
Jeff Peires

*Bhisho*

Those of you who have not yet read this outstanding work should not waste time reading the review but should rush out and buy it immediately. A substantially revised version of his 2002 doctoral thesis, Lungisile Ntsebeza has written a book on his home district of Xhalanga that deserves to be recognised as an instant classic.

Cala, the seat of the Xhalanga magistracy, is so far off the beaten track that it was the last of the 28 towns of the former Transkei to get its own tar road, and that was only in 2004. Its history has been similarly marginalised, being hidden even from Beinart and Bundy’s *Hidden Struggles*. It has never been credited for the pivotal role it played in the battle against Bantu Authorities, although the resistance of Emnxe locality long preceded the famous Mpondo revolt of 1960. Yet among Xhosa-speaking people, Xhalanga is well-known as a cradle of intellectual and political ferment. It had a radical bookshop when it never had a bank. It had peasants but it never had mission schools. Xhalanga’s more famous children include MK members Ezra Sigwela and Ambrose Makiwana, the first MK Chief of Staff; trade unionists Gwede Mantashe, Enoch Godongwana and the Mayekiso brothers; jurist Dumisa Ntsebeza and revolutionary martyr Bathandwa Ndondo gunned down in broad daylight in September 1985.

Lungisile Ntsebeza helps us to understand just how all this happened. The modern Xhalanga district was created in the aftermath of the Thembu rebellions of 1880 that divided western Thembuland into three parts: the white commercial farming district of Elliot; the traditional Thembu district of St Marks (Cofimvaba) dominated by the first Matanzima; and Xhalanga which the colonial government allocated as a buffer zone to loyal black peasants of mixed ethnic origins. The loyalty of the black landowners was as ephemeral as the Cape liberal era which sponsored them. They longed for what were called *embokotwa* titles, that is titles similar to those held by farmers in the neighbouring white district of Elliot. They rejected the inferior titles available to blacks, just as they rejected the inferior political representation available from the Glen Grey style native councils. These legitimate wishes were frustrated by white colonialism, and they changed sides. As Ntsebeza puts it, ‘The people who were giving the government a hard time, and who were now being referred to as agitators, were eminent loyalists in the latter part of the nineteenth century’.

For eighty years, the people of Xhalanga fought these struggles without help or hindrance from traditional leaders. The royal families of Stokwe and Gecelo had been displaced in the original 1880 rebellion, and the headmen of the
district were mainly landowners who sympathised with the other landowners. But lurking in nearby Cofimvaba was Chief K. D. Matanzima whose ambition to become a Paramount Chief could only be realised if he extended chiefly control over Xhalanga. How he did so, in spite of the best efforts of the Xhalanga ‘Jacobins’, is related in the central section of this absorbing book. Here I can do no more than capture the flavour of the times by quoting Xhalanga’s greeting to Matanzima and his fellow-chiefs in 1958, ‘asifuni nkosi apha voortsek mnka naye, ukunya kwenkosi, umnqundu wenkosi’ [we don’t want a chief here, voetsak, take him away, shit of a chief, backside of a chief]. There was burning of huts, there were murders and deportations, but Proclamation 400 won out in the end. People in Xhalanga today will tell you that their district is undeveloped on account of their resistance to Matanzima. They are not complaining, it is something in which they take great pride.

Ntsebeza’s narrative takes us to 1994 and beyond. His focus throughout is on traditional leaders and land matters but he pauses along the way to take in critical issues such as the political struggle between the ANC and the AAC (Unity Movement) in the 1950s, and the rivalry between Xhalanga’s long-established NGO sector and ANC/SANCO/Union structures in the 1990s. Ntsebeza sees the ANC, after ‘years of ambivalence and prevarication’ as coming down on the side of the traditional leaders and fears a ‘retribalisation’, but his evidence in this regard is drawn mainly from the national scene. I was ANC member of the National Assembly for Xhalanga from 1994 to 1996, and I don’t see it quite like that. I see something like a three-way clash between traditional leaders, progressive intellectuals and ANC functionaries entrenched in the Sakhisizwe Local Municipality. I see the Xhalanga traditional leaders benefiting not so much from national support but from the increasing disillusion of the masses with the delivery systems of the Local Municipality. I also see the Ntsebeza family featuring somewhere sometime, though not perhaps soon.

Lungisile says in a throwaway footnote that ‘a detailed study of the politics of Xhalanga from the 1970s onwards warrants a book of its own which I am seriously considering’. That is something we can all look forward to. In the meantime, this one will do us very nicely.