

IZINGOMA ZOMZABALAZO: SONGS OF STRUGGLE ON ROBBEN ISLAND

A Living Archive of South Africa's Liberation through Song
by Prof Neo Lekgotla laga Ramoupi | Supported by the NIHSS



A song that refused silence

In the annals of South African history, Robben Island occupies a sacred and painful space. It is remembered as the prison fortress where the apartheid regime banished those who dared to imagine freedom. Yet within those stone walls, another history pulsed: one not only of resistance and incarceration, but of music. A living, breathing cultural memory. Professor Neo Lekgotla laga Ramoupi has given that memory its rightful place in history through his groundbreaking project *Izingoma Zomzabalazo Esiqithini* (Songs of Struggle on Robben Island), proudly supported by the NIHSS.

Driven by a deep sense of responsibility formed during his tenure as a researcher and oral historian at the Robben Island Museum (2000–2003), Professor Ramoupi embarked on this book project as both a scholarly mission and an act of intellectual activism. His work not only documents the role of song as a form of cultural resistance but also fills critical gaps in South Africa's liberation historiography, particularly the erasure of Pan-Africanist and Black Consciousness contributions.

The Genesis of a Scholarly Duty

Professor Ramoupi's three years at the Robben Island Museum left an indelible mark. Tasked with documenting oral histories of former political prisoners, he encountered a profound truth: their stories were not merely accounts of suffering, but reservoirs of intellectual and emotional resistance. That experience, coupled with a Ford Foundation International Fellowship, ignited his scholarly mission: to transform remembrance into activism. 'To witness such sacrifice and not amplify it,' he reflects, 'felt like betrayal. That guilt became my compass.'



Professor Neville Alexander in his office at UCT with the author 25 August 2011.



Blue Stone Quarry Span Reference Group at the Stone Quarry.



Mr. Clarence M. Makwetu, former President of the Pan African Congress (PAC), interviewed by RIM Interviewing Team at the Lime Quarry. B-Section Reference Group, 2002.

Five Pillars of Resistance Through Song

At its core, Izingoma Zomzabalazo rests on five scholarly objectives:

- **Reclaiming Oral Traditions:** The book positions African oral traditions, particularly song, as central to understanding the emotional, spiritual, and political resistance of prisoners.
- **Culture as Sanctuary and Weapon:** Prof Ramoupi emphasises that while apartheid sought to destroy African culture, prisoners used it, especially song as a realm of autonomy and healing.
- **Giving Voice to the Forgotten:** Beyond Mandela and Sobukwe, the prison was filled with hundreds of lesser-known activists whose emotions, ideologies, and daily resistance found voice in music. This book amplifies their narratives.
- **Pan-African and Diasporic Influences:** Drawing connections to the African diaspora and global black movements, the book reflects how Robben Island was not isolated from the wider freedom struggles of Ghana, Mozambique, the US Civil Rights Movement, and Caribbean Rastafari resistance.
- **Archiving to Counter Forgetfulness:** At a time when post-apartheid South Africa risks cultural amnesia, this work insists on remembering and preserving the songs that held prisoners' souls together.

Rastafari, Reggae, and Robben Island

Among the most defiant acts of cultural resistance on Robben Island was James Mange's unyielding spirit, a political prisoner who turned reggae into revolution.

Refusing to cut his dreadlocks (a direct violation of prison codes) and founding the band Whiplashes, Mange weaponised music as both solace and subversion. For him, Rastafari was not just faith; it was a political language, his locks and lyrics threading defiance into every note. Through songs like Bob Marley's 'Redemption Song,' taught covertly to fellow prisoners, Mange transformed the Island's silence into a chorus of resistance.

Professor Ramoupi underscores this legacy: *'Mange didn't just bring reggae to Robben Island, he redefined survival. His dreadlocks were a manifesto, his band, a classroom. Before him, the prison suppressed Black cultural identity. After him, it had to reckon with its unstoppable echo.'*

Mange's story epitomises the project's core revelation: **song was never mere sound. It was strategy, memory, and, ultimately, liberation written in melody.**



Blue Stone Quarry Reference Group of Ex-Political Prisoners with front row of Robben Island Museum Heritage & Resources Department

Voices Long Silenced, Now Amplified

The book deliberately illuminates the often-overlooked political philosophies of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), traditions systematically marginalised in mainstream narratives of liberation.

Professor Ramoupi issues a crucial corrective: while figures like Robert Sobukwe and Steve Biko shaped the intellectual backbone of the struggle, their contributions have been historically relegated to the footnotes of South Africa's freedom story. Through meticulous archival work and oral testimony, the project recentres these radical traditions, revealing how PAC's militant Pan-Africanism and BCM's psychological emancipation strategies created distinct - yet equally vital - pathways to liberation.

As Prof Ramoupi argues, 'To understand the full spectrum of resistance, we must move beyond the ANC's dominant narrative and grapple with these competing visions of freedom that challenged both apartheid and mainstream resistance orthodoxy.' This scholarly intervention does more than fill historical gaps - it fundamentally questions how we remember, and who gets to write that memory.

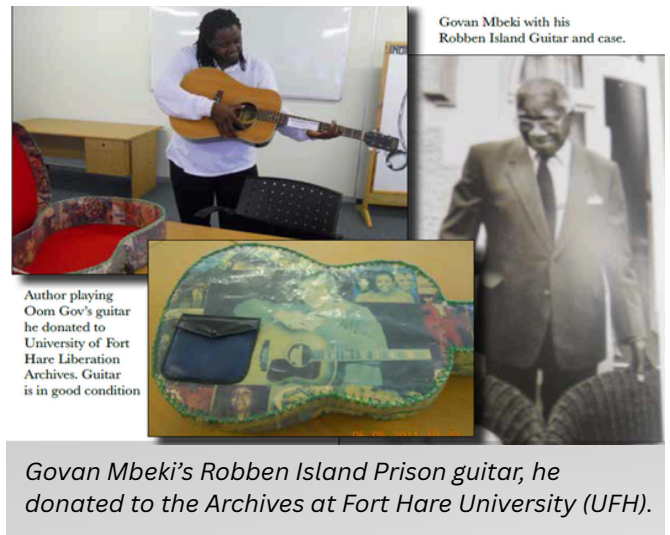
Sound as Archive: Methodology of Memory

Professor Ramoupi makes a radical intervention: songs are not mere metaphors or cultural footnotes; they are primary texts of liberation history. Building on the foundations laid by *Amiri Baraka's* assertion that 'the music was explaining the history as the history was explaining the music,' and *Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's* decolonial epistemology, Prof Ramoupi's work treats music as both living archive and narrative authority.

This approach does more than document, it disrupts. By centering song as historical text, the project:

- Challenges Eurocentric historiography that privileges written documents over oral/aural traditions
- Validates African-centered methodologies where rhythm, melody, and collective memory are recognised as legitimate knowledge systems
- Exposes the full emotional spectrum of resistance, from the coded politics of work songs to the aching 'love songs and longing melodies' that preserved dignity in isolation

As Prof Ramoupi demonstrates, these were not just sounds of survival, they were acts of scholarly rebellion. Each lyric, each hummed refrain, carried the weight of history, refusing the prison's silence and the archive's omissions



Towards a Future of Decolonised Education

Beyond its historical insights, *Izingoma Zomzabalazo* charts a radical path forward. Professor Ramoupi is advocating for the book to be translated into all official South African languages and integrate it into school curricula, a deliberate act of epistemic justice. 'This isn't just about teaching history,' he insists. 'It's about restoring oral culture as the bedrock of education, where a child in Qonce learns resistance songs in isiXhosa with the same reverence as Shakespearean sonnets.'

His vision is rooted in what he calls 'decolonial praxis', a term he defines with twin urgency:

1. **Linguistic Reclamation:** Following *Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's* mandate to 'decolonise the mind,' Ramoupi demands African languages be treated as vessels of critical thought, not folklore.
2. **Philosophical Disobedience:** Echoing Justice Mosenke's foreword, he frames cultural resistance as 'the ultimate act of indigenous intellectual sovereignty', one that rejects Eurocentric canons and centres African ways of knowing.

For Prof Ramoupi, the book is a blueprint: '*When a Grade 10 pupil analyses a Robben Island song alongside Marx's Capital, that's the future. When universities cite oral archives as rigorously as written ones, that's freedom.*'



IZINGOMA ZOMZABALAZO: ECHOES OF FREEDOM FROM ROBBEN ISLAND



Vinyl Records/LPs from Robben Island Prison with track of song assumed to be political or communist in content, scratched out by the censors in the Censorship Office of the Prison.



Vusi Nkumane with his 'Nkumanephone' —made on Robben Island Prison.



Left to right: Nelson Mandela, Toivo ja Toivo (SWAPO leader), visiting the International Red Cross who visited Robben Island with journalists to see how political prisoners were treated by the apartheid government.



*B-Section Reference Group, Robben Island
Left to Right: Toivo Ja Toivo (SWAPO, Namibia), fourth Michael Dingake (Botswana), Wilton Mkwaiyi, (green sweater) Lionel Davies (Mayor of Robben Island Museum Community), Eddy Daniels, Clarens M. Makwetu and Sonny Venkatrathnam.*

A Personal and Political Conclusion

In a profound dialogue between memory and modernity, Izingoma Zomzabalazo closes with the voices of those who shaped Robben Island's resistance, now entrusted to shape its legacy. Justice Dikgang Moseneke's foreword and James Mange's afterword bookend the volume, binding rigorous scholarship to living testimony. Here, the personal is not just political; it is historical, national, and urgently present.

As South Africa navigates the unfinished project of liberation, where decolonisation demands more than symbolism, this work is a rallying cry. It declares:

- **Memory is not a relic, but a compass.**
- **Songs are not artifacts, but lifelines stretching across generations.**
- **Resistance never silences; it only changes its key.**

Professor Ramoupi's magnum opus does not merely document the past. It sounds an alarm: To forget these voices is to surrender the future.

The NIHSS is proud to support this work as part of our mission: ensuring the humanities don't just study history, but activate it.

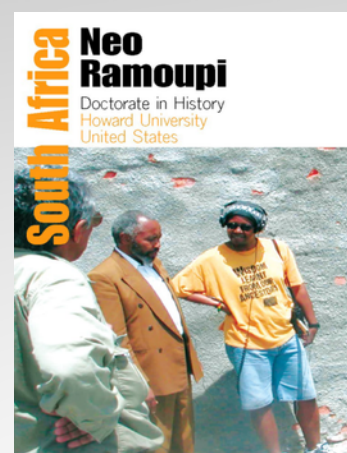
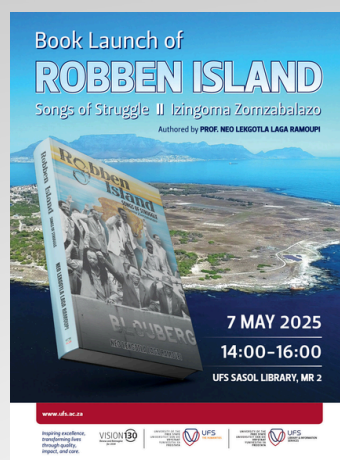


Figure: Author with the Team-NIHSS that funded the publication of my book moved me by traveling from Johannesburg to attend my book launch in Bloemfontein at the University of the Free State (UFS) on the 7th of May 2025.

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