

At home the old people would come. We wouldn't know from whence they came – only the old mother would know. An old man would return home and spend the night and then be gone in the morning. Sometimes they would come on horseback, sometimes on foot. They would not stay. They would come and we would see them and then they would be gone again.

Whatever his future, Phundulu articulates his struggle for justice, careful and strategic but nonetheless dogged and lively, to that time when he was a boy herding cattle in the hills around Lusikisiki, and men defied helicopters with sticks and spears, and then the survivors melted away to return with an indomitable obstinacy that continues to inspire his life work.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE MOVING BLACK FOREST OF AFRICA: THE MPONDO REBELLION, MIGRANCY AND BLACK WORKER CONSCIOUSNESS IN KWAZULU-NATAL

Ari Sitas

#### I

The Mpondoland Rebellion was a profound event that still resonates in South Africa's political and academic life. For political leaders in the liberation movement it marked a symbolic act of resistance against Bantu Authorities and by implication, resistance to the Apartheid State. Such a large-scale rural uprising would be seen as emblematic of a revolutionary or insurrectionary current in rural South Africa.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Although such an instance of open and violent resistance has often been filed as just another happening on the long march to freedom, Govan Mbeki's (1964) book has given the rebellion a serious and significant status in the liberation struggle. In his words, the revolutionary potential of the countryside, the militancy of migrant workers could not be doubted, what was in question was whether a guerilla strategy should prioritise the Bantustans or the city or, as strategy was still vague then, both. I have also been made aware of another two dynamics in Mpondoland: firstly, elders who had participated as rebels then are demanding from the current government the event's cultural and symbolic recognition (nationally and provincially). Groups in Bizana, Lusikisiki and Flagstaff, want respectively Ndlovu Hill, Ngquza Hill and Ngindilili Hill to be somehow valorized further. The installation of a commemorative plaque on the site of the first massacre seems not to be enough. Although Bizana networks seem more organized, such members of the Hill's activities now in their post-70s or 80s or participants as young shock troops of the insurrection, now in their 60s, seem to demand more monuments commemorative resources, a museum and development funds. A few are already in place including the memorial at Ngquza Hill – a lot of the plans/proposals are with the Tambo Metropolitan Council. The second has to do with the strengthening of the South African Communist Party in the area, especially in the greater Flagstaff and Lusikisiki areas where its support has been boosted by thousands of dismissed miners who have availed themselves for local political contestation. Discussions with them over the prospects of a Migrant Labour Museum highlighted the rebellion as a proto-communist phenomenon – it is remembered as for its insurrectionary power and for the brutality of its repression. Within this recent reconstruction effort though, other political organizations and formations – the PAC or the Non-European Unity-movement are beginning to be effaced from popular narratives. See also, Copelyn, John (1974).

For scholars the event has provided a rich trove of data to demonstrate a range of patterns that help theorize both identity and struggle. For a while, after William Beinart's and Colin Bundy's *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa*<sup>2</sup> the academic focus on rural struggles waned somewhat until Mahmood Mamdani's *Citizen and Subject*, where the political dimensions of customary and by implication, the 'rural' are re-emphasised. The event under discussion is seen by him (Mamdani 1996: 18ff) as a rural/peasant response to this indirect rule and a response to the tightening of customary authority in the 1950s.

Then a number of cultural readings tried to shift away from an over-politicised reading of it: Sean Redding (Redding 1996: 556) emphasized some of its more 'enchanted' aspects and how African acquiescence was nurtured and how witchcraft beliefs may have informed covert unrest or even open rebellion in the 1950s and 1960s. Clifford Crais (Crais 2002) adds a new dimension in his portrayal of the event as an instance of a subaltern nationalism 'from below' – a nationalism that was imbued with robust indigenous and messianic moral codes.

For historians and sociologists involved in labour studies, such an event marked the devastating consequences of an already declining 'reserve' economy and had serious winners and losers. For the already 'disadvantaged' in terms of land holdings and cattle, the immediate aftermath spelled hunger and rapid proletarianisation. My concern here is with such 'losers' and how the rebellion and its (re)construction over the years has endured within the imagination of the men and women who fanned out looking for jobs to rebuild their homesteads after the 1960–63 repression.

What was important was that for the first time in the twentieth century a movement of such migrants to manufacturing proper found them at work beyond the sugar plantations that used to be their mainstay. Furthermore, it found them residing in hostels and shack-settlements on the outskirts of Durban, as the enormous expansion of Natal's industrialization in the 1960s coincided with the large-scale absorption of amaMpondo workers who had moved en masse after the rebellion.

The first phase, the phase of the subjects of this investigation was one of 'rooting' as shall be seen below, as their presence in Natal was not

<sup>2</sup> See Beinart, William and Bundy, Colin (1987).

uncomplicated – it was followed by an even larger influx in the late 1970s, the majority of whom could only find such a 'rooting' in the peri-urban areas of Durban. Lawrence Sclemmer and Valerie Moller (Sclemmer and Moller 1981)<sup>3</sup> calculated that of the 676,000 formal black (African) workers in Durban by the end of the 1970s, no less than 242,000 were from the Transkei, of whom the majority recruits were from Mpondoland. Managements welcomed the influx – even up to the late 1980s managers still believed that the amaPondo were 'decent and reliable' workers – 'the Pondos are conscious of ethnic groups and stick together. They do not want to be regarded as Zulus, as they are proud Pondos. Pondos are like Jews, proud of their background and very united' (Christensen 1988: 164).

Pondos  
Jews

Here these young men and migrants, the 'losers' of the rebellion and of the socio-economic upheavals of the early 1960s, who were on the wrong side of the Bantu Authorities system, helped the establishment of significant urban cultural formations in Durban's and KwaZulu's working-class.

## II

The concern here, therefore, is how the experience of the revolt has been transcribed and used in new ways in the interstices of industrial KwaZulu-Natal. My focus is on the reconstructions and fabrications that followed the event rather than the event itself.

Most of my understanding of the rebellion arose out of the everyday conversations with shop stewards in Natal's labour movement – a disproportionate number of them being first or second-generation migrants and, within that category, there was a very solid showing of AmaMpondo workers. I could muster six in-depth interviews with black-worker leaders from Mpondoland and not surprisingly all on the receiving end of the rebellion's repression.<sup>4</sup> They had all migrated in the early 1960s.

What I will be adding to the understanding of the event depends on the narrations of Ezekiel, Phumzile, Langa, Simon, Lovemore and

<sup>3</sup> For a broader discussion of settlements, see Giliomee, H. and Sclemmer, L. (1985)

<sup>4</sup> These interviews are part of broader qualitative work – it was not about Pondo shop stewards or trade unionists but part of broader labour movement-linked work: see Sitas (2004).

Themba.<sup>5</sup> The first five are pseudonyms, the last cannot be hidden: Alfred Themba Qabula has written on the event itself in his autobiography and he was famous enough not to need 'protection'. He was to write a complete story of the rebellion after he had finished researching migrant workers on the East Rand and had permission to do so by all the Bhalasi-based surviving rebels. Unfortunately, a serious stroke put an end to his mobility. I was to meet such rebels during the contestations over his funeral in 2003.<sup>6</sup>

What I intend doing is firstly lay out the stories of their proletarianization and how they invoked the event in relation to their worker experiences in the Greater Durban area and Natal's South Coast. Thereafter I will attempt to draw out some analytical points about the role of the 'rural in the urban' and how the construction of an antinomic consciousness in the labour movement was helped by it.

Key to all accounts was the prowess of the Hill as a centralized organization in Bizana, which (despite the relative autonomy of the Lusikisiki and Flagstaff areas with their intricate structures) commanded up to 180,000 people over 4000 square kilometres.<sup>7</sup> This level of cohesion over such a large countryside of dispersed settlements and households was and remains remarkable.

### III

#### Ezekiel

Ezekiel was part of the battles of Lusikisiki – he was involved in raiding parties against the 'amajendevu' (the 'others', the 'collaborators') and he did get arrested twice and was released twice without many serious repercussions; his elder brother's hut was raised to the ground. He was not on the Hill when the bombing occurred though. He had to be on the run in the 'forests', as the 'system' led by local collaborators was searching for young men. He could not stand around to get arrested a third time.

He always accompanied his father (a healer) in the forests and learnt a lot about herbs but also learnt to distinguish what was edible from

what was not. It stood him well when they had to hide in the forests. 'There were forests still in the early 1960s,' he mused, bemoaning the fact that they had been depleted and cut down in the interim. He had never been a Christian, even though his wife and children were and are devout Zionists.

The early 1960s were years of 'starvation', as subsistence livelihoods were unsteady for lengthy periods of time. He managed to procure seasonal work on the sugar plantations near Port Edward and stayed for three years during the seasonal peak times in cane-cutting work and lived in the company compounds. He experienced first hand how many young Mpondos were crossing or trying to cross over to Lesotho.

He raised enough for bridewealth before another relative helped him get a job at Coronation Brick and Tile in Durban. He worked there for three years, living again in the company compound. He had left by the time of the Durban strikes in 1973, where the Coronation factory featured prominently. He was part of the working committee there which operated under the 'izinduna' – although respected for his herbal knowledge by them, he was found to be too disrespectful and troublesome with their authority. He did not respect 'corrupted' izinduna and amakhosi and spoke openly of his hostility that they accepted to be Apartheid's lackeys just because their salaries were doubled.

His next job was as a security worker for a plastics company close to 'Coronation'. By then he had negotiated a place to build a 'jondolo' near Bhambayi in the Inanda area. The local 'shacklord', a junior headman, was making good money from the outflow of people from KwaMashu given the housing shortages of the time. There were quite a few people from Mpondoland in the broader area (Bhambayi was to become the link with the Transkei/Mpondoland dagga trade in the years to come) and some of them had been freehold tenants in Inanda proper.

In the beginning he witnessed no difference between 'Zulus' or 'Mpondos' in the area – according to him, all this started with homeland consolidation later. And, when Inkatha was formed, as a member of the Residents Association, he joined it believing at that stage that he was joining the African National Congress. He was to join SAAWU (South African and Allied Workers' Union) later and he was to remain loyal to 'Mr Kikine's union' until his retirement.<sup>8</sup> When the conflicts

<sup>5</sup> Themba, Phumzile and Ezekiel have passed on in 2003, 07, 08, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> See Sitas, A. (2007). The current Mayoress of the Tambo Metro Council and the Deputy Minister of Agriculture in the Eastern Cape were also present, also involved in the rebellion and Umkhonto we Sizwe officers.

<sup>7</sup> See Copelyn (1974).

<sup>8</sup> Sam Kikine, the leader of SAAWU in Durban. He refused to bring SAAWU Natal into COSATU because it would be a conformist, counter-revolutionary move. Kikine is of Sotho-descent but has been one of the most powerful orators in labour gatherings in isiZulu.

prowess of  
the Hill

erupted in the early 1980s between Zulu traditionalists and democrats, he joined the UDF (United Democratic Front) but kept the Inkatha card 'just in case'. It is then that 'the Zulu-Pondo stuff' started because the Inkatha warlords, led by Thomas Tshabalala from Lindelani, accused the UDF and later COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions) as a 'Xhosa plot' to divide the Zulus. As the conflict increased Inkatha supporters were not as he insisted Zulus; they were Apartheid's 'Amagundhane' and 'Theleweni'.

For him, the Mpondoland rebellion was a point of no return. Ezekiel was a 'traditionalist', a 'red' in the Eastern Cape parlance, and a 'traditional healer', terms I never use without discomfort. I would rather describe him as a healer or a herbalist who values the integrity of pre-colonial traditions which he considers as African rather than peculiar markers of the Mpondo polity. For him, too, the core problem was not the Bantu Authorities system as such but the issue of rehabilitation, Betterment and land. It was not about 'rehabilitation' of existing (already unequal, reserve/bantustan) land holdings 'but... about more land'. For him taxation was indeed evil and buttressed to serve the colonial structure. A quick conversation with him brought out the exact amounts in shilling and pound that doubled over the period between 1955-9: hut tax, general homeland levy, stock rates (per head of cattle), ploughing, dipping and grazing fees, voluntary and compulsory 'tribal' levies.<sup>9</sup> It is in this sense of outrage that one would find why he opposed the increased power of (government-paid) chiefs and headmen, and why he joined the Hill.

What occurred during the Mpondoland rebellion was the destruction of the 'homestead's pillars', 'Umkhumulansika' – a term used later by Beauty Mahlaba to describe what was going on in the 'Natal Violence' of the 1980s (Mahlaba et al. 1992). Chiefs were violators of deep culture; 'the whites were too clever: they seduced the chiefs to do the dirty work for them'. But 'the wheel was to turn'. Africa would be returned 'Mayebuye Africa' was not enough; it would be actively returned (through their struggle). What was happening, through the years after the rebellion, the degradation of the defeat and the time of 'wandering in the Wilderness'. 'The Hill,' in his words, 'was being revived in the Movement.'

<sup>9</sup> For a lengthy discussion of these changes in taxation see Copelyn, J. (1974).

### *Themba Qabula*

'Run black boy run/ bullet's coming/ run to Edolobheni/ find the kitchens/ clean the pots/ clean the pans/ dance for the baas/ your kraal is ashes/ your goats are ashes/ the burning horseman from the hill has died'... (Qabula, 1992: 2)

As was to be expected, Alfred Themba Qabula (Qabula, 1986: 6) wrote and rewrote the experience of migrancy and came to define much of the popular aesthetic of the labour movement of the 1980s. The technique was obvious: taking a particular experience and making a polysemic, yet general/universal expression of it. To an audience unaware of his involvement in the Mpondoland rebellion the verse is universal: it is about black working life and repression in South Africa. The last line of the 'burning horseman' would be an ambiguous but powerful image about its violence. His most famous, 'The Migrant's Lament', could be read as totally unrelated to specifics as well: 'If I have wronged you Lord forgive me/ all my cattle were dead/ my goats and sheep were dead/ Oh my creator forgive me if I had done wrong to you/... I went to WENELA/ to get recruited for the mines/ I went to SILO/ to work at sugarcane...' <sup>10</sup> The difference, though, was that his and 'their' cattle, sheep and goats were really dead, and that there was nothing metaphoric about the content to start with.

Qabula, unlike Ezekiel, had been recruited to be part of the ANC Youth League in 1959, when still 17 years old and still at school in Flagstaff. Most of the people in the 'forest' hiding from the authorities were also members; half of his cohort followed the one road that led via the sugar plantations of Southern Natal, through the Natal Parks Board Drakensberg reserves and into Lesotho. This was facilitated by 'Ncaca's brother', a driver for a sugar estate. (Ironically, Ncaca was not a Congress man but part of the AAC and Unity movement networks). What Ezekiel described about young Mpondos crossing over, Qabula corroborates.

He did not cross the border, though; he rather followed the road to the mines – he worked at Carletonville as an apprentice plumber. There was also a third option: to Inanda on the outskirts of Durban. He joined relatives there after a decade on the mines. Ironically for such a hero of the trade union movement, he was a scab at Dunlop; he was

<sup>10</sup> Qabula, *ibid*, p. 9.

recruited in 1974 to replace troublesome and militant workers (Qabula 1989: 53).

He was to emerge as one of the key shop stewards at the Dunlop factory and a key participant in creative work in the trade unions. Much has been written on the Dunlop leadership, its trial of strength strikes and factory occupations, and how it formed an epicenter of leadership in COSATU (Baskin 1989:261ff). Qabula dedicated his life to the cultural movement, where he was one of its key public poets, reviving forms of oral poetry and performance. As one of the most anthologized of the poets of the 1980s, he had a major role to play in the self-understanding of the movement.

A key aspect of his writing and performance was that it occurred in isiZulu – there never was a separation between the various communities and for him, no matter what the language, his priority was *national*. He had no objection to his work's translation into English or Afrikaans; he only bemoaned the fact that he lacked the linguistic finesse to perform it himself. It is through isiZulu that events around the Mpondoland experience started becoming metaphors and symbolic figurations for new struggles.

The youth warriors were in perpetual hiding then: 'We left our homes and found new homes in the forests,' Qabula recalls; 'during the daytime we always stayed in the forest until dark. Then we divided ourselves into two groups to patrol around our homes and to check if everything was still in order. There were comrades in the police force who used to inform us when there was going to be an attack... two groups, one group to face the attackers and the other group to burn the attackers' houses...' (Qabula 1989: 10) For a while the balance started tipping towards the rebels until the state upped the repression, the violence and the mass arrests.

The forest experience grows in his work in the labour movement as his enticing Hlathi'limnyama and hlathi elihambayo: 'Escape into that forest/ the black forest that the employers saw/ and ran away from for safety/... deep into the forest they hid themselves and/ when they came out they were free from fear' (Qabula 1986: 14). This 'moving forest of Africa' – the Movement and this time in particular FOSATU is the forest of Mpondoland, of Africa, ('where I took shelter with all the wild beasts/ the mosquitos fed on me but did not harm me' – 'S'Thanda') – became through his work a defining metaphor of struggle. Oral poets of Zulu descent like Hlatshwayo and Ntanzu take on Qabula's lines about the forest to embellish it further, invoking the

necessity to follow through it and through the thickets the spoor of armed columns of men.<sup>11</sup>

The rebellion against Bantu Authorities was so deep in his bones that it affected everything, his politics and most importantly his craft: 'I reject the idea of praising the kings and rulers because in most instances in the past the kings and chiefs proved themselves most willing to be co-opted by the colonial rulers at the expense of their subjects...' (Qabula 1989: 5). In his Autobiography he concludes: 'I shall keep on praising my brothers and sisters in the factories and shops, mines and farms – and I shall praise no chiefs.'<sup>12</sup>

The sense of experience of the grand betrayal is everywhere in his poems: 'After we had appointed them, we placed them/ atop the mountain/ and they turned against us/ they brought impimpis in our midst to inflict sufferings upon us'...<sup>13</sup> The trauma of betrayal and the traumata of suffering are key to the understanding of his work.

Qabula was to be deeply disappointed by the post-Apartheid period; he felt deeply betrayed by his comrades and found himself jobless and abandoned, a hero one day, a marginal, the next. It did not help that he trumpeted his criticism of the movement in poems that started appearing in the press and in official publications. A poem like 'Where are you Now?' (Qabula 1992b: 2) castigated the ANC leadership and bade it farewell, marking a return to Flagstaff and to local struggles. Nevertheless, his disrespect for customary authorities and the upper classes continued to his deathbed. He was buried as a liberation hero in 2003.

### Phumzile

Phumzile found work in the sugar plantations as many women did in the 1960s. Later as the textile industry expanded rapidly she moved to 'Ijelimani' (New Germany). There she stayed in the hostels and worked as a spinner in a mill. Unlike Ezekiel and Qabula, she was an active participant during the Durban strikes. She recalled how, like many of the young women who were newly recruited for such work and who were 'stacked' into hostels, there were two routes: the sexual one or the

<sup>11</sup> The S'Thanda poem appeared in *Writers' Notebook*, vol. 1 no. 2, 1990; Mi Hlatshwayo's 'The Trail' appeared in *ibid.* vol. 1, no. 3, 1990. Madlizinyoka Ntanzu's version has not been published.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, p. 109

<sup>13</sup> Qabula, Interview in *Writers' Notebook*, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 3 op cit.

mountain

Christian one. The former would pair off such young girls with local men and lead to a vulnerable life outside the hostel. The latter would lead to women-centred activities around the church.

So she started being an active community woman in church-linked choirs; they were serious – rehearsals took place three times a week. As the union grew stronger in the Pinetown local, she shifted towards union-linked choir work. In fact for a while there was little separation between hostel, church and trade union-linked choir work – the personnel was more or less the same. But as she shifted from the hostel to a more permanent township life, she prioritized trade union-linked choir work.

Her account of the rebellion was about its extreme forms of suffering and brutality – it was in her mind an example of the lengths that whites would go to suppress blacks: 'to starve them, to destroy their life, their cattle and their livelihoods (my word)'. Her description of her migration is full of Biblical metaphors, of wandering in the wilderness, of the life of the Israelites; whilst back home near Lusikisiki, starvation increased. Her imagery is one of lost men and women, victims of the bottle and of dagga. But, 'usuku'; 'the' day was to come when the rebellion would resurface, a day of judgement. It is not surprising that by 1984 the two most popular worker plays were also filled with Biblical reference as they were titled 'Koze Kuphe Nini' and 'Why Lord?'<sup>14</sup>

Phumzile claims that she never sensed 'foreignness', not in the textile mills as a shop steward and not later as a gradual township resident, a student and a teacher. Her case was one of 'upward mobility'; even as a senior teacher she remained a trade union member and a very strong presence in SADTU. She did marry a 'Zulu man' from Claremont. The first talk of her Xhosa-ness was of the 1980s, when her children were seen to toyi-toyi with the 'Amaqabane', the comrades. The talk started from conservative in-laws who, although in agreement 'that wives move out of their clans and join the husband's lineage, started pointing fingers at obvious and stubborn Pondo genetic traits. Such sentiments were quickly stamped out in Claremont, as a strong amakholwa middle-class and a robust trade union leadership rolled back any forms of Zulu fundamentalism.

She slipped into UDF politics as if it was the most natural thing to do – her husband, also a church-going man was very fond of Archie

<sup>14</sup> For the plays see Astrid Von Kotze, (1987).

Gumede and he was very happy to see more and more women get into the movement – Phumzile became a member of the civic association and the Natal Organisation of Women (NOW). There was extreme tension in the township because of the Inkatha leader being a well-known Inyanga and because people around him were ready to kill. They did kill Mrs Tshabalala one of the most prominent business women in the township from a Congress-linked family.

The difference with all the other people in this narrative was that she was lost to the 'rural' forever after her parents passed on. She attended weddings and funerals of close kin but her homestead was urban; she had been a longstanding Claremont resident and later, when the white areas were opened up, a New Germany one.

### Langa

Langa started work for a hotel in Port Edward. He was a cleaner. He started moving northwards (Umzumbe, Hibberdene) until he reached a chemical plant in Umbogothwini by the mid-1970s. The industrial development to the south of Durban pushed hard against the customary areas of Ubumbulu and Malukazi. These areas, sites of faction-fighting in the past between the subjects of Chiefs Makhanya and Mkhize turned into attractive shack-settlements for people trying to work in Durban. Both Chiefs and their headmen made land available to such incumbents primarily from Mpondoland. Langa was part of a settlement of about 120 homesteads that paid rent to the amakhosi.<sup>15</sup>

The shop floor in the chemical plant was a mix of highly skilled and 'fetch and carry' unskilled workers. The skilled cohort would be composed of workers from the more 'settled' parts of Umlazi and Lamontville; the less skilled from the peri-urban areas south of Durban all the way down to Umkomaas. Most of the Mpondo migrants were of the latter variety, even if they had had solid education. Langa joined the FOSATU-linked chemical trade union and served as a shop steward. At first there was no 'division' between Zulu and Pondo workers. The main division on the shop floor was between the NACTU-linked chemical trade union and Langa's one: the division in other words was not ethnic at all.

<sup>15</sup> On this see Christensen, F., *op cit*.



The trouble started in earnest in the 1980s. Towards the end of 1985 (November, December and early January 1986) 'faction-fights' erupted in the South, in the areas around Amanzimtoti.

According to Chief Makhanya, 'Zulus decided there were too many Pondos in the area. Before the trouble, Zulus liked the Pondos as they brought in money in the form of rents. However, the Pondos became greedy and wanted to all come and live in the area... This was due to Mantanzima not having work for his people... The Zulus wanted first option on the jobs in the area, and on the water and land. The Zulus said that the Pondos were killing the Zulus, as the Pondos were stealing Zulus' jobs, and the Zulu people were getting thin and sick because they had no work and no money. Some of the Zulus called a meeting to see what could be done about the Pondos. It was decided at this meeting that the Pondos should be told to leave the area and move somewhere else, less crowded... The Pondos got very cross and said that they were not going... The Zulus decided that the Pondos must leave the area in two weeks. After two weeks... there were hundreds of Pondos still in the area... When these Pondos refused to leave, the Zulu people got cross and decided to show the Pondos how strong the Zulu people are'...<sup>16</sup>

Langa was caught in the midst of this violence and lost six weeks-worth of work through injuries he sustained in combat. But he did not lose his job, and here was the rub: all of a sudden the enemies on the shopfloor of the two competing unions ganged-up against the Zulu fundamentalists. At first, thanks to a chauvinist Human Resources (HR) practitioner, Mpondo workers were at risk of not only losing their homesteads in the periphery of the factory but also their jobs themselves. The fight-back was decisive and by the late 1980s he left the shopfloor to specialize as a heavy-duty driver in the firm that did most of the carting of 'stuff' from the factory. He therefore changed trade union affiliation to the Transport and General Workers' Union. Yet he knew that the shop floor he left was impervious to 'tribalism'. He subsequently, on the cusp of the transition, started a transport company with a few of his friends from Ubumbulu, '2 Zulus and a Pondo', and graduated towards a more middle-class existence where he did not have to drive at all.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid*, p. 131-2.

For Langa the defeat of the rebellion 'way back then' was a military setback, a painful and humiliating setback. Although people were quiet on the 'outside' and ready to make extreme 'compromises with the devil', it was not to be long before the struggle would restart. The countryside's politics – and a politics he did support fully in the newly independent Transkei – was one of avoidance: no participation in elections, no cooperation with officials and a stubborn refusal to honour imposed chiefs. The misery of the time was often retold to their children.

*Retold to children*

Langa was proud of their fight-back in Durban South, where they managed to resist the attempts to divide Mpondo and Zulu workers and to break the trade unions. He was proud of the fact that COSATU was launched in Durban and that the youth, the generation of his children, were regaining power at grassroots level through the civil war. The metaphors of the Hill, of the Forest, of the great suffering of the Israelites (like in Phumzile's account) and of the steeling of people's resolve against the Puppets like Matanzima and Gatscha and 'their Wizards' (those Abathakathi) have been and continue to be his everyday vocabulary.

#### *Lovemore*

Lovemore was also caught up in the violence of the rebellion. His father was accused of passing information to the Hill about who were supporters of the anti-rebellion headmen and the chief of his area. He gathered the family and moved to Mount Frere, finding shelter at his sister's place.

He intended to return and lead his cattle away from the area but all of their livestock were redistributed. The men who came looking for them rounded up whatever was on legs and burnt down whatever wasn't.

To get to Mount Frere, Lovemore and his elder brother rode the family horses over three days, whilst their father, mother and sisters took the bus there. Father had a bad leg from a mine accident so he could not ride a horse or walk the long distances necessary to keep in touch with the Hill. Once a week, Lovemore would ride out to Ndlovu Hill to collect information and news.

Gradually, like Langa above, Lovemore gravitated towards the Southern Industrial areas of Durban and lived on customary land in a settlement primarily made up of Mpondo migrants. He worked in the construction industry and was amazed how easily the chief there

(either inkosi Makhanya or Mkhize) gave land up for industrial development. Lovemore's company was involved with the building of factories, warehouses and silos. The land near the factories was still part of the 'tribal area' and that is where migrants were allowed to set up shacks and homes by the Amakhosi.

Lovemore remained a contractual migrant and a skilled bricklayer well into the 1980s. His trade union involvement started in the early 1980s when he was told he could not join MAWU (Metal and Allied Workers' Union) because he was not a metalworker. He could not understand that; a worker was a worker and that trade union was making 'great strides'. He knew amaMpondo from his settlement who were in Metal Box and at Slazinger (Dunlop Sport Equipment) and they were very happy there with the trade union. He grudgingly joined a construction union which was in its infancy and part of the black consciousness-linked (later NACTU) movement. He didn't like that.

His elder brother had already left the country – he was in Lusaka or thereabouts as an Umkhonto sergeant – so he could not stay with a trade union that was anti-ANC. So he joined the Workers' Project in Gale Street (a structure for unorganized workers in FOSATU) because he knew from other Mpondo workers that it was being run by 'Rev Magau's' niece.<sup>17</sup>

He was also caught in the 'faction fighting' of 1985/6 in Ubumbulu and Malukazi. His homestead was raised to the ground, his wife was injured and two of his friends died in the clashes. They temporarily moved to Inanda before returning to the Southern Basin after the troubles subsided. He was by then a member of the construction workers' union affiliated to COSATU and at work, after so many years of experience, he was made a foreman. He served on the executive of his trade union branch until his retirement.

He always spoke of the ancestors and the system, of a Nguni past made up of peaceful people but that the Amazulu forced them into militarism. They had to defend their kraals because Shaka and his friends were bothersome. 'They did not know how to come to us in peace'.

<sup>17</sup> Rev Magau was a General Workers' Union organizer from Cape Town who had spent years on Robben Island. He started organizing dockworkers and did so all the way to Durban. His niece referred to must be Nise Malange who ran that Project for FOSATU from Gale Street, a general structure for unorganized workers.

In his universe there was the socialism of the cattle economy, and wealth was measured in people, not goods. There was a time when chiefs were of the people. 'Zulus at first laughed at us for accepting Independence: they pointed to Durban and said, "ours". We will never let it go... We responded by saying we did not accept independence, and spoke about our tragedy. And it was a tragedy that would happen to them because they believed too much in chiefs. That is why Pondos are committed to the union. Kudala Sisebenzi Amaqhawe (he sings)... We were not born freedom-fighters we were forced to become by fire.'

The irony is that those who supported the system during the rebellion, save a select few, never benefited much from Homeland Independence. For him the entire area from Port Edward to Port St John and inland to the main highway is one big township for Durban and Johannesburg. People can never return to the world of his grandparents; they cannot become what is in their 'true humanity': 'people of the soil. 'The pride we have,' he insists 'is that we resisted their Trusts and their Bullshit... We rebelled against Sigcau, we rebelled against Mbeki- with bazookas in the forest (ehlathini)' (Quoting a verse from a freedom song an adaptation of the *Shonamalanga* song).<sup>18</sup>

NB  
Freedom Fighters

#### Simon

Simon was supposed to become a man of the cloth until his involvement in the violence and his growing aggression against locals who tried to 'sit on the fence' cast a bad light on him. He was sent to Durban to be with his uncle in Lamontville and complete his high school. As his father and his two brothers were miners, the pressure was not as immediate as in other households; money trickled in. His religious background helped, but he joined the Catholics because 'they were more socially engaged'.

As black working-class life was brutal and short, the uncle passed on from lung-related problems so Simon had to get out there and work. He found work in Mobeni at a non-ferrous basic metalwork where he worked as a messenger. There he sensed the first stirrings around the Durban strikes and, once that summer of discontent was over, the vicious struggle between trade unions and izinduna in the workplace.

<sup>18</sup> The song has a prior incarnation as 'Pinkie's song' sung about domestic workers days off. I only know the 1980s version which was also about forests and bazookas.



Being a messenger absolved him from the immediate shop-floor tensions; to survive, as he confessed, he joined groups that were very active in the Young Christian Workers' Movement of the Catholics. Although MAWU made great inroads in the foundry, he felt that he had little in common with the 'raw' heavy metal workers who were uneducated and rather unsubtle. But he knew he would have his bones broken if he did not, as a messenger, carry messages from the shop floor to Gale Street where the union was located. He also spent time translating the material developed by the Young Christian Workers into isiZulu and trying to explain it to his co-workers in the foundry.

He was fired for negligent driving and for the wrecking of the Company scooter, and spent two and a half years doing odd jobs as a gardener and as a caddy before he found a more permanent job in a medical supplies' packaging firm. There he met some elders who were reviving trade unionism and fighting for union recognition. One of them was heavily involved in trade unionism in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and was a 'Luthuli Volunteer'. He joined the trade union (FOSATU's Chemical and Industrial Workers' Union) and was elected as a shop steward. But there was no management recognition of their committee forthcoming for the next seven years.

Simon was proud of his contribution to the trade union movement and of the suffering it had involved to sustain it. He saw shop-steward structures and the democracy of mandates in the trade union movement as an extension of the Hill organization of the rebellion. As youths then, their voice was more limited than the elders they had entrusted with the fate of the movement. It was no different in the trade unions or the civic associations: 'the youth were and are the shock-troupes of the revolution'. He feels strongly that what the Mpondo people taught everyone was to be stubborn in their hope for freedom.

#### IV

What must be clear is that I am not claiming that all amaMpondo who were part of the hardships of the early 1960s were at the core of the construction of a radical cultural formation in KZN's industries. What I am claiming though is that those who did once join trade union and community organizations *did so*, and did so by using the rebellion and metaphors about it as key ingredients in the construction.

This they did in isiZulu and alongside Zulu people. Rather the presence of Mpondo migrants in the interstices of Durban's and Southern

Natal's industrial life constructed in *conjunction* with Zulu workers an understanding of the relationship between class and notions of nationalism, ethnicity and race that inflected the symbolism and understanding of workplace and urban struggles. The construction was of an antinomic consciousness: against 'bosses' and against the apartheid state, including black chiefs and leaders who buttressed it.<sup>19</sup>

I argue therefore that the event, and its recall and retelling as an overwhelmingly intense experience, provided an emotional grammar which combined three elements:

1. A justification for the continuance of struggles;
2. An injustice that violated the natural order of things and an organic community;
3. A shared trauma based on the brutality of the 'experience'.

All three have been woven together through the metonyms of the Hill, the Forest, the Suffering.

In this narrative, continuance is obvious; the descriptions provided by the six people here thread a story of total continuity, as if the Hill, the Movement, the Trade Union, the Urban Struggles are all one uninterrupted 'march to freedom'. The Forest is often a partial retreat but in its foliage people are healed to 'emerge free from fear'.

That such a violation of Africa, seen romantically as a natural balance between people and nature and people in nature, according to Qabula is a violation of nature itself: 'in your face now/ we see the railway tracks/ the highways, the buildings, and factories/ the structures/ they fought battles scrambling over you/...' and to the poet's despair: 'and they are making such a NOISE!' (Qabula 1986: 19). But more than this natural abomination is the violation against an organic community care, of a pre-capitalist Mpondo/Nguni socialism that Lovemore or mon constantly reconstruct and refer to.

So if we must understand a strong figuration 'from below' – a subaltern consciousness without the fashionable trends of the day that ignore organizational history and struggle – we need to explore carefully how black worker experience used the story of the Mpondoland rebellion creatively.

<sup>19</sup> For a more detailed account of the broader construction see Sitas 1998/9, republished in Robert Kriger and Abebe Zegeye (ed.) 2001.

Rural sociologists, too, have to depict how these new migrant constellations inflected the 'rural' struggles that were to follow. The continuum between the 1960s to the 1990s is obvious if we follow the permissible studies of trade union history and struggles; but the 1960s involved the unwritten history of yet another strand: the travels towards the sugar plantations. But there, through a secret system of trust and transportation a passage to the Drakenensberg and through there, to Lesotho, 'we were told that all the Youth League members were going to be trained to use guns inside the country, by the Russians. Then they told us that we had to leave the country for training. In our local not a single person was trained' (Qabula 1989: 11). These 'trails through the thicket', hiding the spoor of 'armed columns of men', get also reconfigured: by the 1990s, guns from the Transkei were moving to Port Shepstone and the hostels of Umlazi to counteract the counter-revolution.

Part of the attempt to smash the AmaPondo in 1995/6 in the Malukazi and Ubumbulu areas, in retrospect, reads like a last ditch effort to break an emerging cultural formation of alterity and resistance. It was led by the very same chiefs and headmen who had allowed the residential growth of Mpondo settlements to start with. The growth of trade unionism and the UDF, powered by people like Langa or Lovemore alongside other non-Pondo leaders, was decisive. They survived the 'faction fight'. They had managed to resist a powerful drive by Inkatha to forcibly recruit a mass-base to kill off the 'Amakomanisi' (Communists).

The defining story evoked by migrants from Mpondoland was that black people ('Bantu 'mnyama') in South Africa were condemned to share the same fate and were called on to resist Bantu Authorities by going into the 'forest', the only way to challenge corrupt chiefs, and wait for the messianic moment of the return. This is shared by all above: Ezekiel, Themba, Langa, Lovemore, Phumzile and Simon.

## V

So what does an account like this offer the broader scholarship of the 'rural' in South Africa?

Mahmood Mamdani (Mamdani 1996) insisted that scholars had to search for the rural in the urban and vice versa. Yet, his understanding of how Mpondo migrants might have shaped outcomes in proletarian Durban or how urban amaMpondo could have shaped aspects of

rurality is sadly lacking in his work; it is, rather, theoretically assumed. As for the purity of the 'rural' in Mpondoland, it is suspect and accounts get more complicated as the 'rural' had schools (Qabula), churches (Lovemore), bureaucrats (Langa), nurses, doctors, traders and artisans (all the interviewees state this), all of whom had some role to play in both the organization and the defeat of the resistance.<sup>20</sup>

But if Mamdani's work did not help the empirical contours of such work, at least it speaks of the necessary to and fro between the customary and the urban. Both rural struggles and labour struggles are unthinkable without each other.

Where the lives and stories of Ezekiel, Themba, Langa, Lovemore, Phumzile and Simon are unhelpful is in the fascinating work on magic, evil, 'the' messianic and what anthropologists and social historians return to, the Kongo/Congo/Khongo movement.

Unfortunately, despite my efforts I have found no oral evidence of the movement's existence. I even came to metaphoric blows with Alfred Qabula, who insisted that it was a white man's fabrication. That the first mention of it comes from a local white official in the 1940s – and later repeated by a white magistrate, who told communist lawyer Rowley Arenstein, who in turn informed white scholars, who in turn used this fact without much documentary or oral evidence – is worrying in its own right. We are speaking about the legacy of hundreds of thousands of people on evidence with very shaky foundations.

The stand-off continues: I am instinctively drawn to work 'from below', to qualitative accounts of how subaltern communities construct meaning and resistance, and therefore Clifford Crais's work has been very compelling. He starts the story from 1947, situating it within migrant workers' cultural formations and he states that, 'Congo groups represented one among a number of similar and overlapping associations that emerged in this period, typically formed by male migrants from local areas'... and 'who had become a powerful force in local political society'.<sup>21</sup> For Qabula, and for the other amaPondo rebels in this piece, this is as clear as day: Khongo as in 'ipi loKhongo?' or Kongolese or Khongolose or iCongoless are acoustic variations of Congress.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> See this discussed in detail in Sitas, Ari (2008).

<sup>21</sup> See Crais (2002).

<sup>22</sup> Qabula (1989). A recent theological study about the role of the church during the Pondoland rebellion sides with the Qabula version: Mxolisi Mnaba (2005: 15),

They might be wrong. What is not evident from the narratives above is how decisive it is in the years beyond the rebellion.

That there was Congress involvement, there is no doubt. Already in 1957 and again in 1959, the Hill leader Ganyile reported to the ANC at Lakhani Chambers in Durban about the unfolding resistance in Pondoland. Mpanza's oral testimony of his role as an Umkhonto we Sizwe cadre recollects how, in support of it, he and his cohorts started burning sugar plantations in Natal/KwaZulu and how Sisulu had to be sent from headquarters to stop such anarchic forms of resistance.

To quote verbatim from Mpanza's testimony: 'Around '55, '56 I heard lot of stories about action, people wanting action and all that. Hence, I think it was around 1957, when the revolt began in Mpondoland, eNgquza Hill, and I heard that Anderson Ganyile was at Lakhani Chambers. He told people about the events in Mpondoland. Hence I was also informed about the Mpondoland Revolt... I felt like going there to join the battle immediately. But others discouraged me and said that amaMpondo would not allow that to happen. Moreover, this was their battle. I replied and said, even though this was the case, we must also do something. We were tired of folding our arms... were tired of the ongoing shop-talk, listening to old men.'

According to Mpanza: 'It was suggested that we should adopt a position that would highlight our anger and simultaneously support the revolt in Pondoland. That is how we began our action by burning sugar cane. This was during 1957... *Hayi*, the concerted action to burn the sugar cane, proceeded relentlessly. I remember that others went to burn forests at kwaNgubomnyama at Harding. Others went to kwaNon-goma – cutting down the fence demarcating King Cyprian [Bhekuzulu]'s place... We burnt the sugar cane from 1957, 1958 until 1959 when Sisulu was brought down to stop the action in Natal.'<sup>23</sup>

*The Role of the Church towards the Pondo Revolt 1960–63*, Masters Thesis, Pretoria: University of South Africa, reasserts the Congress/Kongolose interpretation. The obvious and pragmatic narrative is that, whether in the 40s or the 50s, local migrants and rural people formed and structured their version of the 'Congress'. Unrelated as it was to the structure and function of the organization (and the Congress was a loose agglomeration of offices throughout the country, hardly the democratic centralism of later years), the local dynamics and priorities gave it a profound shape and direction.

<sup>23</sup> Justice Gizenga Mpanza's account is part of the oral testimonies for the SADET collection coordinated by Ben Magubane and Jabulani Sithole. It can be accessed online as 'Chapter 32', [www.sadet.co.za](http://www.sadet.co.za) - p.338 ff.

But if a discrete messianic movement might have been a productive fiction, what were not fictional were messianic beliefs, liminal rites, rituals and apocalyptic expectations (40);<sup>24</sup> some of their ferment is found in the way Phumzile, Langa, Qabula and even Ezekiel define their labour struggles. But, the imagery is also Biblical and Christian. Alongside these beliefs there were others too: that the Russians were not only "coming" but that they were spotted in submarines off Port Saint John's has echoes in the Eastern Cape since the Crimean War (Qabula 1989: 12). And so was the widespread belief that the chiefs used powerful muti that needed matching. But we must resist the temptation of tribal stereotypes and denying ordinary people the ability to distinguish between metonymy and metaphor, and the distinction when 'the' song is struck. 'Bulal' abathakathi' in trade union contexts, now as it did then, does not mean that the witches are to be killed (modern-day managers *are* witches) or that they will be killed at all, and Zulu Phungula was not Jesus Khristu, even though he is named as such in a praise poem, as much as Botha Sigcau was or was not uSatane.<sup>25</sup>

What I also want to resist is an anthropological essentialism: left to themselves, Africans were and are about a tribal consciousness. Any institution, political formation for rights, trade union and so on is an externally imposed 'violation'. This paternalistic and racist notion and construction has a long pedigree: it formed the ideational backdrop for the formation of Reserves and Bantustans in the first place. But although the language has been 'neatened' up, it has reappeared as a post-colonial preoccupation.

The migrant workers here were capable of other and complex 'thinkings' as well; they understood well that the denial of their right to be considered as 'employees' under the Industrial Conciliation Act and its Amendments had very little to do with tribe and custom, that the withdrawal of the franchise to select groups in the Western Cape was not an act of enlightenment, that the critique of the Bunga system in the Eastern Cape was not a betrayal of normative adaptations and so on. All such 'thinkings' were part and parcel of migrant and peasant

<sup>24</sup> Indeed very few poets get as 'messianic' as Qabula, or for that matter as 'traditional', invoking isangoma, imbibing love potions, quoting from the Bible and so on. There has not been a confrontation in the trade union movement without either prayer or muti, or the eternal love/hate four-way relationship between Marx, Gandhi, Shaka and War Medicines. In such discourses, Jesus makes important guest appearances too.

<sup>25</sup> See Hlatshwayo, Mi (1990).

consciousness as much as witchcraft and more complex indigenous knowledge systems. Finally, knowledges about white lives were not imbued with 'the magical'; they were also based in their minutest on intimate non-magical detail, a detail that was retold and redescribed ad infinitum by domestic workers.

The stories at my disposal were gathered at a time of a growing euphoria about the prospects of freedom and transformation. Their experiences of three decades of migrancy and proletarianization could not have been so 'unilinear'. They must have also involved lengthy periods of unheroic subservience and multiple re-editions of their past. Yet it did not stop them from separating between good and bad chiefs. Indeed, their relation to customary authorities was double-edged: acceptance of their authority allowed them access to land to the extent that some even joined the Inkatha movement. But they were also 'stubborn', 'insubordinate' and 'dangerous'; many of them were also attentive, good workers, management's 'good boys'. But they did make history and managed to nurture a 'post-tribal' consciousness with their compeers as Zulu, as Mpondo, and as Abasebenzi and as the Poores.

The last words are from Qabula and of his daily work at Dunlops: "There in my head: those forests!... They lingered in my memory... the source of refuge for the homeless and the frightened... the Mpondo resisters... a retreat from the wilderness of the world outside... the world of beatings and interrogations; the so-called normal word marked with murderous lists of names. And in my head those forests, those songs. And when the metalworkers union got entry at Dunlop I knew that the march through the forests had restarted" (Qabula 1989: 67).

Qabula, Phumzile and Ezekiel have passed on; their generation, of the youth cohorts of the insurrection is in their late 60s and early 70s. It is crucial that the oral history of the rebellion, of the subsequent move to the cities and back, of the everyday struggles and conflicts of such a vital part of the country, is undertaken before it is too late. All that was offered here is a minute part of the vital narrative. Fifty years on, the story resonates; how it does is the responsibility of the scholars of today.

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