"Robben Island": Our University

By
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The earliest political detainee on Robben Island was the extraordinary Khoikhoi leader Autshumato, who was known to the Europeans as Haddah, Adda, or Haddot--and, after the establishment of the first Dutch settlement at the Cape in 1652, as Harry. This was the Harry who was later to become famous for his intrigues with and against the Dutch. In the winter of 1658 they banished him and his followers to Robben Island in the aftermath of the first Dutch-Khoikhoi war which broke out in 1657. In December 1659 he escaped from the island in a leaky boat and crossed to the mainland over a heavy sea. An equally famous political prisoner on Robben Island was Nxele, also known as Makana the left-handed, who in May, 1819 attacked the British in Grahamstown in broad daylight, a factor which probably cost him his victory. Three months later he surrendered himself in the vain hope that this would end the British counter-offensive. Instead he was imprisoned and sent to Robben Island, but in 1820 he and some companions overpowered the crew of a small boat and attempted to escape. The overloaded craft capsized, however, and he drowned. Thereafter Robben Island fell into disuse as a penal colony, as one African kingdom after the other was defeated by the invading settler-colonial forces, and the island was used instead as a leper settlement. After 1960 it reverted to its former status when it became South Africa's maximum security prison for political offenders.

In "Robben Island: Our University" three former prisoners on the island reminisce about their prison experiences. Neville Alexander, educationist and former director of the South African Council of Higher Education (SACHED) in the Western Cape, and Fikile Bam, a lawyer and founding director of the Legal Resource Centre in the eastern Cape, spent ten years as prisoners; the third discussant, Kwedi Mkalipi, a credit union worker, spent twenty-one years in prison.

In the first part of the documentary film they recall specific instances of physical and mental torture in prison.

Fikile Bam sets the tone for the whole discussion by relating the agony and the ecstasy which characterized his spell in prison: "I personally felt I reached my lowest ebb and highest point of self-realization." Prison, he adds, cured him of self-pity. The ten years to which he had been sentenced pale into insignificance when compared with others' sentences of thirty-six years, when compared with the twenty-year sentence of an eighteen-year-old youth, when compared with the longer terms of others sentenced on trumped-up charges.

Neville Alexander stresses the ill-treatment they received as prisoners. He recalls the brutal and systematic assault on a group of prisoners, while the rest of the prisoners were forced to watch in order to inflict on them all "a sense of awe." The actual physical conditions on Robben Island, he argues, are not fundamentally different from prison conditions in some Latin American banana republics or under Nazi Germany. What makes South Africa a special case is the link with racist attitudes. Such a statement needs some qualification in light of the anti-semitism that characterized Nazi concentration camps. We learn from Alexander, though, that on Robben Island all the prisoners are black and all the warders white, and that white political prisoners are kept in comparative comfort in Pretoria Central Prison. In what must be an idiocratic refinement peculiar to apartheid South Africa, however, Alexander discloses that even among black prisoners there is a hierarchical gradation in which the lighter-skinned "Coloureds" are accorded better treatment than Africans. In cold, wintry weather the "Coloured" prisoners are provided with long trousers and thick sweaters, and the African prisoners wear short pants and sneakers with no socks.

Kwedi Mkalipi talks about their living conditions and the assault not so much on their physical as on their spiritual being. He tells us how the prisoners used to sleep on a hard cement surface and were provided with three blankets and mats, although after 1974 he says beds and mattresses were supplied but no sheets. He also notes how the psychological torture of the prisoners takes many forms, such as depriving them of reading material, including newspapers. But above all, he abhors the outrages committed by the warders against the religious sensitivities of the prisoners and cites an instance in which one of the warders confiscated from the Anglican prison chaplain wine intended for holy communion. Herein, then, lies the supreme irony of apartheid: far from dehumanizing those who are supposedly the victims of the system, apartheid leads to considerable degeneracy among those charged with responsibility to implement what is essentially an inhuman system. Apartheid is, indeed, a double-edged sword.

The second part of the film dispels any erroneous impression the viewer may have acquired up to this point that the prisoners are eventually subdued by such brutal treatment. These are not house-broken slaves but some of the world's most famous and respected prisoners of conscience, inspired by lofty ideals and convictions, unrepentant and uncompromising on matters of principle, forceful and affirmative.

The conversation in the film then veers towards the steps taken by the prisoners to improve their miserable lot and to assert themselves, individually and collectively. Bam explains how discipline on Robben Island is more in the hands of the political detainees than in those of the

warders. In each cell the prisoners form Prisoners' Committees to regulate conduct towards one another and to represent their interests with the prison authorities, particularly in ending brutal assaults and humiliating conduct towards the prisoners.

Alexander notes how the grand divisive design of the apartheid regime fails when members of rival organizations such as the African National Congress (ANC), the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), and the Unity Movement are brought together under the same prison roof. Instead of tearing at one another's political throats, they reach a greater understanding of their respective points of view and a greater tolerance for each other's ideological platforms and personal preferences such as they might never have attained outside prison. Their different backgrounds become a source of mutual intellectual and political enrichment. Alexander admits to having learned African history and languages in prison and not from the South African educational system which aims to alienate Africans from their history and culture.

Learning is made much of by prisoners on Robben Island, and seminars, tutorials, and lectures are arranged at the work place, right under the noses of the warders, by each of the work spans or chain gangs. In South Africa it is illegal for the racially oppressed to start their own schools, but on Robben Island schools are established by the prisoners themselves: all those who have a formal school education are charged with responsibility to teach a particular subject in which they have specialized. The Prisoners' Committees are responsible for drawing up a schedule each morning so that those prisoners who are learning the same subject can work for the day in the same work span. Mkalipi is literally a graduate of Robben Island, where he studied by correspondence for a Bachelor of Arts degree, with Alexander as his history teacher and Bam as his anthropology and Xhosa teacher. Perhaps in a transformed South Africa we will convert Robben Island into a university to remind people that truth, justice, and freedom cannot be incarcerated in dungeons in an island prison.

The discussions in prison sharpen Mkalipi's political perspective in such a way that he moves from considering the South African problem purely in racial terms, in line with what used to be the political philosophy of his organization the PAC, to thinking also in class terms. Such interaction with other prisoners who espouse a different ideology, therefore, breaks down the barriers created by ideological and racial chauvinism. "You learn to respect others for their points of view even if you disagree with them," Alexander says. In what can be interpreted as an appeal for unity among all the disparate forces ranged against apartheid, Bam makes the observation that in prison they all realized a pooling of resources is necessary to crack apartheid, "provided people are prepared to emphasize their resources, their positive aspects, without necessarily wishing away their differences."

The notion of prison as a finishing school for political leaders and activists may sound outrageous, but Robben Island has become just such a university for leaders of the liberation movements who, upon graduation, return to their communities as heroes who are instantly elected leaders even of such new internal organizations as the United Democratic Front and the National Forum and sometimes of the exiled organizations as well. We also glean from the conversation something of the stature, even in prison, of veteran nationalist leaders Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu,* both imprisoned for life since 1964. They are father figures and bridge figures who reconcile conflicting ideas and personalities. They unify African opposition to apartheid, a factor which explains the extreme reluctance of the South African government to release either man. Clearly, though, their credibility and undisputed position as majority leaders are such that any effort to resolve differences between the apartheid, minority, racist regime and its opponents is doomed to failure without their participation in the negotiation process.

In the third and final part of the documentary film the former prisoners discuss their relationship with the warders, then turn to their past before their imprisonment and clarify why the non-violent struggle in South Africa changed to an armed struggle.

Alexander points out how in the early days the warders used to treat all prisoners like animals and were particularly ruthless towards the political prisoners. Alexander's explanation for such animosity towards political offenders is that the warders, many of them young men, are brought up to believe government propaganda: that all opponents of apartheid are godless communists, saboteurs, murderers, and subhuman goons. According to Bam, relations with the warders changed, however, when the prisoners embarked on a hunger strike. For the first time a realization seemed to dawn on the warders that they were dealing with resolute and refined characters, some of the nation's leading intellectuals. Along with this realization came respect for the prisoners, and from that point on the warders sought professional advice from their charges on every conceivable academic and legal issue. The re-education of the warders liberates them from vicious racist stereotypes which most white children in South Africa internalize through their upbringing. From this section of the film we get an impression of the extent to which we are all victims of apartheid in South Africa, the oppressor and the oppressed alike.

Following Mkalipi's revelation that political prisoners on Robben Island are constantly subjected to pressure by the state to

*Both Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu have since been released from jail.

renounce violence and express regret for their past misdemeanors, the discussion turns to the issue of violence in the struggle. The decision of the liberation movements to take up arms against the state is traced to the decree passed by the South African government to outlaw the ANC and the PAC and to suppress all extra-parliamentary opposition. This followed the shootings at Sharpeville, where on March 21, 1960 white policemen opened fire on a peaceful demonstration against apartheid laws and killed sixty-nine people, including women and children. Until then there had been no intention to switch to guerilla warfare in what Alexander describes as "a systematic calculated way" by any organizations, who all drew the line, as the churches in South Africa still do, between passive resistance and armed struggle. But it had become manifestly clear that the government was never going to listen to constitutional arguments or heed peaceful protest, Bam adds. The salient point here is that the South African government provokes radical action and even counter-violence by its brutality and intransigence in order to justify its supposed defence of South Africa against "terrorist and communist onslaught."

We also learn from the documentary how the Christian background of all three former prisoners has shaped their political orientation, as each man in turn tries to translate his religious convictions into actions. "It was really because I was a good Christian that I became political--the fact that I actually took the tenets of Christianity seriously," says Alexander, who was brought up as a Catholic. "I really believed in a tenet like 'love thy neighbor as thyself,' and I saw very little of that around me. I found an echo of my deeply held beliefs in the political movement. It was because I was a radical Christian that I became a political radical." In addition, Alexander laments the fact that violence orchestrated by the state has become endemic to the South African situation as manifested, for example, in the brutal suppression of each wave of peaceful protest (as in 1960 and, again, in 1976, following anti-apartheid demonstrations by the children of Soweto) which in turn leads increasingly to more desperate and violent efforts by the oppressed to free themselves. "The point is that it is almost a rhythm of South African history that non-violent protest is smothered in blood for which the country pays," he says. The inevitable outcome each time of such harshness in dealing with political opponents is another wave of radicalism and spiralling violence.

By way of summary, Bam returns to a theme he first brings up at the beginning, in a statement all the more remarkable for being devoid of corrosive bitterness, while at the same time mindful of the atrocities perpetrated by the apartheid regime against its opponents. He draws the following lessons from his prison experiences:

> In the end I sort of feel that I learned certain lessons. I learned to be confident in dealing with people. I was particularly flattered that I was chosen as first chairman of the Prisoners' Committee in our section, at a time when groups were difficult to deal with. I feel good about that. I also feel good about the fact that as time went on we also developed very deep emotional links with people.

And again:

> By and large, taking the whole experience, it is one of having a sense of inner victory within me. Prison is a waste of time; ten years is a waste of time of our life. But, at the same time, it's the sort of experience which I don't feel that I regret having gone through, especially for the good company one actually had in prison. I've never again had such a group of people around me with whom you could communicate in so meaningful a way.

"Respect for the consistency of others, their vision, breadth of mind; the fact that others see you for who you are--these things stay with you for life," says Alexander in his closing remarks in which he also points out how he discovered his natural self in relation to others around him in prison. He compares this process to self-liberation from stifling conventions and repressive institutions. He concludes on a note which is elucidated by such writers as Alex La Guma and Dennis Brutus, the former a Treason Trialist from 1956 to 1960, and the latter an erstwhile prisoner on Robben Island: prison in South Africa is a microcosm of the life outside; South Africa is a larger version of Robben Island, which has become a "symbol of colonization, dispossession of this country." "One understood the absolute vulgarity of the system, its destructiveness, because it was concentratedly real." Nonetheless, he continues, prison led to his growth and maturity and prepared him for what is taking place in South Africa now. "Certainly for myself not a single year was wasted," he concludes, reiterating Bam's earlier point. "I don't consider that any movement of that experience is something that I lost and that I need to regret."

Throughout the documentary film the tone is an assertive, even celebratory, testimony to the irrepressible nature of the human spirit and the people's unquenchable desire for freedom. These are prisoners of conscience who, in the poet Kgositsile's words, "emerge to prove Truth cannot be enslaved/in chains or imprisoned in an island inferno." They are people who have been shaped by a resilient culture which has survived more than three hundred years of oppression by its remarkable capacity for self-regeneration, for digging in roots and thriving wherever it may be transplanted.

From a purely technical point of view one can make the criticism that the documentary film is made with about as much imagination as a tape recording, except for the fact that we have before our eyes the three men glued throughout to their seats and, also, except for the occasional diversionary shot aimed at the sea which marks the transition between the film's three parts. Despite its flaws--the occasional lapses of concentration on the part of the photographer whenever he fails to turn the camera on time to the speaker, the monotony of focusing for nearly an hour on the same scene with little attempt to evoke other images with similar associations--the final impression we get from the film is one of touching simplicity. One also comes away from the film with the feeling that every man-hour wasted by the continued incarceration of people of such colossal honor, integrity, and ability is an irretrievable loss for the entire nation; that our hope for reconciliation in South Africa lies with the release of all such people, who are already skilled in the art of reconciling divergent views in a humane manner; and that liberation, when it comes to South Africa, will release energies which, creatively channelled, will make the country one of the leading nations of our planet.