

Dealing with a hot potato: The commemoration of the 1959 “Potato Boycott”

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The year 2009 marked the 50th commemoration of the so-called “Potato Boycott”. This celebration, not unlike the boycott itself, was shrouded in controversy. While the Mpumalanga provincial government appeared to initiate premature celebrations, the event itself was compounded by various misunderstandings and conflicting interpretations. This article will not only analyse the contested nature of the recent commemoration, but also consider the complexity of the 1959 boycott itself.

The controversy of commemorating

The past decade in South Africa has witnessed marked attempts at government level to re-address the South African past. The concern has been to ensure that the stories of previously marginalised groups are given their rightful place in the broader historical narrative of what is considered a more inclusive approach to dealing with South African history. These projects took on various guises, including the unveiling of statues of struggle heroes; the re-naming of geographical place names; the commissioning of publications highlighting previously untold stories; and building new museums, heritage parks and exhibitions.

Taking this reality into consideration, one should not ignore the fact that much of this history has always been part of the diverse and divided discourse on South Africa’s past. However, the emphasis has been to put this history specifically in the public domain and to ensure that these narratives become part of public history. Various academics, especially those interested in the fields of history and heritage, have written on issues relating to these processes over the past two decades.¹ Gary Baines points out that public history is a particularly “contested terrain” and it is here that “battles over [the] meaning of the past are being and will continue to be waged in contemporary society”.² One of the main reasons for the contested nature of public history is the fact that so many role players, including politicians, the media, cultural

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1 See for example: G Baines, “The Politics of Public History in Post-Apartheid South Africa”, in H E Stolten (ed), *History Making and Present Day Politics: The Meaning of Collective Memory in South Africa* (Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala, 2007), pp 167–182; C Hamilton, “The Future of the Past: New Trajectories”, *South African Historical Journal*, 35, 1996, pp 146–148; T Nuttall and J Wright, “Probing the Predicaments of Academic History in Contemporary South Africa”, *South African Historical Journal*, 42, 2000, pp 26–48; S Nuttall and C Coetzee (eds), *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory on South Africa* (Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1998); C Rasool, “The Rise of Heritage and the Reconstruction of History in South Africa”, *Kronos*, 26, 2000, pp 1–21; L Waldman, “The Past: Who Owns It and What Should We Do About It?” *South African Historical Journal*, 35, 1996, pp 149–154; L Witz and C Rasool, “The Dog, the Rabbit and the Reluctant Historians”, *South African Historical Journal*, 27, 1992, pp 238–242

2 Baines, “The Politics of Public History”, p 167

brokers, museum, heritage and tourism practitioners, and also the public at large, are involved in shaping memory of the past and enforcing their own views and interpretations onto the present.³

Added to this conundrum is the fact that history and memory are contested definitions. Each represents fundamentally and inherently different interpretations of the past, but at the same time, they have numerous similarities.⁴ John Tosh perceptively explains that it is not always easy to distinguish between history and social memory as “historians perform some of the tasks of social memory”.⁵ Although academic historians might distance themselves from the “misrepresentations” that are part and parcel of social memory, there is also no denying that memory continues to serve a fundamental role in society.⁶

Baines defines public memory as “a body of beliefs and ideas about the past that help a public or society understand both its past, present, and by implication, its future”.⁷ Nevertheless, he also points out that the interpretation of public memory deals very little with matters concerning the past and much more with issues “such as the nature of power and the question of loyalty to both dominant and subordinate cultures” in the present.⁸ There is no denying that South Africa remains divided in its cultural diversity and its heritage. It is admirable and necessary that the post-apartheid government has tried to shape the South African past into a more diverse and encompassing story to be shared as a new collective, albeit conflicting, national memory. It is, however, disheartening that the past, as was the case with the previous regime, is still used and manipulated by the government for purposes that fit ulterior motives. Despite these concerns, it remains a fact that politics will inevitably always be intertwined with public history. David Glassberg expresses this as follows:

Few can deny that the question of whose version of history gets institutionalized and disseminated as the public history is a political one, and that public history embodies not only ideas about history – the relation of past, present, and future – but also ideas about the public – the relationship of diverse groups in political society⁹

Commemoration, corruption and confusion

It therefore follows that commemoration of a historical event will always elicit some form of controversy and debate. The 1959 Potato Boycott is no exception. In a recent magazine advertisement issued by the Mpumalanga government’s Department of Culture, Sport and Recreation (DCSR) to commemorate the life of African National Congress (ANC) stalwart Gert Sibande and the Potato Boycott, it is said of Sibande: “This man brought South Africa’s economy to a grinding halt in the 1950s – using a

3 Baines, “The Politics of Public History”, p 167

4 Baines, “The Politics of Public History”, p 168

5 J Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (Pearson Longman, London, 2006), p 23

6 Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*, p 23

7 Baines, “The Politics of Public History”, p 168

8 Baines, “The Politics of Public History”, p 169

9 Glassberg, “Public History and the Study of Memory”, *The Public Historian*, 18, 2, 1996, p

single potato.”¹⁰ This eye-catching statement is a historical fabrication, but in terms of commemoration, the veracity of the statement is far more complex. Although commemoration deals with issues of the past, it does not always deal with “truth” or “actuality”. Commemoration is based on conflicting interpretations of selected past memories and more concerned and rooted in the legitimisation and justification of present day realities.

The commemoration of the Potato Boycott, and consequently then the celebration of the life of Gert Sibande, can be regarded as an example of how remembrance can be misconstrued. It reflects the polarisation that often accompanies commemoration in diverse communities. In addition, reflections on the boycott are clouded by various and complex guises. It embodies the usual debate that accompanies memorialisation, but it also speaks to the never-ending contestation between emphasis on historical veracity and historical mythmaking when it comes to remembering and celebrating the past.

In this instance, one would assume that the most uncontroversial, even incontestable aspect would be the date of the commemoration. The boycott was called out at the end of May 1959 and ended in September of that same year. Thus, when in May 2008 the Mpumalanga MEC for the DCSR, J.L. Mahlangu, held a media briefing and informed journalists that 2008 marked the 50th celebration of the Potato Boycott,¹¹ the first error was placed in the public domain. Furthermore, no one in the department attempted to rectify this embarrassing mistake. Successive newspaper articles and speeches delivered by government dignitaries on the commemoration of the event continued to perpetuate the error that the boycott had taken place in 1958. This glaring inaccuracy is also (quite literally) cast in stone as part of the epitaph on the statue erected for Gert Sibande in Bethal.¹²

MEC Mahlangu announced that the boycott would be commemorated with several initiatives. The Bethal Museum would be upgraded and statues of several ANC heroes, including Gert Sibande, would be erected. This project was to be unveiled on 24 September 2008. The MEC also announced that a “theatrical play

10 *Capital Magazine*, Facebook page, “Advertising that Tells Meaningful Stories”, at <http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?pid=3734627&id=240198900193> (accessed June 2010)

11 Mpumalanga MEC for Culture, Sport and Recreation, J.L. Mahlangu: media briefing statement, Nelspruit, 12 May 2008, available at <http://www.polity.org.za/article/sa-mahlangu-mediabriefing-on-culture-sport-and-recreation-overview-and-way-forward12052008-2008-05-12> (accessed October 2008)

12 The epitaph reads: “Gert Sibande: ‘The Lion of the East’ – Born in 1901 on a farm near Oshoek, died in 1987 at Manzini Swaziland aged 85 He is survived by Dumazile Zwane, Minah Dlamini, Elisabeth Sibande, Leroy Musa Sibande and Bethuel Mfanufikile Sibande He campaigned against racist and harsh treatment of farm labourers in Bethal, Trichardt, Lesley, Standerton, Piet Retief, Nigel, Wakkerstroom, Volksrust and Pongola As Chairman of the Bethal branch of the African National Congress from 1942, he collaborated with the progressive journalist, Ruth First and the Anglican priest, Mike Scott in 1947, in exposing the prison working conditions at Bethal This led to the historical and successful Bethal Potato Boycott of 1958, led by the Congress Alliance and SACTU He was banished from Bethal in 1953, charged with treason in 1956, and was elected Transvaal President of the ANC in 1958 Gert was then banished to Mbuzini, near Komatipoort, and later left for exile in Swaziland He became instrumental in creating the underground passage of Umkhonto we Sizwe guerrillas from Mozambique, through Swaziland, into apartheid South Africa A loving, caring and humble person, Gert dedicated his life entirely to the freedom of Black and White South Africans”

about the 50-year anniversary of the Potato Boycott”, had been commissioned to highlight the “social and political injustices” farm workers had suffered in the past.¹³ Although the MEC did not directly mention that the play would also be about the life of ANC stalwart, Gert Sibande, he added that:

Sibande played an important role during the struggle against apartheid and he led the famous Potato Boycott ... we must honour this hero ... who sacrificed a lot for the freedom that we enjoy today¹⁴

However, a month later, the political ramifications of the 2007 ANC Polokwane Conference filtered through to Mpumalanga. In a cabinet reshuffle, Dina Pule replaced Mahlangu as MEC of the DCSR.¹⁵ At an address to the provincial legislature on 24 June 2008, outlining her department’s policy and budget for the period 2008/2009, the newly appointed MEC gave a more streamlined version of the proposed celebration. Only statues of Sibande and one Slim Dick Simelane would be erected. She added that the statue of Sibande would be “larger than life” and that no less than R2.5 million had been budgeted for an imposing “king size statue”.¹⁶

Following the MEC’s speech it was made known that actor, playwright, director and musician, Mbongeni Ngema, had been commissioned to write and produce a musical on the potato boycott and that the play was to be about the life of Gert Sibande and his role in the boycott. The title of the play was to be: “Lion of the East: Gert Sibande and the Potato Boycott”. On Sibande, Ngema proclaimed: “Prior to the potato boycott, farm labourers were treated like slaves and it took this brave man’s determination to free the people.”¹⁷

The stage was thus set for the celebration but when the curtains opened and the musical made its initial debut as part of the planned line-up in the commemoration proceedings, they did so in the midst of a political controversy. It was revealed that R22 million had been budgeted by the Mpumalanga government for the production of the play. The DCSR defended the size of the grant, saying that the musical was to be a “huge springboard” for “local theatre talent” and would “preserve and promote local history and culture”. This formed part of the DCSR’s “mandate to protect, preserve and showcase the traditions of the province”. It was also maintained that the money would cover all expenses for accommodation, rehearsals, publicity, lighting and music. The DCSR underlined the fact that Ngema’s involvement would give the play a significant “brand” and added that the production was to tour nationally and overseas. The department also justified the project by adding: “If we don’t tell the story, who will?”¹⁸

13 Mahlangu, Media briefing statement, Nelspruit, 12 May 2008

14 Mahlangu: media briefing statement, Nelspruit, 12 May 2008

15 T E Mogakane and S Masinga, “Mpumalanga Cabinet Reshuffled”, 14 May 2008, available at <http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Politics/Mpumalanga-cabinet-reshuffled-20080514> (accessed October 2008)

16 Policy and Budget Speech 2008/2009, by MEC for Culture, Sport and Recreation, Dina Pule, Mpumalanga Provincial Legislature, Nelspruit, available at [http://www.search.gov.za/info/previewDocument.jsp?dk=%2Fdata%2Fstatic%2Finfo%2Fspeeches%2F2008%2F08070215151001.htm%40Gov&q=\(+streamlining+\)&t=D+Pule%3A+Mpumalanga+Culture+Sport+and+Recreation+Prov+Budget+Vote+2008%2F09](http://www.search.gov.za/info/previewDocument.jsp?dk=%2Fdata%2Fstatic%2Finfo%2Fspeeches%2F2008%2F08070215151001.htm%40Gov&q=(+streamlining+)&t=D+Pule%3A+Mpumalanga+Culture+Sport+and+Recreation+Prov+Budget+Vote+2008%2F09) (accessed March 2009)

17 V Dlamini, “SA’s Own Potato Story Takes to the Musical Stage”, *City Press*, 3 August 2008

18 N Tolsi, “‘Sarafina III’ a Hot Potato”, *Mail and Guardian*, 21 August 2008, p 3

Potato Boycott

From the outset, Ngema's appointment was controversial; he had a somewhat chequered past when it came to being awarded state tenders.¹⁹ Various role players within the performance industry also questioned the cost of the new musical. Bernard Jay, executive officer of the Johannesburg Civic Theatre, claimed that he had "never seen a budget that big for one show in this country".²⁰ The chief executive officer of Grahamstown's National Arts Festival, Ismail Mahomed, thought it "ridiculous" and added that "R22million would keep a number of festivals running for a number of years and create work for thousands of people". He asserted that having worked in Mpumalanga for several years he was not surprised, because "this level of miscalculation and mismanagement is standard operating procedure there".²¹

In ANC ranks there was also an uproar over the R22 million awarded to Ngema. At the party's Mpumalanga provincial conference some delegates wanted the play cancelled because "the name of Gert Sibande should not be associated with corruption". In response, Ngema said that it was "a shame that the people of Mpumalanga can think that way", and that "the ANC doesn't have shallow thinkers and this is shallow thinking, not the ANC".²² However, the Democratic Alliance (DA) and Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) also condemned the amount budgeted for the play. The IFP wanted the Mpumalanga government investigated by the Human Rights Commission as the province's people were already suffering due to poor service delivery. For its part, the DA felt that the best way to commemorate South Africa's struggle heroes would be to ensure that their vision for South Africa was realised by delivering proper services.²³ The Mpumalanga government defended its decision and the amount of money allocated to Ngema by pointing to the historical significance of Sibande and the boycott. The DCSR claimed that the play formed "part of raising awareness about heroes and heroines whose sacrifices and commitment to bring about a free South Africa have been marginalised and ignored by most of the existing historical accounts".²⁴

The play was in the headlines again when it emerged that Ngema had not entered into contracts with the play's performers. This was despite the DCSR's assurance that the play would unearth "new performing talent" from the province. The Creative Worker's Union felt that Ngema was taking advantage of the young actors, and that the performers' rights were being violated. The union added: "it is a historical fact that artists are dying poor because of exploitation". In his defence, Ngema replied that he was still in the process of selecting the final cast.²⁵ Probably more disappointing was the allegation that Ngema had not bothered to send any talent scouts to Bethal, Gert Sibande's former hometown, although auditions were held in Witbank, Ermelo and Nelspruit. Ngema again responded by saying that the final

19 Ngema had been at the centre of controversy over his previous musical, *Sarafina II*, when it emerged that the R14 27 million contract signed for this project was done without proper approval from the state tender board, and that the public protector had questioned the necessity of spending that amount of money on a single play. See: Tolsi, "Sarafina III", p 3

20 Tolsi, "Sarafina III", p 3

21 Tolsi, "Sarafina III", p 3

22 S Ndlangisa, "ANC to Grill Province over R22m Play", *City Press*, 17 August 2008, p 9

23 C Du Plessis, "'Gebruik R22M Eerder vir Water en Gesondheid': DA, IVP Raas oor Duur Struggle Blyspel", *Beeld*, 15 August 2008, p 9

24 Mpumalanga cabinet statement, at <http://www.mpumalanga.gov.za/otp/cabinet/04092008.htm> (accessed July 2009)

25 V Dlamini, "Row over 'Lion of the East' casting", *The Star*, 2 September 2008, p 3

casting for the show had not yet been completed and that there were still some openings for more performers.²⁶

It seemed that the controversy surrounding the show was finally subsiding when it was announced that the project was to be launched with a showing of video clips of the production at the Bethal Community Hall on 13 March 2009. The opening night of the full stage production was set for the following week, 20 March 2009, in Witbank.²⁷ But controversy flared up again when Gert Sibande's family obtained a court interdict against the Mpumalanga government to stop the premiere and the subsequent performance of the musical.²⁸ Battle lines were drawn between the government and Sibande's sons, Leroy and Bethual. According to Leroy, the Mpumalanga authorities had not consulted the Sibande family about the play.²⁹ The province's cultural affairs manager, Dr M. Lusibi, responded to the allegations angrily. He said Sibande's sons were "crazy", adding: "they decide to speak up now when we are about to open the show. The show will continue and they have been invited to attend".³⁰ According to Lusibi the musical was about the potato boycott and not Sibande's family. He accused the Sibande brothers of lying; the concept of the play, he claimed, had been shown to the family. He speculated that the reason behind this latest saga was money and greed on the part of Sibande's family.³¹ Leroy denied this and was adamant that the family had not been included in the pre-production process; furthermore, they had not been invited to attend the opening of the musical. The Mpumalanga government rejected these claims out of hand, saying that the DCSR had proof that the family had been consulted, and would present this evidence in court.³² In response to the latest uproar to hit his beleaguered show, Ngema indicated that it was an internal family faction fight between Sibande's children in South Africa and those he had fathered while in exile in Swaziland. Like Lusibi, he hinted that greed was behind the interdict.³³

The Pretoria High Court ruled in favour of the Mpumalanga government and set the interdict aside. Mpumalanga premier, Makwetla, announced that this decision was a victory for "strengthening efforts to protect and promote South Africa's struggle heritage", claiming that the musical "will restore the honour and dignity of the 1958 (sic) events". He added that "the skewed heritage landscape and apartheid education [has] denied the major populace, black and white, an opportunity to learn, know and celebrate our common heritage and identity".³⁴ If there is no such thing as bad publicity, then the musical surely had a good long run of free publicity. It began when the Mpumalanga government announced its intention to have the show

26 J Smith, "Mbongeni Ngema and the Potato Famine", *Saturday Weekend Argus*, 23 August 2008, p 21

27 S Panther, "Political Musical Hits a Sour Note", *The Sunday Times*, 13 March 2009, p 3

28 T E Mogakane, "Battle over Struggle Hero", NEWS 24, 11 March 2009, available at <http://www.news24.com/Entertainment/SouthAfrica/Battle-over-struggle-hero-20090310> (accessed July 2009)

29 Mogakane, "Battle over Struggle Hero"

30 Mogakane, "Battle over Struggle Hero"

31 Mogakane, "Battle over Struggle Hero"

32 Panther, "Political Musical Hits a Sour Note", p 3

33 E Sinkings, "Ngema Blasts ANC Hero's Family", *Witness*, 14 March 2009, p 6

34 "Mpumalanga Premier Thabang Makwetla Welcomes Court Ruling", 12 March 2009, at <http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2009/09031312151001.htm> (accessed July 2009)

produced, and ran virtually unabated until the show was finally performed before an audience eager to learn more about history, heritage – and a dollop of controversy.

The show, however, only had a “lukewarm reception” in Mpumalanga with the main interest coming from “government officials and school groups”.³⁵ After its initial three week run at the Witbank Theatre, the production made its way to the Nelspruit Civic Centre, where it once again became the centre of controversy. After ten performances, the show had to be cancelled due to a double booking of the theatre with a local “white high school’s choir festival”. Ngema felt that racism was to blame for the cancellation of his show.³⁶ These allegations, however, were denied by a Mbombela municipal spokesperson, J. Ngala, who claimed that the school had booked the venue a full year in advance. They had also marketed the choir performance for several months and had already sold tickets for its performances. According to Ngala the fault lay with the DCSR and Ngema who had finalised the dates of the show without consulting the municipality. Responding to the allegations that the municipality was racist for “conceding to a choir from a predominantly white school”, Ngala replied: “We would have appeared to be even more racist if we cancelled the school’s booking to accommodate Ngema’s musical.”³⁷

There was more controversy to come. When the show went to KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) it emerged that the KZN government had given Ngema a further R2.9 million to stage the production in Durban, as well as an additional R500 000 to pay for a week of rehearsals. The DA lambasted the KZN government in the press alleging that the “provincial coffers are effectively serving as Ngema’s cash cow”.³⁸ In February 2010, Ngema announced that the show would make its way to Gauteng to be performed at the State Theatre in Pretoria during the Soccer World Cup period.³⁹ However, these plans were later shelved and no reasons were provided. Ngema also claimed that the Broadway League had shown interest in taking the show to New York and that it might well be on its way to Broadway,⁴⁰ but again nothing came of this.

Historical veracity and mythmaking: Reaction to the commemoration

Arguably the commemoration of the boycott, and the life of Sibande had very little to do with remembering the past as accurately as possible. The question thus arises, was this commemoration in the service of the past or the present? The ANC government had sanctioned the commemoration and the resolution taken to celebrate this event came directly from the 2007 ANC National Conference in Polokwane. Moreover, Ngema himself admitted that the musical was “propaganda”.⁴¹

Delivering the Gert Sibande Memorial Lecture on 23 September 2008 in Secunda, Mpumalanga, the ANC president, Jacob Zuma, was keen to use the boycott

35 T E Mogakane, “Ngema Musical Cut Short but Headed for Broadway”, *The Weekender*, 16 May 2009, p 4

36 A Moselakgomo, “Ngema’s Play Booted out ...”, *Sowetan*, 6 May 2009, p 8

37 Mogakane, “Ngema Musical Cut Short”, p 4

38 N Tolsi, “Ngema Gets More Millions”, *Mail and Guardian*, 18 December 2009, p 4

39 E Tsumele, “Ngema Targets 2010”, *Sowetan*, 2 February 2010, p 14

40 Mogakane, “Ngema Musical Cut Short”, p 4

41 Tolsi, “Ngema Gets More Millions”, p 4

and Sibande's life as tools to re-confirm past alliances. He also wanted to underline the commitment of the ANC to address issues that were crucial to the party's rural voting base. Zuma declared that Sibande should be remembered as a rural activist; he would have stood for the distribution of land to rural people who were exploited by farmers. Whether Sibande actually called for "land distribution" or not, is not really the issue here. What is central is that this claim was made by the leader of the ANC; it carried weight with an audience who did not question the historical veracity of what the ANC president was saying. Within the context of the promises being made, the present was their concern; it was the present that engaged them, not the past.

If commemoration as a form of public history can provide the myths and symbols that hold diverse groups together in political society,⁴² then in this case it probably had the opposite effect. The commemoration polarised the broader South African public. Numerous examples make this apparent. With the unveiling of the Sibande statue in Bethal, the Food and Allied Workers Union used the opportunity to launch an attack on how white farmers continue to abuse black farm workers today.⁴³ In October 2008 the statue of Sibande in Bethal was painted white.⁴⁴ Premier Makwetla saw this incident as a racist attack and lashed out at white farmers, saying that the statue of Sibande should serve as a lasting and total rejection of racism and racist exploitation of farm workers. He added that "'unrepentant' racist farmers in the province were continuing to practise the same abuse that had inspired Gert Sibande and his fellow freedom fighters to rise up in Bethal 50 years ago".⁴⁵ What these events demonstrate is that audiences do tend to question the validity of past memory when it comes to the commemoration of controversial events. And as much as public history can supply the myths and symbols that forge diverse communities together, it can also widen the gap between them. It probably also re-confirms the fact that people still interpret history based primarily on social characteristics such as gender, class and race.⁴⁶

This polarisation was also evident in the reception of the controversial musical; reviewers expressed radically different opinions on its merits. One reviewer thought it "outstanding" and felt that there were scenes in the production that would stay embedded in his "consciousness". He was evidently shocked at the portrayal of the abuse suffered by the farm workers, referring to one scene that:

depicts the experience of one farm worker who tried to run away, and to stop him from trying to flee once more, his toes were sliced off in a brutal fashion Limping and desperate he was reduced to nothing His wounds became septic and he eventually died I found myself fighting off tears imagining human beings treating others in such a demeaning, thuggish and animalistic fashion⁴⁷

42 See Glassberg, "Public History and the Study of Memory", p 11

43 Speech by Katishi Masemola, Food and Allied Workers' Union and COSATU CEC member, at the unveiling of the G Sibande statue, 26 December 2008, available at <http://www.faww.org.za/show.php?include=docs/gS/2008/sp1226.html&ID=59&categ=Press%20Room> (accessed July 2009)

44 B Viljoen, "Aanval op Standbeeld 'Rassisties'", *Beeld*, 8 October 2008, p 5

45 Anon, "Makwetla Gets Excited about Gert Sibande Musical", *The Star*, 23 February 2009, p 4

46 Glassberg, "Public History and the Study of Memory", p 9

47 E Tsumele, "Ngema's Potato Musical a Winner", *Sowetan*, 27 March 2009, p 8

Another reviewer lambasted the play as ANC propaganda, describing it as “grandiose mediocrity, and electioneering masquerading as art”. He seemed to have been particularly offended by the excessive use of ANC regalia, slogans and flag waving on stage.⁴⁸ He also questioned the lack of historical portrayal, arguing that the play did not show how Sibande organised farm labourers to fight for their rights. He added that the play “certainly didn’t give any indication why such a huge production had to be made about his [Sibande’s] life”, and took Ngema to task about supposedly incorrect historical facts. He mentioned a number of inaccuracies, including the absence of Ruth First’s role and the fact that *Drum* journalist Henry Nxumalo was incorrectly portrayed as being smuggled on to the farm where Sibande allegedly worked as a labourer. The reviewer went on to accuse Ngema of being “lazy, finish and klaar”.⁴⁹

Nowhere is it apparent that Ngema went on record as saying that he had taken “artistic licence” with the storyline. Instead he was regularly quoted in the press as being the foremost “public historian” on Sibande and the boycott. Indeed, the musical is a work of fiction based on elements of past truths; yet this in itself is not controversial. The controversy is embedded in the fact that the project was marred by allegations of corruption and at times totally disregarded historical veracity, thus spreading propaganda and actively engaging in mythmaking. The danger here is that myths and propaganda have the uncanny tendency to become entrenched as historic facts in the public domain.

Historical reality and myth making: A history of abuse in Bethal, the “abode of God”

The historiography on farm labour in South Africa is wide-ranging and deals with various political, economic and social trajectories. One of the central issues has been the study of “state control” in providing farmers with cheap and plentiful labour. State intervention took various guises throughout the first half of the twentieth century, but due to various factors, has always been viewed as sporadic and indeed not very successful by farmers; they complained continuously about labour shortages.⁵⁰

After the National Party came to power in the mid-twentieth century, a radical change took place in state policy to address the shortage of farm labour. The period between 1948 and 1960 saw this issue being placed in the broader context of apartheid. The state enacted various laws and implemented other coercive measures that benefited farmers; the aim was to ensure a supply of “cheap and plentiful labour”.

48 T Makube, “ANC’s R20m Song and Dance”, *The Weekender*, 28 March 2009, p 4

49 Makube, “ANC’s R20m Song and Dance”, p 4

50 In brief, the period between 1910 and 1948 saw the passing of legislation, such as the Native Labour Regulation Act (No 15 of 1911); the Natives Land Act of 1913; the Masters and Servants (Transvaal and Natal) Amendment Act of 1926; the Native Service Contract Act in 1932; and the Native Trust and Land Act of 1936. Another measure taken to supply farmers with labour saw the establishment of labour depots in Louis Trichardt and Johannesburg in 1945, where farmers could hire “illegal immigrants” to work on farms. Also in 1947, a minor NAD official, P J de Beer, proposed a scheme whereby pass law offenders were given a choice between serving a prison sentence or accepting work in the agricultural sector for a fixed period of time. See D Duncan, “The State Divided: Farm Labour Policy in South Africa, 1924–1948”, *South African Historical Journal*, 24, 1991, p 87

By the 1960s farmers had several ways to acquire contract labour. Farmers made extensive use of recruitment agencies, and indeed formed their own agencies.⁵¹ Secondly, they could also make use of convict labour from farm prisons in what was known as the “9 pennies a day scheme”. Farmers paid the prisoners this amount at the end of their prison sentences.⁵² Farmers could also acquire labour from the various labour bureaux established throughout the Union.⁵³ An important branch of this scheme was for the police to arrest blacks for petty offences; they were then supposedly given a choice between being charged (and if found guilty, sent to gaol) or accepting work on farms. Although the petty-offenders scheme was up and running well before 1954, this particular year saw the operation of the programme extended countrywide. In drawing up General Circular No. 23 of 1954, the government made the scheme official and laid down fixed guidelines for the operation of the process. However, at the same time the state was setting itself up for unprecedented criticism – the document may have been official but its legality was highly questionable.

The circular was a collaborative effort by the Department of Justice, the South African Police (SAP) and the Native Affairs Department (NAD). It envisaged a scheme that would “induce unemployed natives ... [who were] roaming ... the streets in ... urban areas to accept employment in non-prescribed areas”.⁵⁴ The scheme would be enforced if blacks transgressed specific articles of the Native Taxation and Development Act (1925) and the Natives (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act (1945).⁵⁵ In essence, the procedure was that those arrested were not charged immediately, but were instead moved to the labour bureaux. At the bureaux, the opportunity to accept work had to be “offered”, and “priority” was given to farm labour. If the transgressor, who had the right to choose, declined this offer, he had to be returned to the SAP for prosecution.⁵⁶

The fact of the matter was that those arrested were not given the option to choose between prosecution and hard labour. Transgression of the named laws only led to a small fine and less than a month in prison. Detainees were nevertheless forced to sign three-month labour contracts on farms, a period that could become considerably longer than the face value of 90 days. Off-days, Sundays, sick-days and days “unworkable” because of the weather did not count towards completing the contract.⁵⁷ Subsequently the legality of the scheme came under increasing scrutiny. Johannesburg lawyer, Joel Carlson, explained that the scheme was “too shocking and horrible to live with. It humiliates the officers and the farmers and ruins their souls”.⁵⁸

51 UG 61/1951, *Verslag van die Department van Naturellesake vir die Jaar 1949–50* (Staatsdrukker, Pretoria, 1951), p 34

52 UG 30/1953, *Report of the Department of Native Affairs, 1950–51* (Government Printer, Pretoria, 1953), pp 19–20

53 *Report of the Department of Native Affairs, 1950–51*, p 20

54 Historical Papers Archives (hereafter HPA), University of the Witwatersrand (hereafter Wits), South African Institute of Race Relations (hereafter SAIRR), AD 2118/59, General Circular No 23 of 1954, Scheme for the Employment of Petty Offenders in Non-prescribed Areas

55 HPA, Wits, SAIRR, AD 2118/59, “General Circular No 23 of 1954

56 “General Circular No 23 of 1954

57 R First, *Exposure! The Farm Labour Scandal* (Real Print and Pub Co., Johannesburg, 1959), pp 10, 20

58 “Farm Labour System Illegal – Attorney”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 28 May 1959, p 11

Potato Boycott

The steady flow of letters from farmers, calling for more labourers, was countered and matched by letters from labourers, written to the same department, complaining of ill-treatment and abuse by their employers. The labourers' letters, often indicative of utter hopelessness and despair, made allegations of various injustices and cruelties committed on farms. A randomly selected letter, written in 1955 by labourers Jacob Makfela and Samuel Sebhedi on behalf of themselves and the other labourers on a particular farm in the Transvaal, reads as follows (quoted verbatim):

Greetings we are sorry to let you know that we are having too much complains about the company of Mr H Bladden here we are kept like dogs we think even the dogs are even better So all the servant is about fifty we are all complaining when going to work we start from four a m and the food we are eating is just rubbish and we just eat our breakfast no dinner till we are coming to eat the evening and the potatoes we are reaping we just take them out with our fingers they don't take them out with the plough then when when working we are thrashed We are working from four to six evening Then we ask for help from you we think our complains will be well received by the commissioner⁵⁹

The calls for help from farm labourers were not unique to the 1950s, but there was an increase in the number of such letters during this period. This can probably be attributed to the state's vehement clampdown on black labourers, and the implementation of measures that tied them contractually to South African farms. By the mid 1950s, allegations of abuse were sending shockwaves through the country. However, 1959 saw a Vesuvian outburst of farm labour scandal allegations. And like hot lava and volcanic ash flowing and raining down on farmers and the government alike, the allegations became an unstoppable avalanche of press exposés, court cases, protest action and commissions of enquiry.

One farming district in particular gained notoriety for farm labour abuse. Bethal, named after the wives, Eliza(beth) and (Al)ida, of the owners of the farms on which the town was established,⁶⁰ was also a biblically-inspired name, meaning the "abode of God".⁶¹ Ironically, the name of the district came to stand for the incarnation of all evil; farmers and the "bossboys" they employed were seen by labourers as "satanic usurpers" and "agents of the devil". M.J. Murray attributes Bethal's reputation to a number of factors. Firstly, commercial farmers in this area established "factories in the field" by contracting fulltime wage labourers who worked all year round in a highly productive and regulated environment. Secondly, the region was characterised by a constant appeal by farmers for more labour. Many of the farmers were not above illegally recruiting child labour and making extensive use of convicts. Most importantly, however, is that farmers in Bethal modelled their farms on the mines of the Witwatersrand. This saw the introduction of active recruiting of young men as farm labourers, housing them in barb-wired and heavily guarded compounds,

59 National Archives of South Africa, Pretoria (hereafter NASA), Central Archives Depot (hereafter SAB), Native Affairs (hereafter NTS), 2271,741/280(3), Arbeidstoestande op die Plaas Kalabasfontein, Letter dated 8 June 1955

60 D Richardson, *Historic Sites of South Africa* (Struik, Cape Town, 2001), p 252

61 M Scott, *A Time to Speak* (Faber & Faber, London, 1958), p 169 See also M J Murray, "Factories in the Fields: Capitalist Farming in the Bethal District, c 1910–1950", in A H Jeeves and J Crush (eds), *White Farms, Black Labour: The State and Agrarian Change in Southern Africa, 1910–1950* (Portsmouth, Heinemann, 1997), pp 76–77

and conferring on them an ideological subservience grounded in abusive treatment, inhumane living conditions and the exploitation of their fear.⁶²

Bethal's reputation of farm labour abuse led to an inspection of the farms in the area in 1947 by Reverend Michael Scott and journalist Ruth First.⁶³ They were seemingly met by local ANC leader, Gert Sibande, who showed them around the farms.⁶⁴ Once again the hapless and deplorable conditions suffered by farm labourers were exposed. According to Scott, the compound system was not akin to slavery; it was an even more malicious system.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Scott's allegations did nothing to bring improvements. Indeed, in 1952 the same abysmal conditions were exposed in *Drum* magazine by journalist Henry Nxumalo. He wrote an in-depth article on the treatment of farm labourers in the Bethal district.⁶⁶ He claimed that the compounds "looked much like jails: they have high walls, they are dirty, and are often so close to a cattle kraal that the labourers breathe nearly the same air as the cattle".⁶⁷ The article also published comments by Gert Sibande, by now "better known as the Lion of the East". Sibande stated categorically that he had no intention whatsoever of relenting in his crusade to improve conditions on farms. He continued to call on farmers to treat their farm workers better.⁶⁸

Reacting to this criticism, the minister of Native Affairs, H.F. Verwoerd, stated in parliament that it was a most unjust attack by the magazine and that there was no need for an enquiry into the labour system.⁶⁹ But there was ample evidence to the contrary. According to the NAD, 29 known complaints had been submitted to the department in 1951/52 by labourers who alleged suffering abuse at the hands of Bethal farmers. The farm labour inspector apparently investigated these cases, but there was no mention of a report; nor was there any response to the labourers' accusations.⁷⁰ The National Party (NP) newspaper, *Die Transvaler*, accordingly launched its own investigation into *Drum's* allegations. The paper seemingly found no grounds for the accusations made in *Drum*. The pro-NP daily claimed instead that they found neat compounds, most with showers and other amenities, good food and contented farm workers.⁷¹

Bethal may have had a reputation that put the "system of slavery to shame", but by the late 1950s it was not unique in this respect. The cries of exploitation resounded throughout the Eastern Transvaal highveld; the only difference was that now the exposés had gained another dimension. Instead of just focusing on the abuse, a vehement attack was launched by the leftist and liberal press, with the support of

62 Murray, "Factories in the Fields", pp 76–77

63 M Benson, *South Africa: The Struggle for a Birthright* (Penguin Books, London, 1966), p 115; A Yates and L Chester, *The Troublemaker: Michael Scott and his Lonely Struggle against Injustice* (Aurum, London, 2006), p 70

64 Benson, *Struggle for a Birthright*, p 115

65 Scott, *A Time to Speak*, p 179

66 A Sampson, *Drum: The Making of a Magazine* (Jonathan Ball, Johannesburg and Cape Town, 2004) p 23

67 Sampson, *Drum*, p 23

68 H Nxumalo, "Bethal Today: *Drum's* Fearless Exposure of Human Exploitation", *Drum*, March 1952, p 8

69 Sampson, *Drum*, p 32

70 Parliamentary Debates (*Hansard*), vol 77, 7 March 1952, col 2655

71 "Boere Gebelgd oor Stories", *Die Transvaler*, 25 March 1952, p 5

various other organisations, on the legality of the farm labour scheme. By attacking the roots of the system it was hoped that the trunk and branches of molestation would finally be felled.

Accusations, demands and repercussions: Media hype and parliamentary furor

The South African press led the charge, armed with their respective liberal, leftist and conservative pro-NP weaponry. The *Rand Daily Mail* published an editorial in which it defended, but also questioned, some aspects of the scheme:

The farm labour scheme itself is not necessarily wrong merely because it is badly – and in some instances inhumanly carried out. There is, on the face of it good sense in giving a man the option of working on a farm for pay as an alternative to going to gaol or of being fined. But officials should satisfy themselves that he knows the full implications of his choice, and there should be no effort to coerce him. The evidence so far points to a good deal of what looks remarkably like railroading.⁷²

Neither the farmers nor the government saw the reporting on the scheme by the English press as objective. In an angry letter to the *Rand Daily Mail*, one farmer wrote that although he was not an NP supporter, he felt that the paper was biased in its reporting. He further added that most of the men arrested under the scheme were “tsotsies (sic) [who] won’t work” and this made it mandatory to lock them up.⁷³ In parliament the minister of Bantu Administration and Development, M.C.D. de Wet Nel, accused the opposition of enticing the English press into subjective, biased reporting.⁷⁴

If the liberal English press took a critical and sympathetic stance on the issue, the leftist communist paper, *New Age*, undertook to expose every alleged abuse, murder and irregularity with ardour. The editor of the paper, Ruth First,⁷⁵ again took a personal interest; she published a pamphlet in 1959 entitled: *Exposure! The Farm Labour Scandal*, in which she explained the workings of the scheme. She also educated the labourers on their rights should they find themselves caught up in the unrelenting clutches of this controversial system.⁷⁶ As the scheme began to unravel and more cases of maltreatment came under the spotlight, *New Age* continued to report on the plight of farm workers in South Africa.

The conservative Afrikaans press responded to the allegations by highlighting the official government stance on the issue and focused on showing the “positive aspects” of the scheme. *Die Vaderland* instigated its own investigation. In one of their self-professed major scoops, they reported that black labourers exploited the situation by periodically staying away from their jobs; when they returned they said that the farm labour scheme was to blame for their absence. They claimed that they were

72 “That Farm Labour”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 May 1959, p 8

73 Letter: M E Jorsh, “200 Farm Hands Deserted Him”, *Rand Daily Mail*, 24 June 1959, p 4

74 *Hansard*, vol 102, 16 June 1959, col 8575

75 First was married to South African Communist Party leader, Joe Slovo, and was assassinated by the South African security police in 1982

76 First, *Exposure!* p 7

arrested and sent to farms, but managed to escape and make their way back to town on foot.⁷⁷

The Black Sash, a liberal women's organisation that took a keen interest in exposing atrocities under the farm labour scheme, was also assailed in *Die Vaderland* when certain claims the women made proved false.⁷⁸ *Die Vaderland* was gleeful to have a little exposure of its own. M. Blaine, the Black Sash president, claimed there was a "cage" at the Wynberg Labour Bureau in which blacks were cooped up while awaiting collection by farmers.⁷⁹ However, an investigation by *Die Vaderland*, showed that the supposed "martelhof" (torture cage), was in fact a fenced-in courtyard between the holding cell of the Wynberg police station and the adjoining magistrate's court. Nor was the "cage" at the Labour Bureau offices as Blaine had asserted.⁸⁰ She later attributed the mistake to a "black" constable who directed her towards "the cage" when she asked for directions to the Labour Bureau.⁸¹

The Afrikaans press was not only critical of the alleged scandals. *Die Landbouweekblad*, a leading weekly farmers' periodical, refrained from publishing any articles acknowledging the volatile farm labour situation, but Reverend E.H. Botha, in his weekly column in the periodical, dared to suggest that farmers should treat their workers with "more dignity and respect".⁸² Botha's insinuations elicited livid reactions from farmers, who in no uncertain terms told him to restrict himself to matters of the church and keep his nose out of farming and the relationship between farmers and their workers.⁸³

While the media hype persisted, there was also a parallel political furore in parliament. Minister de Wet Nel was outraged by the turn of events on the farm labour accusations. Defending farmers in parliament, he singled out the English press and the Black Sash as the main antagonists, claiming that the Black Sash in particular was "busy painting South Africa black".⁸⁴ He also lauded the farmers in paternalist rhetoric, adding:

There is not a single section of the population that treats its servants as justly, humanely and reasonably as the farmers do. There is a personal relationship between employer and employee. Not only do farmers take the worker on, but his family also lives on the farm. They provide for the wives and the children. They feel it is part of their responsibility. Farmers see to the clothing, food and medical requirements of these people.⁸⁵

77 "Bantoes Hou Vakansie: Kla hulle is Onwettig na Plase Gestuur", *Die Vaderland*, 9 June 1959, p 1

78 "Black Sash is to Probe Farm Labour System", *Rand Daily Mail*, 21 May 1959, p 1

79 "Black Sash vs *Die Vaderland*: Verhaal van Traliehof", *Die Vaderland*, 5 June 1959, p 8

80 "Die Martelhof van Wynberg. Ons Daag die Black Sash uit: Erken dat julle 'n Bok Geskiet het", *Die Vaderland*, 5 June 1959, p 8

81 "Die Martelhof van Wynberg", p 8

82 "Handel ek Reg?", *Die Landbouweekblad*, 1 September 1959, p 75

83 Letters: S J Geldenhuys, "Hoe Behandel Ons Boere hul Arbeiders?"; and D P Toit, "Handel ek Reg?", *Die Landbouweekblad*, 22 September 1959, p 11

84 *Hansard*, vol 102, 16 June 1959, col 8575 Translated from the original Afrikaans

85 *Hansard*, vol 102, 16 June 1959, col 8575 Translated from the original Afrikaans

However, the minister did go on to concede that there were farmers who abused their workers.⁸⁶ The United Party (UP) launched snarling attacks on the minister's paternalist rhetoric; the farm labour system; and the Department of Bantu Administration and Development's (BADD) ineptness in giving account of the scheme.⁸⁷ *Die Transvaler* in turn accused the UP of malicious jealousy, because farmers supported the NP rather than the UP. The newspaper went on to issue a stern warning to farmers that should they withdraw their votes from the NP, the UP would surely destroy their integrity.⁸⁸

The debates in the House of Assembly took an even more dramatic and prejudiced turn; certain NP members adopted an anti-Semitic stance in defending farmers. Helen Suzman, opposition MP for Houghton, and Dr Boris Wilson, opposition MP for Hospitaal, were subjected to racist attacks in a parliamentary debate that raged for more than four and a half hours. Suzman was told: "you should be saying that in a Johannesburg synagogue, not in this House." These remarks emerged when it was established that some of the farmers who were subjected to *habeas corpus* cases were Jewish.⁸⁹ The vehement attacks in parliament only served to contribute to an unavoidable outcome – the farm labour scheme was showing signs of crumbling.

At the beginning of June 1959, an official from the BADD still maintained that the only flaw in the farm labour scheme was that there was no guarantee that once taken to a farm, a worker would receive good treatment.⁹⁰ However, the situation took a dramatic turn when the BADD deputy minister, F.E. Mentz, stated in the House of Assembly that "not a single Native is working as a farm labourer in lieu of prosecution for minor offences".⁹¹ According to Mentz, the blacks reported at labour bureaux of their own accord and the police merely referred them there.⁹² An outrage followed because this statement was riddled with misrepresentations. Lawyer Joel Carlson protested that the "statement is contrary to all the accumulated evidence on the farm labour scheme and in conflict with countless affidavits presented to the courts".⁹³ But more significantly, it contradicted General Circular No. 23 of 1954 that clearly explained the operation of the scheme.

In another twist of events, farmers started returning labourers to the bureaux.⁹⁴ Some farmers saw themselves as the real victims of the unfolding drama.⁹⁵ The high rate of absconding and the possibility of being dragged into lengthy, expensive legal battles placed further pressure on them and encouraged farmers to release their

86 *Hansard*, vol 102, 16 June 1959, col 8575

87 "V P se Skandalige Aanval op Boere in Volksraad", *Die Transvaler*, 18 June 1959, p 10

88 "Skandalige Aanval op Boere", p 10

89 "Nat Attack on Wilson and Mrs Suzman", p 1; "Mrs Suzman Condemns Farm Labour Scheme", *Rand Daily Mail*, 18 June 1959, p 2

90 "Flaw in System, Says Official", *Rand Daily Mail*, 28 May 1959, p 11

91 "Statement by Mentz Causes Resentment", *The Star*, 8 June 1959, p 1

92 "Aantygings Ontken: Mnr Mentz Verdedig Skema van Plaasarbeid in Raad", *Die Vaderland*, 5 June 1959

93 "Statement by Mentz Causes Resentment", p 1

94 "Farmers Bring Natives Back by Lorry Load", *The Star*, 8 June 1959, p 1; "Farm Slave Scheme Cracks: Some Farmers Release All their Workers", *New Age*, 11 June 1959, p 1

95 "Farmers Bring Natives Back", p 1

workers.⁹⁶ The BADD reported that the supply of farm labourers was rapidly drying up at the regional offices in Johannesburg and Alexandra. Where the bureaux were usually able to supply on average 100 to 200 workers each month, it had become increasingly difficult to find labourers who were prepared to work on farms.⁹⁷

The next crippling blow came when the scheme's legality was questioned in court. In one of numerous court cases a farm labourer, W. Dube, testified that he was not given the option to turn down farm labour; he claimed he was forced to put his thumb print on a contract.⁹⁸ The judge was incensed and demanded to be told of the statutory authority behind the farm labour scheme. The Bantu commissioner hesitantly replied that it operated on a voluntary basis, but added that there might be a slight technical illegality in the scheme. The judge was outraged, snapping back: "in law there are no grades of legality. A thing is legal or illegal". The commissioner did his best to divert the responsibility away from the BADD, blaming the SAP for irregularities in the scheme.⁹⁹ But this assertion clearly lacked validity. At an interdepartmental conference in 1950 the SAP had informed the then NAD that the scheme had no legal justification because once an arrest was made according to law, the detainee had to be charged and appear in court.¹⁰⁰ By 1958, there were already signs of irritation among certain SAP officials when the deputy commissioners of Natal and Kimberley expressed their dissatisfaction with the scheme, saying that it was not only a waste of state resources but that blacks also viewed it as forced labour.¹⁰¹ The deputy commissioner of the Transvaal also hinted at trouble ahead when he said that the controversial farm labour scheme could have profoundly negative consequences for the state.¹⁰²

On 16 June 1959, the state scrapped the scheme. Its suspension led to a torrent of court applications from workers who demanded their release from their contracts. In the beginning of August the BADD issued a statement to farmers instructing them to release all labourers employed under the scheme and added that if the labourers requested to remain on the farms, a new contract had to be entered into at the nearest local native commissioner's office. The BADD expressed urgency in complying with these instructions, because claims for compensation on the grounds of unlawful detention and custody could now be lodged.¹⁰³ At last the battle was won, but the war was far from over.

The 1959 Potato Boycott

Importantly, there are primary sources in the National Archives in Pretoria that refer to this particular boycott, while there are also relevant documents in the collection

96 "Farm Slave Scheme Cracks", p 1

97 "No Natives for Farm Labour", *The Star*, 11 June 1959, p 1

98 "Native Says he was Not Given Option", *The Star*, 11 June 1959, p 1

99 "Judge Queries Legality of Farm Labour Scheme", *New Age*, 11 June 1959, p 3

100 NASA, SAB, Commissioner of the South African Police (hereafter SAP), 495, 15/6/52/1, "Memorandum Insake Naturelle Arbeidskema", 28 February 1958, p 1

101. "Memorandum Insake Naturelle-arbeidskema", p 1

102 "Memorandum Insake Naturelle-arbeidskema", p 4

103 NASA, SAB, NTS, 2348, 1110/280, "Instromingsbeheer en die Indiensplasing van Bantoes wat in die Voorgeskrewe Gebiede – dit wil sê die Stedelike Gebiede – Onregmatig is", 16 June 1959

compiled by Thomas Karis and Gail Gerhart.¹⁰⁴ However, it is interesting to note that there are very few studies on African protest and boycotts in South Africa that make more than passing reference to the Potato Boycott of 1959. It is mentioned in Jackie Grobler's *A Decisive Clash?*,¹⁰⁵ in which the author concludes that the potato boycott can be seen as a form of protest that sought to place local grievances in the wider context of discriminatory practices against blacks. More recently, Billy Nair touches on the boycott in a chapter, "Through the Eyes of the Workers",¹⁰⁶ He provides a brief account and mentions it along with other examples of boycott and resistance activity undertaken by black workers. The boycott is also discussed in the chapter: "The Politics of Resistance: 1948–1990", written by Paul Holden and Sello Mathabatha.¹⁰⁷

In May 1959, a fortnight before the farm labour scheme was suspended, ANC activist, Robert Resha¹⁰⁸ called out a potato boycott at the ANC's national Anti-Pass Conference in Johannesburg.¹⁰⁹ Emotions were running high because the conference coincided with the banning of ANC president, Chief Albert J. Luthe.¹¹⁰ A call was made to black people to withhold their purchasing power from particular retail establishments and specifically not to buy potatoes.¹¹¹ It was claimed that black economic power could become a "devastating weapon" because blacks contributed about £400 million to South Africa's economy on an annual basis.¹¹²

The boycott was not an immediate success. Newspapers reported that blacks were still buying potatoes at the markets for some time after the embargo commenced.¹¹³ *Die Vaderland* swiftly resorted to stereotypical dogma, saying that the lack of interest in the boycott was because black people loved to eat fish and chips, and this seemed to be outweighing the authority of the ANC and its call for the boycott.¹¹⁴ However, the campaign began to gain momentum after several protest marches to markets in Johannesburg. Dressed in hessian sacks and with potato necklaces strung around their necks, boycott supporters paraded through the streets with banners stating: "Potatoes are produced with slave labour" and "Don't eat potatoes – Don't buy chips".¹¹⁵ The National Party again downplayed the situation, reporting that the parade drew only a few protesters and elicited little public support.¹¹⁶

104 T G Karis and G M Gerhart (eds), *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa 1882–1964, Volume 3, Challenge and Violence 1953–1964* (Hoover Institution Press, Stanford, 1977)

105. J Grobler, *A Decisive Clash? A Short History of Black Protest Politics in South Africa, 1875–1976* (Acacia, Pretoria, 1988)

106 See B Nair, *Reflections in Prison: Voices from the South African Liberation Struggle* (University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst and Boston, 2001)

107 P Holden and S Mathabatha, "The Politics of Resistance: 1948–1990", in P Delius (ed), *Mpumalanga: History and Heritage* (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Scottsville, 2007)

108 Karis and Gerhart (eds), *Challenge and Violence*, p 292

109 "Potato Boycott Launched", *New Age*, 4 June 1959, p 1; Karis and Gerhart (eds), *Challenge and Violence*, p 292

110 "Potato Boycott Launched", p 1

111 "ANC Call for Ban on Buying of Potatoes", *Rand Daily Mail*, 1 June 1959, p 1

112 "Potato Boycott Launched", p 1

113 "No Potato Boycott Here", *The Star*, 2 June 1959, p 5

114 "Bantoeliefde vir 'Fish and Chips' vs Boikot", *Die Vaderland*, 2 June 1959, p 3

115 "Boycott Parade with Necklaces of – Potatoes", *The Star*, 15 June 1959, p 3

116 "Die Aartappel-betoging Lewer net Pap Patat", *Die Transvaler*, 16 June 1959, p 7

The *Rand Daily Mail*, on the other hand, reported on the success of the boycott, claiming it was particularly effective in Johannesburg. The market master, R. Thurgood, expressed his concern that neither blacks nor buyers catering for black areas were purchasing potatoes; he put this down to threats and intimidation.¹¹⁷ But again, the conservative press, notably *Die Transvaler*, reported that the boycott was having very little effect on markets. According to the Potato Board, the harvest quality of the season was poor and if there was indeed an over supply it was not because blacks were withholding their purchasing power, but because there was an increase in second and third-rate spuds on the markets anyway. The report added that fish and chip shops were not reporting any decrease in sales.¹¹⁸ The *Rand Daily Mail* contradicted this; seemingly the Potato Board had been buying large quantities of potatoes for export to clear the surplus. The *Mail* also reported that an 80 per cent decrease in the sale of chips from fast-food shops had been reported in Johannesburg's industrial areas.¹¹⁹

At the beginning of July, *Die Vaderland* was adamant that the boycott had fizzled out with little success.¹²⁰ *New Age*, however, highlighted its success, claiming that there were signs that the embargo was spreading to Port Elizabeth.¹²¹ As for the ANC, it enthused that the boycott had proved so effective that it should be continued.¹²² Nevertheless, it realised that the campaign could not go on indefinitely, commenting:

the boycott has no doubt been a success [but] a boycott of potatoes is not a boycott of nationalist products and, secondly, a boycott of potatoes cannot have serious economic consequences for farmers who can change their crops and resort to non-boycotted crops¹²³

The boycott had a direct impact on the Potato Board's "stabilisation scheme". In accordance with this policy, lower grade spuds were subsidised and sold in black areas, the reserves and townships. This was a means for the board to rid the market of surplus third-class potatoes.¹²⁴ The over-supply to markets with lower grade potatoes became a crisis towards the end of August. The board noted with alarm that the usual offset points for its stabilisation scheme in black townships near Johannesburg and Pretoria were inaccessible. It was proposed that a "buy one get one free" scheme should be launched to boost the sale of potatoes there.¹²⁵ At the end of September, the board instituted a marketing embargo on all third-grade potatoes in the Union and advised farmers not to send third grade spuds to markets.¹²⁶

117 "Boycott Hits Potato Sales", *Rand Daily Mail*, 17 June 1959, p 1

118 "Aartappelboikot Raak Boere se Markte Skaars", *Die Transvaler*, 18 June 1959, p 3

119 "Potato Board Buying Eases Selling", *Rand Daily Mail*, 24 June 1959, p 1

120 "ANC Boikot Sterf na Drie Weke", *Die Vaderland*, 1 July 1959, p 1

121 "Potatoes: Supply Good, Demand Poor", *New Age*, 25 June 1959, p 5

122 "Potato Boycott is so Successful it Must Continue", *New Age*, 2 July 1959, p 1

123 "Potato Boycott to Continue: May End in Sept", *New Age*, 20 August 1959, p 1

124 NASA, SAB, Chief, Division of Commodity Services (hereafter LKD), KD32/1, Aartappelraad vergadering, notules en kennisgewings van vergaderings: Notule van vergadering van uitvoerende komitee gehou te Pretoria op 22 en 23 Junie 1959, pp 10-11

125 NASA, SAB, LKD, KD 32/1, Notule van vergadering van die uitvoerende raad gehou te Pretoria op 30 Julie 1959, p 3

126 NASA, SAB, LKD, KD 32/2, Notule van spesiale vergadering van die volle raad gehou te Pretoria op Vrydag 28 Augustus 1959, p 2

On 31 August 1959 the ANC called off the boycott.¹²⁷ Luthuli thanked all those who had participated in the campaign, adding: “I hope those white farmers of South Africa who are guilty of treating their African workers in atrocious ways will repent ... respect for moral standards of behaviour demands this of them”.¹²⁸ The ANC realised that the boycott had not changed farm labour conditions substantially; it did, however, unite people across South Africa in protesting for a common goal and purpose.¹²⁹

According to the government, the boycott was an abject failure. In its *State of the Union* report, mention was made that the boycott was confined to the urban townships of the Witwatersrand and that the Potato Board had sold a record quantity of potatoes to black areas.¹³⁰ This was not only denied by various newspapers, but was contradicted by the Potato Board itself in its attempts to manage the crisis. Adding further insult to injury, *Die Landbouweekblad* published an article informing farmers that potatoes made good feed for their livestock and the Potato Board endorsed this by encouraging farmers to buy spuds as feed.¹³¹ It was even decided that should the boycott be resumed, the Board would have to take more drastic measures to prevent the crisis it might face in the coming months.¹³²

Conclusion

Many of the statements made by politicians, journalists and other role players on the commemoration of the boycott are inaccurate and at worst border on severe exaggeration if not fabrication. For example, to claim that Gert Sibande “brought South Africa’s economy to a grinding halt in the 1950s – using a single potato” makes for a powerful metaphor and for great political grandstanding, but appears to be unfounded.

Not much historical research has been done on Gert Sibande. From accounts largely based on obituaries and references to Sibande in Mary Benson’s *South Africa, the Struggle for a Birthright* and from a single paragraph in *From Protest and Challenge*, we can piece together the following synopsis. Gert Richard¹³³ Shadrack¹³⁴ Sibande or Nsibande,¹³⁵ was born in ca. 1901 in either the Ermelo district¹³⁶ or in

127 “Potato Boycott is Over”, *New Age*, 3 September 1959, p 1

128 “Potato Boycott is Over”, p 1

129 “Potato Boycott to Continue: May End in Sept”, p 1

130 *State of the Union 1960–61: Report, Economic, Financial, and Statistical Year-book for the Union of South Africa* (Da Gama, Johannesburg, 1961), p 228

131 “Aartappels is Goeie Veevoer”, *Die Landbouweekblad*, 6 October 1959, p 29; NASA, SAB, LKD, KD 32/1, Notule van die dertigste vergadering van volle raad gehou te Pretoria op 24 Junie 1959, p 5

132. NASA, SAB, LKD, KD 32/1, Notule van vergadering van uitvoerende komitee gehou te Pretoria op 21 en 22 September 1959, p 6

133 “Obituary: Gert Sibande”, *Sechaba*, 6, 1987, p 31

134 M Suttner, “Gert Sibande: Friend of the Farm Workers”, *Weekly Mail*, 12 February 1987, p 16

135 “Obituary: Gert Sibande”, p 31

136 Benson, *Struggle for a Birthright*, p 115; Yates and Chester, *Troublemaker*, p 70; T Karis and G M Carter (eds), *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa 1882–1964, Volume 4, Political Profiles, 1882–1964* (Hoover Institution Press,

Swaziland.¹³⁷ The son of farm labour tenants, he became a farm labourer himself at the age of fifteen, but seldom stayed for more than a year on any one farm. In the early 1930s he moved to Bethal and founded a Farm Workers' Association. Its main objective was to protect labour tenants whose crops were being confiscated by farmers. Having little success with this venture, Sibande joined the ANC and established an ANC branch in Bethal.¹³⁸ Due to his role in the ANC and some of the trade unions in the Eastern Transvaal, he came to be nicknamed "Lion of the East".¹³⁹ Various accounts make mention of Sibande's early efforts to expose the abuse suffered by farm labourers with the help of Michael Scott and Ruth First in 1947,¹⁴⁰ and then in 1952 with Henry Nxumalo.¹⁴¹ Sibande was banned from Bethal in 1953,¹⁴² and moved to Evaton near Vereeniging.¹⁴³ In 1956 he was detained and subsequently charged with treason. He was elected provincial president of the Transvaal ANC in November 1958. After being acquitted with the other accused in the lengthy Treason Trial, he was then banned to Komatipoort. He went into exile in Swaziland,¹⁴⁴ where he died in 1987.¹⁴⁵

Did Gert Sibande play a prominent role in the 1959 Potato Boycott? The claims that he called out the boycott and led it from Bethal seem to be based primarily on deliberate attempts to provide a direct link between the commemoration of the boycott and Sibande. Limited information points to the fact that it was Robert Resha who launched the boycott at the National Anti-Pass Conference at the end of May 1959.¹⁴⁶ Based on the sources that we have available on the life of Sibande, even if he did orchestrate the boycott, it was certainly not initiated in Bethal, as is engraved on the epitaph at the base of his statue. Nevertheless, even if there is no direct link between Sibande and the boycott, one can certainly argue that his life's work in trying to expose the harsh conditions under which farm workers toiled was one of the factors that ultimately led to the boycott.

The flagrant misinformation on Sibande's life (specifically his portrayal in the musical) had one journalist writing that Sibande was given the nickname "Lion of the East" due to

a scenario similar to the Biblical story of Daniel in the Lion's den. Beaten and broken by the police, he was left to die in a forest inhabited by lions. In what was considered a miraculous event, he emerged unscathed four days later, the lions having given up and departed after having sat and watched him for most of the time.¹⁴⁷

Stanford, 1977), p 140; Suttner, "Gert Sibande", p 16; Holden and Mathabatha, "The Politics of Resistance: 1948–1990"

137 "Obituary: Gert Sibande", p 31

138 "Obituary: Gert Sibande", p 31; Suttner, "Gert Sibande", p 16

139 Karis and Carter (eds), *Political Profiles*, p 140; "Obituary: Gert Sibande", p 31

140. Benson, *Struggle for a Birthright*, p 115; Yates and Chester, *Troublemaker*, p 70; Karis and Carter (eds), *Political Profiles*, p 140

141 Suttner, "Gert Sibande", p 16; Holden and Mathabatha, "Politics of Resistance", p 397

142 Karis and Carter (eds), *Political Profiles*, p 140

143 Suttner, "Gert Sibande", p 16

144 Karis and Carter (eds), *Political profiles*, p 140

145 Suttner, "Gert Sibande", p 16

146 Karis and Carter (eds), *Political Profiles*, p 292

147 C Smart, "Lion of the East", Review on Artsmart, 19 December 2009, available at http://news.artsmart.co.za/2009/12/lion-of-east_19.html (accessed June 2010)

Ngema's claim that: "Prior to the potato boycott, farm labourers were treated like slaves and it took this brave man's determination to free the people,"¹⁴⁸ is a blatant oversimplification and chooses to ignore the complex nature of a range of factors that led to a change in government policy, although not necessarily a change in the treatment of farm labourers. As pointed out, the farm labour scheme eventually floundered when the system was adjudged illegal in a court of law.

Moreover, the "people" were certainly not "freed" with the demise of the contentious farm labour system. This is evident in the state's swift amendment of the Prisons Act of 1959, thereby legalising and re-instituting the farm labour scheme. Section 20 of the new amendment made it legal for the minister of Justice to establish so-called farm colonies or prisons. Blacks who were considered "idle persons" and in transgression of the Natives (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act of 1945 could be despatched to these farm colonies "to learn habits of industry and labour". The technicalities that had plagued the previous scheme were thus removed. Transgressors would no longer be taken to the bureaus and given the "option" to work on the farms. Instead they would be arrested, charged and sentenced directly to hard labour on farms. In another restrictive sloop, the new act also banned any "false reporting" concerning prisoners' experiences in the reformatories and prohibited the publishing of sketches and photographs of prisons or prisoners.¹⁴⁹ The government was adamant that the saga would not come back to haunt them again.

Although much more research needs to be done on Sibande to give this struggle icon his rightful place in a broader South African historical narrative, he certainly seems to be worthy of commemoration, if only for his endeavour to improve the plight of a very marginalised section of South African society, the farm workers. All the blunders and controversy that surrounded the commemoration of Sibande and the Potato Boycott would probably have left nothing but a bad taste in the mouth of this "dignified and unshaken" man.¹⁵⁰

Claims such as that made by Mbombela's mayor, L. Chiwayo that the Potato Boycott would have dealt "the country's economy a huge blow as people all over the world boycotted potatoes,"¹⁵¹ are discounted by historical evidence gleaned from the meetings of the Potato Board. They indicate that the boycott had a severe impact on local markets, but also show that the export of first-grade potatoes from South Africa continued as usual.

The crucial question that must be asked is this: When is the veracity of history *in itself* enough to be commemorated and worthy of remembering without the realities of the event being misconstrued to serve other motives? As Baines explains: "all state-sanctioned public acts of remembrance, commemoration or monumentalization tend to valorize the dominant or official memory"¹⁵² and that "historical representations such as a museum exhibit, war memorial, or commemorative ceremony are often

148 Dlamini, "SA's Own Potato Story", p 3

149 *Statutes of the Union of South Africa 1959, Part 1, Nos 1-60* (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1959), pp 33, 54, 56

150 Suttner, "Gert Sibande", p 16

151 T E Mogakane, "Sibande Political Musical is Highly Educational", *The Star*, 29 April 2009, p 6

152 Baines, "The Politics of Public History", p 170

deliberately ambiguous to satisfy competing factions”.¹⁵³ Commemoration, especially if state driven in a previously marginalised society, is always controversial. Indeed, it is the proverbial hot potato.

Abstract

The year 2009 marked the 50th commemoration of the so-called “Potato Boycott”. This celebration, not unlike the boycott itself, was shrouded in convoluted controversy. While the Mpumalanga provincial government initiated premature celebrations, the event itself was beset by various misunderstandings and conflicting interpretations. This article analyses the complexity of the recent commemoration, but also considers the actual boycott, by tracing its history. The potato boycott took place in a period when blacks implemented various economic boycotts to voice their frustration with the discriminatory apartheid laws that affected their daily existence. In this case, the government tried to supply farmers in the then Eastern Transvaal with cheap “convict” labour. In June 1959 the ANC launched the “Potato Boycott” as a reaction to alleged farm labour abuse practised mainly on farms in the Transvaal highveld. By specifically boycotting potatoes, blacks sought to send farmers a direct message and to strike an economic blow to capitalist farming and its allegedly abusive nature. They also were intent on forcing the government to abandon the regulation of farm labour and admit to the illegality of the system. The protest action also elicited widespread (and contradictory) reaction among the press and non-governmental agencies.

Opsomming

Die hantering van ‘n warm patat: Die herdenking van die “Aartappelboikot” van 1959

In 2009 het die 50ste herdenking van die sogenaamde “Aartappelboikot” plaasgevind. Die herdenking, soos die boikot self, is gekenmerk deur omstredenheid. Terwyl dit blyk dat die Mpumalanga provinsiale regering voortydige vieringe onderneem het, was die herdenking ook ontsier deur verskeie misverstande en teenstrydige interpretasies. Dié artikel ontleed die gekompliseerdheid van die herdenking, maar gee ook ’n historiese oorsig van die boikot. Die aartappelboikot het plaasgevind in ’n tydperk toe verskeie ekonomiese boikotte deur swartes gebruik is om hulle frustrasies met die apartheidswetgewing, wat hulle lewens daaglik beïnvloed het, te kenne te gee. In hierdie geval het die staat gepoog om boere, veral in die voormalige Oos-Transvaal, van goedkoop “bandiet”-arbeid te voorsien. In 1959 het die ANC ’n aartappelboikot van stapel gestuur as reaksie teen die beweerde wrede behandeling van plaaswerkers, hoofsaaklik op plase in die Transvaalse hoëveld. Deur spesifiek aartappels te boikot, het swartes gepoog om ’n direkte boodskap aan boere te stuur wat ten doel gehad het om ’n ekonomiese slag te slaan teen kommersiële boerdery en die beweerde gepaardgaande vergrype. Hulle doel was om die regering te dwing om die plaasarbeiderskema af te skaf en om die onwettigheid van die skema te erken. Die gebeure het ook gedurende die tyd wye reaksie ontlok van onder meer die pers en nie-regeringsorganisasies.

153 Baines, “The Politics of Public History”, p 169

Keywords

Potato Boycott; commemoration; African National Congress; Gert Sibande; Bethal; Mbongeni Ngema; farm labour; Michael Scott; Ruth First; Henry Nxumalo; pass laws; apartheid.

Sleutelwoorde

Aartappelboikot; herdenking; African National Congress; Gert Sibande; Bethal; Mbongeni Ngema; plaasarbeid; Michael Scott; Ruth First; Henry Nxumalo; paswette; apartheid.