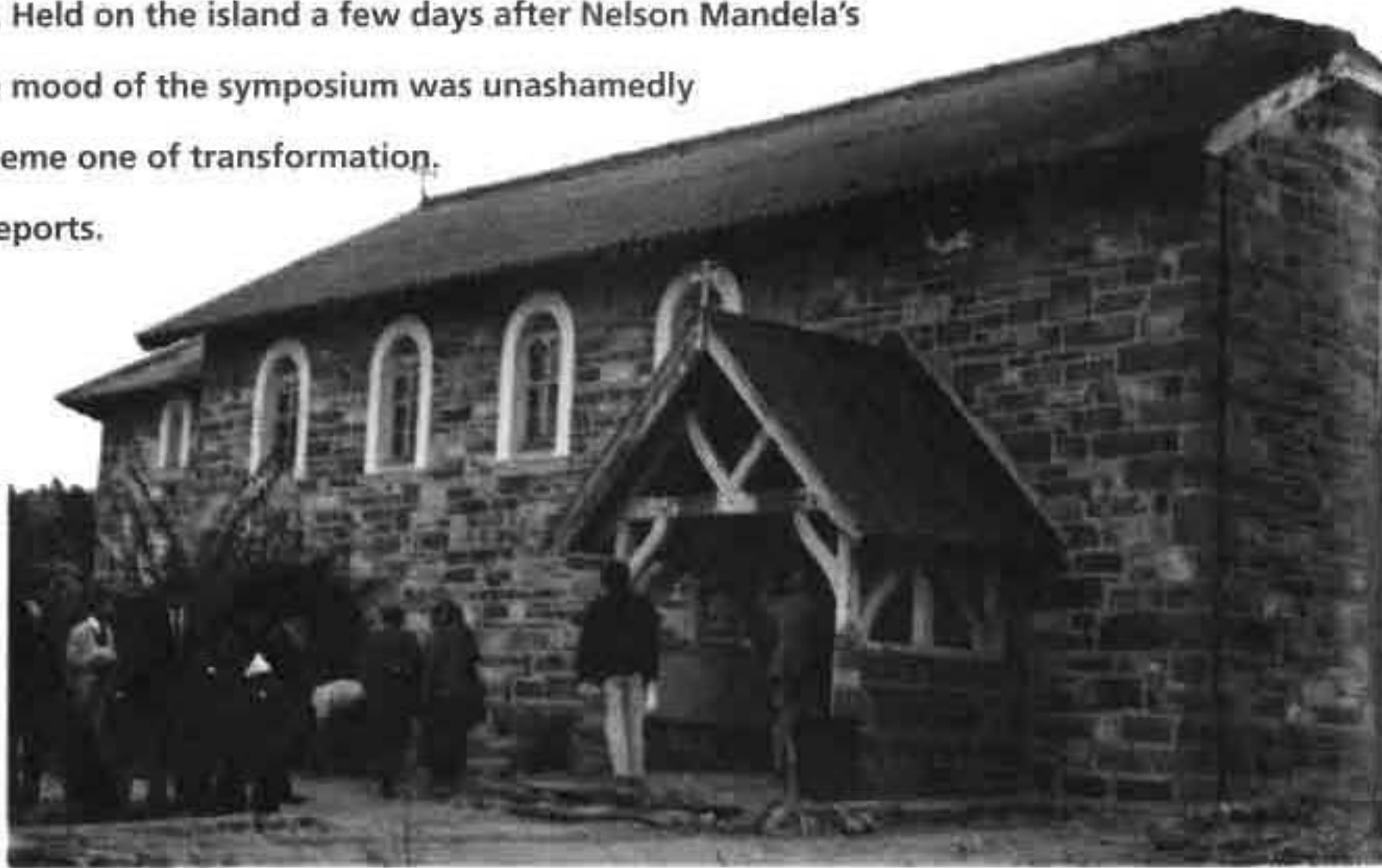


# Island of pain,

Former prisoners were among participants in a recent symposium on the future of Robben Island. Held on the island a few days after Nelson Mandela's inauguration, the mood of the symposium was unashamedly emotional, the theme one of transformation.

SUE VALENTINE reports.



**SANCTUARY:** Designed by Herbert Baker and built in 1895, this church served the leper colony on the island until 1931

**“W**E DO not want a shrine erected to the past which commemorates only the suffering and misery of prison life; we want a memorial which celebrates the triumph of the human spirit over injustice.” According to Stellenbosch political scientist Amanda Gouws, this is the view of many former Robben Island prisoners on what should become of the island and its notorious prison.

It was also the prevailing sentiment of a symposium called “Robben Island: An investment for peace” organised by Peace Visions and held on Robben Island in mid-May. The aim of the symposium was to explore future options for the island; the mood, a few days after Nelson Mandela's inauguration, was unashamedly emotional.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu opened the proceedings with a tribute to the change taking place in the country. “There is a transformation – a transfiguration. How else does one explain the change in people where before they would shake their fists at an army helicopter flying overhead and now they cheer to the rafters or weep like children? Something has happened to us. We look at the same thing, but its reality has changed, its significance has changed.”

The theme of transformation resonated throughout the day. There was a strong shared feeling among symposium participants that although the bleak, punitive conditions of the island prison should not be forgotten, it should also be remembered as an environment in which hope, vision and insight had been nurtured.

A feasibility study conducted on behalf of Peace Visions by Gouws showed much common ground on the island's future among the different interest groups surveyed. These included political parties, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), business interests, youth groups, the Cape Provincial Administration (CPA), the church and former political prisoners.

Most political parties agreed that the socio-political history of the island should be preserved and that it should become a museum and conference venue. The ANC saw the prison as an important element of the museum and the PAC supported limited tourism on the island as a means of raising funds. The PAC also wanted the international community involved and said the island should contribute to peace education for the entire human race. The Conservative Party wanted the island to remain state property, to serve as a military base and continue as a prison.

Former prisoners unanimously supported the preservation of the island's history. They specified that this should include the island's long-term history and not just its use as a political prison since the 1960s. They also spoke of the positive learning experience they had had as prisoners and wanted the educational role of the island to continue.

The CPA and department of Nature Conservation outlined a four-tier management plan for the island covering the physical environment, the cultural/historical legacy, marine conservation and tourism.

# island of hope



**ON THE BOAT:**  
Luyanda Ka-  
Msumza of the  
Quaker Peace  
Centre travels to  
the island with  
former prisoner  
Walter Sisulu.

**HEAD TO HEAD:**  
Cabinet minister  
Kader Asmal chats  
to Colonel H A G de  
Beer, Officer  
Commanding  
Robben Island  
prison.



Despite several attempts, Gouws was unable to get permission to consult prison and other officials who are resident on Robben Island on how they saw the island's future.

NGOs consulted agreed that the island should be used as a museum, conference centre, library and archive. The African Community Theatre Service suggested that an amphitheatre should be built on the island for drama and music performances.

The Anglican Church, the only landowner on the island besides the state, said it was committed to developing the healing potential of the island, for example by building a retreat for contemplation where humanity and identity could be rediscovered. The concept of peace should also be contextualised within African culture, celebrating, for example, the notion of *ubuntu*.

The Mayibuye Centre for History and Culture at the University of the Western Cape favoured an integrated management and development plan which involved a range of NGOs and non-partisan groups. There should be a balance between conservation (both historical and ecological), tourism and development. Former prisoners should be given special consideration for jobs that might be created in the process.

All groups consulted were opposed to commercialisation of the island, although they accepted limited tourism that would not disturb the ecology and that would be educational and help make the island accessible.

Delegates agreed that the way forward was for a national working group, headed by Peace Visions, to initiate widespread consultation on the future of the island. ■



**Fikele Bam**

*'A jewel out of ugliness'*

**T**HE symposium on Robben Island took place almost 20 years to the day after Eastern Cape advocate Fikele Bam was released from imprisonment there. It was the first time he had returned since 1974, and delegates listened spellbound as he remembered prison life and what it had meant for him.

"Coming here isn't as painful for me as going away from the island was when my time came to leave. It is the act of moving away from your friends, people whom you've come to love, no matter what the circumstances, that is more difficult. Not only are you leaving a band of people for whom you have developed respect and love over a period of time, but you are going to an uncertain world.

"A lot of people who left the island would have survived if they had been kept here. I think of Griffiths Mxenge and a lot of other people from the Transkei and all over, where there were these tyrants who were just ready, as the people came out of the island, to assassinate them and to make sure that they didn't have an input to make. I think all our respect goes to those people who could not see the celebrations that have taken place over the last few days.

"This piece of land on which we are standing today is holy land, it is a place to be venerated. It is the coal-face which received all the tears, which received all the sweat and all the blood and all the cries of the people who were fighting for freedom, for all the things that were realised to some extent by the jubiliations which we witnessed a few days ago.

"People came here from all over the country, some as young as 15 and 16, some approaching their 70s. They came from all walks of life and this is also important. It wasn't only the Mandelas and Sisulus that you read about who were here.

"Because of all the things that happened on the island, it is an experience one never regrets, despite the losses – and make no mistake, you do lose time when you are in prison because prison is repetitive and it is a waste of time.

"What this conference is really about is to say that we are trying to transform an ugly experience into something positive. Through adversity we actually reach hope, through adversity we reach peace. We are trying to look for that jewel out of the ugliness of the situation.

"Even while we were here, the seed was being laid down for this positive side of things. Not all warders were bad. We discovered, and so did they, that they had a humanity, they discovered we had a humanity.

"Some people would say that in trying to change the image of Robben Island it should not be the victims who take the initiative. I agree with this, but with a big qualification: in the process of trying to heal and trying to reconcile, we also have to be gracious and trusting. We also have to deal with people – even those whom we believe were in the wrong – with a kind of decency." ■