

The African National Congress (ANC) and the Construction of Collective Memory and Its impact in the Post-apartheid Era

Chitja Twala

*Faculty of the Humanities, Department of History, University of the Free State,
Bloemfontein, South Africa
E-mail: twalacm@ufs.ac.za*

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ABSTRACT Since the entire history of existence, the African National Congress (ANC) has been using collective memory in reminding its members of the history of the organisation, firstly as a liberation movement and secondly in the democratisation period as the ruling party in South Africa. The purpose of the present paper is to expose the significant relationship between the ANC and the impact of collective memory on the history and identity of this organisation. The paper commences with the premise that memory is an active, non-stop procedure which takes place in social contexts and is inevitably influenced by them. In understanding the history and political identity of the ANC, collective memory has played a significant role in this regard. The paper notes that sometimes in grappling with the issue of collective memory, some former political activists within the ANC had difficulties in coming to terms with traumatic experiences imposed by the apartheid government during the struggle days.

INTRODUCTION

The invocations of history, symbolism, memory and tradition are a strategic part of the African National Congress's (ANC's) political history. They are an important part of how the ANC profiles itself within the South African political constituencies. It is argued in this paper that the ANC's public representations pivot on the way in which it uses memory for strategic political ends. The repetitive references to key events and constant mentioning of personalities in its history in one way or the other instigate a sense of collective remembering. The paper analyses the rise of widespread interest in the use of collective memory by the organisation's leadership and how this continues to enhance its political identity. However, it should be noted that interest in collective memory by the ANC has been fuelled by developments both within and outside the academy. These include the forms of social and cultural history that have produced not only oral history but also a focus on testimonies, popular memory and forms of memorialisation and the related focus within cultural studies on questions of history and identity. In this paper, the researcher contends that the ANC's history is one that embraces the collective memory and experiences of most people in South Africa, their victories, their mistakes and their pain.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

To date, no historical studies have been conducted about the strategy of collective memory of the ANC and how this has shaped the political attitudes of its members. The paper scrutinises the ANC's members' recollection of the past in attempts to highlight the organisation's strategy for the construction of collective memory in the post-apartheid South Africa. Without doubt, within the South African tradition of rhetoric speculation, the use of collective memory in documented history as a discursive practice is still a new phenomenon. More particularly, as mentioned earlier the purpose of the paper is to discuss various relationships in the ANC's history and the impact of its collective memory. Almost two decades after the ushering in of democratic rule under the leadership of the ANC in South Africa, it remains to be seen as to how collective memory has been used to benefit this organisation in the post-apartheid country.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The prime objective of the paper is to contribute to the shared acknowledgement of the role played by the ANC and its strategic collective memory during both the apartheid years and the post-apartheid period. This shared acknowledgement thus involves the recognition of the painful truth about the organisation's past. The paper provides new insights into the strategic

directions taken by the ANC after its unbanning in February 1990, one of such being the use of collective memory in the provision of political identity. This paper stems from a qualitative design located within an interpretative research paradigm. Within the parameters of qualitative research, primary and secondary sources were explored, since they allow for an in-depth study of the phenomenon being investigated. Further, the paper also used oral testimonies in order to fulfil the aim of the research study. In so doing, a narrative approach was pursued in which such memories were recorded. It should be noted that not all interviews conducted for the purpose of this paper were used. Coupled with the above, the paper adopted the descriptive method. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995: 321) indicated that 'descriptive case studies have aimed at giving a narrative account of life as it is in a social situation'.

Literature Study

In most cases, those who study collective memory often treat memory as if it is consensually held; that is, subscribed to by nearly everyone in society, when in fact, memories are typically constructed quite differently in different segments of the community. Memories are always the subject of bitter political debate and that 'collective' may be accepted by virtue of coercion and elite hegemony, rather than by individual choice. What the members of the ANC believe about the strategy of collective memory by the organisation is an empirical question, answerable through rigorous survey methods and how this collective memory has shaped their attitudes about the ANC. Some scholars argue that rather than referring to 'collective' memories, it is perhaps more neutral to use the terms 'social' or 'historical' memory so as not to beg the empirical question of how widely such memories are accepted in a society.

Most historians who study collective memories take the work of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs as their primary theoretical reference point. Following Halbwachs, they understand collective memories as collectively shared representations of the past. Despite the above, some historians remain uncomfortable with Halbwach's determined anti-individualism (Hutton 1993: 73-90; Winter and Sivan 2000: 23). To find an alternative to the sociologically 'occupied' conception of collective memory, Kan-

steiner (2002: 181) contends that scholars have coined terms such as 'social memory', 'collective remembrance', and 'popular history making'. However, it should be mentioned that history is not to be confused with the past, for history is a collection of stories and arguments about some set of events from the past; therefore, memory plays a role in this regard.

Kansteiner (2002: 179) argues that the memory wave in the humanities has contributed to the impressive revival of cultural history, but the success of memory studies has not been accompanied by significant conceptual and methodological advances in the research of collective memory processes. Most of the studies, done specifically on memory, focus on the representation of specific events within particular, chronological, geographical, and media settings without reflecting on the audiences of the representations in question. As a result, the wealth of new insights into past and present historical cultures cannot be linked conclusively to specific social collectives and their historical consciousness.

In this study, one tends to agree with Kansteiner (2002: 180) that collective memory should be conceptualised as the result of the interaction among three types of historical factors, namely, the intellectual and cultural traditions that frame all representations of the past; the memory makers who selectively adopt and manipulate these traditions; and the memory consumers who use, ignore, or transform such artefacts according to their own interests. Klein (2000: 127-150) notes that through the concept of memory, one can demonstrate to post-modern critics how representations really work and how the power of representations can be explained. Gonzalez-Castro (2006: 7-14) published an article whereby he unpacked as to how historical events are remembered and how these memories are mediated by age cohorts and gender.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Unpacking the Concept 'Collective Memory'

A collective memory is a 'set of ideas, images, feelings about the past (Irwin-Zarecka 1994: 4). Such memories are often socially constructed to meet contemporary social, psychological, and political needs. A collective memory, thus, represents a society's understanding of itself,

especially about its past. Generally and for the purpose of this study, attempts are made to identify the central elements of the beliefs that people hold about the ANC, often with a focus on generational differences in memories. 'Memory' is sometimes used to indicate the ability to recall objective information about the past.

Collective memory signifies narratives of past experience constituted by and on behalf of specific groups within which they find meaningful forms of identification that may empower them. Collective memory and the institutions and practices that support it help to create, sustain and reproduce the 'imagined communities' with which individuals identify and this gives them a sense of history, place and belonging (Weedon and Jordan 2012: 143). Collective memory refers to the shared pool of information held in the memories of two or more members of a group. The Popular Memory Group of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (1982: 207) employs the term 'popular memory' to reference 'the power and perverseness' of historical representations, their connections with dominant institutions and the part they play in winning consent and building alliances in the processes of formal politics'.

In another elaboration, Stratigoula (2009: 2) explains collective memory as follows: 'Collective memory determines and is determined by the societies in which it takes shape. It is an important function in every society since it preserves and transfers society's cultural capital, perpetuating its existence. It is also a high-stake between the social and political parties of societies since it shapes and perpetuates the identity of society's members and reassures the society's coherence. The formation of national identity is a non-stop procedure that is influenced by national memory. The renegotiation of collective memory has a consequence on the change of the content of the national identity'.

The Social and Political Role of Collective Memory

Collective memory responds to the need of all human societies to be perpetuated by transferring their cultural capital to the next generations. Although memory appears to be a seemingly simple concept, in reality, it is a lot more complex. Halbwachs submits that 'the mind reconstructs its memories under the pressure of

society and that society obligates people not just to reproduce in thought previous events of their lives, but also to touch them up, to shorten them, or to complete them' (Halbwachs 1992: 51). Halbwachs avers that historical memory, or memory that does not personally belong to an individual cannot be remembered directly and can only be recalled through acts such as reading about or commemorating past events in concert with other people (Halbwachs 1992: 25). The fact that historical memory is socially constructed in the present plays a central role in political action. According to Wood (1999: 1) 'memories of the past are reconstructed with regard to the demands of the present and then performatively expressed through 'vehicles of memory'; memories can be mutated in such a way that suits the interests of those who are recalling them'.

Further the idea is elucidated by Robinson's newspaper article referring to the ANC centenary commemoration in January 2012: 'This year marks the hundredth anniversary of the African National Congress, the ANC, founded in 1912 to defend and advance the rights of African people. Leader in the struggle to destroy the apartheid state, with a vision to replace it with a united, non-racist, non-sexist, democratic and prosperous South Africa in which the people as a whole shall govern and all shall enjoy equal rights' (Robinson 2012: 9). The above statement by Robinson became a trump card message carried along by the ANC for many decades even after it was unbanned in February 1990.

The ANC and the Selective Use of Collective Memory

Stratigoula (2009: 4) writes that national identity describes the social representations that a national group has not only for itself but for every other national group. As a result, the ANC's national identities as other identities are continuously developing. The above could be said about the ANC in South Africa which developed from a group inspired by African nationalism; later its identity expanded through the construction of collective memory. However, according to Ross (2009: 10) the ANC's process of remembering is, to a certain extent, highly 'selective', drawing on and publicising a nuanced recollection of the past. Soudien (2009: 182) refers to this process of selective memory as the promotion of what he terms 'triumphalist memory'

which is aligned to an ethic of redemption by the ANC.

Ranchod (2013: 12) opines that the selective construction of a heroic past as exhibited by the ANC. In most cases this involved the use of personalities and symbols that guided the organisation throughout its struggle era. Furthermore Ranchod (2013: 12) stated. 'The symbolic cache the ANC developed in the period of struggle resonates in the democratic era. It galvanises the party and stimulates excitement. It endows the ANC with a sense of historical rectitude, and renders its myth-making tangible'.

Historically, the question of collective memory played a significant role in identity formation of the ANC. As initially indicated, collective memory plays an important role in the formulation of the references of the ANC's identity. Thus, the renegotiation of collective memory either by regulatory standards or by historical circumstances causes, as a consequence, a change in the identity of the organisation.

However, Olick and Robbins (1998: 111) contend that: 'Historical memory is memory that reaches us only through historical records. History is the remembered past to which we no longer have an organic relation, the past that is no longer an important part of our lives, while collective memory is the active past that forms our identities. Memory inevitably gives way to history as we lose touch with our pasts. Historical memory, however, can be either organic or dead'. Underneath are some of the examples elucidating the impact of collective memory by the ANC.

The Use of Liberation Language

It is evident from historians' opinions that from apartheid to the constitutional dispensations in South Africa, the ANC and its aligned structures bonded within the bounds of collectivism and consolidated their efforts in the political struggle through slogans, such as 'an injury to one is an injury to all' or 'pass one pass all'. In these two slogans workers and students respectively demonstrated their collectivism without understanding what they were heard saying. Here the issue of collectivism and collective memory became a way of life to the freedom fighters. These sentiments emanated from collectivism; the cultural value aspect of the African people. During the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, the language of liberation was central to its pursuit of public representation and began to transcend pithy slogans. Liberation

was accorded theoretical content that continued to animate the ANC's ideological vision of a democratic South Africa. According to Ranchod (2013: 15), the liberation language within the ANC shifted over time and took on different meanings. For example, during the exile years, this language was promoted by the military wing of the ANC, namely, Umkhonto Wesizwe (MK). MK's publicity emphasised its popular and militarist orientations. Thus, Johnson (2003: 201) wrote that in most cases, the liberation movements became the ruling party's experienced challenges of nation-building and consolidating its own power base.

In most cases, the Freedom Charter was also used in constructing the vision for a liberated South Africa. With the Charter's emphasis on the 'we' in its preamble and on all key statements, it became a vehicle for collective identity of the ANC and its aligned structures after 1955. In the post-apartheid era, reference to the Charter became evident in many of the speeches by the ANC leaders. For all its militant rhetoric, the targets of MK's actions were not only the South African armed forces. Davis (2013: 118) argued that the MK's strategic approach in the years after its founding was to destabilise the economy in the hope that a popular insurrection might ensue. Such destabilisation would occur through its 'armed propaganda' activities.

The ANC recognised the importance of communicating the idea of the self-emancipation of the people. Strategically, however, the ANC would remain the ultimate 'instrument' of freedom. It would be the head of the democratic forces; the guide to the realisation of 'a better life for all'. Consequently, despite the above Ranchod (2013: 26-27) observes that the vision of liberation would not surrender to a few slogans and catch phrases. The by-lines of struggle were invested with significant ideological and theoretical content. Key ideas were packaged and animated the ANC's political discussion, action and representations. It was clear from the above that the ANC's liberation language became an important tool to popularise the movement and later its governance mandates as the ruling party in South Africa.

Nelson Mandela as the Guarantor for Support of the ANC

Popularising key personalities in the ANC became a strategic necessity. More than two decades since the unbanning of the ANC, the

organisation's stories needed to be told to a new generation of activists. Lodge (1991: 41) noted that during this period the black press reflected political biographies and memoirs of the 1950s. Therefore, a new, nationalist genre of poetic and dramatic writing provided a popular medium for this process of historical discovery. Mandela's name and personality were invoked for specific political ends. This became evident in 1980 when the ANC in Lusaka broke with its tradition of promoting only a collective leadership, and launched a Free Mandela campaign. Through this venture the ANC mobilised around the persona of Mandela in order to force the apartheid government to free political prisoners.

In the early 1990s, South Africa's transition was described as a 'small miracle' with Mandela as its guarantor, so much that the country enjoyed a level of international exposure. In many of the ANC's gatherings, the masses were reminded about the role played by Mandela and mobilisation revolved around his personage. To a certain extent this was dubbed 'Mandelomania' or 'Mandela magic' which was hoped would deliver South Africa from all kinds of challenges and difficulties.

The Impact of the Underground ANC's Political Work

While the ANC was banned, there were individuals who became involved in underground activities by linking up with the movement activists based inside the country or with those in exile. Houston and Magubane (2007: 372) wrote: 'Some political activists maintain that in the 1970s there was a political vacuum and people were cut off from ... the history of the struggle as a result of the banning of people's organisations in the 60s ... Ronnie Kasrils recalls that many of the young people he met in the MK camps in the late 1970s, most of whom were born in the first half of the 1960s, were blank about the history of the struggle, the role of the ANC, of MK in the earlier period'. To a certain, such statements led to the mistaken conclusion that the ANC had failed to conduct any meaningful underground political work inside the country during the decade. In post-apartheid South Africa, the ANC reminded the masses about the role played by the political activists amidst the atrocities endured from the apartheid government. Furthermore, on closer examination of the early

1970s, it was disproved that any perception of the ANC had been crushed by the apartheid regime. Despite innumerable difficulties, including extensive repression, a number of efforts were made by people inside the country to revive the ANC's underground structures, including the establishment of cells and underground networks that carried out a variety of revolutionary tasks. These ranged from the political tasks of organisation, to political education and propaganda, to the military tasks of recruitment for training abroad and to providing military training to recruits (Houston and Magubane 2007: 372).

According to Ranchod (2013: 4), political education in MK camps and on Robben Island schooled young activists in the history of the ANC. On the Island, political education was explicitly launched by ANC veterans to recruit followers from the cohorts of youthful Black Consciousness (BC) and unaffiliated militants imprisoned for their part in the liberation struggle. Soundly schooled in the language and content of liberation, released political prisoners became mouthpieces for the ANC in their communities. They would educate, propagate and market-brand the ANC. They then would spread the tales and myths and reinforce a highly nuanced story of struggle.

The Political Dominance of the ANC

The ANC used its liberation and struggle credentials to remind the masses about its role in the liberation struggle. Resistance, especially against the apartheid regime, to date holds a special place in the collective memory of mostly black South Africans. Political scientists argue that for a party to qualify as dominant, it should be dominant in numbers, win the majority of seats, occupy a dominant bargaining position, remain in government over a long period of time, and hold a position within the party system that enables it to bargain or effectively swallow smaller parties. It should dominate the electorate, other political parties, the formation of governments, and the public agenda. The ANC qualifies with ease on all these fronts (Pheko 2007: 29). Although the ANC claims to have delivered the African masses from bondage, no single political party or individual delivered the people of South Africa from the slavery of colonialism and apartheid.

Robert Kaden argues that the collective memory of the ANC is in most cases selective. In his article *This will help in healing our land: Remembering and forgetting Quatro in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, he states the following: 'The ruling ANC government, on the other hand, has been actively engaged in a process of forgetting Quatro. It appears that the memory of Quatro presents the ANC with a traumatic and ambiguous narrative that does not fit into the master narrative of the struggle. The ANC has, therefore, practiced a kind of memory politics that involves the active negation of the ambiguous narrative and traumatic memory of Quatro in order to write a shared history of the past that can foster a new South Africa' (Kaden 2012: 122). This is tantamount to the manipulation of history and the shifting of historiographical interest from ideology to imagery and from meaning to manipulation.

CONCLUSION

The paper explored how the ANC used collective memory in revoking its past histories. The reader may have picked up that in using collective memory as a tool to remind the masses about its past successes in attempts to garner more support, the author provided a few examples in the ANC's history to justify the above. The focus of this paper was not mainly on the romanticisation of the ANC's history but rather, on a much greater collective memory. Moreover, the paper highlighted the complex dynamics by which individual memories become subsumed under an overarching collective memory of former political activists within the ANC, as well as showing that there is an understanding of the relations between history and memory. Political activists and those in support of the ANC often provided political legitimisation for nationalism and other more reconstructive identity struggles. This involvement calls into question not only the success of such activists into being objective, but the very notion of objectivity itself.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The ushering of the democratic era in South Africa after the April 1994 elections brought with it not only the assertion of new identities but new identity interests from the ANC. These iden-

ties are not just for material interests but also psychological and cultural in nature. As members of the ANC assert these identity interests, a bigger paradox that demands great leadership skills began to emerge. This led to embracing of the history and tradition of the organisation. The ANC should note that political identities are forever changing and there is a need for the organisation to progress in that regard.

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