

Review

Thembela Kepe and Lungisile Ntsebeza (eds) (2012)
Rural Resistance in South Africa: the Mpondo revolts after fifty years. Cape Town: UCT Press

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South African history, Thembela Kepe and Lungisile Ntsebeza remark, has often prioritised the importance of township, trade union and organised nationalist protest (4). Nevertheless, the Mpondo Revolt has held a particular fascination. For one, as Ntsebeza notes, it was the largest of all the rural protests across South Africa that erupted in the middle decades of the twentieth century (2). Most immediately, this was the revolt of a rural society against the policies of the apartheid government – an imposition that William Beinart, elsewhere, has called the most forceful government intrusion into rural society since colonial conquest.¹ Moreover, the Mpondo revolt achieved almost instant recognition because of Govan Mbeki's famous book with a striking photograph of horseback insurgents on its cover. (Allison Drew provides a chapter on 'Govan Mbeki's *Peasants Revolt*' in the book under review.)

This edited collection of essays – as the title promises – underscores the importance of rural resistance as way of understanding the course of the revolt and its legacies. This is not a path-breaking argument, but there is clearly still much mileage in these ideas as a focus of research. Many chapters are rooted in detailed primary research that often brings new aspects of the revolt and its aftermath to light. Liana Muller reconstructs the events of the Ngquza Hill massacre – an iconic moment when a meeting of insurgents was ambushed by government troops – by interviewing survivors. Diana Wylie came across an in-patient register at Holy Cross hospital where a number of casualties were treated. Fred Hendricks and Jeff Peires compare the neighbouring districts of western Mpondoland, which did not experience

a revolt. They provide a fascinating account of how paramount chief Victor Poto managed to ‘maintain popular support and legitimacy’ whilst implementing the government’s betterment policies (126).

A number of contributions assess legacies of the revolt. Thembela Kepe makes a powerful case for foregrounding the continuing importance of themes of local politics, rural resources and resistance. For one, South Africa’s contested land claims processes keep these matters alive. Kepe recounts his experiences of doing fieldwork in Mpondoland in the mid-1990s when local residents, who clearly remembered the lessons of the 1960 revolt, initially accused him of being a government interloper. Secondly, much like the north coast of KwaZulu-Natal, Mpondoland faces a new type of intrusive economic development. Jacques P De Wet sees clear parallels between the rural betterment and current plans to strip-mine the mineral sands at Xolobeni. His contribution is emphatically titled: “‘We Don’t Want Your Development!’ Resistance to imposed development in North-Eastern Mpondoland’.

However, there is the difficult question of whether the concept of rural resistance can explain recent historical change. As Thembela Kepe himself notes, the political economy of rural South Africa has dramatically changed since 1960: local jobs, migrant remittances and increasingly pensions and government grants, not land and livestock, are the mainstays of household livelihoods. To their credit, both Kepe and Jacques P de Wet offer some discussions of the changing value of natural resources. A number of other chapters also offer intriguing insights. Jonny Steinberg writes about a rural trader who makes his profits from selling goods to his neighbours who live on government grants. Ari Sitas’ provides fascinating life histories of male and female migrants shuttling between Mpondoland and the townships and burgeoning shack settlements on the fringes of Durban, illicitly trading dagga and in search of factory work and casual jobs.

The other unresolved question is how this study of rural resistance fits with newer, more fashionable, post-modern historical themes. Jimmy Pieterse’s chapter provides a scrupulously neutral account of changing readings of the Mpondoland revolt – from the accounts that emphasised political-economy, to the interests of rural social historians, to post-modern readings of rural culture. William Beinart is equally diplomatic, but more direct. He notes that recent work by Clifton Crais and Sean Redding ‘has asserted the centrality of rural culture in analysing events such as the Mpondo revolt. They are also critical of earlier writing on rural resistance for

dwelling too much on the reactive and political elements on consciousness' (92).

One way of bringing together these diverse, seemingly disparate interpretations into a single synthesis is through detailed life history interviews with the leaders of the revolt. Beinart's chapter suggests how 'organic intellectuals' connected the more localised concerns of the revolt to broader processes of social and cultural change as well as wider political ideas and movements. But our knowledge of the political and personal trajectories of such local leaders depends on in-depth interviews, as only fragmentary details of their lives show up in the archives. Given that we are more than half a century away from the events of the Mpondo revolt and many participants are at least 70 years old, the opportunity to reconstruct such histories together with the revolt's local leaders is rapidly disappearing.

Note

1. William Beinart (1994) *Twentieth Century South Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p.130.