. He was also greatly concerned about Messrs Suze and Pole's conduct in the field. He said he found them on certain occasions addressing the referee without his knowledge.

Mr Suze called because he wanted to have an interview with the Executive. He told the Executive that he had come to a decision that he was no longer to play but to remain just as a member of the Club. The reason

was that he found Rugby not suitable for his liking. He time and again quarrelled and that was something he did not like. He mentioned his quarrel with Mr Masuku in the cell. The Executive found it could not discuss the matter but only to take it to the Council. The chairman declared the meeting closed (Mayibuye 1.2)

The records of the sporting and recreation committees are one of the few ways one can have access to community self-perception of life on the Island at the time. Unlike interviews or prison memoirs, these records were produced on the Island in the course of daily life, for the use of the prisoners themselves, not an outside audience. Within this context, one of the most interesting and important things that emerges in the documentation is the concern with the vulnerability of the community; either in itself or in terms of the state of sport. Thus the chairman of the Makana Football Association (MFA) of the time, John M. Ramoshaba, raised various issues of concern to the MFA Annual General Meeting.

- (1) The mental, moral, spiritual stability of the inmates is not regarded or seen by others as depending on strong and healthy bodies, and good relations between persons and groups.
- (2) The will to play is dead in many of the inmates.
- (3) Soccer is being dealt a blow because many soccerites [sic] and fans either live in the past of the Island soccer or a future of soccer far removed into the future away from the Island. The present as far as they are concerned is either of no account or nonexistent.
- (4) Any organized group performs better and more harmoniously, if the procedural aspect of its affairs is strictly adhered to. Random and loose handling of affairs can never be a blessing.
- (5) Discipline has plainly become painful to others. Thus any irregularities in behaviour displayed by any member of any football club on the field of play or off it or any disregard to apply discipline by any responsible body connected with soccer, manifests in all starkness the unmerciful blows dealt such a healthy, attractive and beloved game; "soccer" (Mayibuye 17.1)."

What comes across in the hundreds of sports clubs minutes and letters is the fragility of the community - how easily tempers flared, how important sport (and other recreation, including culture) was to maintaining morale and relieving tension, and yet how difficult it often was to maintain sporting standards, both in the administration and the games themselves.

Former Islanders often speak to the positive things that were gained from their years on the Island; the community that was forged, the lessons learnt, and the personal and organizational growth experienced. Bam, for example, said he didn't regret the experience (Robben Island: Our University in Lodge and Nasson 1991, 300), and Brutus (1973, 60) writes "[i]t is not all terror/ and deprivation,/ you know;/ one comes to welcome the closer contact and understanding one

achieves with one's fellow men,/ fellows, compeers...". Especially after the early years of the 1960s and other particularly bad periods, such as in the Badenhorst years, the non-Islander may be mislead into undermining the enormous difficulty of keeping or maintaining any semblance of normality in one's psyche and soul. The determination with which prisoners forged and fought for meaning in their lives in prison was a remarkable act of resistance, of a refusal to let the state destroy their minds, bodies, or souls, as it intended to.

The world of sport and cultural life on Robben Island cannot be separated from other spheres of prison life. One of the areas this is particularly clear is in the organizational training that the recreation arena provided. Michael Kahla, in his Chairman's annual report of the Prisoners Record Club of 30 August 1974, writes of the challenge that faced him and his committee, of which he was the only person who remained from this first executive.

Gentlemen...

On our assumption of office we were faced forthwith with the task of having to organise and overhaul this club - to endeavour to serve you to the best of our ability - to satisfy that diversity of tastes in this most abstract of all the arts - music. To show that this is no mean task we were flooded with a barrage of complaints, suggestions and requests. We welcomed all these, and interpreted them as a sign of life - the beginning of an education in Music.

The Annual Report that follows outlines the tasks, difficulties and challenges that followed, from disagreement among the prisoners as to the process for choosing and playing records, to the warders' obstruction of their procedures, to protecting and enlarging the record collection. Whatever the pressures Mr. Kahla (and his team) were under, he apparently felt he had gained more than he lost in his community service. He ended his report with the following comment:

Finally, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to you all for having conferred this office upon me. You have given me a schooling in administration, patience and understanding that no formal school could have given.

I thank you all.

Indeed, this is the general impression one has in reading these documents; that the recreation and sporting committees were an invaluable tool to teaching new or honing old organizational skills. As such, they contributed to the quality of life within prison, and the preparation for life outside prison, to the advance of individuals and their organizations.

Before exploring the overtly political dimension of life on the Island, it is worth underscoring that resistance to overt abuse or the more insidious boredom, depression, or monotony of prison life are inextricably linked. In calling for a recognition that the Island should not be recorded simply as a site of oppression and persecution, but as a site of a multi-

dimensional resistance, one should not lose sight either of the repression and oppression, the pain and the torment. Natoo Babenia describes his reaction to the abuse suffered at the quarry, quoted above.

As we dashed around 'Zed' gasps to me "Natoo, they are going to kill us!" I had tears in my eyes and was limping with only one sandal. Riot, just behind me, was also crying. It was such a quick glimpse into tragedy and three comrades honest sharing of emotions, but next moment we heard Piet [Kleynhans, the warder] shouting "Wat doen daai twee koelies daar?" Quickly we took up our wheelbarrows and went our separate lonely ways (Babenia: 180)

Feminists have long pointed out that the 'personal is political'. The vulnerability displayed in the sporting documents (amongst other sources) makes it clear that the political is also personal. That is, the success of political resistance, and the ability to maintain or strengthen one's political identity and mission also depends on people as personal, not just political beings.²⁷

A THIRD DIMENSION OF RESISTANCE: FURTHERING THE AIMS OF BANNED ORGANIZATIONS

There is probably no greater form and level of resistance for a political prisoner than to continue political organization and political struggle while imprisoned, or as a result of imprisonment. This was a prime achievement of Robben Island and the Robben Islanders.²⁸ This was achieved in a number of arenas and through a number of methods. A primary means of continuing political resistance organization was through political organization. Second, political organizing occurred through continued movement or organizational affiliation. Crucial to this endeavour was the illegal collection and dissemination of news. Third, there were structures and methods to mediate inter-movement relationships. Finally, there was explicit and implicit training and preparation for continued political activism upon release.

Organizations and structures

Political organization on Robben Island was of course influenced by the national context from which the prisoners had come. This included the question and issue of who from the two main organization had been sent to prison (as opposed

²⁷ Space constraints unfortunately prevent a consideration of the personal in terms of the families of the prisoners, the relationships between them, and issues such as letters or visits.

²⁸ I argue for the overt contribution of Robben Island to the anti-apartheid struggle for the 1963-1976 period. Arguably, however, that contribution was even stronger and more explicit for the people who left or went to Robben Island after 1976.

to going into exile, or staying in the country in a more or less underground status). Arguably, at least two factors affected the differences between the ANC and the PAC as regards organization on the Island. First, the ANC was a far more established organization, whereas the PAC had only been created in 1959. There was therefore a greater fluidity in the PAC's composition, perhaps seen most overtly in the fact that the Pogo movement to some extent saw itself as part of the PAC, and vice-versa. Second, the ANC had the very dubious advantage (at least as far as Robben Island politics was concerned) of having most of its national leadership imprisoned together, and for life sentences. In contrast, the PAC on the Island was often wracked by divisions that frequently were a result of prisoners being aligned with various regional leaders, where a national leader like Zeph Mothopeng was (first) on the Island for a relatively short period. Perhaps too, the involvement of the state in 'creating' or furthering leadership played a role, as long-term PAC prisoners like Johnson Mlambo were kept in the general sections rather than in the single-cell section generally considered for 'leadership'.

The highest structure of the ANC on Robben Island was the high organ, and was initially composed of the four prisoners who had been members of the ANC National Executive Committee at the time the ANC was banned; namely Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Raymond Mhlaba and Govan Mbeki. From time to time they co-opted an individual onto the committee, such as Ahmed Kathrada (Kathrada interview)²⁹. Within the general sections of the prison, the ANC soon organized around the Disciplinary Committee, or DC. "Right from the beginning we had what was called a Disciplinary Committee. Until the ANC leadership arrived the 'DC' was the top ANC body on the Island. They were appointed by a senior ANC comrade. In the early days there were five on the 'DC'. Curnick [Ndlovu], Billy [Nair], Phillip Matthews, [Andrew] Masondo and Jeremiah Francis (Babenia mans 182)." By the mid-1960s, there was an enlargement in these structures. A new position of a Public Relations Officer was instituted, as well as group leaders in each of the four sections of a prison-cell. Below this were smaller organizational cells³⁰ of (about) four people per group (Babenia: 183). In turn, each cell would have a leader which would liaise with other cell leaders in a group, and the group leader would interact with other group leaders, itself forming a committee (Gwala interview). There were also organizational cells amongst the single-cell prisoners

²⁹ See below

³⁰ Vocabulary is difficult here, because 'cell' can of course mean more than one thing. I have therefore tried to distinguish between an physical prison cell and a human organizational cell.

(Kathrada interview).³¹

The role of the DC was to monitor and mediate the potential and actual tensions amongst the men, on an inter- and intra-organizational basis.

The 'DC' would meet regularly and discuss various things amongst themselves. Like the conditions, the attitude of the PAC towards us and say food. And, very importantly, if something happened in one of the cells, like if two chaps fought, it would go to the 'DC'. The 'DC' would resolve the issue and reprimand the fellows. Times were hard and people would easily lose their tempers. Often over the most small, inconsequential matters. But it did not seem like that at the time (Babenia: 183).

Of course all this political activity violated the prison rules, and therefore had to be kept as secretly as possible. This was one of the reasons for the small groups; "if the warders found you meeting in big groups, which was very difficult anyway during those early years, the warders would accuse you of having a political meeting. You lose three meals (Babenia mans, 183)." Being punished for political activity also took other, more ominous and long-term forms. Curnick Ndlovu noted that communication between sections and especially with leadership in the single cells was essential, but dangerous. People would be "victimised in such a way that if they catch you with any document then your studies are going to be taken away for the whole year...They would even cancel when your exam papers are there (Ndlovu interview)." Aside from being monitored by the warders, the political prisoners were also monitored by some of the common-law prisoners, as well as informers from within the political community. "There are informers on Robben Island too," notes Alexander, "men who for diverse reasons have left their organisations (or been expelled) and are collaborating with the authorities." The security police also monitored the prison, through - as in the example of Mac Maharaj - going through his letters and listening to his visits to attempt to identify secret messages (see for example, The Weekly Mail and Guardian, July 29 to August 4 1994).

³¹ It has often been quite difficult to get specific details of organizational structure in interviews. There are a number of possible reasons for this, including the following: 1. former Islanders still consider these secret; 2. certain prisoners did not know the exact structures of the liberation movements inside prison; 3. structures were not especially precise, and it would be wrong to assume they were - Ndlovu (interview) said the ANC "wasn't a structure as such"; 4. structures changed over time and interviewees generalise for the experience throughout their term of incarceration, rather than identifying exact organizational definitions; and 5. organizational structures differed in different sections, even within the general section.

According to Johnson Mlambo (interview), the PAC did not really have a structure on Robben Island in the early 1960s. As has been argued, Mlambo explains this in light of the competing regional leaderships from around the country that came into the prison. But with time there was a push towards centralised and common leadership. This was helped enormously with the arrival of Zephania Mothopeng to the prison in mid-1964. Soon after his arrival, however, he was removed to the single-cell section which again limited the uniting influence he could have. This was further reduced when he was transferred from the Island a year later (Mlambo interview). In turn John Nyati Pokela, also a national PAC leader, was imprisoned on the Island in 1967. According to Mlambo he too played an important role in developing the PAC on the Island, especially in the area of political education, although he was in the single cells.

By the early or mid-1970s, "we had a committee in charge of the PAC in the main section and that committee functioned of course under the leadership of Pokela. He was in the single cells but the committee was in the main section (Mlambo interview)." The committee - which had different names at different times, including the administrative committee and the coordinating committee - in the main section was made up of about five people, who were elected to that position. Furthermore, PAC members within prison cells would have a representative who was the link between their cell and the members in other cells (Mlambo interview).

At times, PAC unity had been achieved at considerable costs. It was a widely accepted aspect of the political prisoners stated and unstated code of conduct that prisoners should not benefit themselves at the expense of comrades or at the expense of organizational unity. There were, however, certain political prisoners who worked with the criminal prisoners too smuggle food, which meant that there was less food for the political community as a whole. This of course led to divisions, and also worked against PAC and ANC unity against the authorities. "Us politicians felt that smuggling was bad. For when you smuggled, or as others would have it, stole from the kitchen, you were taking food away from your comrades (Babenia mans, 196)." The problem of smuggling appeared to be greater among certain PAC followers (and the non-political prisoners), and therefore had to be tackled by that organization. This was to cost Johnson Mlambo his eye, as he elaborates:

In 1967...we took this particular stand within the PAC that we are going to try and stop people receiving special treatment and the like. Because they are humiliating us, and it is in our interests to stop this...In the process of trying to stop...that, we discovered someone had received some special dish and we were trying to take it away and dump that food in the toilet. Whilst we were struggling to get that dish away from him, he, together with a few who went along with that, actually put...his finger into my eye socket and

that is how I lost my eye... (Mlambo interview). The problem and practice of smuggling food only really ended, however, when the political prisoners finally won their struggle to have political prisoners rather than criminals prepare their food, which happened in the mid-1970s.

Divisions within an organization were not unique to the PAC. The ANC too had divisions. Some of these reflected long-standing ideological tensions within the ANC, like those between 'nationalists' and 'communists'. Another source of tension was between leadership and the more mass-based membership, in this case exacerbated by the limitations prison imposed on communication.

There was the possibility of democracy in all of these structures. But there was also the chance for top down telephones. Sometimes we would talk back to the leadership and tell them they are talking nonsense. Or it could work the other way around (Babenia mans, 223-224).

Perhaps the difference that had the potential of being of the most danger to the ANC was that between Nelson Mandela and Govan Mbeki. The primary or at least initial reason for the conflict was over the question as to whether it was acceptable for the ANC to support participation in apartheid structures as a strategic measure. Nelson Mandela (with Walter Sisulu) believed the question should be debated with an open mind to participation. Govan Mbeki (with Raymond Mhlaba) on the other hand, militantly opposed any reconsideration of the 1962 Lobatsi conference resolution that called for a boycott of apartheid institutions. Not surprisingly, other accusations and further acrimony developed out of this disagreement.

Andre Odendaal (1994, 8) writes that

Mandela and Mbeki represented "polar opposites in attitudes and opinions", according to the memorandum which was sent from Robben Island to the movement in exile. The personality clash and political impasse between them lasted for several years, "at times reaching extreme tension and bitterness". Allegations abounded, including one that some members were abandoning the armed struggle and another that some were formenting racial discrimination. Mandela's status as the most senior ANC leader on the island was also called into question.

The long period of crisis, from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, was eventually resolved with new membership on the high organ, and various other suggestions and measures, including criticism of the men at the heart of the conflict, reinstatement of the four men onto the High Organ, and a reaffirmation of Mandela's leadership.

News and political education

Whatever intra- and inter- organizational differences existed, political education was a concern shared across the political spectrum in prison. Indeed, while academic education is considered important, political education lies at the heart of ex-Islander reflections on their incarceration and of the association of the Island as 'University'. (Thami Mkhwanazi

(Weekly Mail August 14, 1987) wrote that "I had first heard the Island described as the University of Revolutionary Politics by a security policeman during my interrogation. He said I had been caught because I was an amateur - and soon I would be sent to "the university". ") Political education must not be understood in a narrow sense. It included news analysis, seminars, research, debate and discussion about politics, but went beyond that. Living on Robben Island was itself a form of political education because every action is self-consciously considered in political terms.

The precise structure of political education varied from time to time, from section to section, and according to organizational affiliation. In general, however, the education committee of an organization decided upon the content and implementation of political education. Jacob Zuma (interview) describes his experience:

A group of us who came from Durban [had been involved in political education there]...SACTU in particular developed a culture here in Durban of political education which we called labour theory discussions...About five of us who had attended those political discussions here [in Durban] found ourselves on Robben Island...and felt we needed to have some political discussions among ourselves [on the Island] to revise what we used to discuss [outside prison]. We...began...political lectures for everybody during lunch time. which was an hours, we used that [time] to revise and discuss if there were news items...So when we were joined by particularly comrade Stephen Dlamini, who was our leaders, [and] Harry Gwala...[who] had were actually our political instructors outside...we started having discussions with them everyday at lunch time and we were gradually joined by other people, whoever was interested. Revising political lectures or discussions that we'd had over the weekend, analysing news items, discussing about labour theory in particular and enriching our knowledge, that became in fact the nucleus of the culture on Robben Island, the culture of political education.³²

From the PAC perspective, Mlambo notes

But there were many things we also learnt. Some of us were totally inexperienced and we learnt a little more from some of our leaders...Uncle Zeph [Zephania Mothopeng], who was the second president of the PAC after Sobukwe...was always bombarded with questions. 'What were

³² Certain people who were part of the ANC grouping on the Island may not have been ANC members before their incarceration. These would have included members of the Indian Congresses or the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU).

we going to do with the Europeans when we were free?'³³ That question was a perennial one. He would give a talk enlightening us on this or that aspect - and by the way it was illegal to even have those political discussions. You would be charged for holding meetings... (Mlambo interview)."

One important source of information was leadership. Political writings of people such as Sisulu, Nair and Mbeki³⁴ were circulated (illegally) in the prison to be used by the inmate community. Leadership were also looked to provide information that was otherwise unavailable:

When I arrived in the single cells section, ANC members were discussing the history of the ANC. Needless to say we had no written guides, but Comrade Walter Sisulu, who led the discussions, was a walking history of the organization. Comrade Walter's memory was phenomenal. Not only did he remember events, and the names associated with them, but also the circumstances under which they occurred.

Political discussion was prohibited on Robben Island: it flourished notwithstanding.

After the history of the ANC, which took a vast period because of its richness and the complexity of its evolution, other topics were tackled: nationalism, Marxist theories, and current national and international topics. Consensus was never the object in discussions of a general political nature. The aim was to learn from each other (Dingake 1987, 214).

A critical component of political education was the need to apply party principles and ideology to the world of political activity outside. To do that, prisoners needed to follow national and international news. But this was entirely forbidden. So a fundamental aspect of political prisoner resistance became the struggle to get news. Of course formal representation would be made to the prison authorities and visitors like the International Committee of the Red Cross and

³³ This paper is not concerned with the content of the ideology of the movements, or internal debates. Mlambo, however, did give Mothopeng's answer to this question in the interview: He would say "That is a negative type of question you are asking. Ask what we are going to do for the African That is the question you should be asking...Sobukwe actually put it that in the new Africa there would be no reason why a predominantly black electorate cannot even have a white person representing them in Parliament because colour will be of no consequence."

³⁴ Many of Mbeki's prison analyses have been collected in his book Learning from Robben Island: The Prison Writings of Govan Mbeki (Cape Town: David Philip in association with the University of the Western Cape Historical and Cultural Centre Project, 1991)

Helen Suzman for the right of prisoners to read newspapers. But the real struggle was in actually obtaining news by an array of illicit means (see for example Naidoo 1982, 132 and Dingake 1987, 193-5). At times the struggle for news was a source of competition and even antagonism between the liberation movements, but more often there was co-operation between organizations on sharing the news that had been obtained.

Inter-organisational relationships

One of the remarkable achievements of the men imprisoned on Robben Island is that there was, with some notable exceptions³⁵, a high degree of cross-organizational solidarity and unity in terms of the attitude towards the authorities, and in ensuring a shared set of mores and rules to govern life on the Island. The experience of gangs in common law prisons, and among the common law prisoners on Robben Island, make it very clear that in the absence of a unity with respect to the common enemy, the state and prison authorities quickly use a divide and rule strategy.³⁶

While relationships between organizations had their ebbs and flows, it does appear as though there was generally a high level of mutual cooperation, especially as far as the state was concerned. Unity was always a particular imperative in protest action like a hunger strike. In cases like these, representatives of organizations from the general sections would consult with each other to reach agreement on the appropriate course of action.

The relationships between organizations in the single cells was more formal. Helen Suzman (interview) notes that Nelson Mandela had been chosen to represent the prisoners in the single cells, despite their different affiliations. "Neville Alexander said 'Don't waste time speaking to us, go to the end

³⁵ The two most important periods of inter-organizational conflict on the Island appeared to be in the 1960s, and in the post-1976 to approximately 1981. In the 1960s unity needed to be forged both between the ANC and PAC, and within the PAC (as discussed above), in order to effectively challenge the state. On the other hand, there were actually unity talks between the ANC and the PAC in the 1960s, which were ultimately unsuccessful (Kathrada and Sisulu interviews).

³⁶ Indeed, insofar as there were inter- or intra-organizational tensions, bringing these to the attention of the state could well have proved very dangerous. Mark Shinnars (interview), is a PAC member who was on Robben Island from 1963 to 1973. He was later tried in the 1978-1979 Bethal trial only to be reconvicted and sent back to Robben Island. He said that the security police used discussions of tensions within the PAC in Indres Naidoo's Island in Chains as a basis of their interrogation.

and speak to Mandela', which I did."³⁷ Fikile Bam (in Robben Island: Our University: Lodge and Nassum 1991, 309) speaks of being "particularly flattered when I was chosen as the first chairman of the Prisoners' Committee in our section at a time when the groups [political organizations] were really difficult to deal with." In time, that committee evolved into Ulundi, a formal committee to which each organization in the single cells had a representative, that is, the ANC, the PAC, the Liberal Party (represented by Eddie Daniels), SWAPO (represented by Toivo Ya Toivo), the NLF/NEUM group, and later APDUSA. According to Sonny Venkatrathnam, Nelson Mandela chaired this committee for many years, and as such represented the community to visitors to the International Committee of the Red Cross and Helen Suzman. Then, with his own removal to the single cells as a representative of APDUSA, and the arrival of the first Black Consciousness representatives to the Island and single cells, a "kind of alliance" was formed and he had now become Chairperson of Ulundi. "And I said 'What, is Nelson going to serve under me?'...There was a lot of power...in the sense that you were the spokesperson. You had to meet with the prison department and the visitors, ...And a number of things happened during this time because of this change. The ANC were getting jittery about their position there (Venkatrathnam interview).

Despite the implied and stated criticism to certain individual's and political practices on the Island, Venkatrathnam (interview) also emphasized the human dimension of individual friendship, solidarity, and mutual care. "Despite the kind of alliance that was formed [between various groups in opposition to ANC control], the relationship between individuals on the Island did not change. My closest associates in the single cells were ANC people." (There was a very delicate negotiation of the border between personal and political relationships.) Furthermore, there was an equality between the prisoners that no doubt did much to underscore the camaraderie.

One thing I experienced on Robben Island was the spirit of camaraderie, [a] tremendous spirit of camaraderie. This is one of the greatest things about Robben Island that I still think of fondly, is that when you are depressed, people will realise it quickly and come and try and knock you out of this feeling. If you are ill they will hang around you, even clean you....We could talk to anybody as equals. That was the other great thing [on the Island]. Whether it was Nelson or any of the young chaps, there was no position [of inequality] in the single cells at least. Everybody was treated equally. Even in terms of work - you know we organized our own work schedule - if it is this group's turn to wash the toilets [from] Nelson to the youngest guys, will

³⁷ In her autobiography she gives the same account, except she remembers Eddie Daniels as being the person who directed her to Mandela on behalf of all of them.

join in and help do it. The point is there was always absolute equality in terms of where prison life was concerned. In terms of organisation it was another matter. In the organisation was leadership... but as prisoners it was absolute...I have never experienced such camaraderie [as I did on the Island] in all my life, and you cannot possibly get it outside prison.

Whatever the formal status of the organizational relationships, personal friendships often blossomed between members of different movements. Furthermore, one of the ways ideological antagonism was reduced was to avoid discussions that would bring up political differences. People would generally avoid discussing ideological questions with those of another group, and maintain an assumption of tolerance for all perspectives.

Most of the people on the Island, and in the single cells at least, don't enter into ideological debates. I would not openly stand and start criticizing, running down the ANC. I know you are with the ANC, and we accept one another's position on the basis that you are not going to change me, and I am not going to change you. But other issues we will debate, and if part of our logical standpoints don't convert we will argue and discuss, and we will not allow intolerance...We could talk to anybody as equals (Venktrathnam interview).

ROBBEN ISLAND'S CONTRIBUTION TO RESISTANCE AND RENEWAL

The outset of this paper asserted that Robben Islander represents an important instance of continued resistance, organization and defiance in South Africa during the period under analysis - 1963-1976. This was a time generally felt to have relatively little resistance, and a pervasive fear, even terror, that undermined organized opposition to National Party tyranny. There was of course resistance inside the country, and many of its agents and products were to land up on the Island because of their opposition. These included James April who in 1971 was arrested after infiltrating South Africa following Umkonto we Sizwe training (Lodge 1985, 302), and the South African Student Organisation nine who were tried and convicted for their black consciousness convictions and their celebration of Frelimo's anti-colonial victory. But, in general, there is no doubt that a pervasive political fear and a very oppressive environment gripped (at least black) South Africa. Saki Macozoma for example, commented that although the Eastern Cape generally and Port Elizabeth in particular had a reputation for being at the heart of anti-apartheid resistance, this was not his experience.

This may surprise many of you here as it goes against popular myth [but]...The Port Elizabeth I grew up in the late sixties and early seventies was very apathetic politically. Port Elizabeth's townships had suffered so much from the repression of the early sixties that people would not even speak about the struggles of that

period, [although] in fact people from this area constituted a majority on the Island (Macozoma 1989 56 author's emphasis).

The first area or form of resistance the Islanders engaged in was to challenge the truly horrendous conditions of their existence. They took the enormous risks of publicly challenging the prison authorities, through a variety of actions, the most extreme of which were hunger strikes. They challenged the right of warders to be called 'baas', the right of the state to mete out arbitrary 'justice', and to treat them in a sub-human manner through inadequate food, medical care, clothing, and contact with their families.

In itself, these resistances, protests and challenges to the system were far-reaching. They challenged power relations from a point of extreme vulnerability from the perspective of the prisoners, and achieved tangible and measurable improvements to their lives. Moreover, these achievements, the establishment of a minimum baseline of behaviour beneath which it was dangerous for the authorities to sink, allowed the prisoners to concentrate on using their imprisonment as productively as possible.

The second area where prisoners created a sense of victory was in the development of individuals qua individuals and as political beings. While most prisoners seem to emphasize their overt political training through political education, the way the entire prison experience was used contributed to the growth and sophistication of people and movements. One of the primary areas this was seen was in the relationships with the warders. Slogans or even readings about the state were unlikely to ever have contributed as much to as subtle an understanding of the meaning of power as the strangely intimate relationship between a warder and a prisoner. Nelson Mandela comments:

We soon became aware that in terms of our daily lives...an ordinary warder, not a sergeant, could be more important to us than the Commissioner of Prisons or even the Minister of Justice. If you went to the Commissioner of Prisons or the Minister and said, 'Sir, it's very cold, I want four blankets', he would look at the regulations and say, 'You can only have three blankets... more would be a violation of the regulations...'. If you went to a warder in your section and said 'Look, I want an extra blanket', and if you treated him with respect, he'd just go to the storeroom, give you an extra blanket, and that's the end of it (Mandela in Schadeberg 1994, 18-19)."

Furthermore, the sophisticated and complex society and culture that the prisoners developed taught people about administration (as illustrated in the above examples about the sports and recreation committees), dealing with those one disagreed with, mutual support, and overt political and organizational development. When Jacob Zuma was asked whether it was perhaps axiomatic that leaders emerged out of Robben

Island, because it was leaders that had gone in to the Island prison, he was quick to disagree, and in so doing provided what might be described as a curriculum vitae of his own years in prison:

If I take my own example, when I went to Robben Island I was an ordinary young cadre...I hadn't been a commander before, I hadn't been anything. I began to work in the smallest unit in the ANC [on the Island], as a member of the group and I was changed from one group to the other. I then at one point became identified to collect news for the cell, because we had a system where collectively we collect news and come and disseminate the news...You would keep [the news] in your head because we were not allowed to write down anything...At one time I was appointed a group leader, which was different than me serving as a group member...Once you are a group leader you actually attend cell leadership meetings of all the groups. In other words you are now at the cell leadership collective grouping. At another point I was...the public relations person, in the cell who then linked up with the unknown person...At times we'd be asked to prepare a lecture...By the time I left Robben Island I was the chairman of the political committee, that was responsible for disseminating political lectures throughout the prison.

As well as developing individuals, a third function of political resistance was to develop organizations. On the one hand, prison provided protracted periods of time for people to consider past strategies and tactics, and re-evaluate their organisation's thinking and practices. "Because of the time [in prison] that I had to reflect on the mistakes made in the early sixties, that is why I couldn't be arrested for a second time...because I so understood them, I could predict their thinking wherever I'd be (Zuma interview)." Newer members and supporters were able to learn their organization's and country's history, often a timeous luxury on the outside in the heat of the later fifties and early 1960s. On the other hand, internal differences, whether based on ideology or personality, had to be overcome to the extent of forging decent relationships to prevent the state abusing divisions within or between organizations. Perhaps this was less important for the ANC, which had managed to remain a fairly strong organization despite pulls in different directions over the years. But the PAC had greater divisions and certainly seems to have fared better within Robben Island than in exile. On Robben Island it united or at least found common cause amongst its membership. Much of its current leadership are Robben Island veterans and graduates. Robben Islanders were critical to rejuvenating the organization in exile. Tom Lodge (1991, 191 and 193) notes that:

[d]uring the 1970s the PAC had virtually fallen apart due to conflict among its leaders. In 1980 John Pokela, one of the PAC's founders, was released after being imprisoned for twenty years on Robben Island...[I]n 1981 he was elected president of the exiled PAC...During the

early 1980s, Pokela managed to bring back into the fold some of the dissident factions that had been alienated by the erratic behavior [sic] of previous leaders...Pokela died in June 1985, and his mantle was assumed by another long-term Robben Islander, Johnson Mlambo. In 1989...Mlambo retained the executive functions of chairperson, and another recently released veteran,...Zephania Mothopeng, became PAC president. After Mlambo became PAC president in 1985, the APLA [Azanian People's Liberation Army] began to launch guerrilla operations...³⁸

Fourth, closely related to the role the Islanders played in maintaining and developing organizations, was their role in keeping the otherwise banned organizations alive inside the country, albeit mostly behind prison walls. For nearly thirty years, the only place in South Africa where the ANC and PAC were able to keep intact was on Robben Island. On the Island the liberation movements were organized as the ANC and the as the PAC, something which should not be underestimated. They discussed ideology and policy, educated their membership, cultivated leadership, and recruited members.³⁹ While exiles would overwhelmingly have to wait (unbeknown to them) till the 1990s to return to the country, most prisoner did have ends to their sentences and could reinsert themselves politically into South Africa. In saying this, one should not understate or underestimate the enormity of repression that faced former Islanders, and the incredible odds that worked against their continued political activism. But in fact many former Islanders did continue work inside the country, although usually under enormous secrecy.

In this work inside the country, as well as the struggles behind prison walls, the Robben Islanders laid the foundations for the next generation. Fifthly then, as far as prison was concerned, the changes and improvement won by the prisoner struggles of the sixties and early seventies allowed the post-1976 generation of prisoners to emphasize politics from the start rather than begin their terms fighting for survival. Indeed, so much had the conditions improved, they were often contemptuous of the older men, who they felt were submissive

³⁸ These events are of course in the 1980s, not the pre-1976 period. The point, however, is that these men were a product of the prison from the 1960s, and reflect the difference to the previous exiled (as opposed to imprisoned) leadership.

³⁹ The most vigorous recruitment campaigns on the Island, and, from the ANC's perspective, the most successful, were those of the post 1976 period, where many (primarily) black consciousness were recruited to the ANC. But this was certainly neither the first or last recruitment initiative, as all organizations maximize their strength through larger numbers of members.

to authority. Within the country, the former Islanders were severely restricted by bannings, banishment orders, surveillance, and threats. They could seldom therefore be visible beacons of the continuation of politics, especially in the pre-1976 period. But they nevertheless found ways of being reference points for the youth who took over much of the struggle in the 1970s. Jacob Zuma, with the help of Harry Gwala and others, reinvigorated the Natal ANC underground. Similarly, Martin 'Magalies' Ramakgadi ran the greater Johannesburg ANC underground in the mid-1970s, along with people like Joe Gqabi who did much to recruit the disenchanted youth of the 1970s into Umkhonto we Sizwe and the ANC. Nor was this confined to the major centres of the country; Peter Nchabaleng first organized the ANC underground and then the United Democratic Front in the Northern Transvaal, and there are countless accounts of people who continued various forms of legal or underground political work in the Eastern Cape. The PAC too relied on its former Islanders to maintain or rejuvenate their organizations, and the spirit and practice of resistance. Simon Ramagale (interview), a PAC member imprisoned on the Island in the 1960s, describes helping young black consciousness members in the early 1970s Walter Sifozone Tshikila, who had previously been on the Island for six years as a PAC member, was found guilty in 1977 in Grahamstown for being a PAC member, inciting people to leave the country for military training, and giving lectures on the PAC, and was sentenced to a new thirteen years imprisonment (SAIRR Security and Related Trials 7/76-5/77 -TBA).

Perhaps the most powerful sets of evidence currently available about the role of former prisoners is the number of Robben Islanders who served a second sentence in that prison, having continued their underground work upon their release. Indeed, not only is that the case with the PAC Bethal trial of 1978-1979, but the four former Robben Islanders - Zephania Mothopeng, Mark Shinnars, Hamilton Keke, and John Ganya were also charged with furthering the PAC while on the Island in the 1960s and early 1970s! Regarding Mothopeng, Lodge (1991, 193) writes:

Mothopeng was arrested again in August 1976 and endured, at the age of sixty-six, sixteen months of solitary confinement. A lengthy trial [known as the Bethal trial] subsequently revealed his almost single-handed efforts to resurrect the PAC as a political force in South Africa. Setting up a coordinating committee in Johannesburg, Mothopeng was able to bring within its ambit a string of youth and other associations that had been formed in the wake of the black consciousness movement. He made contact with the PAC in Swaziland and set up a recruitment program. In 1978 he was sentenced to fifteen years under the Terrorism Act.

Two major ANC trials also reflected the results of the Robben Islanders. One was known as the Joe Gqabi or Pretoria 12 trial, and while Gqabi and Nchabaleng were both acquitted (and later killed), Martin Ramakgadi, a fellow Island veteran, was sent back for a second term. The other major trial took place

in Pietermaritzburg. Harry Gwala and Msomi Matthews Meyiwa were again convicted and returned to Robben Island. There were other, smaller trials of Robben Islanders who had been caught continuing the struggle, and frequently it was their former fellow Island prisoners who were forced to give evidence, though many refused.

A sixth function the Islanders' resistance fulfilled was one to ensure cross-generational communication between different age sets of activists who were thrown into prison. At times relationships could be tense, especially in the post-1976 period, but generally the prisoners worked to understand each other and build their organizations from the perspective of different generations. This meant, *inter alia*, that former prisoners leaving the Island to resume activism would be able to carry the knowledge and insights of multiple periods of struggle.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to show that not only did the use of Robben Island as a political prison continue the Island's long history of a site of repression, but that it also continued its role as a site of resistance. Moreover, I have argued that resistance was found in many forms, often with far-reaching consequences, that affected not only the life chances of the men in the prison, but also the life-chances of the anti-apartheid struggle outside the prison. From demanding to be treated as human beings, to academic and political education, to developing mandates for prisoners returning to the struggle outside, Islander resistance shaped the history of the prison, as well as influencing national history. Survival and growth of the prisoners and their organization on the Island thus defeated the government's aims to destroy opposition to apartheid, racism and inhumanity. Dingake's comment on his release from Robben Island is an appropriate conclusion:

I had done well in gaol, if one can do well there. I was leaving Robben Island in one piece, unbroken in spirit and flesh. Not only could I boast a PG (Prison Graduate), I could boast three academic degrees obtained through correspondence with the University of South Africa. During my 15 years, I had served our prison community through a variety of committees. I also served in all the underground structures of the ANC, from the committee responsible for drawing the organization's study programme to the highest committee entrusted with day-to-day administration and organizational discipline in the section. I had lived a full life in a 'basement' devoid of natural life (Dingake 1987, 227).

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