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

¹ Although such an instance of open and violent resistance has often been filed as just another happening on the long march to freedom, Govan Mbeki’s (1964) book has given the rebellion a serious and significant status in the liberation struggle. In his words, the revolutionary potential of the countryside, the militancy of migrant workers could not be doubted, what was in question was whether a guerilla strategy should prioritise the Bantustans or the city or, as strategy was still vague then, both. I have also been made aware of another two dynamics in Mpondoland: firstly, elders who had participated as rebels then are demanding from the current government the event’s cultural and symbolic recognition (nationally and provincially). Groups in Bizana, Lusikisiki and Flagstaff, want respectively Ndlovu Hill, Ngquza Hill and Ngindilili Hill to be somehow valorized further. The installation of a commemorative plaque on the site of the first massacre seems not to be enough. Although Bizana networks seem more organized, such members of the Hill’s activities now in their post-70s or 80s or participants as young shock troops of the insurrection, now in their 60s, seem to demand more monuments commemorative resources, a museum and development funds. A few are already in place including the memorial at Ngquza Hill – a lot of the plans/proposals are with the Tambo Metropolitan Council. The second has to do with the strengthening of the South African Communist Party in the area, especially in the greater Flagstaff and Lusikisiki areas where its support has been boosted by thousands of dismissed miners who have availed themselves for local political contestation. Discussions with them over the prospects of a Migrant Labour Museum highlighted the rebellion as a proto-communist phenomenon - it is remembered as for its insurrectionary power and for the brutality of its repression. Within this recent reconstruction effort though, other political organizations and formations- the PAC or the Non-European Unity-movement are beginning to be effaced from popular narratives. See also, Copelyn, John (1974).
For scholars the event has provided a rich trove of data to demonstrate a range of patterns that help theorize both identity and struggle. For a while, after William Beinart’s and Colin Bundy’s *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa* the academic focus on rural struggles waned somewhat until Mahmood Mamdani’s *Citizen and Subject*, where the political dimensions of customary and by implication, the ‘rural’ are re-emphasised. The event under discussion is seen by him (Mamdani 1996: 18ff) as a rural/peasant response to this indirect rule and a response to the tightening of customary authority in the 1950s.

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

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

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

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

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