

SEBATAKGOMO AND THE ZOUTPANSBERG BALEMI ASSOCIATION: THE ANC, THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND RURAL ORGANIZATION, 1939–55

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THE existing scholarly literature on the African National Congress (ANC) and the Communist Party (CP) of South Africa in the 1940s and 1950s stresses the remoteness of these organizations from rural issues and rural constituencies. A good deal of support for this view has been found through an examination of the formal organizational reach, the programmes and the pronouncements of these parties. Bundy, with characteristic eloquence, has summed up the essential elements of this approach:

the national movements – physically located in urban centres, ideologically concerned either with the vanguard role of the proletariat or with wringing political concessions for modernizers – were structurally ill-equipped to respond to the inchoate and murmurous patterns of peasant resistance. They failed to lead – or to follow – them.¹

Yet those who have probed the politics of the rural Transvaal in these decades have found – sometimes to their considerable surprise – evidence of organization and action clearly linked to the ANC and CP. The role of Alpheus Maliba – a CP member – and the Zoutpansberg Balemi Association (ZBA) in the northern Transvaal in the 1940s has attracted some attention.² But the most fully described episode involved Sebatakomo, an ANC-linked organization founded in 1954, which played a pivotal part in a major episode of rural resistance in 1958 in the eastern Transvaal – the Sekhukhuneland Revolt. As I have shown previously, this movement was rooted in migrant worker networks, and its main strongholds were hostels on the Rand; but it

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¹ C. Bundy, 'Land and liberation: popular rural protest and the national liberation movements in South Africa, 1920–1960', in S. Marks and S. Trapido (eds.), *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa* (London, 1987), 281; see also, for example, T. Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1983), ch. 11.

² Baruch Hirson, in particular, has done valuable and pioneering work on the ZCA/ZBA. See B. Hirson, 'Rural revolt in South Africa; 1937–1951', in *The Societies of Southern Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Collected Seminar Papers No. 22, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London) (London, 1977), viii, 115–32; B. Hirson, *Yours for the Union: Class and Community Struggles in South Africa, 1930–1947* (Johannesburg, 1989), ch. 10; Interview by P. Delius, London, 14 June 1990.



Fig. 1. Transvaal.

also had a powerful influence in the villages from which the migrants came.³ The precise nature of the movement's relationship to the organizations which helped launch it, the ANC and the CP, and the extent to which it drew on a previous lineage and experience of rural mobilization through the Zoutpansberg Balemi Association have not been adequately described.

This article explores Sebatakomo's organizational genesis and qualifies the image of the remoteness of national movements from rural struggles. In the process the interaction of the ANC and the CP in the making of a mass-based movement in the late 1940s and the 1950s is thrown into sharp relief. The picture which emerges provides a critical perspective on accounts of transformation of the ANC which have downplayed the contribution of the CP and have placed a decisive emphasis on the role of the ANC Youth League.⁴

³ P. Delius, 'Sebatakomo: migrant organization, the ANC and the Sekhukhuneland Revolt', *J. Southern Afr. Studies*, xv (1989), 581-615.

⁴ See for example, T. Karis and G. Carter (eds.), *From Protest to Challenge* (4 vols.) (Stanford, 1973), ii, 98-120, and iii (Stanford, 1977), 4-5; D. Everatt, 'The politics of nonracialism: White opposition to apartheid, 1945-1960' (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford Uni-

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Sebatakgomo was formally launched from within the ANC when, in December of 1955, the National Executive Committee announced the formation of a new peasants' movement. The ANC was by then no stranger to Transvaal rural politics or to Sekhukhuneland, having a rich history of connection stretching back to the first decades of the century. Chiefs played a key role in the foundation and early years of the organization. Some of the most senior royals in the eastern Transvaal, such as Chief Sekhukhune II, Chief Tseke Masemola and Chief Sekwati Mampuru, maintained close connections and provided financial support, the latter two becoming members of the ANC House of Chiefs from the 1920s. The members of the educated elite who pioneered political organization often came from rural backgrounds, and some had strong connections to chiefly families. S. M. Makgatho, for example, who was prominent in Transvaal politics from the turn of the century and who became President of the ANC in 1917, was the son of a senior Sekhukhuneland chief, Mphahlele. And in this period rural issues, in particular the 1913 Natives Land Act, were of central concern to the ANC.⁵

Although most members of the ANC were drawn from this rather narrow educated and chiefly elite, Bonner has shown how in the period 1918-20 the leadership of the provincial level of the ANC, the Transvaal African Congress (TAC), was 'swept away by an immensely powerful upsurge of working class agitation, being radicalised and fragmented at the same time'.⁶ Elements of this process and effect were evident in relation to rural areas in the 1920s, but the limited rural activities of the TAC were dwarfed by the campaigns of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union later in the decade.⁷ Bonner also points out that the TAC de-radicalized as the 1920s wore on and that by the 1930s the relative pull of the countryside had diminished. The principal rural connections of the TAC remained the chiefs, but there was a significant decline in their role within the organization. Many were disillusioned by the failure of ANC campaigns round the land issue, and some questioned the purpose of their cash contributions. After the 1927 Native Administration Act, chiefs were also drawn into a tighter and alternative embrace by the Native Affairs Department (NAD), a trend little affected by the renewed attempts of the ANC during the presidency of Pixley ka Isaka Seme to woo royals. The focus of concern of the TAC leadership also became increasingly urban in these decades. This did not lead to a complete rupture, but there was only minimal organization in the countryside,

versity, 1990), 51; J. D. Omer Cooper, *History of Southern Africa* (London, 1987), 186, 205-7.

⁵ P. Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa* (London, 1970), 1-37, 142-3, 227-8; A. Odendaal, *Vukani Bantu! The Beginnings of Black Protest: Politics in South Africa to 1912* (Cape Town, 1984), 1-23, 40-54, 72, 117, 258-85; Karis and Carter (eds.), *From Protest to Challenge*, iv, 68-9.

⁶ P. Bonner, 'The Transvaal Native Congress, 1917-20: the radicalisation of the black petty bourgeoisie on the Rand', in S. Marks and R. Rathbone (eds.), *Industrialization and Social Change in South Africa* (London, 1982), 305.

⁷ Transvaal Archives (TA), NTS/7661/23/332; H. Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom: The ICU in Rural South Africa, 1924-1930* (Johannesburg, 1987), 148.

so that by the early 1930s in Sekhukhuneland (and elsewhere) there was little evidence of ANC activity beyond intermittent contacts with leading chiefs.⁸

In fact, as Walshe and others have shown, the fortunes of the ANC reached a more general nadir in the early 1930s. It was not until 1936, when the Rev. James Calata became Secretary-General and in the context of the threat to African land and political rights constituted by the Hertzog Bills, that a gradual recovery took place, the impetus of which quickened in the 1940s under the leadership of Dr Xuma. The broad outlines of this revival are well known but the extent to which Transvaal rural organization was reconstructed as part of this process has remained unclear.⁹

The rural context in these years was one of mounting turmoil as Africans reacted to intensifying state intervention in the countryside in the aftermath of the 1936 Native Trust and Land Act. The key elements of these struggles can be briefly sketched here. In the late 1930s and early 1940s 'Betterment' planning was enforced which imposed strict controls over communities – particularly those on land acquired by the South African Native Trust – and which led to the expansion of the powers of Native Commissioners and Agricultural Officers over daily rural life. 'Betterment' included (in varying degree) prohibitions on the cutting of trees, the culling of cattle and the demarcation and reduction of fields. These measures engendered intense opposition, especially in the extensive Trust lands of the Northern Transvaal. This ferment was not, however, restricted to Trust lands. In Lydenburg district for example, the proclamation in 1938 of Chapter IV of the 1936 Act, which set out to regulate and extend the labour obligations of labour tenants, met bitter resistance amongst African farm workers which ultimately forced a retreat by farmers and the state.¹⁰

Conflicts also simmered in the more highly capitalized farming areas and in 1947 the appalling conditions suffered by compounded workers in Bethal were exposed and tenants in the same district resisted mounting demands for labour. In the older reserve areas tensions were inflamed by the perennial irritants of taxation and cattle dipping. The effects of the Second World War added further dimensions. The northern and eastern Transvaal had been major zones of the recruitment of African servicemen and many of these men returned after 1945 convinced that they had been duped or coerced into service by chiefs and officials; they were further outraged by their meagre rewards on discharge. There were also some petty traders and primary school leavers in pursuit of economic and political elbow room who increasingly questioned the suffocating authority of chiefs and – especially – officials.¹¹ There was thus ample fuel for organizational growth.

⁸ Bonner, 'The Transvaal Native Congress', 305–6; Rev. E. Mothubatse, interviewed by P. Delius, M. Molepo and Jane Furse, 1983; L. Maredi, interviewed by P. Delius and I. Sekhukhune, Mohlaletse, 10 Aug. 1987; Walshe, *The Rise*, 210–13, 386.

⁹ Walshe, *The Rise*, 239–54.

¹⁰ Delius, 'Sebatakgomo', 603–5; Hirson, *Yours for the Union*, ch. 10; Lodge, *Black Politics*, ch. 11; J. Bekker, 'We will plough where we like: resistance to the application of Betterment Schemes in the Pietersburg area, 1937–1946' (B.A. Honours dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, 1989); S. Schirmer, 'Freedom in land and work: labour tenancy and the proclamation of Chapter Four in Lydenburg' (B.A. Honours dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, 1989).

¹¹ Delius, 'Sebatakgomo', 596–7; A. Maliba, *The Condition of the Venda People* (Johannesburg, 1939); *Inkululeko*, Dec. 1940–Jan. 1942; TA, NTS/1381/39/213 and NTS/7252/259/326.

The ANC engaged with these protests only to a limited extent. The beginnings of the revival of the ANC in the late 1930s brought yet another attempt to draw chiefs into Congress. But, with no more than a handful of active supporters amongst the chiefs, this was an unpromising tactic. While some chiefs showed a degree of renewed interest many were fearful of the consequences of intensifying rural struggles for their own positions and most were wary of alienating an increasingly assertive NAD. Open chiefly political and financial support for the ANC therefore remained the exception rather than the rule.¹²

The stress on the role of the chiefs in rural organization continued after Dr Xuma assumed the Presidency of the ANC, but underwent a shift in emphasis. Xuma saw the incorporation of chiefs not primarily as an end in itself, but rather emphasized their role in the wider drive to establish branches and to develop membership in rural areas, most especially in the reserves. There is indeed some evidence of organizational growth in the Transvaal countryside in the early 1940s. Walshe and Hirson note ANC connections amongst the Bakwena ba Mogopa, and there was an ANC presence in Rustenburg. In Pietersburg and in Duiwelskloof/Zoutpansberg in 1942 steps were undertaken to establish local organization. At Witbank a branch was established which made some attempt to penetrate the town's rural hinterland and made contacts both with Sekhukhuneland and with labour tenants in the Middleburg district.¹³

Probably the best known ANC branch with rural connections was established in Bethal location. The ANC made attempts to organize African agricultural workers and in 1947 helped to expose the grim conditions under which they lived and worked on the farms. A key figure in the branch was Gert Sibande. Born on a farm in the Ermelo district in 1901, Sibande started work for a white farmer at the age of eight and spent the next twenty years labouring on various farms in the eastern Transvaal. He never stayed on any one farm for long, apparently because of his propensity to challenge employers about labour conditions. In the 1930s he settled in Bethal location and started a Farm Workers' Association. In 1939 the members of the Association sent Sibande to Johannesburg to meet the ANC, and this encounter led to the formation of an ANC branch in Bethal. Later, in the 1950s Sibande rose to prominence within central ANC structures.¹⁴

In the latter half of the 1940s the ANC initiated recruitment drives in rural areas. A key figure in these campaigns was David Bopape, who was Transvaal Provincial Secretary from 1944 and who, though by then resident in Brakpan, had grown up in the northern Transvaal. During 1947, for example, Bopape made a trip to Sekhukhuneland and made contact with a

¹² Delius, 'Sebatakgomo', 599-601; Rev. Mothubatse, interview; Walshe, *The Rise*, 385-7.

¹³ *Ibid.*; Hirson, *Yours for the Union*, ch. 10; University of the Witwatersrand Library (UWL), Xuma Papers ABX430112, T. R. Masethe to Xuma, 12 Jan. 1943; ABX430219, T. R. Masethe to Xuma, 14 Feb. 1943; ABX430607c, T. R. Masethe to Xuma, 7 June 1943; AXB430823a, T. R. Masethe to Xuma, 23 Aug. 1943; AXB430907c, Xuma to J. M. Nkosi, 7 Sept. 1943; AXB430918a, J. M. Nkosi to Xuma, 18 Sept. 1943; ABX43101b, T. R. Masethe to Xuma, 16 Oct. 1943; AXB431021f, J. M. Nkosi to Xuma, 21 Oct. 1941; ABX431122c, T. R. Masethe to Xuma, 22 Nov. 1943; ABX40320a, J. M. Nkosi to Xuma, 20 Mar. 1944; ABX440203b, J. M. Nkosi to Xuma, 3 Feb. 1944.

¹⁴ UWL, ABX470819a, Secretary Bethal branch to Xuma, 19 Aug. 1947; *Learn and Teach*, II (1987), 19-21; Karis and Carter (eds.), *From Protest to Challenge*, iv, 140.

local voluntary organizer and a local network of members and chiefly sympathizers. After securing the permission of the Native Affairs Commissioner, he spent two weeks going from village to village holding meetings. Bopape recalls, perhaps with a degree of overstatement, that thousands of new members signed up as a result of his efforts. This was Bopape's only trip to Sekhukhuneland, but he travelled to the Zoutpansberg and to other parts of the rural Transvaal.¹⁵

Although relatively few (mainly Christian) migrant workers joined the ANC in the urban areas during the 1930s and 1940s, some migrants did play a part in helping to keep their home communities and chiefs informed of ANC activities and policies.¹⁶ And there were prominent ANC leaders on the Rand who both acted as a focus for a migrant constituency and who maintained strong rural connections. Probably the most important of these – certainly in relation to Sekhukhuneland – was Elias Moretsele. Moretsele was born into a chiefly lineage in Sekhukhuneland in 1897 and had joined the ANC in 1917. A stalwart of ANC campaigns in the 1920s and 1930s, he was appointed Provincial Treasurer in the early 1940s. He was steeped in the history of Pedi dispossession and resistance and, despite having long lived in town, maintained his links with the countryside.¹⁷ The cafe Moretsele ran at 41 Pritchard Street, in Johannesburg, constituted a crucial conduit between town and country. Basner described it as the 'centre of the radical element' in the 1940s, and David Bopape recalls that leading members of the ANC Youth League, 'Lembede, Mandela and Tambo, they would all take their lunch there'.¹⁸ But Pedi migrants, working in town and/or living in the Johannesburg hostels, would also eat there; as Bopape recalls, 'you see, you know the type of porridge that people eat, mostly from Sekhukhuneland, Moretsele had that type of porridge, it was very good for the people'.¹⁹ Moretsele, the 'old Man', became something of a father figure for men from Sekhukhuneland. As the obituary in *New Age* commented; 'he was a centre of the Bapedi people of the towns. To him they came for advice on matters big and small'.²⁰

There is thus evidence of some organizational growth in the 1940s and of the existence of networks linking urban and rural areas. One must, however, be careful not to exaggerate the extent, effectiveness or durability of these developments, for by the end of the decade there was little to show in terms of entrenched rural organization. Many of the rural branches appear to have rested heavily on the initiatives and interests of individual founding members. They failed to gain momentum and collapsed within a couple of years often amidst acrimonious disputes about the failure of central organization to provide either financial or physical support and counter accusations of the

¹⁵ D. W. Bopape, interviewed by P. Delius, Johannesburg, 28 Oct. 1987. Bopape was also a leading figure in the Communist Party of South Africa, and it appears that some of his rural trips – especially to the Zoutpansberg – were undertaken primarily for the CP.

¹⁶ Maredi, interview.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*; J. Nkadameng, interview 1 by H. Macmillan, Lusaka, 6 June 1988, and interview 3 by P. Delius, Johannesburg, 3 Apr. 1991; Karis and Carter (eds.), *From Protest to Challenge*, iv, 97.

¹⁸ M. Basner, 'Biography of H. Basner' (unpublished manuscript), ch. 15; Bopape, interview.

¹⁹ Bopape, interview.

²⁰ H. Joseph, *If This Be Treason* (London, 1963), 162–3.

abuse of membership fees.²¹ But probably the most striking weakness in these years was the failure of the ANC – with the notable exception of its Bethal branch – to engage effectively with the major struggles that were being fought out in its rural hinterland in the Transvaal. There is, for example, no evidence of concrete ANC support for the struggles of Lydenburg labour tenants against the increased obligations imposed on them by the proclamation of Chapter IV. The tenants' principal political connection was Senator Rheinault Jones and his local election committee based on the African-owned farm of Boomplaats. A letter from Mrs Rheinault Jones to the Rev. J. Calata, General-Secretary of the ANC, requesting that his organization should look into the trouble at Lydenburg, elicited a less than enthusiastic response. The correspondence took place in 1938, at the height of the struggle, but produced no more than a vague commitment from Calata that the ANC intended to 'review the Land Act at a later stage'.²²

Similarly, in the early 1940s, major struggles against the imposition of Betterment planning and Trust control in Zoutpansberg and Pietersburg met with a feeble response from the ANC. In the case of the conflicts in the Zoutpansberg the crucial connection was with the Zoutpansberg Balemi Association, which was linked to the Communist Party. In the case of the Pietersburg resistance the ANC connection was tenuous. A key local leader, M. Molepo, a headmaster and President of the Transvaal Teachers' Association, called a meeting in 1942 to form a working committee of the ANC and received some response from the ANC head office. In January 1943 Xuma attended a meeting in the Pietersburg Municipal location, at which the grievances of Trust tenants were aired and the meeting decided 'unanimously to support the...ANC'.²³ But more than a year later, Molepo returned 118 unsold ANC membership cards. And somewhat half-hearted attempts to arrange a subsequent meeting to be addressed by Xuma failed to yield fruit. Molepo and Hyman Basner (a lawyer and ex-communist who ousted Rheinault Jones as Senator in 1942) provided legal support and leadership in Pietersburg. Both also abandoned initial attempts to engage ANC support and were involved in breakaways from the ANC. Molepo headed the shadowy and shortlived African National Liberty Party, while Basner helped to found the equally insubstantial African Democratic Party. With such uncertain support from local leaders and feeble intervention from central ANC leadership, it is unsurprising that a recent study of these events should have concluded that the 'resistance in Pietersburg never embraced or articulated the aims of the ANC or any other national goals'.²⁴

In Pietersburg and elsewhere the TAC petitioned on behalf of local leaders who clashed with the NAD. But overall there is little evidence of a concerted or coherent ANC response to local struggles. While attempts were made to rebuild the organization in the countryside under the leadership of Xuma, rural struggles were not the principal priority for a mainly urban-based ANC

²¹ See references in note 12 above. See also UWL, ABX460731b, Secretary Bookkeeper to Xuma and enclosures, 31 July 1944; ABX450727, Xuma to I. Chili, 27 July 1945; ABX460817b, T. R. Masethe to Xuma, 17 Aug. 1946; ABX480615a, Secretary Springbok Legion Witbank to Xuma, 15 June 1958. Institute of Commonwealth Studies (ICS), London University, South African Materials Project (SAMP) No. 99/100, interview H. Basner.

²² Schirmer, 'Freedom in land and work', 43-4.

²³ J. Bekker, 'We will plough where we like', 70.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

leadership. The initiatives that were taken were hamstrung by organizational and material weaknesses which were thrown into sharp relief by the heavy demands of rural engagement. These difficulties might have been partially overcome had the ANC leadership identified more closely with local level demands and actions. But the primarily constitutional and cautious content and style of their politics made this improbable. The existing evidence supports Basner's view that the national leadership did not know *how* to respond to the intensity of struggles and to the undercurrents of insurrection in the countryside. He recalled: 'Xuma wouldn't move when it came to anybody who resisted...once it came to the stage of taking political action and not just presenting a petition to the government for redress...Xuma wouldn't do more.'²⁵ There is also little evidence of sustained organizational growth in rural areas. The figures that do exist for 1946 – though incomplete – bear witness to this sorry state of affairs. Out of a total recorded provincial membership of 518, the only rural branch of any scale was Bethal, which had 14 members.²⁶

The recruitment drives launched by Bopape after the war may have increased levels of rural membership somewhat, but the impression remains one of failure to follow up initial enthusiasm or to establish enduring structures. The message which was carried to the countryside was also one which sometimes showed only a limited appreciation of the consciousness and context of these communities. For example, Bopape's opposition to the culling of cattle and his protests over land shortage probably struck responsive chords, but his attack upon the migrant labour system was rather less well received in a context where many communities saw migrancy as a defensive strategy with the alternative being the permanent loss of people to the towns. The continuing closeness of the ANC to chiefs also made for difficulties, as popular grievances had accumulated against individual chiefs, amid widespread fears that the office had been corrupted by NAD control. In some instances, chiefs facing challenges from their subjects called on ANC leaders to come to their assistance – a practice which did little to enhance the movement's mass standing.²⁷

The late 1940s were years of flux and struggle within the ANC, stemming in part from the activities of the ANC Youth League. A question which remains is the extent to which the Youth League began to place rural issues and organization on the agenda of the ANC. This seems unlikely. The organizational base of the League was in urban areas and in educational institutions, and its membership was 'largely intellectuals'.²⁸ According to Walter Sisulu, 'the issue of rural organization was not on the [Youth League] agenda at all despite the fact that many of us had a rural upbringing.'²⁹

In any case as the decade drew to a close the scope for conventional ANC activity in the reserves diminished rapidly. The Nationalist Party victory of 1948 sounded the death knell of open rural organization. Under proclama-

²⁵ ICS, SAMP No. 99/100, Basner, interview.

²⁶ UWL, ABX460618, Bopape to Xuma, 18 June 1946.

²⁷ Bopape, interview; G. M. Pitje, interviewed by P. Delius, Johannesburg, 12 Oct. 1987; Elias Motsoaledi, interviews 1 and 2; Nkadimeng, interview 1.

²⁸ W. Sisulu, interviewed by P. Delius, Johannesburg, 15 Aug. 1990. See also Lodge, *Black Politics*, ch. 1.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

tions issued in 1939 and 1945, permission had to be secured from chiefs and Native Commissioners for gatherings of more than ten people in the reserves. Powers also existed to prevent particular individuals from attending meetings and allowed the NAD to remove troublesome individuals from specific areas of the Union. Prior to 1948, permission was given fairly frequently for meetings to be held – as the example of Bopape's tour of Sekhukhuneland shows. After 1948 these repressive powers were exercised more fully. Permission for meetings was routinely refused and pressure was intensified on chiefs to limit political activities in their areas. More robust rural organization might have been able to weather these setbacks, but the frail and sparse formal rural presence of the ANC withered in these hostile conditions. By the end of the 1940s there appears to have been little in the way of a rural branch structure in the northern or eastern Transvaal outside of Bethal.³⁰

What did exist was a loose network of broadly sympathetic, though often conservative, chiefs increasingly constrained by the tightening embrace of the NAD. They were also often nervous of the consequences of mass action for their own positions. ANC members, drawn mainly from the chiefly and educated elites, were scattered across rural villages and in some instances they formed local clusters. A handful of migrant workers also provided important links. And there were a number of individuals – like Elias Moretsele and Gert Sibande – both elected to the National Executive in the early 1950s – who had strong links to the countryside. These networks were not sufficient to root the ANC deeply in the countryside. But they did ensure that the ANC was not entirely cut off from developments in the reserves, and there were channels of communication and influence available to the movement. In 1954, for example, the ANC was able to make contact with chiefs in the northern and eastern Transvaal and help to ensure that the Minister for Native Affairs, Hendrik Verwoerd, received a cool reception when he outlined his vision of Bantu Authorities to senior royals assembled at a meeting at the Oliphants River. However, the ANC had a very limited capacity to mobilize a mass constituency to challenge developments in rural areas and its central organizational strategy – the use of chiefs and the establishment of local branches – seemed to have been checkmated by the early 1950s. There appeared to be little in ANC organizational experience or current strategy to provide solutions to these difficulties.³¹

THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND RURAL MOBILIZATION

Sebatakgomo, formed in 1954, has been described by Walter Sisulu as the 'first well organized [rural] movement' in the history of the ANC.³² Yet while the ANC certainly played a part in the growth of Sebatakgomo, the primary impetus for its formation, its core membership and the crucial organizational experience in which it was grounded, came from a specific communist element within the Congress alliance. Elias Motsoaledi recalled the beginnings of Sebatakgomo:

³⁰ Walshe, *The Rise*, 387–8; Pitje, interview; Nkadimeng, interview 1; Sisulu, interview; Motsoaledi, interviews 1 and 2; Bopape, interview. ³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Sisulu, interview.

First of all it is organized by the Communist Party – but the Party realizes that it is not within its sphere. In other words it realized that the important organization to tackle this is the ANC. So it goes and organizes and then it gives it to the ANC... and the members of the Party who are in the ANC prosecute it.³³

At first sight Sebatakgomo's genesis appears to be as improbable in the CP as in the ANC. The CP had neither the rural roots nor even the rural networks of the ANC. Scholars have also stressed the indifference and even the hostility of the CP to rural issues.³⁴ And an equally telling objection might be that the CP, which was formally disbanded in 1950 under threat of the Suppression of Communism Act, was more concerned with surviving the immediate crises that confronted it than with revising rural strategy.³⁵ Yet a closer examination of the available evidence, including interviews conducted since the release of political prisoners and the unbanning of the CP, presents a rather different picture.

Despite the CP's grounding in urban working class struggles it had adopted a theoretical position which laid a significant emphasis on the peasantry. As Bundy has recently reminded us, it was in 1928 in the context of local rural turmoil and the prescriptions of the Communist International that the CP adopted the slogan of an 'Independent South African Native Republic as a stage towards a Workers and Peasants Republic' – a policy formulation which emphasized that the 'black peasantry constitutes the basic moving force of the revolution in alliance with and under the leadership of the new working class'.³⁶ Immediately after adopting this position the CP made some attempts to penetrate the rural areas, but these became increasingly feeble as the 1930s progressed. The CP was decimated and paralysed by internecine strife, and by the end of the decade its remaining membership and activities were again focused in the towns.

Rusty Bernstein recalls of the CP in the Transvaal in the late 1930s and early 1940s, that

I think we recognized in the Party, at least from the theoretical point of view, the importance of the countryside and the peasantry... The practice of it was that in fact very little attention was paid to the countryside, partly because our links with the countryside, with rural people, were absolutely minimal. There were scarcely any links at all and the result was that rural questions alone almost didn't feature in the Party's... discussions about work in the Transvaal.³⁷

There were differences of opinion within the CP on the emphasis to be placed on rural issues, which probably broadly coincided with tensions over the relative emphasis to be placed on national or class struggle. However, there is little evidence to support the suggestion that there was substantial principled opposition to organization in the countryside. But equally there

³³ E. Motsoaledi, interview 3 by P. Delius, Soweto, 11 May 1990; see also J. Nkadimeng, interview 3.

³⁴ Bundy, 'Land and liberation', 262–3, 281; Hirson, *Yours for the Union*, ch. 10.

³⁵ Delius, 'Sebatakgomo', 606.

³⁶ Bundy, 'Land and liberation', 260. See also B. Bunting, *Moses Kotane: South African Revolutionary* (London, 1975), 32–42.

³⁷ L. Bernstein, interviewed by P. Delius, Dorstone, 18 June 1990. In practice, of course, many African members of the CP were migrant workers with strong rural connections.

was little theoretical effort to flesh out the rather vague concept of the peasantry which informed Party policy, and the position of migrant workers did not receive systematic theoretical or organizational attention. In sum, a combination of urban location, working class roots and practical difficulties helped ensure that the agrarian issues remained low on the CP's list of priorities for action.³⁸

There were moments, such as elections for the Native Representative Council and for Native Representatives in the Senate, when the CP's consciousness of rural issues was heightened, and there were individual members who argued for more vigorous rural engagement. One of the most important of these was H. M. Basner, who has already been mentioned in connection with his activities in Pietersburg. Basner gained insights into rural society from his work as a lawyer and his experience of running – unsuccessfully – as a CP candidate in the 1936 Senate elections. His emphasis on the need for rural mobilization had limited impact, and he also found himself increasingly at odds with central elements in CP policy. In 1939 he resigned amidst considerable acrimony in the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Finland. In 1942 he stood successfully as an independent candidate for the Senate and – as noted above – played a prominent role in assisting and highlighting rural struggles.³⁹

Ultimately more significant in terms of the Communist Party and the countryside were the activities of a migrant worker from the Zoutpansberg – Alpheus Maliba. He was born in 1901, in Nzhelele in Venda, and by the early 1930s he was working in Johannesburg where, while working in a factory, he enrolled in a Communist-run night school. He joined the CP in 1936 and from 1939 to 1950 served on the Johannesburg District Committee.⁴⁰ In 1939 he wrote a pamphlet, published by the CP in Venda and English, on the 'Condition of the Venda People'. Against the backdrop of the requirements of the mines and farms for cheap labour, the pamphlet outlined grinding pressures on Venda communities of land shortage, taxation, rents, dipping fees, labour tenancy and low wages. It also detailed the miserly provision of education and infrastructure in the area and lamented the undermining of chiefly autonomy and the growing dominance of Native Commissioners. The pamphlet also set out a series of demands – the land and the mines should be returned to the people; taxes and fees should be abolished; individual tenure and agricultural training should be encouraged;

³⁸ This is not to say, of course, that there were not individuals within the CP who were strongly opposed to effort being expended on the countryside. ICS, SAMP No. 99/100, interview with H. Basner; Bernstein, interview; Motsoaledi, interview 3; B. Bunting, personal communication, London, 12 June 1990. For a more negative version of the role of the CP see Hirson, 'Rural revolt', 122, and *Yours for the Union*, 133. It is difficult, however, on the basis of the evidence produced to sustain the argument that a substantial section of the CP was actively hostile to rural work.

³⁹ ICS, SAMP No. 99/100, Basner, interview; Hirson, interview; Bekker, 'We will plough where we like', *passim*.

⁴⁰ Karis and Carter (eds.), *From Protest to Challenge*, iv, 70. Maliba's early life history remains vague. There is, for example, fascinating but fragmentary evidence that Maliba, as early as 1932, was in contact with T. W. Thibedi and the Trotskyist Communist League of Africa; Hirson, interview; A. Drew, 'Events were breaking above their heads: socialism in South Africa, 1921–1950', *Social Dynamics*, xvii (1991), 72. Hopefully, oral research on Maliba's life currently in progress will clarify this picture.

Native Commissioners and the Native Affairs Department should be done away with and the people should be given the right to vote for Africans to represent them.⁴¹ The pamphlet concluded with an exhortation that 'the first task is organization', an imperative that was grounded in a fascinating blend of modernizing zeal and party vanguardism. In a context 'where tribal organizations are usually afraid of "politics"', and only helped individuals who were in need of money, and where the ANC and Communist Party were both weak, 'the more advanced people will have to teach and organise the backward people'.⁴²

In 1939 Maliba, along with a number of fellow migrant workers from the Zoutpansberg – some of whom were also members of the CP – founded the Zoutpansberg Cultural Association (ZCA). Its Johannesburg office was in Progress Buildings, which was also the headquarters of the CP. The CP provided some organizational back-up for the ZCA – mainly in the form of transport, duplicating leaflets, legal assistance and occasional discussions of tactical issues. The ZCA was also given considerable prominence in the Venda section of the CP newspaper, *Inkululeko*. The ZCA was, however, seen very much as 'Maliba's baby'.⁴³ It was not regarded as a sub-division of the CP but, as Bernstein recalls, 'we regarded the Party as having a role and what we would have classed loosely ... as mass organizations as having a separate role and this was one of them'. And while Maliba was,

in theory a disciplined member of the Party and subject to the Party's control and guidance at all times...in practice because his base of operations was in the Zoutpansberg area which was a long way away and with which we had no direct contact or communications ourselves...he was a law unto himself.⁴⁴

The ZCA echoed the concerns with welfare and self-help of the 'tribal organizations' of the time. Amongst other things, it provided assistance in the event of arrest, offered small loans and planned to help provide cheap food. The ZCA drew on Venda history, language and locality, but despite its increasingly strong Venda tint it had a regional rather than narrowly ethnic focus. Its initial meetings in Johannesburg were attended by representatives of 'all the northern Transvaal communities... Venda, Shangaans and Sotho'. Its migrant worker leadership used their regular trips to 'the North' to hold meetings and to attempt to garner support for the organization. Maliba, in particular, travelled widely in the early 1940s and held innumerable meetings in the northern Zoutpansberg. While expressing concern about the corrosion of chiefly office by NAD control and the incumbents' consequent 'unpredictability and greed', the ZCA sought to work closely with local chiefs and gained access to some of the regular and compulsory meetings (*tshivhidzo*) at the various royal villages. The beer drinks organized by women to mobilize

⁴¹ Maliba, *Venda*, 9. Hirson, *Yours for the Union*, 129, finds it surprising that a Communist Party publication should call for individual tenure. The most probable explanation lies in the prevalence of two-stage theory and in the fact that the pamphlet was a prelude to launching a mass organization rather than a party structure. It certainly is unlikely to have been a popular demand amongst communities battling to protect systems of communal tenure and it was not – as far as existing evidence shows – repeated by the ZCA/ZBA.

⁴² Maliba, *Venda*, 9–10.

⁴³ Bernstein, interview; see also Motsoaledi, interview 3 and interview 4 by P. Delius, Johannesburg, 2 Apr. 1991; Nkadimeng, interviews 1 and 3. ⁴⁴ Bernstein, interview.

communal labour on their lands also provided an organizational entree, and in some instances women held these events for the specific purpose of hosting Maliba. A rather different forum was provided by the Venda pages of *Inkululeko*, in which Maliba showed considerable skill in infusing his writing with the forms of oral communication which prevailed in the countryside. While literacy was restricted to a relatively small scattering of individuals within Venda society, these published texts both lent themselves to oral rendition and may have contributed to the support the ZCA won amongst some black teachers and businessmen.⁴⁵

The ZCA initially campaigned against forced conscription and made representations to the state to stop imposing penalties on late tax payers. But in response to mounting struggles against 'Betterment' in Zoutpansberg, it increasingly focused on challenging the controls enforced on communities on 'Trust Land'. These included restrictions on the cutting of trees, prohibitions on ploughing on river banks, and controls on the size of plots. The initial tactics of petition and polite protest gave way by 1941, in a context of mounting ferment in the area, to a call for open defiance of these regulations. Confronted by a combination of mass resistance, Communist Party-linked lawyers and the exigencies of wartime, local officials beat a retreat. These early successes helped build a groundswell of support for the ZCA.⁴⁶

In 1942, Maliba stood as a CP candidate for the Native Representative Council. His campaign, though ultimately unsuccessful, involved meetings addressed throughout the northern Transvaal by himself, Edwin Mofutsanyana, J. S. Lekgetho, Dr Dadoo and Moses Kotane. In 1943 the ZCA, now renamed the Zoutpansberg Balemi (Ploughmen's) Association (ZBA), started recruiting farm workers and helped found a General Workers' Union to represent workers in and around the town of Louis Trichardt. It also launched a boycott of the Messina municipal beer hall with considerable support from local brewers. By 1944 the ZBA had opened an office and a flourishing night school in Louis Trichardt and claimed a membership of over 3,000, which, if even roughly accurate, made it considerably bigger than either the ANC or the CP in the Transvaal.⁴⁷

Despite, or perhaps because of this success, the ZBA experienced decline after 1944. It is evident that the ZBA and Maliba attracted mounting hostility from local police, officials and white citizens. Its leaders were arrested, meetings were banned, the organization was ejected from premises it rented and individuals were prevented from entering key areas. In one particularly ugly incident in 1944 youths attending the night school in Louis

⁴⁵ A crucial source of additional information on Maliba and the ZCA/ZBA has been the Venda section of the Party newspaper – *Inkululeko*. I am grateful for the advice of B. Hirson and L. Bernstein, who directed me to this rich source, and to T. Nemutanzhela who translated the articles for me. See especially *Inkululeko*, Dec. 1940, Jan. 1941, Apr. 1941, May 1941, June 1941, Aug. 1941, Nov. 1941, Jan. 1942, Feb. 1942, Mar. 1942, May 1942, Aug. 1942, Sept. 1942, 6 Feb. 1943, 20 Feb. 1943, 27 Mar. 1943, 20 June 1943, 20 Nov. 1943, 4 Mar. 1944, 15 Apr. 1944, 10 June 1944, 22 July 1944, 14 Aug. 1944, 25 Aug. 1944, 30 Sept. 1944, 7 Oct. 1944, 25 Nov. 1944, 9 Dec. 1944. See also T. Nemutanzhela, 'Cultural forms and literacy as resources for political mobilization: A. M. Malivha and the Zoutpansberg Balemi Association, 1939–1944' (B.A. Honours dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, 1991).

⁴⁶ *Inkululeko*, Dec. 1940–Mar. 1944; Hirson, 'Rural revolts', 115–32, and *Yours for the Union*, ch. 10.

⁴⁷ *Inkululeko*, Jan. 1942–Aug. 1944.

Trichardt were attacked, and two were killed.⁴⁸ The local police showed little interest in taking action against the white assailant. As the war drew to a close the state became more determined in its prosecution of 'Betterment' and the earlier successes of the ZBA in assisting communities to flout these regulations increasingly gave way to defeats. Officials also intensified their efforts to persuade chiefs that the ZBA was intent on usurping their positions and that Maliba should be banned from entering the area.⁴⁹

While the evidence does not support the argument that the activities of ZBA were actively opposed by significant sections of the CP, it is probably true that many individuals were bemused and even a little uneasy about events in the Zoutpansberg. Bernstein recalls for example: 'What we felt was that the Party couldn't possibly have a direct message to the peasants there' and also that there was 'an ecological side to it... the party certainly had some hesitation about insisting on the right to plough the river banks'.⁵⁰ George Findlay's view in 1944 was that

The Platteland (rural) Africans are a secondary area – more propaganda is needed there, not peasant revolts. Intensify ideological work – don't water down to 'popular appeal' standards.⁵¹

It seems unlikely, therefore, that the CP wished to get drawn ever-deeper into a spiralling conflict in the north – especially after the Soviet Union entered the war and the CP put its weight behind the war effort – or that, in the post-war world, it felt it appropriate to put these issues high on its list of priorities. In any event, by the late 1940s the ZBA became a shadow of its former self. Chiefs and officials supported measures to prevent Maliba from operating in the Zoutpansberg, and his activities were mainly restricted to Johannesburg. He was, nonetheless, to continue to play a highly influential, although much less visible role in relation to the countryside – one partly facilitated by the changing nature of the Party.⁵²

MIGRANT WORKERS, THE COMMUNIST PARTY AND THE ANC, 1940–55

The CP had in fact made considerable advances during the war years. Lodge has provided a striking outline of this transformation, pointing out that in 1939 the CP's

following numbered less than three hundred, its influence in the trade unions was negligible, it was isolated from other political organizations among blacks... Six years later the Party could count its adherents in thousands rather than hundreds, it was capable of winning white local government elections, and its members presided over the largest-ever African trade union movement as well as contributing significantly to the leadership of the African and Indian Congresses.⁵³

The 1940s also witnessed a considerable change in the racial composition of the membership of the CP in the Transvaal. Bernstein recalls:

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* Mar.–Dec. 1944.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*; Hirson, *Yours for the Union*, 132–3.

⁶⁰ Bernstein, interview.

⁵¹ Hirson, *Yours for the Union*, 133.

⁵² *Ibid.* 132–4; Nkdimeng, interviews 1 and 3; Motsoaledi, interviews 3 and 4.

⁵³ T. Lodge, 'Class conflict, communal struggle and patriotic unity: The Communist Party of South Africa during the Second World War' (unpublished seminar paper, African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, 1985), 1.

numerically the party just grew steadily from... 1940-41 until 1946 and the black membership grew fastest and became the overwhelming majority. I mean that in 1940 the black and white membership must have been 50/50 or round about there but by 1945-46 the white membership was a minority.⁵⁴

This trend continued and was accentuated in the post-war period as white wariness of the CP reasserted itself as the Cold War set in. In these years the Party's main channels of recruitment were public meetings, the trade union movement and (though to a lesser extent than in the 1930s) night schools. It also established grass-roots organization in a number of townships, a development which has been most fully described in Brakpan. On the East Rand the CP mobilized residents around immediate local concerns and issues, it contested Advisory Board elections and it used its control of elected positions to defend local interests.⁵⁵

There had also been important developments in the CP's relationship with the ANC. In 1929 the CP had accepted a Comintern directive to work with the ANC. However, the ideological turmoil within the Party and the sorry state of the ANC in the 1930s helped ensure that it was not until the end of the decade that,

for the first time in many years...the Party's leading committees began to take seriously the question of developing the ANC, putting their strength or their muscle behind the development of a substantial ANC.⁵⁶

Especially in the Transvaal a close relationship was established with the ANC, and in the 1940s a considerable overlap in membership and leadership developed. Leading communists such as Moses Kotane, J. B. Marks, Edwin Mofutsanyana and David Bopape played a central role in the ANC and made an important contribution to rebuilding it, their experiences within the ANC in turn helping to keep the 'national question' high on the CP's agenda.⁵⁷

But probably the most important element of all in relation to subsequent rural organization was the fact that in the post-war years the Party recruited a number of young migrant workers from the northern Transvaal (particularly from Sekhukhuneland), who, like Maliba before them, provided crucial entrees to wider migrant networks and associations. As has been explored at considerable length elsewhere, prior to the Second World War the organizations created by migrants from the northern Transvaal although widespread, tended to be informal and politically introverted. But the growth of secondary industry, the expansion of education in rural areas and the extension of accommodation in municipal hostels all helped to lower barriers between the migrants and the wider urban world. Migrants also crafted their own more formal organizations – most notably burial societies – which helped them deal with their changing circumstances.⁵⁸

Some of these men also joined trade unions and political parties. In the 1940s it seems that of all the political movements it was the CP which had the

⁵⁴ Bernstein, interview.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*; H. Sapire, 'African political mobilization in Brakpan in the 1950s' (unpublished seminar paper, African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, 1989); Lodge, *Black Politics*, 97-8, 131-4.

⁵⁶ Bernstein, interview; Bunting, *Moses Kotane*, chs. 1, 6 and 7; Motsoaledi, interviews 2 and 3; ICS, SAMP No. 99/100, Basner interview.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ P. Delius, 'Sebatakgomo', 593-605.

most impact. It recruited a number of young migrants at this time – for example Elias Motsoaledi and Flag Boshielo, both from Sekhukhuneland – who were subsequently to play significant roles. Although in the 1940s the majority of migrant factory workers had, or anticipated securing, access to significant (though inadequate) resources of land or cattle, there were some whose families faced bleak futures in the countryside: Elias Motsoaledi recalls that his family ‘had no land of our own ... this is part of what brought me into politics’; while Flag Boshielo ‘came from a very poor family’. But, probably the most important common point amongst this group of migrants was that after spells as domestic or mine workers they found employment in secondary industry and then gained experience of trade union organization and action. Motsoaledi, for example, in 1943 got a job with the City Boot factory, led a protest action, was dismissed and made contact with the Leather Workers’ Union. He subsequently found employment in a cosmetics factory and joined the Chemical Workers’ Union. In 1945 he became a member of the CP.⁵⁹

The ANC of the 1940s held a very limited appeal for this element amongst migrant workers. They were distrustful of the chiefs who were often the rural face of the ANC, and they were alienated by the educated elite who dominated the movement in the towns. It also seemed that the ANC had little to say to their own experiences. Motsoaledi recalls that the ANC

didn’t try to get to the grassroots level grievances of the people. Whenever you were in meetings they would listen to the articulation of the English language – they would encourage people to display their qualifications. They spoke in English ... but English was not the language of the people.⁶⁰

The CP, however, was active in the world in which they moved – particularly the factories, the hostels and the unions. Moreover, the CP explained that world in ways which made sense of their own experiences. Its stress, for example, on dispossession and a cheap labour system as lying at the heart of the South African political economy, its campaigns against the pass laws, and its emphasis on the position and role of workers had immediate resonances for their own lives. There were also already migrant workers from the Northern Transvaal – men who were initiated, who spoke Venda and Pedi and alongside whom they lived and worked – who were members and even leaders within the CP. One particularly telling example of this political cross-fertilization is Flag Boshielo, who was a driving force behind the establishment of Sebatakgomo. He had grown up with Elias Motsoaledi in the village of Phokwane in Sekhukhuneland. In the mid-1940s he got a job in a bakery in Johannesburg in which a number of CP members had employment. One of his fellow workers was Alpheus Maliba, who told vivid stories of the struggles he had led in the Zoutpansberg.⁶¹ Maliba became a crucial influence on Boshielo and other younger migrant workers within the Party. Boshielo, in turn, was active in Denver Hostel – one of the main municipal hostels for migrant workers – which lay to the east of central Johannesburg and in the wider world of migrant associations. He also played

⁵⁹ Motsoaledi, interviews 1, 2 and 3; see also Nkadimeng, interviews 1 and 3.

⁶⁰ Motsoaledi, interview 2; Bernstein, interview; see also G. Ngake, interviewed by P. Delius, *Oliphants River*, 7 Apr. 1988.

⁶¹ Motsoaledi, interviews 1–4; Nkadimeng, interviews 1 and 3.

a vital role in drawing some of his compatriots into formal politics. John Nkadimeng, for example, who was an active unionist living in nearby Jeppe Hostel – another key migrant centre in Johannesburg – recalls that ‘he was the best man from my area’. After they met at a burial society meeting, Boshielo played a critical role in Nkadimeng’s political development and persuaded him to join the ANC in 1950 and the CP in 1951.⁶²

Once these workers joined the Party they were exposed to a programme of political education, starting with a new members’ class that introduced them to basic elements of the Party’s structure and policies. They were taught elements of the history and political economy of South Africa. Once they had completed this course, advanced classes dealt with a variety of topics, including trade union issues and the ANC. As Bernstein recalls,

there was continuous political education going on in the Party... there was always something going on and people were pressured by their unit, their groups... branches to participate in classes.⁶³

Just as importantly, the CP had ‘really very high standards of practical work’.⁶⁴ Members were expected to become actively involved in political and union work and were guided through expanding responsibilities. Motsoaledi remembers:

when they teach you politics they put you into the field, you were working... the Party watches cadres developing – time and again they promote cadres (eventually) they would say now as a developed cadre we are giving you this (George Goch) location and Denver hostel – they are both under you, yours is to plan and do everything – if you need leaflets tell us – but the planning is yours.⁶⁵

Considerable emphasis was placed on identifying and mobilizing around grassroots issues and grievances, and both policy and practice instilled this approach as a basic political reflex in Party members.⁶⁶

Lodge is no doubt correct to suggest that the CP at this time ‘represented a rich composite of South African political traditions’ and to dismiss the notion that the CP in the 1940s was ‘a Leninist vanguard of professional revolutionaries’.⁶⁷ But it is nonetheless probably also true that the model of a vanguard party, to which some members aspired, helped establish relatively high levels of political training and organizational dynamism within the CP (especially in comparison with the ANC).

It was CP policy in these years to encourage its members to join the ANC. This view met some resistance amongst those migrant workers and others who viewed the ANC as conservative and ineffective. From 1939 onwards,

The Party really in the Transvaal did put a lot of muscle behind the ANC including pressurizing its own black members to join... and many of our members resisted it, they didn’t want to, they regarded the ANC as being a sort of petty bourgeois organization.⁶⁸

But the CP’s two-stage theory of transformation played an important part in

⁶² Nkadimeng, interviews 1 and 3.

⁶³ Bernstein, interview.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Motsoaledi, interview 2. See also N. Mokgatle, *Autobiography of an Unknown South African* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971), 239–42.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*; Bernstein, interview; Nkadimeng, interview 3.

⁶⁷ Lodge, ‘Class conflict’, 16.

⁶⁸ Bernstein, interview.

enabling some of its members to overcome their reservations about ANC. Motsoaledi for example remembers:

As a result of the education by the Party, I understood the long term programme of the Party and the short term programme of the ANC – then I came to understand the alliance – that when we achieve liberation the ANC struggle ceases and there is a continuation now with the class struggle. But I wasn't taught that therefore you must not continue with the class struggle [in the interim].⁶⁹

In 1948, three years after having joined the Party, Motsoaledi joined the ANC and within six months was elected to the provincial executive.

There was not any substantial shift towards activism in the CP's formal thinking about the countryside in the late 1940s, nor was there a major rural initiative to follow on from the work of Maliba in the Zoutpansberg. But the older generation of migrants recruited in the 1930s – often via night schools – had been supplemented by a younger grouping of migrants rooted in factories, unions and hostels. These newer members were, unsurprisingly, also more acutely aware than the leading party ideologues of the political particularities and possibilities of migrant workers and rural communities. They were certainly alive to any new threats to their position in both the urban areas *and* the reserves. Thus the CP maintained a degree of sensitivity to rural questions, as Motsoaledi recalls, due to 'the workers themselves – men who had come from the rural areas'.⁷⁰

When, in 1950 under threat from the Suppression of Communism Act, the CP formally disbanded amidst considerable confusion amongst its membership, the majority of African members of the CP now threw themselves into building the ANC with reduced reservation and enhanced zeal. Reflecting on the 1940s and early 1950s, Bernstein suggests that this was a decisive contribution:

The work content of a Party member's day was very considerable and they were used to working as an organized group, but the ANC was not, the ANC was a very loose organization. You could join the ANC and pay five shillings and not ever attend a branch meeting...our people brought into the ANC and for that matter into the trade unions a very particular style of work which wasn't indigenous to these organizations and I think that was our biggest contribution. Frankly, a lot of commentators write about the great theoretical contribution we made to these organizations. I think, in some ways, it's the other way round. They made a great theoretical contribution to us, but we made a really important organizational contribution to them and gave them what they lacked, which was a sort of organized disciplined core. The few spread out through the branches and through the various organizations, and this is what enabled them, I think, to grow as a great mass organization.⁷¹

In the early 1950s the group of young workers from Sekhukhuneland, whose life histories we have touched on above, played a crucial role in the ANC. Motsoaledi, Boshielo and Nkadimeng all held senior positions within the Transvaal African Congress and played leading parts in the various campaigns launched by the ANC. Boshielo was the leader of the first Defiance Campaign volunteer unit in Johannesburg on 26 June 1952. Nkadimeng was

⁶⁹ Motsoaledi, interview 2.

⁷⁰ Motsoaledi, interview 3; see also Nkadimeng, interview 3.

⁷¹ Bernstein, interview; see also Motsoaledi, interview 4.

his deputy and returned from prison to find that he had been sacked from his job, whereupon he became a full time organiser for the Council of Non-European Trade Unions.⁷²

In these years Communists went through a process of re-evaluating their role in South African politics. Most members of the Party had supported its dissolution on the assumption that it was a ploy. But disquiet grew as little concrete appeared to be happening to reconstitute it. It was to be former members of the Johannesburg District Committee who took the decisive initiative in launching a new party. With new rules on recruitment and observing strict security the South African Communist Party (SACP) was formed between 1951 and 1952, and its first national conference was held in 1953. By the time its second national conference took place in 1954, a solid core of members and a structure of units, branches and district committees was in place. After a period of debate the ideology of the new party consolidated around the necessity for a close alliance with the ANC and the centrality of national democratic struggle.⁷³

SEBATAKGOMO

It was against the backdrop of these major political changes that Flag Boshielo first initiated the idea of forming the Sebatakomo movement. He consulted closely with Maliba and Nkadimeng and more widely within the SACP. He was also influenced by the example of the ZBA, and more recently, by his own experience of a period of continuous residence in Sekhukhuneland in the early 1950s. Boshielo now argued that rural struggles and the land question were of vital political importance. Sebatakomo was conceived as an organization linking farm workers and the inhabitants of Reserve and Trust lands in a form of trade union, and its early meetings were attended by individuals from a wide range of areas within the northern and eastern Transvaal. Sebatakomo's inaugural meeting was in 1954 in Pretoria, at Bantu Hall in Lady Selbourne. Alpheus Maliba gave the keynote address, and Boshielo was elected as Chairman and Nkadimeng as Secretary. Its core of Communists rooted Sebatakomo in an established history of rural mobilization and placed considerable organizational drive and skills at its disposal. Significantly for its development, the importance of concentrating on 'the concrete issues that affect people's daily lives' was deeply engrained in its initiators.⁷⁴ And Sebatakomo responded to the heightened difficulties of rural organization in the 1950s by basing itself even more firmly than had previous movements in hostels and amongst migrants. The growing ferment over Bantu Authorities in Sekhukhuneland provided a powerful motor for the growth of the movement and resulted in a mainly although not exclusively Pedi membership.

It was decided within the SACP that the proposed rural initiative launched

⁷² Lodge, *Black Politics*, 302; Nkadimeng, interview 3; Motsoaledi, interviews 2, 3 and

4.

⁷³ Everatt, 'The politics of nonracialism', 49-118; Motsoaledi, interview 4; Bernstein, interview. Flag Boshielo played a part in this process and became a member of the reconstituted Johannesburg District Committee.

⁷⁴ Nkadimeng, interview 4. See also Nkadimeng, interviews 1 and 3, and Motsoaledi, interviews 3 and 4, for the formation and growth of the movement.

with Sebatakomo should be located within the ANC; hence the surprising, not to say perplexing, fact that the ANC National Executive should announce during 1955 the formation of a new peasant's movement, Sebatakomo, without any prior formal discussion of the matter within the wider circles of the ANC.⁷⁵ The location of Sebatakomo within the ANC both reflected Party policy and enabled the movement to draw in and/or consult a network of senior individuals within Congress whose rural links and experience were vital to its growth. Prominent amongst these were Elias Moretsele and Gert Sibande. In the early 1950s a growing number of workers and others with strong rural connections were attracted to a more militant and mass-based ANC. These men were rapidly recruited into Sebatakomo, which came to represent a thorough-going fusion of ANC and SACP networks and organizational experience. Over time the movement drew in a wide range of migrant networks and associations. The different ideologies and leaders of these groupings asserted a growing influence within Sebatakomo, especially after the banning of Flag Boshielo in November 1954, and the arrest and arraignment of John Nkadimeng and Elias Moretsele for treason in 1956. The movement was powerfully infused with Pedi history, language and symbolism and shifted towards a still more localized political focus.⁷⁶

From 1957 the membership of Sebatakomo soared as the NAD attempted to enforce Bantu Authorities in Sekhukhuneland, and a rurally based counterpart – the Khudutamaga – was established. Migrants kept the urban and rural wings of the movement in close contact and helped to ensure that chiefs and others who wavered in their opposition to Bantu Authorities remained conscious of the risk to their persons and positions should they collaborate with the state. The deportation of the Paramount Chief, Morwamotshe, in 1958 brought matters to boiling point in Sekhukhuneland, and after the police opened fire on a crowd in the village of Manganeng on 16 May, people considered to be collaborators were attacked and killed and their property was torched throughout the area. The police swarmed over Sekhukhuneland and villagers took refuge in the mountains. There were over 300 arrests, and trials on charges of public violence and murder continued over the next two years. The main activity of Sebatakomo in this period was to liaise with lawyers and the membership dug deep into their pockets to pay for the defence costs of the numerous cases. The state, alarmed by the intensity of the resistance, beat a somewhat undignified, if temporary, retreat. Morwamotshe was returned home and the plans to impose Bantu Authorities were shelved.⁷⁷

CONCLUSION

The linked histories of the ZBA and Sebatakomo must qualify the assertion that the national movements 'failed to lead – or to follow' rural struggles.⁷⁸ Both movements had close initial links with the CP, although it was migrant worker members, rather than the leading Party ideologues, who grasped the

⁷⁵ Karis and Carter (eds.), *From Protest to Challenge*, iii, 235.

⁷⁶ Delius, 'Sebatakomo', 605–16; Nkadimeng, interviews 1, 3 and 4; Motsoaledi, interviews 3 and 4.

⁷⁷ Delius, 'Sebatakomo', 606–16.

⁷⁸ Bundy, 'Land and liberation', 281.

organizational opportunities. Sebatakgomo was also rooted in ANC history and networks. But, equally, the success of both organizations in developing a mass base was both consequence and cause of political strategies and styles which were not conditioned by the political agendas of their host bodies.⁷⁹

The prominence of CP activists in bringing Sebatakgomo into existence also suggests that the argument that Communists played a central role in building the ANC as a mass organization deserves rather more serious attention than it has received in the work which credits the ANC Youth League with prime responsibility for this transformation. For example, Everatt's recent conclusion that

The ANC in the 1940s and early 1950s... was transformed from a small organization concerned to enroll 'distinguished university graduates' to a mass based nationalist organization... Those changes were largely brought about by the ANCYL, formed in 1944 and comprising a group of highly able students.⁸⁰

seems – at best – partial and to demand much fuller research on, and consideration of, the role of the CP.

SUMMARY

Sebatakgomo – a migrant worker-based movement – was founded in 1954 and went on to play a central role in the Sekhukhuneland Revolt of 1958. It was launched from within the ANC, and a number of its leaders were also members of the Communist Party. This article explores the roles played by these wider political movements in the formation of Sebatakgomo. It argues that, while ANC networks and individuals within its central leadership made an important contribution, the rural presence of the ANC was fragmentary in this period and that its central organizational strategies had been effectively checkmated by an increasingly authoritarian state. It suggests that the crucial initial impetus and strategy behind Sebatakgomo came from Communist Party members living in a migrant world and trained in the Party's history and methods of organization. In particular Alpheus Maliba, who led the Zoutpansberg Balemi Association in the northern Transvaal in the early 1940s, provided a mentor and model for Flag Boshielo, who was the driving force in the establishment of Sebatakgomo. The article also suggests that the history of Sebatakgomo provides an example of the impact of Communist Party activists in transforming the ANC into a mass organization in the early 1950s.

⁷⁹ Delius, 'Sebatakgomo', 605–15.

⁸⁰ Everatt, 'The politics of nonracialism', 51; see Lodge, *Black Politics*, 28–30, for a rather more balanced, if incomplete, view.

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