Banishment and rural resistance in the early 1950s: GaMatlala and Witzieshoek

THE APARTHEID STATE’S interventions in the rural areas of South Africa during the 1950s and early 1960s gave rise to ‘a succession of bitter localised conflicts between peasants and authority’.1 Resistance by rural people to state initiatives detrimental to their lives was nothing new, as the literature on rural and reserve conditions in the first half of the twentieth century indicates.2 The Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) had a substantial following in the reserves. The Wellington Movement in Transkei had as one of its key features an ‘attempt to boycott the state institutions [and] to seek actual or imagined Africanist solutions’.3 The literature highlights the existence of anti-dipping movements and the role played by independent church and chieftaincy movements in reserve-based resistance.

In the 1950s and early 1960s ‘established social relationships were disrupted’, traditional authority was ‘robbed of what legitimacy it retained’ and ‘the area of conflict between people and government expanded rapidly’.4 These conflicts were not simply isolated responses to specific state initiatives. Instead, the imposition of Bantu Authorities and betterment schemes ‘was clearly indicated in the incidents of rural resistance … typically the two were fused and the local headmen would accept and try to implement a Betterment scheme [only to be] opposed by the majority of “his” tribespeople’.5 Struggles against Bantu education and the extension of passes to women were inter-woven with these issues. Resentment of tax increases also played a role, particularly in Transkei, where direct taxation virtually doubled between 1959 and 1965. A further ‘element in rural discontent was provided by the tightening of influx/efflux controls and the population resettlements of the 1950s and 1960s’.6
Widespread and militant responses to a variety of inter-connected state policies were most dramatically manifest in struggles in Northern Transvaal and Witzieshoek in the early 1950s; by the opposition in Bahurutshe in 1957 to the extension of pass laws to women; and by the uprisings in Sekhukhuneland (1958), Thembuland (late 1950s), the Natal south coast (1959) and Mpondoland (early 1960s).

Popular resistance in the reserves was more ‘widespread and rather bloodier than [that] occurring within the cities’ because ‘the manner in which [it was] dealt with could be considerably more brutal than in the urban context, but also because the conditions of rural existence were even harsher than those that prevailed in the townships’. However, rural conditions and disenchantment with the imposition of onerous state policies are insufficient to explain widespread and militant resistance. New streams of consciousness fuelled by more outright dependence on wage labour and a measure of contact with organised resistance in the urban areas also played a part. It was in response to popular resistance in the reserves that the apartheid state resorted to banishment.

In this and the following two chapters the key episodes of rural resistance in South Africa that gave rise to political banishment are discussed. The courageous resistance of communities and individuals who, in the words of Govan Mbeki, ‘know what it is to be crushed by the armed force of the white, to be imprisoned without trial, banished to desolate parts of the country, and banned from normal social contact’ is also highlighted.

The largest number of people (23, including five women) were banished from GaMatlala. However, these were not the first banishments under apartheid. This dubious honour goes to seven men from Mabieskraal. In 1949 they, including Mokate Ramafoku who was first banished in 1935 and was the only person banished both before and after apartheid, were sent to Driefontein (Northern Cape). Altogether 11 people were banished from Mabieskraal, but there is no scholarly account of the conditions that gave rise to these banishments. What can be pieced together from banishment orders served in 1935, 1949 and 1955 is that there was both internecine conflict and conflict between sections of the community and the state around various issues. These included an ‘uncooperative attitude’ towards officials, resistance to the Bantu Authorities system, betterment and Bantu education, and ‘continued open flouting by the tribe of the laws of the country and the tribe’s disregard of duly constituted authority’.