The statue debate: Ancestors and 'mnemonic energy' in Paul and now

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Why do people in South Africa fight over statues – even to the extent of tying themselves to a mere bust? Using insights, especially from Jan Assmann, the study develops the argument that material culture (such as images and statues) provides the social energy that drives the manner in which history is told, that is, historiography; they provide the 'silent objects' with the power to control the public discourse and collective identity. Statues encapsulate all we need to know, inversely, concerning public discourse, particularly, concerning issues pertaining to control, power and class. From this perspective, those who vandalise them may be regarded as contesting public discourse identity and historiography. Insights from this discussion provide parallel discussions, especially, in Galatians where Paul contrasts the image of Abraham with that of Moses – choosing Abraham as the public image that best represents the identity complexity, cosmopolitan and heterogeneous nature that characterises the Hellenistic context.

Introduction

Interestingly, although we remember, we do not remember everything because we forget some events and we need to be reminded about others. The process and dynamics of what to remember is complex, yet not a mechanical process, because we *choose* what to remember and how the past is remembered (Kirk 2005:1). The term *choose* is crucial; it reminds us that remembering is active. The things we choose to remember, we actively circulate through literature, songs, stories, folklore, legends, painting and images to keep the memory alive – thus, cultivating and preserving the memory (Assmann 2008:111). The question is why do we remember particular events and people, yet selectively choose to forget other events? What informs the process of remembering and forgetting? These questions, whilst being the preoccupation of memory studies, especially in social sciences, may hold valuable clues towards the debate concerning whether to remove statues from public spaces in South Africa. In addition, in my view, the debate over statues, comparatively, helps to understand Paul's choice of Abraham instead of Moses, especially in Galatians.

Theory: Dynamics of memory

In social memory studies, Maurice Halbwachs (1980:12), a student of Emile Durkheim, argues that memory is a product of our socialisation, producing a shared narrative that he calls 'collective memory' (Dube 2015:1). Significant events form 'social frameworks' that stand as memory markers (Kirk 2005:1), providing pillars that dictate how memory is narrated – its historiography that indelibly characterises the people's identity (Halbwachs 1980:38). According to Maurice Halbwachs (1980:54), experiences are arranged in terms of importance, meaning that certain memories stand out more visibly than others and, are easily remembered as characteristic of a group (Halbwachs 1980:54). However, why do we remember certain events and not others? Barry Schwartz (2005:43) thinks that to remember is to construct identities; it is a continuous dialectical process between the present and the past memories. Thus, to remember is an interpretative process, placing a part of the past at the service of the present needs, in which the past is variously and subjectively retold for identity formation (Dube 2015:1; Schwartz 2005:43). Alan Kirk (2005:1) adds that in remembering, we 'key' or frame the present in view of the past, providing the present with a sense of meaning, continuity and stability (Dube 2015:1). Thus, memory works dynamically by re-appropriating the past in moulding, reimaging, and stabilising group identity (Bhabha 2005:123; cf. Kelber 2005:226).

Jan Assmann (2008:111) provides the perspective that informs this study. He distinguishes between Halbwachs' 'social memory', which he calls communicative memory, from 'cultural memory', which is the memory engraved in 'objects, anniversaries, feasts, icons, symbols, or landscapes' (Assmann 2008:111). In terms of cultural memory, Assmann (2008:111) notes two important aspects:



- that cultural memory possesses 'figures of memory'; that
 is, people and objects that punctuate the way history is
 told. Usually, these are evoked to stabilise identity and
 historiography; for example, in South Africa the names of
 Nelson Mandela or General De La Rey evoke particular
 historical sentiments and identities.
- according to Assmann (2008:111), these important figures in history emit 'mnemonic energy' – a concept that he developed from Aby Warburg (cf. Assmann 2008:111), who studies iconoclasts and relics, and concludes that they possess some form of social energy.

Hence, 'mnemonic energy' functions as some form of ritualistic power embedded in material objects or images, demanding and propelling history in a particular direction.

In terms of the South African context, Assmann's (2008:111) cultural memory makes us ask why particular images are pushed forward into the public space as representative of social history. Why these particular statues? What history and collective memory do they seek to reinforce? For example, the image of Mandela has been caricatured with the phrase 'Mandela magic' to characterise the way Mandela dealt with a tumultuous time in the 1990s which could have, potentially, thrown the country into chaos. Mandela is the symbol of unity and reconciliation; the public image of hope and social wellness. Yet, in contrast, recently at a Democratic Alliance conference, a veteran journalist, Allister Sparks, elicited criticism when he compared the outgoing leader, Hellen Zille, to the apartheid architect, Hendrick Verwoerd. In his speech, Sparks says:

I've encountered some really smart politicians, the likes of Harry Lawrence, Bernard Friedman, Margaret Ballinger, Helen Zille, Helen Suzman, Zach de Beer, Frederik van Zyl Slabbert, Marais Steyn, Japie Basson and Hendrik Verwoerd. (Davis 2015)

To summarise the controversy, people refused the resurfacing of Hendrik Verwoerd as a 'figure of memory' that can be emulated, more importantly, as an image that can inspire collective identity. The Twitter controversy over Hendrik Verwoerd illustrates that images inspire particular memory and identity. Selectively, this means that people prefer particular 'figures of memory' to be forgotten because they disturb the construction of alternative social identities.

Thus, using Assmann (2008:111), the study argues that statues represent particular discourses and their presence is not, merely, aesthetic. In this regards, the protests against the statues may be symptomatic of the refusal by sections of society to accept implicit social canopies encapsulated in the statues; it is a form of protest and subversion of the paraded historiography (Berger & Luckmann 1966:54; Scott 1990:42).

As a critique of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's theory, the perspective seems to present an assumption that worldviews are watertight and stable – a cosy social canopy. This weakness is apparent when we consider the South

African post-1994 situation in which the statues, though mute, were all along loud in the ears of the spectators – a visible reminder of their unpleasant past. In this regard, canopies of the 'rainbow nation', maintained by clichés such as 'the Mandela magic', hide protest and discontent.

Busts in South Africa: A public debate

Using Assmann's theories, the debate over whether to remove the busts from public spaces in South Africa may be understood from the perspective of contest over the 'mnemonic energy' oozed by the material culture - the statues. The busts represent a particular historical period and persons, and therefore emit 'mnemonic energy'. As figures of memory, they demand us to ask why these particular individuals. South Africa, concerning ethnicity, has various social groupings that include black Africans, as well as Afrikaans, coloured and Indian people. These social categories can be contested but generally, they capture the social terrain within the country. However, the public space is dotted with busts, most of which are associated with Afrikaans or English heritage. In the beginning of this year, five statues were vandalised, including that of John Rhodes, who was a British imperialist and had ambition to spread British imperial control throughout the entire African continent (Pather 2015). The second statue to be vandalised is that of Jan Hendrik Hofmeyer, who was a Dutch parliamentarian, leader of the Afrikaner Bond in the Cape, and a close friend to Rhodes (1880) (Pather 2015). The third is the Uitenhage War Memorial, which honours members of the Uitenhage community who fought in the Anglo-Boer war (1899-1902). Members of the Economic Freedom Fighters Party claimed responsibility for vandalising the statue (Pather 2015). The fourth statue is that of Paul Kruger, known as the father of the Afrikaners, pioneer of apartheid and, was the president of the Transvaal during 1883 until 1900. The fifth statue to be destroyed is that of the Horse and Rider Memorial in the Eastern Cape, which celebrates the second war between the British and the Boers. The last statue is that of Louis Botha (1862-1919), which was smeared with red paint. Botha was the first president of the union of South Africa and, was an army general during the second Boer war (1899). During his leadership, he fought to protect South Africa from becoming, totally, a British colony and made sure that the interests of the Afrikaners were protected (Melrose House 2003).

These statues carry 'mnemonic energy' and the question is what discourse is encapsulated through these 'figures of memory'. Firstly, the above 'figure of memory', largely, celebrates Afrikaans historiography. Thus, as memory frameworks, the busts dictate the historiography, the way history is told and the rituals associated with it. Secondly, as 'figures of memory', the busts dictate how the past must be told by, visibly, controlling the collective social history. Dramatically, the statues provide an awkward experience; the glare of the unwanted past into the present.

Concerning this subject, Basil Dufallo (2013:5), in reference to the Romans, states that during the 1st century, the Romans had a culture of parading their emperors in public spaces to remind the conquered concerning whose social history pervades the public space. Yet to Dufallo (2013:3), the busts, in addition to parading arrogance of the conqueror, exhibit cultural competition; the need to assert through the 'passive visual image', the cultural and aesthetic superiority. Jan Assmann (2000:x) raises a valuable point by saying, in raising our eyes to look at the silent statues, inversely, we idolise and worship them; the statues possess us; inscribing on our minds their superior origin and further tag us as inferior subject - its 'mnemonic energy'. In this case, the busts across South Africa were not erected, merely, to fill-in empty city spaces, but to spell out identities. Silently, the busts monitor history, reminding the living that they are dead but living through public discourses. In the case of South Africa, the public narrative was to celebrate the Afrikaans and British historiography. The absence of statues depicting black figures may be interpreted as a silent affirmation of the inferiority of the black people who were discursively regarded as recipients of their master's history. Their inferiority seems, inversely, to be carved out by the presence of the statue; they are the subject who must gaze and internalise the power emitted by the statues.

Assmann's (2008:111) concepts of 'figures of history' and 'mnemonic energy', give us a plateau upon which to evaluate the protest over statues in South Africa. The protest over statues in South Africa is polarising, with a significant group of Afrikaans people willing to die or to carry an all-night vigil in defending the statues. On 07 March 2015, the Front National Party, led by the Afrikaans singer, Sunette Bridges, released a statement saying:

This act of defiance is a call for unity of all like-minded individuals and groups to resist any further acts of vandalism or intention of removal of national heritage sites and symbols. The Front National will be there to chain ourselves to the statue as well and we call on all our supporters to be at Church Square at 8.30am on Wednesday. We will be holding a peaceful protest to hand over a petition against the destruction of our national heritage statues and monuments. We will probably have people chaining themselves to the statue. (Bothma 2015)

There are two symbolic gestures that the protestors did which agree with Jan Assmann's (2008:111) assessment: first they defined the statues as national heritage, indicating that they regard the busts as figures of memory, which define how collective memory must be narrated. Secondly, the participants chained themselves to the statues, symbolising that the busts have 'mnemonic energy'; the protestors regarded their identity as intertwined with the energy oozed by the statue. Unfortunately, what is missing from the narrative is the realisation that those who destroy the statues were expressing an important point, which is the busts do not represent their history and, that through vandalising, they are not merely engaging in acts of criminality, but expressing a historical narrative which is missing in the very image that the protestors were defending. This hidden transcript is best captured through the black youth who protested, saying 'we

do not know this person [bust], those who erected him know who he is, but not us, so the statue must be demolished' (Ngqola 2015). However, an interesting opinion from Albert Grundlingh (2011:153) may reveal why the statues are objects to die for, especially amongst the Afrikaner people. Grundlingh analysed the historiography of the Afrikaner people and feels that there is a general nostalgia amongst certain groups of Afrikaans-speaking people, a development that is traceable from the time South Africa received political independence. The nostalgia seems to envy yester-years, especially the time when the Afrikaans community had strong leaders who stood for entrenched Afrikaner exclusive identity. Thus, tying oneself to the statues may be interpreted as longing for that part of history; one characterised by territoriality and sovereignty of the Afrikaans-speaking people - in which case, losing the monument is tantamount to losing a cherished past.

Of importance to this study is the realisation that statues and public images function as channels of particular discourses. A postmodernist, Jean Baudrillard (1988:171), observes that images produce 'simulations' that is, copies of reality, making it impossible to distinguish between the real and the unreal. I take Baudrillard's insight to mean that statues carry illusive meaning; to the tourists, they represent aesthetic value and, vandalising them is barbarism. Yet, their very presence mediates particular oppressive discourses. This contradiction was felt when the South African media emphasised the aesthetic value of the statues - of preserving touristic attractions, beauty, aesthetic and curbing vandalism. Yet, to the majority of black people, the 'hyperreal' is the true narrative behind the narratives, which is the colonial discourses that continue to glare at us and mock our false liberation (Baudrillard 1988:171).

An important deduction is that people protest when the collective social canopy collapses, which evokes Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's (1966:54) notion of the symbolic universe. In this case, the public statues, most of which being Afrikaner and English busts, do not provide a collective social canopy towards unity and inclusion. This last statement is important as a bridging point to zoom into the time of Paul and his juxtaposition of Abraham *vis-à-vis* Moses. I argue that the way the South Africans debated the legitimacy of particular images provide parallel discussions to how Paul contrasted Abraham from Moses in search of a images that best provide a collective, inclusive social canopy, especially, for the Hellenistic community living in a heterogeneous context.

Abraham and Moses as conflicting emerging social identities

That Paul socially contrasted Moses with Abraham is not a newly discovered gem; instead, the main contribution of this study is to show parallels on a discourse level – particularly, the refusal to accept colonial images within the public space in South Africa to the selection of Abraham instead of Moses

amongst Hellenistic Christians. In a book, Abraham as our spiritual ancestor, Israel Kamudzandu (2010:87) explains that the Hellenistic Jews, in view of how the Greeks boasted about their ancestors, chose Abraham as their founding father – their public identity marker. Within a Greek cosmopolitanism, characterised by blending of various culture, Abraham represented the cosmopolitan nature of the community and, was 'less bound to particular symbols of Jewish life than Moses' (Kamudzandu 2010:87). Though in Diaspora, the 'Hellenistic Jews did not shy away from their founding ancestor. However, most Jews remained socially exclusive, preferring to maintain their narrow social boundaries. Typically, the controversy in Galatians seems to refer to the Jews who had comfortably accepted the cosmopolitan nature of diaspora life and, reluctantly fellowshipped and dinned with the gentiles without being culturally sensitive. Concerning identity markers, E.P. Sanders' (1977:xxix) and James Dunn (2005:110) note that the Jews used the law as a social boundary marker to maintain their unique social position (covenantal nomism). By keeping the law, the Jews ensured social boundary markers that excluded non-Jews (Dunn 2005:110).

Given this context, Paul's choice of Abraham as the public image for the Gentile community's collective image, may explain the contestation of 'figures of memory' (Gruen 1998:246). Why did Paul, being a Jew, contest the public image of Moses, instead associated his Galatian Christian community with Abraham? Arguably, Moses represented a particular social constituency and identity contractions, in this case - the Jews. In Paul's historiography, the choice of Abraham and, in the process the denigration of Moses and the laws, must be understood within the context of searching for an inclusive social identity symbols, in view of the growing of the gentile missions during the 1st century - which reinforces our initial insight that public images or 'figures of memory' function towards 'mnemonic energy'. Moses represented a particular social and identity construction during the 1st century (Yinger 2011:23). In discussing the position of the laws in relation to grace, Paul seem to regard Moses as encapsulating particular cultural identity energy which his Hellenistic gentile Christians were not necessarily obliged to follow.

To illustrate, Paul says:

Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as referring to many, but rather to one, 'And to your seed,' that is, Christ. What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise. (Gl 3:16–3:18)

In contesting how the law constructs identities, Paul argues that God's promise to Abraham was based on faith and not works, thus like Abraham, those who constitute the new community are accepted by faith. However, according to Paul, this does not annihilate the law, whose main purpose

was to illuminate sin, thus making us to appreciate grace (Rom 7:14ff.). In Galatians 3:19, Paul states the following in relation to the law: 'Why the Law then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made'. Logically, for Paul, to base the collective identity of the community on the cultural memory represented by Moses is to limit entry and inclusivity. Consequently, Paul accuses the Jews for burdening the gentiles with legalistic and cultural demands such as circumcision and other Jewish rituals upon entry into the new community (Rm 3:1).

In this case and, in reference to Jan Assmann (2008:111), Moses was a 'figure of memory' that exuded particular 'mnemonic energy', with predictable social consequences. As material culture, the image of Moses was prescriptive; it demanded the gentiles to be accepted after fulfilling certain social demands. This echoes the asymmetric gaze of the black South Africans when they gaze the statues of Loius Botha. The public memory of Moses would make the gentiles feel less adequate; blaming themselves for having been born as gentile, thus their very nature of being gentiles excluded them from equal fellowship. To the Jews, Moses provided the narrative tool that helped them to entrench their exclusivity (Gruen 1998:246).

Instead, Paul built the identity of the Galatians around the image of Abraham. In Romans 4:11-4:12, claiming Abraham as the father to the uncircumcised, Paul explains, Abraham received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had whilst uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had whilst uncircumcised. Noticeably, Paul is hoisting the image of Abraham:

- before he was circumcised
- whilst he was a nomad
- whilst inhabiting in a foreign land and amongst the Gentiles (Gn 12) – images that resonate with the diasporic Hellenistic community.

As 'mnemonic energy', Abraham represents inclusivity and tolerance. Phillip Esler (1998:i) rightly commented that, in Galatians, Paul's rhetorical strategies were designed to establish and maintain desirable identity for his congregations in the face of competing Israelite claims. Abraham captures the social imagination and discourse in Galatia - a context characterised by cosmopolitanism and identity complexity, compared to Moses (Kamudzandu 2010:87). Within such a context consisting of many cultures, with less links to Jerusalem, Abraham became a symbol of identity construction. Abraham became a narrative tool that critiques the exclusivity of the Jewish identity. Abraham,

like the Galatians, symbolises cosmopolitanism, a figure that matches with his Hellenistic audience. Within oral memory, Abraham fits the experiences of the Hellenistic Christian community, capturing their experiences and identities, far away from home. Poignantly, Kamudzandu (2010) notes:

Unlike Aeneas, Abraham is a wandering Jew with no fixed home; however, like Aeneas, his divine purpose is to establish a new people - God's people. By presenting Abraham as a competing ancestor, Paul is overturning the structures of power within the Greco-Roman world, something that is both scandalous and provocative. (p. 99)

Like Mandela in South Africa, Abraham represents emerging identities, characterised by cultural heterogeneity and a diasporic identity.

Conclusion and comparison

This study notes parallels between the need for neutral statues in South Africa to Paul's use of Abraham in Galatians. In South Africa and in Paul's context, exclusive discourses were challenged by the need for inclusive discourses. In the case of South Africa, the study discovers that media hype regarding vandalism and destruction of property seem to miss the real debate, which is the need for public images that capture the inclusivity and cultural heterogeneity of our current context. In this case, removing the statues is removing narrow entrenched identities and narratives, engraved through statues. Memory and identity are transmitted through the visual objects around us. In this case, the study discovered that the vandalism of statues is a mini-drama that demands inclusive images. Post-colonial South Africa, necessarily, needs images that evoke inclusivity and this, as a nation, we have found in the image of Mandela. The image of Mandela, as he is affectionately called, the Mandela magic, brings the sensation of unity and collectivism. Conversely, whilst others might argue otherwise, the statue of a colonial, such as that of Botha and other colonial masters, perpetuates the discourses of exclusivity.

In the case of Paul, his contrast of Moses with Abraham reveals a quest of inclusive public images. In comparison, the image of Moses evokes cultural exclusivity, whilst Abraham represents inclusivity and cultural heterogeneity. Importantly, as history changes, affecting our social identities and social composition, equally, public images that represent our collective identity and self-awareness must change.

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