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Belinda Bozzoli

The South African Truth Commission has three Committees -- one on Human Rights Violations, one on Amnesty and one on Reparation and Rehabilitation. Together they are, in the words of the Commission itself, designed to 'reveal the truth about the political conflicts of the past.' Their ultimate aim is to develop a 'culture of human rights in our country, so that the suffering and injustices of the past never occur again.'. This paper examines the operation of one of these committees, that on Human Rights Violations in Alexandra township. Alex was the home of many of South Africa's political leaders during the struggle against apartheid. It was a place where intense political and social conflicts occurred throughout the period covered by the Commission (1960 - 1993), peaking in a strikingly focused period of rebellion in the mid 1980s. The Truth Commission has taken thousands of statements from victims of apartheid, hundreds of them residents in the townships of Johannesburg. People were asked to come forward if they or their kin had been killed, abducted, tortured or severely ill treated for political reasons. The commission defined such experiences as gross human rights violations. It undertook to investigate them through its Investigative Unit. It aimed to find out who was responsible for these, how and why they happened; and to hold public hearings. The Committee on Reparation and Rehabilitation would receive the information thus derived, consult with 'communities' and make policy recommendations to the President for appropriate reparation to victims.

This paper is concerned with only one of these activities, the holding of hearings throughout the country, at which victims could speak out and be heard and seen by the public of their own communities. Many hearings were recorded for television, but usually only brief extracts were shown. The paper explores one of these hearings in more detail. Of the many who had been victims of apartheid in the township of Alexandra, 22 were invited to present their testimonies concerning resistance in the township between the 1960s and late 1980s. I attended two of the three days during which the commission sat in Alexandra and heard these 22 testimonies.
Listening to the testimonies presented, many of them by people not well known outside Alexandra itself -- the classic subjects of oral histories-- led me to realise that the public hearings were unique. They involved entirely different processes from the taking of oral histories of the period and they were quite unlike court cases as well. The commission has chosen to use the method of ritual rather than that of law to carry out its purpose. This paper explores this procedure, using the case of one relatively small but extremely significant part of the country as its lens.

The workings of rituals are well known to sociologists of religion. Durkheim divided religion into belief and ritual, the latter including actions, cults, rites, ceremonies and practices. In these, he said, are hidden realities of the greatest significance. Durkheim rejected simple psychologism. He saw ritual as social and symbolic, asserting that 'behind these outward and apparently unreasonable movements' lay 'a mental mechanism which gives them a meaning and a moral significance.' In ritual, the worshipper is brought face to face not just with himself, but with his society. The type of rite closest to that which appears in the Alexandra hearings, what Durkheim calls 'the piacular rite' has an ambiguous nature. Normally embodied in such occasions as funerals, the marking of drought or plague, or the occasion of a poor harvest, the piacular rite is 'negative.' It allows the separation of the sacred from the profane and of the individual from the

collective. It allows for the replacement of individual representations by collective beliefs. But it is also 'positive' in that it allows the worshipper to bridge the gap between himself and the 'object' of his cult, by encouraging recall and the construction of myths. It allows expiation, but also brings to the fore 'sentiments of sorrow or fear' about 'every misfortune, everything of ill omen.'

Rituals require the use of sacred ground, the gathering together of an 'assembly,' and the definition of a purpose: 'the gathering of people seeking the same goal and vibrating with the same emotions.' Here too Durkheim rejected what he saw as 'psychological reductionism.' He did not view the assembly as being primarily concerned with the giving up of individuality by those taking part. Rather it was a deeply social institution, which created and recreated beliefs and sentiments, caused new beliefs to come into existence, and strengthened existing ones. Rites remake individuals and groups morally -- and therefore have power over things, he said. 'They have a profound effect on the participants as individuals and as a group, intellectually and emotionally.' Participants take away a feeling of well-being. 'Men are confident because they feel themselves stronger, and they really are stronger.'

It is not difficult to see the connections between some of these observations and the ritualised events at many Truth Commission hearings. Clearly the Commission, headed by two Ministers of the Church, has been influenced deeply by religious thinking. One of the first forms of preparation of the commissioners, mostly secular people, was to take them on a 'retreat' and introduce them to some of the healing and confessional rituals of the church. The TRC undoubtedly wishes to see its rituals performing the function of 'making men stronger' throughout the land. It has set out to allow people to participate in rites of confession, mourning and making public their private pain and anger. Rather than opting for a punitive approach, it has opted for an expiational and healing one. It seeks to transform individuals and assemblies of individuals from stances of resentment, anger, hatred and guilt, to those of acceptance, wholeness, forgiveness and confession. These changes will then, it is hoped, be 'writ large' upon the society as a whole, freeing it from the burdens of unspoken passions and from a possible future age of retribution. Public ritual is designed, therefore, to generate personal and social 'transition' from one state of affairs to another.

What this paper seeks to explore, following Durkheim, is how this has worked in one particular case. How have the various elements of the ritual been constructed, and how have they operated? What is the significance of the fact that, although a semi-religious ritual is being used, the TRC is ultimately a secular institution? Surely there must be a tension between its personal and its social aspects? If the purpose of ritual is not purely psychological, but also social, if it is there to construct and enact a myth through which redemption, healing, or other types of 'transition' can be sought, then what myths does it construct? How are they related to the personal dimensions of change? How does the ritual bring the worshipper -- or in this case the witness -- 'face to face with society'?

The paper does so by exploring the core ingredients of the ritual. These include its form and design; the public and private myths of the past to which it is referring; the present context in which it seeks to transform individuals and the community; the forms and discourses of participation by those who act as witnesses; and the role of the public. It is out of the interplay of these that myths are constructed and transition may or may not occur. There follows a detailed reconstruction of these elements in the case of Alexandra, followed by an assessment of the process.

Ceremony and Symbol

Although Durkheim considered form to be relatively unimportant, it is surely necessary to establish that there was indeed a ritual, and to give some idea of its shape and dimensions. This is particularly important given the fact that this was not, strictly speaking, a religious occasion but a secular one.

The 'physical' elements of the ritual embodied the commission's function as a bridge between the public and the private. They also conveyed to those present, and to the absent, invisible audience, that the object of contemplation was twofold: it was both God, and the 'nation.'

The ceremonial form of the hearing was proto-religious. This helped it become a highly emotional occasion. The hearing was constructed around a variety of carefully chosen collective representations. It was held in a large, well-kept community hall, which for the three days concerned was transformed into a proto-religious setting. An elevated platform was set up in front of the rows of seating, on which were arranged formal tables, at which the commissioners sat in a row. Four commissioners were present on each occasion. The tables were covered in immaculate, long white cloths; flowers were displayed, as well as the Truth Commission's own banner and symbols of peace and reconciliation. Each speaker had a microphone. There were booths down the side where simultaneous translation was done. Witnesses and commissioners could speak in the language of their choice, and audience members were offered earphones through which they could hear the proceedings in one of several languages. A television studio was set up in a side room, and all proceedings were filmed. Order was emphasised and a sense of a peaceful oasis was conveyed, amidst the undoubted chaos that is Alexandra.

Each session opened with a prayer, conducted by a religious figure from the community who would then light a candle to symbolise the bringing of the truth. The national anthem followed. The words were distributed amongst what felt like the "congregation" -- although most people only knew the first, Zulu, part. However they were rescued from their mumbling by two dynamic young women, both clearly employees of the Truth Commission, who took what appeared to be their customary position of choral leadership on the platform in front, and sang with gusto.
The precise schedule for the day was not known until the proceedings actually began, mainly for security reasons. This added to the sense of symbolic distance between audience and commissioners, lending the latter a certain authority. The order, authority and distance had a purpose - but not a particularly pleasant one. Tears would flow; hidden pain would be revealed; terrible stories would be told. But the symbolic calm of the hall would both permit and control these things.

The witnesses for the day - 13 men and 9 women - sat in the first two rows of the hall with their families. The commissioners stepped down from the podium to shake hands with them one by one, welcoming them. While they were doing so hymns, or hymn-like songs, were led by the assistants, lending a funereal tone to the proceedings. The witnesses were much more smartly dressed than the bulk of the audience. The hall was not full on the first day. There were many elderly people there, mostly probably friends and relatives of the witnesses. Their clothing was worn, modest and sometimes idiosyncratic. Some were in German Print, home made dresses, listening intently and grimly; women wore shawls and headscarves. One man came barefoot, with a torn shirt. He had a shaved head marked by what looked like a bullet hole. One elderly woman walked hesitantly, using an old hockey stick as a walking stick. In the afternoon the local patron, Linda Twala, seems to have drummed up some support, as the hall filled up. There was a

sprinkling of outsiders, who were formally welcomed. The second day saw an audience that was far younger and more confident -- perhaps because the events being recalled on that day were much more recent.

Each witness in turn was called up to the platform, for a strict half-hour. A special table was set apart for the witness, their accompanying family, and a translator. The table was slanted to face the audience as well as the commissioners. All those listening could receive, through earphones, a simultaneous translation of the questions and testimony into one of several languages. The translation process lent a slow, deliberate air to the proceedings, adding to the sense of importance of each testimony.

Tea and food were offered to all witnesses, guests, commissioners and staff, both at mid-morning and at lunch. This reinforced the distinction between the hearing and a court of law, where far greater social distance would have been encouraged.

Alexandra's public past

Powerful public myths already exist about Alexandra. The story of oppression and resistance in the township is already frequently told as part of the litany of African nationalism -- its civil religion. It is also embodied in numerous published writings, and also in a variety of unpublished theses and dissertations. These are obviously less directly nationalistic but are not unrelated to the myths of public nationalism. The township's past was as the neglected township called 'Dark City.' Its brave residents have constantly experienced poverty, crime and hardship, and yet took part in courageous bus boycotts and squatter movements in the 40s and 50s. They, particularly the youth, mounted a virtual local revolution in the mid eighties, followed by a famous treason trial. They resisted government attempts to remove them more than once. The various narratives of Alexandra end today with the tragic conflict between the ANC and the IFP in the 90s, and the appalling overcrowding and rising social tensions as thousands more squatters move in. As with every nationalism, the stories of Alex, as told popularly, are heavily mythologised. It is a community whose symbolic boundaries have been clearly constructed.

To what extent would the TRC hearing simply reinforce this? Would it permit the complexity that is reality to come through, however modestly -- or would it restate, and even reinforce, the public or even the nationalist narrative of the past? Would its enlightenment aims allow it to hear something other than the stories we already knew? Would the ritual of the Commission, in allowing people to 'come face to face with society' simply present them with an already-made myth? If not, what would the purpose be of the myths that already existed in the context of the creation of new ones?

The first clear evidence that the public myths about Alexandra were being used as part of the hearing was the way in which a concept of 'community' was developed as an integral part of the ritual. Witness selection itself was part of this. As in all cases of the Truth Commission, the Commissioners charged with handling Alexandra had held preliminary hearings with witnesses, at which some of the processes outlined below were already evident. All had been interviewed and prepared. Many had already had a chance to express their feelings and wishes. Initial meetings were often accompanied by weeping, for example. From the broader group of witnesses heard a smaller group was selected to appear at the hearings.

The choice of witnesses was heavily influenced by the ANC. Obed Bapela, leading ANC provincial councillor and central figure in ANC politics in the township for many years, together

with his wife Connie, had assisted the Commission to find its witnesses. The impression was given that they were the 'hosts' of the occasion at one point. They were thanked in the opening speeches for their help and cooperation; and Bapela, although he gave evidence, (but of a very particular sort) did not sit with the rest of the witnesses. This is not to infer that efforts were not made to include non-ANC witnesses who had experienced human rights abuses; nor that they ANC was not a key and highly significant player in the events experienced by Alex residents. But the identification of the ANC with the public telling of the story of Alexandra's past - with the very definition of 'community' - was surprisingly central and to an extent built in to the hearing from the first.

A second aspect of the initial mythmaking was the way in which the ritual itself referred implicitly and often quite explicitly to an abstract notion of 'community.' Key speakers were included in the hearings, not as witnesses to specific abuses, but as 'community representatives.' Thus a person clearly designated as spokesperson for the township, Patience Pasha, opened the proceedings by welcoming the commission on behalf of the community of Alex. She was dressed formally and expensively, perhaps to lend weight to her status as a representative. The commission, she said, was there to hear not just the individual witnesses -- who in a purely legal setting would be individuals before the law -- but an entity thought of as "the community," of which the witnesses were representative in some way. The "community" again came to resemble the "congregation": the truth will be spoken from and about it, as well as from and about individuals who are "part" of it.

Pasha's welcome concerned the task of the commission to heal. She sketched the main "community" experiences that she believed Alexandra residents consider to be the central motifs of their suffering under apartheid. She included the bus boycotts of the forties and fifties, the gangsterism of the fifties, the removals and upheavals of the sixties, the six day war of the mid-eighties, the orchestrated conflict between ANC and Inkatha, and the plight of the displaced people, of the nineties. Clearly Pasha was invoking the powerful community myth already mentioned, a story that encapsulates key moments and perceptions of their suffering, to which the audience clearly related. Pasha concluded by linking community, the TRC, God and the nation - arguing that the TRC was there to act as a national life line, in a context in which South Africans could express their need for each other and their capacity to work together. People said 'we did not know,' but that was not true, she said This was a time for sorrow, but God would give us strength.

The community was further defined as the hearings proceeded. To Pasha's and Cairns' historical and religious welcomes were added, the following day, the stories of two others: Benjamin Lekalakala ,and Obed Bapela himself. These were both presented to the Commission as witnesses but they were witnesses 'for the community,' rather than for themselves. Both indeed claimed to speak on behalf of the community. Obed Bapela had been a major figure in Alexandra politics from the 1976 township uprisings onwards, and, as a leading participant in the revolutionary events of 1986, an accused in the famed 'Mayekiso' treason trial of 1989. Detained more than once, he displayed wide knowledge of the recent history of resistance and state repression in the township, and gave the hearings a certain weight. He spoke of the need for forgiveness and reconciliation. When Bapela spoke, he often referred to examples of human rights abuses that were not inflicted upon himself but upon others -- reinforcing the impression that he was spokesman for the community.

Bapela's evidence was a powerful restatement of the existing public myth, with a strong slant

towards the ANC. He had prepared it, in fact, using published documents and dissertations, as well as his own experience in giving evidence in the Treason Trial, and his own memories. He described how during the struggles of the early 1980s, the leaders of the UDF had been detained. He asked why the leaders of Azapo had not -- implying a close collaboration between Azapo and the authorities and clearly distancing himself from non-ANC Alexandrans. He talked of how many leaders of the UDF-aligned organisations had been killed -- several of them his close friends. He said that violence had been sponsored by the state, which had set up Joint Management Councils throughout the country to try to manage the townships using the military. Winning the hearts and minds of Alexandra residents had also been tried. One Steve Burger had come forward, on behalf of the authorities, with plans to install electricity and sewerage, to paint roofs. Plans were made to 'indoctrinate the youth, through clubs, and camps and choirs.' And 'the strategy worked' at least for a time -- not least because the leaders of all resistance were in gaol.

Bapela then spoke of the 'six day war' and the subsequent Treason Trial. Following quite closely the accepted narrative of the time he said it had all started in June 1985. A lot of townships were aflame. There was a lot of activity. People wanted to establish street committees. They started in Sebokeng, then moved to Soweto, then come to Alex. There was also a consumer boycott. In January 1986 things started to take off in Alex. There was shooting at Jazz Stores; Michael Dirading was killed. This 'provoked the whole situation.' His funeral was held at Alex stadium; then his parents' home was teargassed. That provoked the youth. The police became targets. Alex was aflame for six days. Ninety people died.

'How did the Street Committees start?', Bapela was asked. They began in the Eastern Cape, he said. He had travelled a lot and been exposed to how they worked. He had shared the idea with other comrades. They had tried to get support -- first from the Alexandra Civic Association, which refused to support them; then from Moses Mayekiso -- who agreed. They started yard and block committees. The idea spread. They moved from street to street.
He was asked about peoples' courts. The idea had arisen in 1985. They were started by the youth, who formed into anticrime patrol groups. They took out youths and told them not to drink, fight, etc. Crime went down to zero. They took many knives and weapons. People started having confidence in youths and brought cases to them. They would take the complainant and the perpetrator together and give advice. The courts spread. There was no sjambokking at this time. But after the six day war, youths 'got excited' and started to hold trials and prosecutions. There was now sentencing and sjambokking. Bapela himself was charged with treason, and said he was not personally accountable for the sjambokking.

He was asked if the strategy of the time had been to form an alternative government. He answered that the intention WAS to undermine the government and to make it ungovernable. This was a just war and a just struggle. Now we are liberated.

He was asked if the consumer and rent boycotts were violent -- particularly in the light of the fact that the police say they were responding to the violence of the day. They were not, he answered. The police had legal means to respond to consumer and rent boycotts. They did not involve killing and attacking.

Bapela's evidence again placed the ANC, as it is presently constituted, firmly at the centre of events. He portrayed Moses Mayekiso, now publicly revealed as a member of the Communist Party as well as the ANC and perhaps less 'suitable' as a key figure giving evidence, as of secondary importance to himself. This presented quite a different picture from the portrayal of

their roles in the Treason Trial. Furthermore he now portrayed the period as one in which they had indeed sought to 'undermine the government'- an admission which could have seen him found guilty in the trial. But the way he distanced himself from the more dubious and brutal actions of the youth, on the other hand, followed the line taken by the Treason Trial defence absolutely. There is to be no admission of responsibility -- even indirect -- here. The youth, it seems, had been the architects of their own descent into a sort of depravity. The Commissioners reinforced this by asking only if the Rent and Consumer boycotts had been violent -- thus allowing Bapela neatly to sidestep the question of other forms of violence at the time. The significance of this 'marginalisation' of the story of the youth's own experience cannot be underestimated. They were the key actors in the entire revolt, both in Alexandra and throughout the country. And yet this particular narrative obfuscates their role, and any direct or indirect connections there may have been between the youth and the ANC or its surrogates.

Bapela's capacity to tell the story of the revolt gave a weight and coherence to the occasion, a central 'myth' to which other, more personal and fragmented, stories could be connected. It remains to be seen how successful this myth was in appropriating the occasion.

The 'private' stories

With the remaining witnesses the Commission undertook a far more difficult task - making the private public. Clear procedures were necessary. The questioning commissioner would adopt a gentle, respectful tone, quite unlike the tone used in the courtroom.. The giving of evidence was highly ritualised. Each was accorded a dignified welcome. They were told that their words and stories were very important. Each witness was asked several pointed questions. Most testimonies were brought to a dramatic point where the recall of the witness's greatest suffering was reached -- and many would break down here. As they wept, women, clearly there for precisely that purpose, would come up to hold and comfort them -- but the witnesses were encouraged to carry on, sometimes quite relentlessly. Thus those called, in a legalistic sense, 'witnesses' behaved unlike witnesses in a court. This was an occasion upon which collective, as well as individual, memories and experiences were drawn upon. Emotional displays were common. A strong relationship between witness and audience, and between witnesses and their questioners, developed.

Each was then ceremonially thanked by the Chairperson who would sum up important elements of the testimony. He or she would talk of, say, 'what kind of son you had'; 'what was in your heart'; 'your sad story,' your 'gratitude for survival' or your 'spirit of reconciliation'
Every witness told a different story. The stories told here were restricted to occurrences defined as "human rights abuses" by the terms under which this particular arm of the commission was set up. But certain aspects of these stories came across as being emblematic of a wider series of experiences and of storytelling about apartheid, as 'myths' themselves. Here I will try to capture something of what the various pieces of evidence added up to, and whether and how they differed from the existing 'public myths'. What conceptions of suffering did they convey?

Abuse of the person

The horror of the abuse of persons, bodies, selves, loved ones, was foremost in the testimonies of these days in Alex. The way in which these experiences were conveyed was often fragmented: a single, simple core experience was presented to speak for itself. The body of the self or a loved one had been invaded, damaged, neglected or destroyed by the state.

But unlike Bapela, not everyone presented this as a 'community' experience. Mahlomolo Isaac Tlale, the first witness of the day, was resolutely individual in the way he presented his story of how in 1963, under detention, a plastic bag was put over his head and tightened. His bowels ran. Similarly, Mabusane Boy Moquae told of events that occurred outside Alex altogether -- on the East Rand. In 1984 he found his missing brother in a mortuary with his genitals cut off; he had been "given to the enemy" at Thokoza hostel. "I don't think I will forget it until I die," he said.

Kenneth Manana had been involved in robbery, an involvement that he did not portray as having had anything to do with Alex at all. He appeared to have been a criminal, although he said he undertook criminal acts for political reasons. He was shot in both thighs; shot again; beaten and subjected to interrogation at Brixton police station, where he was tied to a chair, and his hands and genitals electrocuted. They wanted to know what he knew about arms, and told him they had killed those who had been with him in his car.

Jabu James Malinga had started as an activist in Alexandra where he had been shot in the back in the 1976 revolt. But his worst experiences were elsewhere: he was then arrested, and, bleeding was asked by friends: 'are you still alive?' 'I didn't respond' he said. After two weeks in hospital he was taken to a prison farm for three months. There, he said, in 1978, he was taken in a car to the bushes, abused -- '"you kaffir" they said'- and told to 'get wood and make fire and braai meat.' He was told to 'tell them everything, for example about Mashinini.' They started beating him, 'handcuffed me and dragged me to the fire.' Petrol was added. 'They burnt me.' '"You must tell the truth" they said.' They then extinguished his burning overalls and kicked him until he was unconscious. He awoke later in a clinic, where they continued to ask him about various 'comrades'

But this casting of experience in an individual mould was outweighed by the many of the testimonies of abuse that had a clear local reference point. Alex's landmarks and geographical peculiarities were frequently mentioned. Thus when Jabu James Malinga was abused again in 1986, this time he was held in or closer to Alexandra. He said that when he refused to talk he was taken to the Jukskei river, which borders Alex, and put in the water for two hours. He was beaten. He asked them: 'is it legal for you to beat us when we are arrested?' They said 'shut up' and put him into an army van. They took him to a 'camp' at Kelvin -- also adjacent to Alex -- where he 'did exercises the whole day.' At the end his 'teeth were loose.'

Nkosana Prince Mngadi too, described his 1985 experience as happening when he was driving with friends towards the women's hostel in Alex. Five hippos faced them, and "just shot at us." Two died, one escaped, and he, Prince, was shot in the leg. Matsiliso Paulina Monageng described her son Jacob Mabizela's experience in similar geographical terms. Jacob, a well-known UDF leader, was detained in 1985 for eight months, went on hunger strike and was released, 'only to be shot dead in a meeting in a church on Ninth Avenue shortly afterwards.' He knew the police were "after him"; he had said to her "Mama, I don't know how my life is going to be."

To others, the 'handle' onto which their story was attached was ceremonial rather than geographical. Thus Daisy Mashego recalled that she was shot in the back at a funeral in 1984. Montshentshe Jan Matjila was at a night vigil at 'Jingles'' house in December 1986. He displayed a typically unequivocal willingess to apportion blame for what followed. He cast the events in clearly moral terms of good versus evil. The police arrived, he said, their faces were painted black; they wore berets. People were scared and were told to go inside the house. But instead people tried to go home. The police threw canisters. 'One landed in front of me. I tried to run away. I

fell inside a drum.' Two black policemen, including Mothibe,and four white policemen 'kicked me. They hit me with batons. I lost consciousness. I found myself in hospital. My arm was broken. My teeth were out.'

Other stories had a similarly filmic quality. Jessie Moquae tells about an Alex 'character'- her fiancee, the well-known Alexandra 'peoples poet,' Jingles. He was shot dead: 'A white Mazda had passed three times. They shot Jingles,' she said. And Maria Malokoane told of how she went out on a Tuesday in April 1986, when she saw people in blue shirts and navy pants, with cloths tied around their heads, singing down the street. Later they surrounded her house looking for her boyfriend Ace Hlongwane. They came in and asked for him; they started shooting; they set the house on fire, with Ace inside. He died. They were the Makabasas -- almost certainly police disguised as gangsters in a notorious attack on Alexandra that month

Dorah Mkihele told of how her son Jabulani, a nineteen-year-old with a Standard Two education, 'who delivered papers for Allied,' was shot after he left very early to go to work. But 'before he reached the bus stop he came across white police at Twelfth Avenue and was shot by them. Three people he was with ran away and climbed a tree and 'were shot at until they fell.' Others ran into a shack but were pulled out. Sizakele called an ambulance. The ambulance arrived but the 'police would not allow it.' The police 'finished the rest.' She found out only the next morning what had happened and found Jabulani's body in the government mortuary.

Famous local names were often included in the testimonies as points of reference: Jingles, Ace Hlongwane, Michael Dirading -- these were important figures in the community and, indeed, in the public narratives of the past. As we have already seen, specific policemen were at times mentioned in these stories. One of these came up as being the most notorious and evil: Mothibe. His sin was that he was both of and yet against the community. He epitomised the 'sell-out.'

Maria Malakoane continued her story by saying that earlier she had seen "Mothibe"-- whom she knew -- amongst the police. He even tried to warn her. He said 'I know you. Get away. We are going to cause damage.' But she was nevertheless injured. 'I was bleeding everywhere.' She went to work the next day. At 4.30 the police "shot again." They retreated. "The hostel ladies helped me, washed me, reporters took statements." She had a bullet in her bones.

Margaret Madlana's story of physical abuse was the most poignant of all, and the most brilliantly told. It combined place, event and time, conjuring up a visual image of the events, apportioning blame, and situating it within the known stories about Alex.. She appeared in front of the commission with her daughter, to talk about her son, Bongani. 'It was February 1986; Monday the seventeenth. I was at home' she said. There were some youths who came to my house. They were telling us to get out of the house. My twelve year old son went with the youth. After a while I got worried. I had had no breakfast. I needed to go to my sister, at Fifth Avenue.
'When I passed Twenty-fourth Avenue, I found a child shot in the yard. They were pulling him. They were white police. He was not dead. They pulled him up and hit him against a rock. They chased us away. I looked back. More police arrived. Mothibe was there. ... I passed the place. I told my sister they had killed a young child. She said don't worry, relax. I said how could that happen. Bongani would not do that. I went home. He was not there. I told them I saw the police. I woke up at 5am. Still no Bongani. I went to the Alex Clinic, and then home. Then I went to Bramley police station. The police didn't listen. I looked at their records. He was still not there. Some had been hit by bullets. They said go to Khotso House; go to the mortuary. I went to his father's work. I explained about the hippos. I took a taxi, and went to the mortuary, not to

Khotso house. The taxi passengers agreed. There was a queue at the mortuary.

'"Mama," they said, "we have seen one child. He came alone and was carried in a hippo." They took me into the mortuary. There were bodies lying on the ground. Bongani was there.' She cried 'Bongani you have left me behind.' She continued: 'They gave me letters for the police and myself. I went and told his father. Mothibe took the letter. He said the child was killed at number twenty-four -- the one I had seen...they had photos of him holding a halfjack which was a petrol bomb. Therefore the police knew him and knew me -- yet they took him to the mortuary alone because they knew me. Most children disappeared and parents could not find them.'

Later the commissioners ask her to give more details of his death: 'They hit him with irons' she answered. 'He may have survived but his head was hit against a rock. He was swollen.'

Searching for a loved one and finally finding his or her body in the clinic or mortuary was a horror which several experienced, particularly in the 1986 revolt. Such an experience reflected the callousness of the police, and -- to the parents of the dead -- the waywardness of their children. Lesoro Hilda Mohlomi's son Reuben had been shot in the eye in 1985 and his eyesight permanently damaged; a year later he was shot dead. 'Reuben was a comrade,' she said, 'it was the Friday before Michael Dirading's funeral; Reuben wanted to go -- but I advised him not to go because he couldn't see clearly and couldn't run. He went but denied it. I was selling alcohol -- I asked him to stay home and sell for me. When we heard there were police and bullets I closed the business. Reuben could go. They came and told me he was shot, suspected dead. At the clinic all the bodies were lying in the hall. I tried to drag him out. I tried to talk to him. I took off his shoes, a key and a letter to the President. A nurse came in and said he was dead. They refused to let us into the mortuary. The priests of Alex helped us get the bodies of our children, but only after five weeks.

The phrase 'our children' is indicative of the fact that what Reuben's mother was experiencing was so common as to become a part of the collective memory of the township. Thus Dorah Mkihele spoke of how a big ambulance went around the township calling people to come and identify bodies. Reuben was, like many others, buried at a mass funeral and the family's mourning became part of a communal process. Maria Makaloane remembered that: 'they were buried -- that is many people, seven at a time, though nine were advertised. They were all shot.' Like Reuben's mother she, too, remembers the time lapse: 'they were buried after 4 weeks' she said. Mass funerals meant that the story of one's child or husband's death became part of the wider story of the suffering of the community. Martha Susan Smiles too, whose husband was shot in the six day war, was drawn into this: 'After three days I realised he must be dead. I found him in the mortuary. He had to be buried with the children who had died, because "he died for his country"'

Many stories told how even after death loved ones were neglected or abused. 'Whites disturbed us from preparing for the funeral' said Jessie Moquae, fiancee of Jingles. 'Teachers and comrades were not allowed in Jingles' funeral'- which was at first arranged by the police. The comrades were so angry at this they collected his body again. Then police arrived at Nineteenth Avenue, looking for his body. They threatened to shoot. There was teargas. The funeral didn't go well. 'The police took corpse and threw it into a hearse,' said Jessie Moquae, weeping. 'They stopped the people from going to graveyard. I am proud of him. They had to bury him. At graveyard the reverend came, but people were absent. They took the body, threw it, like any rubbish, and threw soil on top of it. She actually says the 'body was abused.'
As in the case of Jingles, the denial, manipulation or control of burial rites was a further abuse --

of the body and of the bereaved. Matsiliso Paulina Monageng suffered greatly. She said that 'Boers harassed us every day' before Jacob's funeral which was restricted by law to only twenty-five people, and which was held with 'police all around the graveyard.' No buses were allowed, people were stopped from attending, and some were arrested in the church. Those at the subsequent night vigil were teargassed, as was the frequently the case. Irene March, too, reported that night vigils were 'very difficult to attend'; and the burial of her son was 'disturbed by teargas.'

The Reverend Snoeki Mzamo expressed his outrage at the fact that after 'dozens of young people were killed in the six day war of 1986, the magistrate refused permission to bury them in a mass funeral.' But, he said, 'some of our people did not have their own money ... Why did the magistrate do it?' The people were angry and could not stand these restrictions. Mzamo was appalled: 'The burial of a body is a right' he said.

Clearly the idea of the community as a spatial and symbolic entity deeply interwoven with the experience of apartheid was an integral part of the memories of the witnesses. This is not quite the same as the public presentation of Alexandra's story, in which the community was a united social force more than a series of spaces and places. But some overlap clearly did exist.

Loss

Most testimonies were about loss as much as about abuse. These were far less to do with community. They had more to do with a wholeness of self, the body, the family, the home, that had been breached in ways that left the victim bereft of something precious. Most desolate were who had lost loved ones. Stories about the losses of children, youths, comrades, were common in the hearing, as already demonstrated. More were told: Sekitla Anna Mogano's one son disappeared in 1985. He went out and never came back, she said. She enquired about him for a whole week, but he was never found. Then in 1990 her second son, Mmathipi 'was killed by the white man.' He had said he was going to school in Braamfontein where he was doing Standard Ten. There was gunfire in the township. Her brother Lucas found him shot, and saw a white man's yellow van driving away. He still could speak -- he said they shot him. They took him to the clinic but he died.

Irene March lost three sons, not all of them in political conflict. But her losses were all part of her experience of the years of apartheid. Philip, a student activist, died after being injured in his schoolyard in 1976, during the riots of that year. David was abducted from work and never seen again. His employer said he had 'appeared sick' so he 'called the police' to take him to hospital. She told David's young son that his father had 'gone to Cape Town'- and only told him the truth nine years later. Joseph was shot on the 18th June 1993 -- the anniversary of Philip's death -- by unknown gunmen of, in March's guarded words 'a certain liberation movement'.

Losing a breadwinner was particularly tragic in this poor community. Ramotsobane Masenya lost her mother in the 1976 riots. She was a Sangoma. She was shot through the back. She left 7 children. The family was orphaned, said Masenya, and also lost their home because they had no rent. Matsiliso Paulina Monageng, mother of murdered Jacob Mabizela , told of how he left his girlfriend pregnant. She herself had 'lost her health' and stopped work. She stayed at home with the grandchild. Sekitla Anna Mogano said that one of the two sons she lost left his girlfriend pregnant. The girlfriend subsequently disappeared. 'I had to take the child to creche' said Mogano; 'how will I support the child? I am not working now. The mother of the child has vanished.' In the case of Mahlomolo Isaac Tlale -- the elderly victim of torture and Robben Island

prisoner in the 1960s -- it was the loss of his own capacity to act as a that brought tears to his eyes. He broke down as he recalled the suffering of his family in the absence of a breadwinner. 'They had to sell vetkoek from door to door,' he wept.

But the destruction of homes and possessions was also desperately deeply felt by witnesses. Clement Linda Twala, local businessman and patron, spoke bitterly of his losses: 'my home and cars were destroyed; my furniture, my clothes, everything when my house was bombed. My children were inside -- but my three daughters went into the dog's kennel and were saved. The fire brigade came but had been instructed not to put out the fire.' His neighbour's house was also burnt down: I saw my house was on fire,' said Mabusane Boy Moquae. It was the police. Children were inside. A neighbour came and helped us try to put on water. A cop came and asked whose house it was. Linda Twala's and mine was the reply. The cop said he had wanted that. We found the children -- but had nothing left. Moquae wept at the memory. 'I worked very hard for my clothes, my furniture' he said 'Everything was burnt to ashes. It was very cold. It was winter. If you lose your home you are destitute.'

Ntombizodwa Sidzumo talked of the loss of the home her son had lived in when he was driven out by political forces she would not mention. She now lived with five children and four grandchildren in a flat in town. Moko Melita Lephuthing's house was also burnt down. Her son had been a comrade; her husband had helped Civic Association members. She went out after being told armed people were coming from barracks. It was the 22nd April 1986. And then 'they' came and told her that her children, her friends and her husband were burnt in her house. She waited for the fire to die out so she could get their corpses. She prayed to God. Her husband came out. Her children were safe. They had hidden in bushes. There were no bodies in the house. Nobody had been killed.

Obed Bapela and his wife Constance were staying in his lawyer's house while he was on trial, and it, too was bombed in January 1989. At 3a.m. they heard an explosion and the screech of car tyres, he said. The house was burning. They didn't wake easily, and could not get out easily. Bapela pointed out that in 1990 evidence had been given before the Hiemstra Commission that someone had been paid by the City Council police to attack UDF houses.

Several witnesses had lost their good health. Often it was easy to link such a loss directly with the harsh political experiences they had gone through. Yet even when the link was more indirect, to the witnesses their loss was part of the punitive regime under which they had lived. The elderly Mahlomolo Isaac Tlale had been ill since his imprisonment in the 1960s. He had had high blood pressure and a heart attack. He had stayed in the prison hospital for a long time -- years it seems. 'I suffered;... I suffered;.... I suffered...' he repeated. He had never recovered. After Obed Bapela's lawyer's house had been bombed his wife Constance, who had been pregnant at the time, was deeply shocked, and needed psychological treatment. Their baby, he said, was born with a hearing deficiency. Martha Susan Smiles, who had lost her husband in the six day war, said her health had declined since then. 'I was sick after his death' she said. She had sugar diabetes, high blood pressure and a heart ailment. Nkosana Prince Mngadi, who we have seen was shot by 'white people' in a hippo and left lying on the ground for 3 hours, had then had his leg amputated. This had entailed great mental trauma. He had wanted to become a teacher, but now could only do office work.

When Daisy Mashego was shot in the back while looking for her children in the mayhem following Michael Dirading's funeral she described violence and conflict in the street. People were

crying, looking for their kids. She was in hospital for two to three months afterwards. She was left completely helpless, and depended on the Red Cross and on her disability pension. Maria Malakoane, shot in 1986, lived with a bullet in her body for several months until she finally had it removed. But she had suffered from constant headaches and was no longer healthy. Sekitla Anna Mogano attributes her loss of health to the deaths of her two sons. 'I lost strength' she says.

Two of the witnesses implied that the loss of a child was so great a tragedy for parents that they died subsequently. The link is indirect. However this is surely an indication that whatever suffering occurred in those times was thought of as part of a generally oppressive experience. Indeed it is often difficult to separate these things out. Thus after Ntombizodwa Sidzumo's brother was shot three times by the police in a hippo in June 1976 his body was taken away. There was no inquest and no grave. There had been no reason for him to be shot. Her father got ill and died 1980; her mother died in 1982, she said. Similarly, Maria Makaloane said that both Ace Hlongwane's parents died after he was burnt to death -- strongly implying that this was because of the death.

Suffering in a social sense

While 'human rights abuses' were defined by the Commission as mainly being concerned with the kinds of deeply personal tragedies outlined above, there was room in this hearing for broader issues to be raised. And although they were not the centre-pieces of any story, social and cultural matters were clearly part of the generalised experience of apartheid, and part of the discourses within which such experiences were retold. In fact, so powerful were these aspects that they often 'burst through' an individual's story even when they were not specifically being asked for by the Commissioners. The gross unfairness of apartheid; the ways in which whites and blacks were regarded as enemies at worst, alienated from one another at best; the presence of, and appalling behaviour of, hated officialdom; ignorance; poverty; the uncared-for children and youth; poor education - these things have all already appeared in the stories already quoted. Not all of these things can be 'proved' in a court of law, or even in a Truth Commission. They are about the sense of oppression at its broadest. Indeed, some of the details of these aspects of the stories told by witnesses may not be accurate -- they may be born of misunderstandings or misperceptions themselves. But insofar as they reflect the contours of oppression they are of fundamental importance. They help us understand the consciousness of the witnesses and perhaps of the community from which they come. They illuminate the operation of the Commission more broadly.

One witness spoke bitterly of how she had noted that when white students protested they were mildly treated; but when black students protested, they were arrested and shot at. Witnesses felt excluded from knowledge of the workings of courts, police stations, mortuaries, and the other institutions with which they, in their moments of suffering, had to interact. They felt the police were not only violent and murderous, but also deceitful. Maria Makaloane would not forget how they tied cloth around heads to pretend they were 'Makabasas.' Guns and bullets were ubiquitous; violence was common. The eighties were a time where the 'people'- portrayed as poor and humble - were cast against 'the police' in all their power and might.. As Jabu James Malinga said, 'we fought the police with stones and dustbin lids.'

The community, it was felt, had been more or less invaded by the forces of the struggle. Irene March said that Alex was a battlefield -- a sentiment echoed almost exactly by the Reverend Snoekie Mzamo: 'Alex was like a battlefield,' he said; people were inside their houses and the houses would be surrounded by police. Dorah Mkihele described how one day the streets were

blockaded and people were stopped from going to work. In 'Bongani's story', we hear how after the boy's funeral 'my daughter and friends were taken away by white policemen. They were bailed out. In court the police said "let's work quick today because we have to do things. Today we are going to the township." They were there to burn people; people were burnt by police. They had petrol bombs, axes, they were singing. The police - from Wynberg and Bramley - did the burning of houses. I walked behind them. They went to no 31 and 32. Then they went to Second Avenue. The next day white people were taking pictures.'

Obed Bapela told the story of the Makabasas too -- with the greater perspective that he brought more generally to the occasion: 'During that period the police wanted to identify a group to use against us. In April when they could not find a local group they themselves dressed up and called themselves 'Amakabasa'(called after a local gangster. They dressed up like them with uniforms on, though they pulled their shirts out. They came from Wynberg; They entered Alex and attacked all meeting places and houses. They retreated back to Wynberg.'

These invading, deceitful and violent people were also heartless, said witnesses. When Jabu Malinga had been beaten up until his teeth were loose, he asked who could help him; he was told 'go to Mandela.' When Mahlomolo Isaac Tlale told the story of how he 'lost his health' and was still stonedigging on Robben Island, he said 'but they did not care that I could not do it.' This heartlessness appears also in Linda Twala and his neighbour's stories. When their houses had been burnt down, the fire service would not extinguish the fire. Nkosana Prince Mngadi said that when he had had his leg amputated, a doctor from South America working in the hospital had said he was 'Mandela's terrorist.' He asked to be moved from the hospital because of harassment. When Sekitla Anna Mogano went in 1985, to seek the body of one of her two sons, and it was not there, she was told to "go to Mandela" to find it.

Thus the stories convey a sense that the community of Alex had been insulted, invaded, damaged and cheated. They, the people, had been cast in opposition to the evil state, embodied in the police.

One unintended consequence of this was to exclude from the communally constructed narrative the main 'public' story of the revolt of the 1985-6 period. The impression given by the witnesses is as follows: a community consisting mainly of older parents and somewhat wayward youth, and surrounded by a series of set rituals - funerals mainly - over which they had no control, was subjected to unbearable brutality. Many loved ones died, their homes were burnt, and their lives overturned. And of course that is how it was.

But their story is only partial. The fact is that the youth of Alexandra organized and led a revolt, whose main contours hardly appear at all in the hearing. No mention is made, except in the most anodyne of terms, of the marches, street committees, youth groups and their 'headquarters', mass meetings, comtsotsis, banners, placards, songs, renaming of parks, schools and streets, setting up of barricades, hounding out of local Town councillors, boycotts of police stations, throwing of petrol bombs, necklacings and peoples' courts. The youth are the absent witnesses. We do not know if they were proud of what they did, or sorry for it. We do not know if they felt they had won major victories, or lost. We know nothing about the real forces against whom the police were ranged -- the youth. Almost the only way in which their experiences are recounted in the hearing is at second hand -- through the tragic stories of the parents who lost them. The effect of this is twofold. The parents are portrayed as the victims of the brutality of the system; but the question of what the youth were actually doing at the time they were shot or attacked is

sidestepped. This both demeans the youth, and possibly lets them off the hook. I have assumed this was not a conscious strategy on the part of the Commission.

Stance, Transformation and Closure

It has already been pointed out that the hearing had a clear transformative purpose: that of strengthening and healing the person through the telling of a story of oppression. However a second purpose has also been identified -- that of transforming private experience into public myth. Clearly on the personal level, what it meant to be a victim of a 'human rights abuse' was defined by the occasion. But as their testimonies were presented to the hearing, peoples' lives and stories came to carry meanings beyond the personal. A public sphere came to be constructed, within which private experiences could become the property of all. As the witnesses spoke, it often seemed as if many were telling of their lives for the first time -- in public at least. Experiences such as theirs had been hidden, or only partially brought to light. Oral historians are themselves conscious of the ways in which they themselves take part in a process of this sort. However for an institution as morally and politically charged as a Truth Commission, the complexities are multiplied.

This section of the paper explores how a subtle and complex social process took place. The stories of the witnesses were recalled in ways that were meant to transform their memories and their persons. Their stories were meant to be transposed from the private to the public sphere. Perhaps even, to revert to the Durkheimian idea, the profane was meant to be transformed into the sacred. It examines whether and how they and their stories came to be emblematic of a wider experience. It asks what the processes of meaning construction were through which this series of attempted transpositions, essential to the success of the Truth Commission itself, occurred.
In order for it to perform these functions, the hearing contained within it what could be called 'rites of closure.' By this I do not refer only to the closure of the ceremony of evidence-taking -- for example the ritual thanking of witnesses and concluding of each one's story. There was also evidence that the hearing both set out to, and succeeded in, creating a sense of psychological closure in the witnesses themselves. This in turn affected both the audience present and the 'imagined' audience of the general public who would read press reports and watch television, or perhaps ultimately read the commission's report itself. Such a conclusion was 'meant' to occur through the witnesses reaching a stance of 'closure' such as forgiveness. Yasmin Sooka, who chaired the hearing on the first day, expressed this in her welcoming statement. She pointed out that the TRC sought to listen, to create a record of what happened and to find out what kinds of reparations victims wanted. She said that the commission could not, however, itself offer forgiveness -- that 'is up to you.' However as we shall see, this turned out to be an extremely complex process.

In order to reach an understanding of the 'concluding' stances of the witnesses it is useful to examine first what their 'opening' stances were. How did the witnesses think of themselves in relation to their own possible transformation as they came to the witness stand? Two broad possible opening stances could be made -- the 'weak' and the 'strong.' These were indicative of a variety of things probably better analysed in another, psychological, context. To the sociologist what is of interest is how these stances reflect how apartheid was remembered by them, what they thought the purpose of the Commission was, and their own personal life stances.

Weakness

One type of weak stance was often unsuccessful from the transformative point of view. These were the witnesses who appeared mystified by what had happened to them; indeed who seemed lost in a sea of tragedy. In this case their 'weakness' may have been a function of their inability to find concepts to help them make sense of their memories and experiences. Dorah Mkihele, whose son was shot, gave a deeply incoherent tale of the subsequent proceedings in court -- a tale that seemed to get nowhere. Her brother had to intervene to help convey her message. And Sekitla Anna Mogano conveyed an air of being mystified. She seemed lost for an explanation of why 'the police came and looked for him' (her son) and said 'he taught others to write on walls.' He was a leader of the comrades'.

Fear was another 'weak' stance. Commissioners found this hard to deal with. Ntombizodwa Sidzumo would not mention the people suspected of driving her son away from his home, in spite of being pushed hard by the Commissioners. 'God would reveal' them, she said. She appeared to be deeply traumatised, and to have found giving evidence extremely difficult. She could hardly answer when asked if her son had been killed or had committed suicide, saying she did not feel free to do so.

By contrast the other most common 'weak' stance was perhaps the most transformative -- that of weeping. These witnesses were comparatively most malleable at the hands of the Commissioners. At first they often demonstrated a reluctance at self-exposure; they were in turn gently pressured for the sake of reaching the truth. However the listeners here were not psychologists; and even more was at stake than the freeing of the individual psyche from the torment of unacknowledged suffering. Often the unstated aspect of this was that they were pressured in order to allow the community to feel through their suffering. Perhaps their suffering was thus turned into martyrdom, their weakness into catharsis.

The first witness, Mahlomolo Isaac Tlale, for example, was an old man, who needed help to walk up to the platform. 'You have much to teach us,' said his questioner. Mr Tlale spoke of the 1960s, when, as we have seen, he had been an organiser who assisted youths to leave the country to become freedom fighters, was arrested, interrogated and tortured. Having made his first brief statement Mr Tlale made it clear that he wished to conclude. "And that is the end of my testimony" he said.

But more was expected of him. His questioner, gently and respectfully, and knowing what he had to say, prompted him to go further. He expanded on his experiences -- twelve unhappy and cruel years on Robben Island, constant sickness, his knowledge of another prisoner who died as a result of torture. He broke down and wept twice: once when he recalled his own long years of suffering; and again when he recalled how his children were forced through poverty to sell vetkoek and chickens door to door while he was in jail. His pain in reliving the humiliation of these times was tangible throughout the audience. Some wept as he wept. He was comforted by women who appear to be on hand precisely to assist in this sort of situation. But no release from giving his testimony was at hand. He must and did continue to the end.

The pain of the fifth witness, Ambrose Shezi, was so great that he could not even come up to the stand at first, to recall the death of his son, BPC activist Mthuli Shezi, who was pushed in front of a train in 1972. He was warmly and lovingly comforted. His hands were held. But a gentle force was exerted upon him to bear witness. After he had done so he was thanked for revealing what was "in his heart." Many others wept, or broke down and were temporarily unable to continue -- including Jessie Moquae and Matsiliso Paulina Monageng . They seem to have

experienced a painful "expansion" of the self by speaking to an audience, and perhaps becoming symbolic of a wider experience. Perhaps this ritual allowed catharsis.

Strength

A stance of strength was transformative in a different way. The coping, strong witness was the witness who could most easily forgive. Common themes were those of dignity, the strong woman, the constant protection of God, the benign presence of Mandela and the luck of having a strong family. Irene March, who had lost all three of her sons, showed no self pity at all. She had survived, she said, because of her strong family, the gift of love, her neighbours and the presence of Mandela. Ramatsobana Masenya spoke of herself as 'a strong woman': she gave thanks to God and thanks to Mr Mandela.

Another strong stance was that of indignation and anger. Linda Twala's fury was evident as he read out a statement: My rights have been violated by the police in the previous government. My home and cars were destroyed. My furniture, clothes, everything. Who were they and who instructed them? he asked angrily.

Many witnesses cast the relationship between victim and perpetrator in clearly 'binary' terms. Innocence stood opposed to guilt. This stance was encouraged by the mandate of the Commission itself, which did not seek out ambiguity. Witnesses frequently felt it necessary to proclaim their own moral innocence. Linda Twala and his neighbour were both keen to emphasise that they were Christians, Catholics, who were at church when attacked. Montshentshe Jan Matjila had fallen in with members of Cosas 'through singing together at school.' Obed Bapela's testimony was interlaced with frequent emphases on the innocence of himself, his colleagues and at first, the youth.. Dorah Mkihele's son Jabulani was with comrades who were 'just sitting there' when attacked by police; Jabu Malinga said he 'knew nothing' about politics in 1976, but was 'just accompanying them (the comrades) as they were singing.'

Forms and failures of closure

From the strong and the weak witness sometimes forms of closure emerged. The weeping, weak witness reached, it has been suggested, a sort of catharsis, and his or her weeping assisted the audience, too, to attain this state.

Other forms of closure included strong statements about the desire for truth, and a belief in its healing power. 'Everyone must come forward,' said Jabu Malinga, 'even the Kabasas.' And 'Have the commission called all the people to ask for forgiveness -- or maybe they want us to point them out,' said the Reverend Snoekie Mzamo. After he had recalled his house being surrounded by police he asked 'where are those police? Why don't they come out?...they must come and confess, confess they were Makabasas... This should be part of the commission. I can understand why they did it. They were driven out, isolated, they could not drink in our shebeens, they could not fall in love with our women, they could not buy in Alex. If they come forward and confess, the community will be very happy.'

Obed Bapela's enthusiastic claims about the healing power of truth elicited less than positive responses from the audience present. He named five policemen who owed the Commission both information and an apology -- including Sergeant Mothibe, now, he said, a preacher and repentant. But, the Commissioners asked, what about Erasmus and Ndaba and the informers -

what will your attitude be when you know them?' Bapela said: 'some I meet - I am friends already. But they must come and repent to the whole community.' The Commissioners asked: 'Does the community share these feelings of reconciliation?' He answered 'If they come back the community will welcome them.' But the audience jeered at this point. They knew better, perhaps. Sergeant Mothibe had indeed attempted to visit Alexandra in recent months, but had been 'almost killed' according to one informant. Another said he had been stoned.

Some witnesses said they would forgive. They were often those who took stances of strength. To them, truth-telling and repentance would lead to forgiveness. Thus Martha Susan Smiles claimed to speak on behalf of everyone when she said: 'People who hurt the people of Alex should come forth, like de Kock, and tell the truth and maybe we will forgive them. I would like to forgive them, because if I do not forgive them the Lord will not forgive us.'

Many witnesses would not, however, contemplate forgiveness, as the example of Mothibe seems to suggest. It could be said that these did not achieve 'closure' at all. Linda Twala would not 'forgive or reconcile.' When asked by a Commissioner whether he held out any hope, he answered 'we need something to motivate us. We had it in the old days. Now we don't.' Jessie Moquae asked bitterly and rhetorically 'will I ever forgive white people?' Margaret Madlana, mother of Bongani, was at first passionately unforgiving: 'I apologise before God, but I will poison the white man's children,' she cried. 'I will never forgive in this case. ...what will make me to forgive is if Sindane and Mothibe come and confess and say sorry to the parents. ..they killed children of the wars. How can Mothibe be a minister now? Which children is he preaching to? I will never forgive, I will never forgive, I will never forgive, I will never forgive, I will never forgive....' And later she said 'we work for them (whites), raise their children for them, cook for them, but they still kill us like dogs or baboons'.. She continued by blaming the present government as well: 'I can't forgive for at the moment the government is doing nothing for us'. However she contradicted herself by saying that she would forgive, but only if 'Sindane and Mothibe confess and come and say sorry to the parents.'.

A more common form of closure than forgiveness was that of an expressed desire for reparations. Most demands were extraordinarily modest. Linda Twala suggested that the 'children who died in Tanzania' must be brought back and buried at home. He said that the government should give families tombstones for the dead. More ambitiously, he suggested that the government should 'Create jobs for the school dropouts now unemployed.' Similarly Jessie Moquae wanted the government to 'help us through education.' Obed Bapela, in his more nationalistic style, said 'we must honour the victims of the Makabasa attack as heroes and heroines on the 85th anniversary (it was not clear whether he meant of the ANC or of Alexandra itself) next year.' He said the government would or should 'declare Alex a presidential project in honour of its people who have carried the flag of freedom since 1912.' Martha Susan Smiles said that the people of Alex should make tombstones for those killed during the six day war. Daisy Mashego wanted a bullet removed from her body -- and a house of her own.

Some chose to enact closure through apology. Tlale said to his family: 'I am sorry I burnt the church down.' Obed Bapela rendered an apology on behalf of the community: 'I must say that in the conduct of the struggle there were things that went wrong. But these were not planned. We sometimes succeeded in stopping it, but not always. Peoples' Courts were not set up by us as leaders, but by members of the community. People demanded and wanted them. But unfortunately people got excited. There was great anger after the six day war. Wrongs were committed,' he said. Kenneth Manana was now a Christian: 'you have changed, repented' said the

Commissioner, 'but from what?' He answered: 'to show that in all that had happened, I now realise that some of those things were mistakes. I had the heart to forgive.'

Some used the occasion to make a general statement. It is not clear whether these qualify as 'closure' however. Many of these statements raised more questions than they resolved. Irene March made a statement about the need for crime to end and 'policemen to do the job' of securing South Africa as a home for black and white. Linda Twala was even clearer about this: 'Most of the youth are loitering around the streets. They are our future leaders and must be assisted. We must groom our leaders of tomorrow.' He earned applause for this from the audience, after which he continued. 'Youth,' he said, were 'nice' in those days when they were fighting for the struggle. But today, in these times of drugs, liquor and unemployment, he said, youth 'are no longer nice.' For this he earned further applause. Others made similar links between the high rate of crime in the Alexandra of 1996, and the past. As Margaret Madlana put it, 'now they, the youth, are with the criminals.' The audience muttered agreement.

Because such statements were outside the terms of reference, the discourse, of the commission, they were perhaps not 'heard' as readily as the main forms of closure. However it was they that earned the greatest support from those present.

Conclusion

Many of the elements which Durkheim saw as central to the workings of ritual have certainly been identified in this case. Most witnesses behaved as though involved in a piacular rite, in which they set out to express their sorrows or fears. Their individual experiences were cast in a social mould. Assembly was used as a social institution, through which people were supposed to be remade, made stronger.

It is in the relationship between the witness and society that the most complex set of processes seems to have occurred. In the Durkheimian model, the ritual bridges the gap between the worshipper and the 'object of his cult'; it brings him 'face to face with society.' As has already been pointed out, this process would necessarily be different where the ritual was, however well disguised, primarily secular. In secular society, the 'object of worship' is no longer God but 'society,' or perhaps 'the nation.' How has the evidence presented here illuminated this?
It appears that two different narratives of the events covered by this particular hearing have emerged. First there was the public, nationalist and official 'community' narrative, as already existing in the public sphere, articulated by Obed Bapela and reinforced by other witnesses speaking on 'behalf of the community.' Second, there were the private narratives of the individual witnesses speaking mainly on behalf of themselves and their families. There are several overlaps, but also sharp disjunctures between the two.

The 'public' narrative places the ANC firmly and purposively in the lead of a just war, planned and conducted in a semi-militarized fashion. It names heroes and martyrs. It casts the organically defined 'community' in opposition to 'the state.' It acknowledges the role of the youth insofar as they were 'good,' but attempts to marginalise their 'bad' behaviour. It is able to attain a successful 'closure.' Peace and liberation have been attained, and forgiveness needs to be granted. The 'private' narratives of the witnesses are much less seamless, but do, it has been argued, form something of a statement. In these narratives, 'community' may be absent altogether. More commonly it is thought to consist of a series of geographical and ritual 'markers' around and upon which resistance occurs or an entity subjected to evil, insult, or deceit, usually by the forces of

evil, demonised and personified through the image of the Kabasas, or Mothibe. The experiences of the witnesses are not so much those of participants in a just war, but those of a suffering people, subjected to loss, abuse, and social oppression. Like the public narrative, the private ones also tend to marginalise the role of the youth. How the youth behaved in the 1980s is only indirectly referred to. Storytellers concentrate more on Africans as victims than as actors. Young people are spoken of critically, or in the worried tone of the parent whose child has acted waywardly. And closure in these narratives is only partially successful. It is hindered by problematic links to the difficult present, by an unwillingness to forgive, or an uncertainty about precisely how much 'truth' is going to be told by the perpetrators.

The hearing allowed the private narratives to be brought into the public realm. It created a ritualised setting in which witnesses and audience could 'come face to face' with their own experiences. But the coherence, formalised sanctioning of and indeed state ownership of the older 'public' narrative rendered it extremely powerful. Press reports of the hearing reflected this. In spite of this, the public narrative only partially succeeded in partially appropriating the private stories. These remained focused upon the myriad of tragic experiences of ordinary people, mostly those directly attributable to apartheid. Some experiences only indirectly attributable to it were also mentioned. They were cast in quite different terms. They were not usually heroic. They often reflected a sense of helplessness and marginality.

A public realm has been created by the Commission. However it is not certain whether this realm will be fully capable of bringing to the fore the secluded and excluded 'private' realm of Alexandra township -- or whether a new form of sequestration of the experiences of ordinary Alexandrans will not be the result. The total or partial exclusion of the role of the youth from both narratives is of particular concern here, and could be linked to the worries that many witnesses expressed about their role in the present. The TRC's undoubted successes in bringing to the fore the stories, the pain, of many of those who suffered in the revolution need to be weighed up against its failure to confront the stories of the revolutionaries themselves.
