Early writing on the politics of land rights, land-use planning, and livelihoods in Pondoland is important for understanding resistance against the state. Some of these writings, including those by Hunter (1979) and Stapleton (2001), leave two seemingly contrasting images about resistance by the Mpondo people against outsider intervention. On the one hand, historians have argued that the Mpondo, being the last southern African state to fall under colonial rule in 1894, and by avoiding direct and violent confrontation with colonial powers, arguably escaped from the worst impact of colonial take-over suffered by other states (Beinart 1982; Stapelton 2001). This they did by not resisting trade with colonizers, and by allowing missionaries to live and work among them. On the other hand, new laws governing land occupation, forests, grazing, burning, and livestock movement and livestock numbers have, historically, been seen by the Mpondo as threats to their livelihoods, and therefore were vigorously resisted where possible (Beinart 1982; Kepe 1997). Beinart (1982) cites at least three occasions where Mpondo people turned against their traditional leaders, who they accused of compromising their livelihoods. The first incident was during the 1880s, when Mhlangaso, a chief councillor to the paramount chief of Eastern Pondoland, pursued trading with whites. The second case happened almost twenty years later, when Sigcawu, the paramount chief, became unpopular when he helped organize migrants from the Pondoland area, to work in the mines. The third occasion came almost fifty years later, when Chief Botha Sigcawu agreed to the rehabilitation schemes and Bantu Authorities. On this third occasion, peoples’ dissatisfaction was expressed through violence, in what became the Mpondo Revolts (see also Mbeki 1984).

When I began my doctoral work in Lusikisiki in Eastern Pondoland, my brief introduction to the Mpondo in general were writings by Hunter (1979), Beinart (1982), Mbeki (1984), Kuckertz (1990) and
Hendricks (1991). These writings, which focused on the periods before and during apartheid rule, encouraged me to research post-apartheid dynamics in regard to the relationship between rural governance, land-use planning, and livelihood activities in Khanyayo village, Eastern Pondoland. The research data on which this chapter is based was collected over several years, initially beginning with a nine-month full-time residence in Khanyayo, and followed by regular visits to the same village and the nearby Lambasi area since then, up to August 2009. Local land-use planning and village administration histories were investigated mainly through archives (Cape Town Archives), interviews with local people, as well as other secondary material. Details about contemporary land, livelihoods, and natural resource use and management issues were collected using a range of methods, which included life histories, semi-structured interviews, transect walks, and participant observations (see Kepe 1997; 2005a; 2005b; 2008).

Many years since my initial research in Pondoland, the two contrasting reactions to outsider intervention by the Mpondo, which I have mentioned above, can still be observed. While conducting several research projects in Lusikisiki, Flagstaff, Bizana, and Port St Johns, I remained curious to understand why the rural Mpondo showed discontent, and often violent reactions, to some outsider interventions affecting their livelihoods, but appeared passive or resigned in some cases that, to other observers, deserved strong responses of disapproval. In all these musings I have tried to use the Mpondo Revolts as a point of reference. To reflect on this issue I draw from my field research in Khanyayo and Lambasi areas in Lusikisiki. I do this by using the case of land and resource rights, as well as land reform in these areas. But before I proceed with the discussion on cases of discontent and apathy concerning land reform, I believe it is important to briefly share the story of my first few days in Khanyayo village, where I quickly learned that the Mpondo Revolts were still a recent powerful presence among the people.

‘Who gave you authority to come here?’

One Monday in April 1996, I drove for four hours from Mthatha to Khanyayo village, with the hope of being accepted by villagers to spend a year with them, doing research on land and natural resource rights. The people I met by the side of the road within the village advised that I talk to the different leaders, including the local headman and