



# Memorials and shifting meanings of rural revolts in South Africa: the Mpondo rural revolts and insurgent scholarship

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## ABSTRACT

This article uses the case of the commemoration of the Mpondo Revolts and the massacre by the state of defenceless villagers in Mpondoland in 1960 to argue that the political elite engage in distortions of history for political gain. The ruling party elite have over time omitted or added narratives about the revolts, thus gradually marginalising their significance. Part of the distortion of the history of the revolts is the gradual attempt to change the conversation during the annual commemoration event of the revolts and the Ngquza Hill massacre. While local people continue to be disenfranchised from their land, ironically now by the post-apartheid government, politicians at the memorial event focus not on the issues that were the causes of the revolts, especially the struggles around land, but on apparent local needs, such as electrification, access to clean water and bringing revenue to the villages through tourism. However, memorialisation of historical events is prone to these contested histories and narratives because of the political and financial support of the government in power, institutionalising both tangible and intangible aspects of the history that is being memorialised. It is only through defiant or insurgent scholarship that more accurate versions of the history of events such as the Mpondo Revolts can help to maintain their significance.

## KEYWORDS

Mpondoland; Mpondo Revolts; memorialisation; heritage sites; South Africa

## Introduction

Covering colonial and apartheid years in South Africa, acts of resistance, defiance, courage and sacrifice by black people in the face of racialised violence and subjugation at the hands of white people have been celebrated and memorialised to this day. In the three decades since the official end of apartheid, however, it has become clear that party politics strongly influence which, and how, histories of resistance against colonialism and

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apartheid are memorialised. In the age of concern about job security, and the need to get research funded and 'liked', it is easy for scholars to refrain from calling out those who twist history for political gain. Those scholars who turn a blind eye to deliberate distortions of history for political purposes risk less, while those who are vocal in respecting facts risk more and lose more. This essay is in honour of one of those scholars, who has risked and lost more, yet gained the unconditional respect of many of his academic peers in post-apartheid South Africa.

Lungisile Ntsebeza's work on rural resistance is legendary and has built on, as well as enhanced, the work of other South African scholars who did not mince words when sharing their scholarship findings, for example, the late Archie Mafeje. In a time spanning over 40 years, Ntsebeza has been a constant critical voice about how we should understand dynamics in South Africa's rural areas, particularly around land governance and democracy. In his fine-grained study (Ntsebeza 2006), he went against the common strategy of the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), endorsed by other academics, of appeasing chieftaincy structures by not calling out their undemocratic origins and practices. As a structure based on hereditary titles, Ntsebeza (2006) declared that chieftaincy is not consistent with the democratic principles that black South Africans claimed they desired. Citing as examples three pieces of legislation – the Traditional Leadership and Governance Framework Act of 2003, the Communal Land Rights Act of 2004 and the Traditional Courts Bill of 2008, later reintroduced in 2012 – Ntsebeza (2013, 74) argues that post-apartheid legislation affecting governance in rural areas has failed to emancipate residents of these areas from the yoke of apartheid: 'democracy for South African citizens residing in the rural areas of the former bantustans remains a pipe-dream, at least at the legislation level'. Again, using the example of the Mpondo Revolts, Ntsebeza (2012) rejected the common narrative that in South Africa rural struggles were extensions of, and influenced by, urban struggles. He also rejected the idea that these revolts were uncalculated and random actions, as some would have us believe. He argued that rural struggles that reached a peak around the early 1960s were authentically rural, in that they were led by ordinary people in those areas and dealt with the day-to-day issues that they experienced, even if those issues were similar to those affecting people in urban areas. In trying to understand Ntsebeza's forceful views about rural people's struggles against the hegemony of the state, one is forced to see him as an insurgent scholar or, as Daley and Murrey (2022) argue, somebody performing defiant scholarship. An insurgent scholar constantly confronts and challenges existing orders and power relations, even as they are aware of the risk to themselves (Kepe 2021). In embracing Ntsebeza's stance of engaging in scholarship that relies on available evidence in order to expose or challenge distortion of facts publicised by powerful actors, even in the face of attempts to silence and marginalise the scholar, this article presents a critical discussion on the dynamics of the different meanings of the Mpondo Revolts and the memorialisation of the massacre of villagers that occurred in Mpondoland in 1960.

The traumatic event that shook the Mpondo people and the rest of South Africa over 60 years ago remains a strong memory for the local people. On 6 June 1960 apartheid security forces massacred, injured and arrested scores of defenceless rural people who had gathered on Ngquza Hill for a meeting to discuss their grievances against the apartheid government. The massacre was a traumatic climax of the Mpondo Revolts that took place in Mpondoland between the late 1950s and the early 1960s. There has been rich coverage in

academic literature of different aspects of the Mpondo Revolts, including by Turok (1960), Kiley (1960), Copelyn (1974), Mbeki (1964), Wood (1993), Redding (2006), Pieterse (2007), Kepe and Ntsebeza (2012) and Bruchhausen (2017). From these writings and from local narratives based on field research in Mpondoland it is very clear that the Mpondo Revolts originated from and were carried out by local people, as well as being focused on local discontent about how apartheid affected their daily lives. It is also clear that the revolts had relevance and impact well beyond Mpondoland. The revolts and the massacre on Ngquza Hill in 1960 served as the rallying point for subsequent rural resistances against apartheid in South Africa (Kepe and Ntsebeza 2012). The national significance of the Mpondo Revolts is, in a small way, indicated by having the Ngquza massacre as one of several events that were memorialised by the post-apartheid government, through the creation of monuments and the reburial of local people who were killed by the apartheid regime.

A key observation during almost three decades since the official end of apartheid has been how the memory, meaning and significance of the Mpondo Revolts and the Ngquza massacre have been mutating, especially within the media and post-apartheid government's discourse. At the centre of this change are the inconsistencies in the narratives of the revolts and the massacre and their meanings, between local people and outsiders. Some issues are marginalised, while others are elevated and are at times completely reframed, irrespective of the proven facts. The Mpondo Revolts and the Ngquza massacre are, however, not unique in terms of having these contested histories and narratives. Scholarship on memory studies sheds light on why memorialisation of events and places is prone to controversies. As Marschall (2013) observes, memory studies have largely focused on memory relating to tangible sites that include monuments, museums and other buildings or objects. Marschall (2013) also notes that such tangible memorials often have the official, political and financial support of the government. However, there is a clearly a growing interest in intangible cultural heritage and identity aspects of memorialisation in terms of both research and projects being implemented. Scholars have increasingly focused on understanding the symbiotic relationship between tangible and intangible memorials (Müller 2008; Marschall 2013; Victor 2015). In South Africa, despite the rhetoric of promoting intangible memories of places and events, there is a tendency by the ANC government to institutionalise them, often leading to controlling them politically to serve the interests of those who hold political power at the time (Grundlingh 2011; Marschall 2013). In fact, Bakker and Müller (2010) argue that the South African government is reluctant to have close engagement with intangible aspects of memorials, and instead opts for simple symbols or markers that can easily be manipulated to serve political interests. Poor local support for certain memorialisation projects, including monuments and cultural identity heritage projects, is seen as resulting from local people's resistance to insufficient consultation with or inclusion of local voices during the conceptualisation and implementation stages (Marschall 2013). In the rush to memorialise historical events and important places, the South African government tends to ignore the role that memory and meaning of place have in conserving those places (Müller 2008). While it is not uncommon for local people in South Africa to have selective memory, and often to reimagine historical events and places, it is the hegemonic political elite, including the state, that succeeds in perpetuating the reimagined histories (Victor 2015). As this article argues, this has significant negative impacts on local people's goals, especially if those histories are tied to local resistance against hegemonic ideologies and practices, and struggles for emancipation.

While there has been some research on the mutation of memories around the Mpondo Revolts (see Kepe and Ntsebeza 2012), the yearly anniversaries of the massacre that take place at Ngquza, Mpondoland, provide rich material for analysis. This article explores how and why inconsistencies exist on the memory of the revolts and the Ngquza massacre, as well as how the political power of the state can influence changes in the contemporary memory of the revolts, their significance and their impact on local people's welfare. In particular, the article explores the significance of the different versions of these revolts and the massacre for current political discourses on rural areas, the role of traditional authorities and the current policies (e.g. land reform and rural governance) affecting rural people. Central to this article is the attempt to understand the reasons for, and 'acceptance' of, the mutating discourse of the Mpondo revolts by different stakeholders.

In unpacking the disjuncture between common local understandings of the revolts and the massacre, and the most popularised, yet shifting, narratives promoted by outsiders with political power, this article draws from several sources: first, a discursive analysis of the Ngquza massacre commemoration events on 6 June, between 2010 and 2019, including speeches by politicians, the memorabilia relating to the event, and subsequent media reports on the events of this day. The author has attended four of the events between 2010 and 2017, and when not in attendance, obtained speeches by politicians, as well as local informants who attended that particular year; second, the author's long-term field research in rural Mpondoland, mainly on local struggles around land rights, biodiversity conservation and livelihoods, from 1996 to the present; third, secondary material, including published research, opinion pieces and newspaper articles; fourth, semi-structured interviews with the local leaders, specifically about the Ngquza massacre commemoration, conducted between 2010 and 2020.

The next section presents a synopsis of the Mpondo Revolts, mainly focusing on the reasons for them, as well as written accounts and oral evidence, where consensus appears to exist, of related events, the Ngquza massacre, and subsequent clashes with the apartheid regime. This section is followed by an analysis of the yearly commemoration of the Ngquza massacre, with emphasis on its history, political speeches, the monuments and local people's involvement. The last section concludes.

## Some consensus on the causes and meanings of the Mpondo Revolts

The Mpondo Revolts have been extensively covered in both academic and popular literature for the last 60 years, albeit with different levels of focus in terms of depth. Arguably, the most detailed accounts about the revolts are by Copelyn (1974), Kepe and Ntsebeza (2012) and Bruchhausen (2017). Both local and international media covered the revolts extensively, especially after the massacre of the villagers in June 1960 (Pieterse 2012). These writings, along with Govan Mbeki's book *The Peasants' Revolt* (Mbeki 1964), which despite having only one chapter on the revolts remains a classic, dispel any notion that the Mpondo Revolts were obscure. Rather, the revolts formed part of the widespread discontent and resistance by rural people against apartheid around the same time, with violent unrest in Sekhukhune, Witzieshoek, Zeerust and Xhalanga (see, for example, Harsch 1986; Zondi 2004; Matoti and Ntsebeza 2004; Ntsebeza 2006). In other words,

there appears to be no controversy or debate about the significance of the Mpondo Revolts in the broader resistance against apartheid.

Another area of consensus in both writing and local interviews concerns the actual reasons for the revolts. This is an important issue in this article because, as shown later, the official memorialisation of the Mpondo Revolts and the Ngquza massacre does not appear to connect with what local people fought and died for. The most publicised reasons for the revolts were, first, the introduction of Bantu Authorities in rural areas during the mid 1950s in terms of the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 (Kepe and Ntsebeza 2012). In simple terms, Bantu Authorities were meant to be structures that would implement the apartheid agenda in rural areas. Rural people in many parts of South Africa rejected the implementation of apartheid in their areas, particularly through unaccountable chiefs (Turok 1960; Copelyn 1974; Matoti and Ntsebeza 2004). In the case of Mpondoland, by 1957 villagers were openly challenging the authority of government-appointed chiefs, demanding that their grievances be directly referred to the government in Pretoria (Turok 1960). Second, the land rehabilitation schemes, otherwise commonly known as ‘Betterment Planning’, are the other reason Mpondo people rose up and revolted. Even though Betterment Planning was legislated in Proclamation 31 of 1939, it was intensely implemented during the 1950s and 1960s, and continued through to the 1980s (de Wet 1996; Ntsebeza 2012). It was a form of soil conservation and racist land and agrarian reform, in that it was meant to combat soil erosion and control livestock numbers, as well as form new villages that were easy for the state to manage (Ntsebeza 2012; Kepe 2012a; de Wet 1996). The most important aspect of Betterment Planning that was arguably despised by the Mpondo people and land rights activists was the loss of access to the large crop fields they previously had and the forced resettlement of villagers who ended up with smaller residential plots and gardens (de Wet 1996). Even though many villages in Eastern Mpondoland succumbed to losing land, resistance was fierce. The loss of land through Betterment Planning that triggered the Mpondo Revolts was a continuation of historical land disenfranchisement against black people in South Africa that began during the colonial period and continued till the abolition of apartheid in the early 1990s. The 1913 Natives Land Act had restricted black people to only 13% of the land, and this had a long-lasting impact of restricting or discouraging farming among them (Kepe and Ntsebeza 2012). Other apartheid policies worsened the plight of both rural and urban black people, a situation that post-apartheid South Africa’s land reform programme aimed to reverse but that it has been roundly criticised for failing to do (Ngcukaitobi 2021), as most of the productive agricultural land is still in the hands of white people, and in reality the government still takes a neoliberal approach that is supported by the West (Hall and Kepe 2017).

As Kiley (1960) shows, in addition to these two major causes of the revolts the villagers had other specific discontents. In the memorandum submitted to the Department of Bantu Administration by the Anti-Bantu Authorities Act Committee from Lusikisiki, there were calls to replace Chief Botha Sigcawu with his brother Nelson, who was seen as the rightful chief; unhappiness was expressed with the high taxes that villagers felt were simply taken to pay salaries of unwanted government-appointed chiefs; and there was opposition to Bantu Education, which they argued simply indoctrinated their children to be servants. To this day, all these reasons for the revolts are repeated by the now elderly people who were old enough to remember that time, as well as by younger people who learned about the revolts through oral history.

In almost all written and narrated accounts about the modus operandi of the Mpondo Revolts, there appears to be consensus on at least three issues. First, the revolts were influenced and led not by outside forces, but mainly by local people. Even though, as Beinart (2012) shows, some members of the local resistance had ties to political organisations, such as Anderson Ganyile and Leonard Mdingi, the ANC was not the driver of the Mpondo Revolts. Other accounts on leadership of the revolts agree with Beinart's account and emphasise the agency and leadership of local, ordinary people in directing the revolts, including making the sacrifices that are characteristic of such resistance (Turok 1960; Copelyn 1974; Matoti and Ntsebeza 2004; Bruchhausen 2017). This does not mean there were no conversations and collaboration with external political organisations because, as Beinart (2012) and Kayser and Adhikari (2004) show, there were limited, subversive discussions between the ANC and the All-African Convention (AAC) and some local leaders. Rather, as Drew (2012) argues in her analysis of Mbeki (1964), it was the Mpondo Revolts that helped to reshape political thinking about rural protests within the ANC's military wing, uMkhonto we Sizwe. Second, the revolts are commonly referred to as *iNtaba* (mountain or hill) for a good reason: because of apartheid restrictions, the rebels had to hold their meetings in nearby forests, where they would discuss their grievances and discuss strategies for their next moves (Turok 1960; Copelyn 1974; Kepe and Ntsebeza 2012; Bruchhausen 2017). Therefore, the revolt's modus operandi entailed these mountain discussions, as well as dealing – often violently – with dissenters, including local traditional authorities who continued to carry out apartheid instructions that were at odds with the demands of the resistance (Turok 1960; Kepe and Ntsebeza 2012). Third, while the most popularised accounts of the revolts frame a narrative of a male-dominated movement, local interviews and some detailed written accounts acknowledge and even elevate the role played by women during the revolts. Vangiwe Maqashalala, an 80-year-old resident of Ngquza village, vividly remembers how as a newly married teenager she and other women provided support to the rebels in ways that they could, such as bringing in supplies to the rebels in the forests, as well as choosing to be beaten up by security forces rather than reveal the location of their relatives participating in underground meetings in the forest. During an interview with the author in July 2020, Maqashalala vividly remembers the sacrifices women made, because her father and her husband were shot and then arrested during the Ngquza massacre on 6 June 1960 and only released in 1966. Bruchhausen (2017) similarly highlights the role that women played during the revolts, writing that 'not only did women sometimes organise themselves autonomously from men in public and militaristic forms during the revolts, but the mountain movement would never have been able to function without the political involvement of women' (Bruchhausen 2017, 131). She adds that a disruptive protest march that took place in Mbizana on 20 March 1960 had deep involvement by women, arguing that

A confidential telegram sent by the magistrate of Mbizana to Pretoria on 22nd March 1960 reveals that not only were women active members of the thousands of people who collectively protested against the tribal authorities in Isikelo during this period, but that upon investigation it was found that women were in fact the ones who had 'incited the men to take up arms'. (Bruchhausen 2017, 137)

Well known though rural people's resistance to apartheid is for the content of their grievances, including inequality, repression and land dispossession, much of what has become topical in political circles and media about the Mpondo Revolts is the Ngquza massacre



on 6 June 1960, where unarmed villagers in a peaceful meeting were shot dead or injured, while many were arrested or executed. However, as stated above, the very reason that the revolts were popularly known as *iNtaba* was because the nearby forests provided shelter and freedom for local people to meet far from the gazing eyes of apartheid security forces, as well as of traditional authorities who were largely collaborators of the state. Throughout the revolts during the late 1950s up to the time of the massacre in June 1960, local people in Eastern Mpondoland were not allowed to hold meetings of more than 10 people to discuss grievances unless they sought and obtained permission from the local Native Commissioner (Kiley 1960). In 1957, when villagers in Mbizana became hostile after receiving neither convincing arguments from chiefs about why their grievances were not sent to the government nor explanations from the chiefs themselves of what the benefits of tribal authorities were, they threatened violence and were arrested (Turok 1960). These arrests escalated tensions, leading to the burning of homes of known informers and traditional leaders, which led to more arrests (Kepe and Ntsebeza 2012). Local interviews reveal that there were widespread police raids in the villages, mainly targeting men who were seen by the state as agitators. Many of these raids led to the victimisation of women, who suffered beatings by the police as well as destruction of property, including food items, and in some cases what amounted to armed robbery, as the police took some items by force, including bead necklaces. The interviewees for this research saw both the arrests and the home raids as forms of repression against the revolts.

Local interviews, as well as many scholars (Kiley 1960; Turok 1960; Copelyn 1974; Kepe and Ntsebeza 2012), argue that by early 1960 it was clear that local discontent and unrest had intensified. These scholars, corroborated by local interviews, note that the fateful day of 6 June 1960 at Ngquza Hill near Holly Cross hospital was a peaceful gathering of hundreds of people (others put this number in the thousands). The organisers of the gathering had made a point of asking the attendees not to carry any weapons, as this could be used as an excuse by the security forces to attack them. By all accounts to which the author has had access, this call was heeded (Mbambo 2000; Müller 2012). Clearly aware of the planned meeting, the security forces, arriving by aircraft, vehicles and on foot, surprised the *iNtaba* members as they were still gathering on Ngquza Hill. Despite a member of *iNtaba* raising a white flag, signifying that the meeting was peaceful, security forces used tear gas and live ammunition against the people, killing 11 instantly and seriously injuring many others. There were also many people who were arrested on the day.

## Commemorating the Ngquza massacre of 1960 and contested meanings

The idea of commemorating the Ngquza Massacre has several origins, both local and external. As Ntsebeza et al. (2006) argue, the spirit of the Mpondo revolts and the repression by the state against local opponents of apartheid continued into the 1970s and 1980s, long after the massacre. It is therefore no surprise that, according to local interviews, around 1988 local political activists began talking about memorialising the Mpondo revolts and the Ngquza massacre. The interviewees admit, however, that they had no firm idea about what needed to be done, and by whom, because by the late 1980s both the opposition to apartheid and the violent repression by the apartheid state were intense. A

couple of years after these initial ideas about a memorial, in April 1990, the liberation fighter and apartheid resistance leader Chris Hani returned to South Africa from exile, on a provisional amnesty from F. W. de Klerk, state president at that time. Between 1990 and 1991 Hani spent time in the Transkei, also with the welcome and support of Bantu Holomisa, military ruler of the Transkei Bantustan ('homeland'). Among the areas that Hani travelled to while in Transkei were the Lusikisiki and Flagstaff areas, which, along with Mbizana, were the hotbeds of the Mpondo rebellion during the 1950s and 1960s. It is during this time in one of the meetings held at Holy Cross Hospital that local activists mentioned to him their idea of commemorating the Mpondo Revolts and Ngquza massacre. Hani is said to have promptly asked that he be taken to the site of the massacre, and they took him to the forested hill. This was in 1990. Hani argued that it was important always to remember those who died fighting for freedom. The earlier local people's idea about the memorial and Hani's encouragement led to the construction of a monument by the Ngquza Hill Commemoration Committee in 1998 (Müller 2012). The monument was built by local people and was located not where the massacre took place but on the level ground nearby, close to the main road. As a result of testimonies at South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, where the Ngquza massacre of 1960 was prominently discussed, the bodies of Mpondo Revolt's 23 heroes who were executed by the state in Pretoria in 1964 were exhumed and reburied at the chosen memorial site in Ngquza (Tunyiswa 2018). The government, through the National Heritage Council and in collaboration with the Eastern Cape's Department of Sport, Recreation, Arts and Culture, has constructed the Ingquza Hill Massacre Heritage Centre and also rebuilt the grave site. R15 million was invested by the Department of Arts and Culture to construct a museum on the site to commemorate the Mpondo Revolt and the Ngquza Hill massacre (National Heritage Council 2016). What needs to be asked is this: what does the yearly commemoration of the Mpondo Revolts and Ngquza massacre mean and how has it unfolded?

Interviews and direct observations by the author, as well secondary sources, such as brochures, have informed understandings of the dynamics of the commemoration of the Mpondo Revolts and the Ngquza massacre to this day. This section briefly discusses activities and writing that appear to misrepresent the history of the revolts, as well as the relegation or marginalisation of the of the local people's reasons for the revolt, and the papering over of their historical and current concerns through emphasis of the ANC's plans of action. The argument made in this article is that individuals within the ANC, from local representatives to the ANC and state president, have at one point or another participated in derailing the momentum of the legacy of the Mpondo Revolts by distorting aspects of it for gains other than for the achievement of what local people fought for during the revolts. In the villages and towns of Mpondoland ANC members in leadership positions participate in the distortion of the legacy of the Mpondo Revolts either by repeating the rhetoric of senior party leaders or by being silent when these distortions occur in their presence. The older regular residents of villages, who may or may not vote for the ANC at any one time, mostly remain free to vocally lament the marginalisation of the historical injustices that led to the Mpondo Revolts.

Following the 1990 meeting and tour of Ngquza with Chris Hani, local rural Mpondo activists, mostly ANC members in the villages around Flagstaff, began planning the commemoration at Ngquza Hill. By 1996 it was becoming clear that the lobbying for external support from the new post-apartheid government was building momentum. Several annual



but smaller gatherings later, the Eastern Cape provincial government funded a bigger commemoration in 2005. Since then, except for 2020 (where only about eight people attended the event, owing to the Covid-19 pandemic, confining their activities to sweeping around the grave sites and saying a prayer), the event has taken shape as a focal annual political activity and celebration. Villagers in Eastern Pondoland are bussed to the event on 6 June, but this is preceded by a prior day or two of other activities that include sporting events, a memorial lecture and other local school activities. The highlight of the commemoration is 6 June, when usually senior ANC politicians from the national, provincial and municipal levels of government attend and give speeches. There is always representation of the Eastern Mpondoland royal family, who have opportunistically used the commemoration to air a family feud over who is the legitimate king. It is important to highlight some examples emerging from the yearly event that show these distortions, the neglect of the significance of the Mpondo Revolts, and the political opportunism that surrounds the commemoration.

### **The ruling party's footprint**

As the ANC was, at the time of writing, the ruling party in South Africa and leads in the Eastern Cape province and OR Tambo district, where the Ngquza Hill Massacre took place in 1960, the prominent presence of the ANC at the event makes sense. However, as the author has directly observed over several years, the heavy presence of ANC leaders and the party's paraphernalia at the event, as well as the verbal claims of credit that the ANC led the revolts, is not consistent with their documented history. First, while there is acknowledgement from many sources that the revolts originated out of local grievances (Matoti and Ntsebeza 2004) and that therefore no single party should take credit, the organisers of the commemoration event have not made any known attempt to invite speakers from other political groups to make presentations. Other than the ANC, those consistently invited are religious leaders under the banner of the South African Council of Churches, which happens to have worked closely with the ANC during the struggle against apartheid. Second, for over a decade, the public gathering that takes place in the marquee, just before the leaders join the people, is always preceded by a 'briefing', which translates to a caucus between local ANC members and the high-profile ANC leaders, including the state president, provincial premier, cabinet ministers and mayors present at the event. Journalists and other people are not allowed to attend the briefing, yet the events of the day in the marquee cannot begin unless the briefing is completed. Third, in addition to struggle songs led by ANC dignitaries at the event, speaker after speaker reminds the people about how the ANC fought for their freedom and how they need to always support it.

Last, on the 50th anniversary of the Ngquza Massacre in 2010, an event that was attended by thousands of local people and the then President Jacob Zuma, along with the programme was a brochure with the title 'Remembering the brutal massacre of AmaMpondo 50 years ago'. This brochure contained a well-researched history of the revolts. But at the same time, it made a statement that is not accurate concerning the links between the Mpondo rebellion and the ANC. In particular, the brochure stated: 'While the resistance had its origins in local grievances, the movement quickly developed to embrace the national demands of the liberation movement. The mountain movement adopted the Freedom Charter, the programme of the ANC, as its own.' This is clearly a serious distortion of the facts. It is also clear that this passage is a reference to a statement made by Mbeki (1964, 129) when, while not claiming the ANC's involvement in the Mpondo Revolts (Beinart 2012),

he argued that the mountain movement, in addition to local grievances, also articulated the need for basic political freedoms that were identical to those advocated for by liberation movements, including the ANC. Mbeki (1964) argued that it was for that reason that the mountain movement adopted the full programme of the ANC that is embodied in the Freedom Charter. In other words, contrary to what is stated in the 2010 Ngquza massacre 50th anniversary brochure, there is absolutely no record of the Mpondo Revolts mountain movement having adopted the ANC's Freedom Charter. To his credit, Mbeki highlighted how the ANC learned from the Mpondo Revolts, particularly in forming its military wing, uMkhonto we Sizwe, in the early 1960s. But the distortion in the brochure has gone uncorrected, as the misrepresentation of Govan Mbeki, a high-ranking ANC member for most of his life, was not accidental.

### **Silence on progress made on the triggers of the revolts**

The commemoration event is at Ngquza and is mainly organised by the Eastern Cape Department of Sport, Recreation, Arts and Culture, the OR Tambo district municipality and Ngquza local municipality, all of which are under the control of the ANC. Based on the author's observation, the organisers curate the event so that the causes of the revolts that have remained remain unresolved during the post-apartheid era do not get mentioned. Among many legacies of colonialism and apartheid are the unresolved land issues in South Africa, with many writers arguing that the post-apartheid land reforms have failed to redress the imbalances of the past (Hall and Kepe 2017; Hendricks, Ntsebeza and Helliker 2013; Ngcukaitobi 2021). In Mpondoland, the rehabilitation schemes that were one of the key grievances that led to the Mpondo Revolts represented land injustice for which the people were prepared to lay down their lives (Kepe and Ntsebeza 2012). Since the Mpondo Revolts in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the people around Flagstaff, Lusikisiki and Mbizana, the hotbeds of the revolts, have experienced numerous major incidences or threats of land loss at the hands of the state. There are numerous high-profile examples of land loss in Eastern Mpondoland as a result of government initiatives during apartheid, and many of these remain sources of tension as they have not been resolved to the satisfaction of all the stakeholders involved. These include the loss of land in Lambasi and Lusikisiki area to establish Magwa Tea, now a failed parastatal, that was initiated by the Transkei Bantustan state in 1963 (Kepe 2012b); loss by the Khanyayo people during the 1970s in order to establish Mkhambathi Nature Reserve and Tracor Agricultural Project – also a parastatal run by the Transkei Bantustan government (Kepe 2012b); and loss by the uMgungundlovu community in Mzamba, near Mbizana, to establish the Wild Coast Sun beach resort in 1979 (Makhaye 2022). All of these are plagued by deep tensions even after the official resolution of the claims made by communities, and this has led to further court cases (*ibid.*). In addition to these, communities along the Wild Coast area, east of uMzimvubu River, are up in arms over imminent loss of land and livelihoods as a result of state-backed and approved development projects that include sand dune mining in the Mbizana area and a toll road that would link major cities such as Durban and East London along the coast, but which cuts across villages (Tessaro and Kepe 2014; Kepe 2014; Huizenga 2021). These threats to local people's land, in the name of development, are constant reminders of what led to the Mpondo Revolts (de Wet 2012; Mahlatsi 2018).

The author experienced at first hand local people's anxiety and anger because of what happened to their land before, during and after the Mpondo Revolts. Upon arriving and

seeking permission to conduct his doctoral research fieldwork on land issues in Khanyayo Village, the author went through hours of interrogation, with villagers indicating that they do not want people studying their land. They said that '*Asimfuni lombemi apha, kuba ukugqibela kwethu ukuyeka abantu bazokufunda ngomhlaba apha, kwenziwa ucando, salahl-ekelwa ngumhlaba wethu*' (We don't want this person here, because the last time we let people here to come and do studies on land, we ended up with 'Betterment Planning' and we lost our land). While the author was eventually allowed to conduct the doctoral fieldwork, it became clear that land was a sensitive topic and that outsiders are not fully trusted until their intentions are verified.

In short, despite there being numerous unresolved land tensions involving rural people's land in Mpondoland, the memorial is not used as an opportunity to reflect on the causes and historical legacy of the revolts. Rather, speaker after speaker praises the bravery and resolve of the Mpondo people during the revolts. The most prominent items in the programme involve a list of projects that the national, provincial and local government is planning or doing to mitigate poverty, bring jobs, attract tourists to the area, and so forth. Excerpts from President Zuma's speech at the event in 2010 reveal just how much the narrative has shifted, as he made the following points:

The 1960 revolt was not only against the oppressive laws and wanton resettlement; it was also about the crudest effects and manifestation of that marginalization, being poverty.

It has come to our realization there has been virtually no development in this area since that time. This event therefore highlights the plight of this area, as well as our commitment to improve the lives of the communities here.

While traditional leaders are prominent in the programme, by virtue of the annual presence of the Eastern Mpondoland royal family, the continuing dilemma over their role and powers within a democracy is not discussed or clarified. There is no attempt to gauge what Mpondo people say about traditional authorities during the post-apartheid era. Indeed, an interviewee from Khanyao village commented:

We do not understand why chieftaincy structures are now spoken of as heroes of the Mpondo Revolts during the Ngquza massacre event, and in other political gatherings in our villages, because these same chiefs helped the apartheid government in our oppression. Yes, many chiefs these days walk with the people and share the same struggles as us, but it is wrong for the politicians to change the story and say chiefs fought with us during revolts. We have not forgotten that chiefs at that time were *impimpis* (sell-outs). We rejected chiefs because they were paid salaries by the same government that killed our people before and after the revolts. It makes no sense.

It is the author's view that the ANC leaders who attend the Ngquza massacre commemoration are careful not to antagonise traditional leaders, who they believe they need for bringing in votes (Ainslie and Kepe 2016). Being silent on this issue also means that they do not risk antagonising the rural people affected, by saying something in support of traditional leaders.

### **Why do local people attend the Ngquza massacre commemoration?**

Since the commemoration of the revolts was first held, several thousand local people often attend. Random, opportunistic interviews with the attendees from the area reveal

varying but consistent reasons why. First, many, if not most, are aware that this is a commemoration of people who died fighting for Mpondo people's rights, so this is the main reason that both young and old give for attending. Second, another prominent reason given is having access to politicians. Local people argue that, as one woman put it, 'we never see or hear from these politicians. So, we see this as an opportunity to see them, hear what they have to say and even have conversation with some of them, if we get that chance.' Indeed, politicians ranging from local to provincial and national governments have a heavy presence at the event. While there are not many opportunities for the local people to have one-on-one meetings with the politicians, both sides appear to appreciate the interaction, however limited. The impromptu meetings often allow the local people to communicate their requests or questions. Third, the organisers of the event organise booths or mobile units that aim to meet people's needs on the spot. For example, there is a mobile clinic, registration services for receiving a government grant (such as old age, disability or child support). Local people who voice discontent at how the event has turned into a politicians' gathering with the captive audience of rural local people argue that they are willing to ignore that for the sake of having this yearly access to needed services, as they are not always able to go to town to access them. Fourth, young and old attendees argue that the artistic performances, which are mostly traditional dances, tend to occupy most of the programme beyond the numerous speeches by the politicians. Last, there is always a heavy presence of students from local primary and high schools. Many of these students, often wearing school uniforms, take notes on, and pictures of, the monument and other structures. Upon being asked, they often indicate that they were taught about the Mpondo Revolts and the massacre, and their teachers mandated that they attend. The sixth of June is de facto a public holiday for school students in Eastern Mpondoland, if it falls on a weekday, to allow as many of them as possible to attend.

Another group of people with opinions about the commemoration of the Mpondo revolts and massacre at Ngquza Hill has not been keen lately to attend. An 80-year-old woman with intimate knowledge of the Mpondo Revolts, and the pain that they caused, argued that contemporary politicians need to be listening to the locals about the pain they suffered during the revolts so that they can therefore honour the reasons why the local people and their families suffered. She told of herself and other women being violently kicked by white police officers who raided their homes, asking them to reveal the whereabouts of their husbands. She also told of the times they underwent danger by going to the forests as women, to bring food to the rebels there, knowing that they could be arrested or killed.

Another local ANC activist, who was born in 1960, when the revolts were intense, but who currently works his land in the villages, lamented how ANC politicians have distorted the reasons for the revolts. He argues that when they speak about the revolts, '*bayawangawangisa*' (they are waffling or rambling)', as there is never any substance relating to how their grievances of 60 years ago are being addressed. These two interviews come to a similar conclusion, about how the commemoration has somewhat lost the sombreness and the honour that the Mpondo people desired for those who sacrificed their lives through being killed on the day of the massacre or executed later.

Overall, the discussion in this section gives an overview of the commemoration of the Mpondo Revolts and the Ngquza massacre. It highlights some examples of the reasons why there is a general perception that the yearly event has contributed to the distortion of the history of the Mpondo Revolts, including its significance and legacy.

## Conclusion

This article uses the case of the commemoration of the Mpondo Revolts and the massacre by the state of defenceless people in Mpondoland in 1960, to write, alongside Lungisile Ntsebeza, a critique of the narrative of these events. It first acknowledges the difficulty that scholars experience when they challenge prevailing ideas of those in power, using Ntsebeza's example of defiant or insurgent scholarship in his critique of the ambiguity of the post-apartheid Constitution and government regarding the role of traditional authorities in governance. Ntsebeza has consistently and forcefully proposed that it is dishonest to argue that chiefs can work collaboratively alongside elected officials, as they are not democratically elected but gain their positions through inheritance. Ntsebeza, alongside several others (for example, Ainslie and Kepe 2016), is critical of the state's position of remaining ambiguous over the role of traditional authorities in rural governance, including in land administration. Rather than publicly acknowledging this ambiguity and clear attempt to appease traditional authorities for political purposes, the political elite tend to engage in distortion of history or marginalisation of dissenting voices when it suits the situation. This article argues that the distortion of history for political gain is rife in memorialisation projects such as that of the Mpondo Revolts.

Veiled and blatant as the attempts are at changing the narratives of significant events such as the Mpondo Revolts, it is the duty of scholars to do their best to keep documenting whatever truth they are able to gather about the issue. Memorialisation of historical events is prone to such contested histories and narratives. Marschall (2013) argues that memory studies have largely focused on memory relating to tangible sites that include monuments, museums and other objects, all of which often have the official, political and financial support of the government in power. However, even in cases where the focus of memorialisation is on intangible aspects, such as culture and identity, there is a tendency by governments in power, such as the ANC in South Africa, to institutionalise these, often leading to political control that serves the interests of those in power at the time (Grundlingh 2011; Marschall 2013). This appears to be the case with the Mpondo Revolts and the Ngquza massacre memorialisation.

This article has detailed how the ANC elite have over time distorted the history of the Mpondo Revolts, with the consequence of gradually marginalising their significance. Part of the distortion of the history of the revolts is the gradual attempt of those in power to change the conversation during the annual memorial in Ngquza. For example, while local people continue to be disenfranchised from their land, ironically now by the post-apartheid government, politicians at the event focus not on the issues that were the real causes of the revolts but on other apparent local needs, such as electrification, provision of water and bringing tourism to the villages. Land struggles, which were among the central grievances during the revolts, are not discussed as a priority at the memorial event. Without voices such as those of insurgent scholars such as Ntsebeza, important historical events such as the Mpondo Revolts are under threat of historical distortion. This is why insurgent scholarship is essential.

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