Multiple Layers of Memory: The History of Mpophomeni Told and Retold

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Abstract

In April 1985, the workers of a transnational corporation known as BTR Sarmcol in Howick in the Natal Midlands embarked on a strike to demand basic workers' rights. The entire workforce – 970 people, many of whom lived in the nearby township of Mpophomeni – was dismissed a few days later. This triggered a cycle of violence between the striking workers, mostly UDF-ANC supporters, and the people hired to replace them, usually residents from Inkatha-aligned areas. Deprived of income, many Mpophomeni families experienced extreme poverty. The brutality of the dismissal and the efforts of the community to develop alternatives soon attracted the attention of journalists, union leaders, academics, anti-apartheid activists, lawyers and cultural workers. Several oral history projects were dedicated to this history in subsequent years. The paper examines the manner in which the survivors' memories varied over time. At first their version of events aimed at challenging the dominant national narrative of the apartheid regime. The memories collected in recent years give a more nuanced view of Mpophomeni's history. The community appeared as having been less united and less cohesive during the years of the Sarmcol strike than previous narratives led to believe.

Keywords: memory, oral history, political violence, Mpophomeni, BTR Sarmcol, African National Congress, Inkatha.

Many South African black communities were plagued by violence during the last decade of apartheid. The case of Mpophomeni near Howick in the Natal Midlands is particularly remarkable. This small township, established in 1969 to accommodate people forcibly removed from Howick's 'black belts', lived rather unnoticed until November 1982 when a successful bus boycott, prompted by a fare increase, revealed a surprisingly high level of solidarity and activism among its inhabitants. In 1983 the residents started a rent boycott – which was to last for many years – over a rent increase backdated to 1978. On 30 April 1985, the workers of a rubber factory owned by a transnational corporation known as BTR Sarmcol embarked on a strike to demand basic workers' rights. The entire workforce – 970 people, a third of whom lived in Mpophomeni – was dismissed three days later (Labour Monitoring Group (Natal) 1985: 92-94; Leeb & Radford 1987a: 1-2; Bonnin 1988: 100-103, 198-244); This triggered a cycle of violence between the striking workers, mostly United Democratic Front (UDF) - African National Congress (ANC) supporters, and the people hired to replace them, in many cases residents from Inkatha-aligned areas. Deprived of income, many families experienced extreme poverty. The brutality of the dismissal and the efforts of the community to develop alternatives soon attracted the attention of journalists, union leaders, academics, anti-apartheid activists, violence monitors, clerics, lawyers and cultural workers. Several oral history projects were dedicated to this history in subsequent years.

Changing Memories as an Object of History

The purpose of this paper is not to add to the existing knowledge on the history of Mpophomeni, however useful this might be. It is rather to take advantage of the exceptional richness of the literary, archival and oral documentation accumulated since the mid-1980s on the history of Mpophomeni to examine, in a historical perspective, the phenomenon of remembering and representing the past – what we shall call here public memory – in a community exposed to the trauma of forced removals, unfair dismissals and political violence before facing the challenges of the era of democracy, reconstruction and post-apartheid development.

The relationship between history, a narrative about the past, and memory, a process in which information about the past is encoded, stored and

retrieved as private memory at the individual level or as public memory at the social and cultural level, is complex. Starting with the pioneering work of French historian Pierre Nora on 'sites of memory' (Nora 1984-1992), this relation has only been a focus of academic research for three decades. In South Africa, since the end of apartheid and the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) which drew attention to the ways in which victims and perpetrators of human rights abuses dealt with a violent past, studies on memory and commemoration have also started to multiply. They analyse the manner in which events of the South African past such as the arrival of the Huguenots, the South African War or apartheid were reconstructed (Nasson 2000; Denis 2003), imagined (Field 1998) or occluded (Bonner 2013) by the people who took part in them or their descendants. In 2010 a study on commemoration and spatial memory in post-apartheid South Africa examined the ways in which commemorative monuments, memorials and statues contribute to the creation of a new shared public memory with its emphases, ambivalences and silences (Marschall 2010).

Memory is an active process. There is a consensus, among the authors having contributed to the field of memory studies in recent years, that, if memory is the capacity to store, retain and subsequently retrieve information about the past, it is also defined by its ability to select, organise, omit or even invent aspect of past experiences according to the needs, desires and emotions of those who remember. Memory is information actively reconstructed in the present, a process which is at the same time psychological, social and political (Thelen 1990; Radstone & Schwarz 2010; Thomson 2011).

Secondly, memory is a process, if not determined, at least influenced by the group to which the person sharing his or her memories belongs. As observed by Maurice Halbwachs, the author of a groundbreaking study on collective memory, we do not remember alone. We gain access to events reconstructed for us by others (Halbwachs 1950; Ricoeur 2004: 121). How the group – kinship, friends and neighbours, local community, nation – influences individual memory, however, is open to debate. As we shall see, the Mphophomeni community in the apartheid era has been presented by its defenders as a coherent group with a single set of experiences and memories. Yet, later interviews show a different picture, with a bigger variety of individual opinions than was imagined before. Even among people sharing similar experiences, there are always memories which do not fit the collective

pattern (Green 2011: 108). Rather than collective memory, we prefer to speak of public memory to make apparent the multifaceted process through which individual memories or memories shared by a small group of people find expression – or fail to find public expression – in the public arena (Ashplant *et al.* 2000: 20). To describe the complexity of the relation between past and present in the act of remembering other expressions, such as social or cultural memory, could also have been chosen (Radstone 2007: 33).

Whatever the term chosen, it is important to note, thirdly, that the reference to the past always includes an element of contestation. Remembering and sharing one's memories implies positioning oneself on a terrain, be it interpersonal, political, social or cultural, which, in one way or another, is disputed. It is in that sense that one speak of the 'politics of memory' (Radstone & Schwarz 2010: 3). From a phenomenological point of view, we can say, after Paul Ricoeur (2004: 56-92), that memory can be 'abused' in several ways: it can be blocked, manipulated or abusively controlled. The contradictions and oppositions inherent to public memory are put in evidence in the definition which John Bodnar, the author of an influential study on public memory and commemoration in twentieth century America, gives of this term:

> Public memory is 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. It is fashioned ideally in a public sphere in which various parts of the social structure exchange views. The major focus of this communicative and cognitive process is not the past, however, but serious matters in the present such as the nature of power and the question of loyalty to both official and vernacular cultures. Public culture speaks primarily about the structure of power in society because that power is always in question in a world of polarities and contradictions and because cultural understanding is always in question in a world of polarities and contradictions and because cultural understanding is always grounded in the material structure of society itself. Memory adds perspective and authenticity to the views articulated in this exchange; defenders of official and vernacular interests are selectively retrieved from the past to perform similar functions in the present (Bodnar 1992).

A further aspect of memory, individual or collective, is its variability. As Carolyn Hamilton pointed out, the fluidity of the archive, whether written or oral, far from being a problem is an opportunity for a better understanding of the past (Hamilton 2002: 209-212). Only the tenants of a positivist view of history disqualify as unreliable the memories of events that change over time. They try to find the best record of these events and eliminate the memories which seem to contradict it. A more fruitful method, pioneered with great success by oral historian Alessandro Portelli in his work on partisans' memories in post-war Italy, consists in analysing the variations in memory for what they are: the signs of a constant evolution of representations and knowledge. One did not look at apartheid and political violence in the same way in the mid-1980s, when Inkatha *impis* (warriors) regularly threatened to attack the township under the eye of the South African police, as one does in the 2010s, when the youth has lost the memory of apartheid and when lack of service delivery, unemployment and crime are pressing challenges.

This paper will examine the various manners in which the Mpophomeni residents and other social actors involved in the life of the township have remembered and represented to wider audiences the establishment of the township, its early development, the working conditions at BTR Sarmcol, the strike, the dismissal of the workers, political violence and the return to peace and democracy. We shall ask ourselves how the social and political changes undergone in South Africa during these three decades affect the memories of the Mpophomeni residents. Taking a clue from recent work on war memory and commemoration (Ashplant, Dawson & Roper 2000), we shall pay attention to the various *narratives*, oppositional, sectional or dominant, and *agencies*, sponsored by the state, linked to civil movements or informal, which articulated the township's memories.

As already noted, an important turning point in that history is the BTR Sarmcol strike in May 1985. Another one, at local, provincial and national level, is the installation, in May 1994, of a democratically elected government which tried, among many other pressing tasks, to develop more inclusive heritage policies. In Mpophomeni's history there is a before and an after. Before 1994 the residents experienced land dispossession, the humiliation of the apartheid laws and regulations, a labour legislation enabling BTR Sarmcol to summarily dismiss hundreds of workers and, above all, the trauma of a civil war secretly manufactured by the white government. After 1994 the infrastructure developed, the wealthier residents moved to

formerly white-only areas in Howick or Pietermaritzburg and a new ruling class, including former Mpophomeni activists, took charge of the Umgeni municipality, a freshly-delineated territory encompassing the white town of Howick, the Indian and 'coloured' suburb of Howick West, Pietermaritzburg's posh suburb of Hilton, the black townships of Mevana near Howick and Mpophomeni and the surrounding rural areas.

From Obscurity to the International Limelight

From the point of view of a history of memory, the history of Mpophomeni can be divided into five periods. As with any periodisation, the one we propose here is a construction of the mind, but we hope it will throw light on the phenomenon of memory development which this paper is attempting to document.

The period between 1963, when Montrose Farm was expropriated by the South African government to make room for the new township, causing Guy Lund, the farm owner, to commit suicide, and 1985, when the residents started to become restless because of bus fare and rental increases while, in Howick, the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) was striving to obtain union recognition in the BTR Sarmcol rubber factory, can be described as being 'under the radar'. Apart from a few articles on the bus boycott in the December 1982 and January 1983 issues of *The Natal Witness* (Forsyth 1991: 45-46), an article on a conflict between the KwaZulu township manager and four pro-Inkatha councillors in *Echo*, the *Witness*'s supplement, in April 1984 (*Echo* 26 April 1984, quoted in Forsyth 1991: 62) and two articles on a call by Mpophomeni residents to Inkatha leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi to resolve the five-year-old rent controversy in March 1985 (*Echo* 4 March 1985; *The Natal Witness*, 7 March 1985, quoted in Forsyth 1991: 74), the local media, if we follow Paul Forsyth's inventory of violence-related newspaper articles (1991), had nothing to say on Mpophomeni. During this period no attempt was made to record the residents' stories and to commemorate their lives. Other communities displaced or harassed by apartheid agents were visited by human rights activists during this period and the story of their members received some publicity (see for example Desmond 1970). This was not the case for Mpophomeni. The memories of the township's residents remained in the private sphere.

In May 1985 a succession of events pulled Mpophomeni out of obscurity and subjected it to an unprecedented degree of local, national and international exposure. The residents' stories started to be shared, recorded and even acted out.. A body of memories – of living conditions prior to the establishment of Mpophomeni, of the early years of the township, of the first acts of resistance, of the BTR Sarmcol strike, of the sufferings of the dismissed workers and their families, of their mobilisation and of numerous acts of solidarity on the side of local, national and international human rights movements – came to the fore. To follow the typology outlined above, these memories can be termed oppositional. They reflected the movement of protest and resistance against the apartheid regime which spread throughout South African in the wake of the June 1976 Soweto uprising, culminating with the creation of the UDF in August 1983. Various civil society agencies, including trade unions, church-based human rights organisations and the University of Natal, articulated these memories through press statements, informal papers and academic studies.

The first of these events was the ruthless dismissal of the BTR Sarmcol's workforce referred to above. It had been recommended, one was to hear later, by a labour consultant as the best way to 'clean out the shop stewards' (Abel 1995: 141). In response the unions launched a boycott of white businesses in Howick. A one-day stay-away was organised in Pietermaritzburg on 18 July 1985 and another consumer boycott of white businesses in Pietermaritzburg in August. A variety of newspapers, including *The Natal Witness*, *Daily News*, *Business Day*, *The Star*, *The Citizen* and the *Weekly Mail*, reported on these manifestations. The issue was taken up by unions abroad. Britain's Trades Union Congress (TUC) called on the British government to act against BTR Sarmcol's alleged contraventions of the European Economic Community's code of conduct for companies operating in South Africa. In July the International Metalworker's Federation (IMF) urged the British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, to intervene (Race Relations Survey 1986: 191; Mkhize 1995).

In a very short time the dismissed BTR Sarmcol workers, several hundreds of whom resided in Mpophomeni, attracted a vast range of supports, well beyond the scope of the labour unions, which immediately came to their defence. Among the first to be mobilised were the churches, or rather progressive elements within the churches, most notably Larry Kaufmann, the Catholic priest of Mpophomeni, who authorised the strikers to

meet in his church; Denis Hurley, the Catholic archbishop of Durban, who paid a pastoral visit to Mpophomeni on 26 June 1985; the Anglican synod who pledged solidarity with the workers after a delegation of strikers invaded its meeting on 11 July 1985; the Pietermaritzburg Agency for Christian Social Awareness (PACSA), an ecumenical human rights group which played an important lobbying role; the ecumenical agency Diakonia in Durban, which offered to bring the parties to the negotiating table; and the South African Council of Churches (SACC), which also contributed to the mobilisation of the Christian churches (Kumalo 1997; Denis 2013). In November 1985, to help the strikers survive, MAWU assisted them in setting up the Sarmcol Workers Cooperative (SAWCO), a cooperative with five projects: T-shirts and button making, agriculture, health, culture and bulk-buying (Bonnin 1988: 237, 355). Health professionals delivered medical services free of charge to the strikers and their families during the week-end (Kruger [1991]). Community theatre activists assisted the workers in developing and staging in South Africa and abroad a play called 'The Long March' (von Kotze 1987; von Kotze 1988; Sitas 1987; Kruger 1995). Lawyers offered their help to assist the dismissed workers in obtaining their reinstatement at the Industrial Court (Abel 1995: 123-172). With funds from international funding agencies, Archbishop Hurley purchased a farm of about six hectares of irrigated land for vegetable production on behalf of SAWCO in Merrivale near Howick (*Natal Witness* 12 June 1990; Kearney 2009: 233).

The second period in the history of Mphophomeni's memory – from the sacking of the BTR Sarmcol workforce in May 1985 to the dismissal of the striking workers' court application in July 1987 – is characterised by the emergence of a body of research reports and academic papers on the strike, its effects on the workers and the acts of solidarity and resistance it generated. No longer confined to obscurity, Mpophomeni became the object of a public discourse. Between 1985 and 1988, no less than four studies were dedicated to the labour dispute and its effects on the Mpophomeni residents. Written by a collective of labour activists known as the 'Labour Monitoring Group (Natal)', the first was published in the October-December 1985 issue of the *South African Labour Bulletin*. Essentially descriptive, with background information on BTR Sarmcol, MAWU and Mpophomeni, this twenty-three-page report aims at demonstrating that the Pietermaritzburg stay-away in support of the Sarmcol workers was a success (Labour Monitoring Group 1985). The second is a brief but well informed report on the dispute and its

aftermath in the 1985 *Race Relations Survey* published by the South African Institute of Race Relations the following year (Race Relations Survey 1986: 191, 203).

The third study is by far the most extensive. The author was Debbie Bonnin, a University of Natal postgraduate student involved in union activities through the ecumenical agency Diakonia who subsequently joined a group of Durban activists running awareness workshops on behalf of the Sarmcol strikers and ended up writing a Masters thesis on the Sarmcol workers under the supervision of sociologist and activist Ari Sitas (Bonnin 2013) In addition to a survey by questionnaire of about 200 workers, she conducted 22 individual interviews between March and October 1986 with the help of an interpreter. Large extracts of the interviews are reproduced in her thesis. They provide rich information on the life stories of the workers, their working conditions in the factory, the strike and the ensuing events (Bonnin 1988; Bonnin & Sitas 1988). The key findings of this research were presented during a court case launched in November 1986 at the Industrial Court to obtain the reinstatement of the dismissed workers. One of the interviews provided material for the 'Long March' play (Bonnin 2013).

Also used as evidence by MAWU's lawyers during the hearings of the Industrial Court (Leeb & Radford 1987a: 2) was the research conducted by Wendy Leeb, a mother of four with links to PACSA and the Black Sash who was completing a degree at the University of Natal (Leeb 2013) with support and guidance from John Radford, a lecturer in organisational and social psychology in the same institution, on the effects of job loss on Mpophomeni. In late August and early September 1986 Leeb, who knew well the community for having helped residents during the bus boycott in early 1983, distributed a 16-page questionnaire to 126 randomly selected residents, a quarter of whom were ex-Sarmcol workers, with the help of six isiZulu-speaking students. The research showed that the majority of the 1604 households – with an estimated population of 10,000 people at the time – were 'in a serious state of impoverishment' and that the ex-Sarmcol workers, who until May 1985 formed 'the basis of the stable foundation of the Mpophomeni community', had suffered 'a significant greater degree of psychiatric stress when compared with equivalent groups of employed men' (Radford & Leeb 1986: 27-28).

The findings of Leeb and Radford's research were not only used for the BTR Sarmcol Industrial Court case. They were disseminated in academic

circles and among local activists. An article summarising the results of the research appeared in the January 1987 issue of *Reality*, the bimonthly magazine founded by Alan Paton and other ex-members of the Liberal Party in Pietermaritzburg (Leeb & Radford 1987b). Analyses of the findings were presented at a conference of the Association for Sociology in Southern Africa in July 1987 in Cape Town (Leeb & Radford 1987a) and at a workshop on regionalisation and restructuring in Natal in January 1988 in Durban (Leeb & Radford 1988). These publications emphasised the negative consequences for the township of the strikers' dismissals.

　　　As one can see, a non-negligible amount of documents on Mpophomeni and its residents was produced in the two years following the strike. Some included verbatim quotations from Mpophomeni residents. The most significant were the extracts of interviews of Sarmcol workers reproduced in Bonnin's Masters thesis. The extracts of conversations with Mpophomeni residents quoted by Leeb and Radford in their *Reality* article were also interesting. A new public memory, partly oral and partly written, of the township started to be constituted during this period. It was a militant memory, developed in a context of conflict, violence and death. It challenged the South African government's discourse which presented the anti-apartheid movement as a threat to peace and stability as well as the anti-union stance of the multinational company BTR Sarmcol. The dismissed BTR Sarmcol workers – and by extension the entire population of Mpophomeni – were presented as innocent victims of unfair labour practices who fought for their rights, suffered oppression and poverty, mobilised support and survived against all odds. It was a history with heroes and villains: on one side, the strikers, their families and their neighbours, the unions, the other workers who laid down their tools in solidarity and the civil society movements who supported the movement; on the other side, the management of BTR Sarmcol both in South Africa and abroad, the security forces, the 'scab' workers hired to replace the strikers, UWUSA, the Inkatha-led rival union, and, last but not least, the nine murderers, known to be linked to Inkatha, of Phineas Sibiya and Simon Ngubane, two MAWU shop stewards, and of Florah Mkanathi, daughter of a shop steward, all involved in SAWCO, on 5 December 1986 after an Inkatha rally in Mpophomeni.

　　　The concluding paragraph of Leeb and Radford's *Reality* article illustrates the manner, empathetic, supportive and engaged, in which the Mpophomeni residents were spoken about in the mid-1980s. The

Mpophomeni residents were not only presented as victims but also as actors of their own history, remarkable for their courage, their resilience, their cohesion and their solidarity:

> The community itself is a paradox. It is made up of ordinary individuals who are struggling to survive. Their lives are full of hardship and pain, and yet they have managed to struggle against the system several times. These people are battered but not beaten. In the midst of violence and conflict, neighbour shares with neighbour, and the more privileged feel a responsibility for those suffering. Against incredible odds parents struggle to bring up their children with values and use their scant energy to try and ensure their future. There is a surprising lack of bitterness and anger. There is a strong feeling that despite the problems something can be worked out, and a new tomorrow can emerge. People have hope, in the midst of their despair, and a faith which is childlike and strong. Every day they rise to a grim reality, and yet they carry on because they believe in themselves. This will to overcome is the backbone of Mpophomeni, and possibly, of our whole society. The question is – will we succeed? (Leeb & Radford 1987b).

Monitoring Political Violence

From the point of view of a history of memory, the third period, which covers the years 1987-1993, was very different. To a large degree the memories of the Mpophomeni residents retreated to the private sphere for lack of public exposure. Once it became clear that the BTR Sarmcol workers had lost their case for reinstatement at the Industrial Court, the situation of the workers, painful and depressing as it was, ceased to attract attention. In 1990 SAWCO, which by then had only maintained three of the original five projects, closed down, the members complaining that the monthly allowance provided by the organisation was insufficient to support their families. The agricultural project continued its activities independently from SAWCO on land purchased on behalf of the workers by the Catholic archdiocese of Durban, but only with a reduced workforce (Ndlela 1990).

The spectacular movement of solidarity with the dismissed workers

observed in 1985 and 1986 gradually dissipated. Mpophomeni fell out of the limelight. The agencies which had articulated the Mpophomeni residents' memories in the preceding period moved to other terrains. As Simanga Kumalo noted a decade later for the churches – but his observation could have applied to other civil society movements, to the academic community or the media – after a few years the strikers discovered that they could only count on themselves. Material and moral solidarity could not be sustained in the long term:

> The big problem is that all that [the church' response to the strikers] was to be short lived. The strike continued and suffering continued for the victims. As time went on, the workers were left alone by the church. All the church groups that had been assisting in ministering to the strikers and their families in Mpophomeni withdrew quietly. Some complained that funds had dried up. Others just disappeared (Kumalo 1997: 52).

As time went by, the Mphopomeni residents' most pressing concern no longer was Sarmcol and the fight for reinstatement. This battle was lost, at least for the time being. The biggest source of worry was political violence. Mphopomeni, a UDF enclave in Inkatha territory, became a hotspot of political violence in the Natal Midlands but because the conflict extended to the entire province Mpophomeni was nothing more than one theatre of political violence among many others, of no particular interest to journalists, academics and human rights activists. Only a small number of those continued to visit the township. Meanwhile the 'war', as the Mpophomeni residents described it, was unfolding with its litany of deaths, injuries, torture, loss of property and refugees. Between October 1987 and July 1990 the township residents and refugees from other parts of the Natal Midlands faced attacks from neighbouring Inkatha-dominated villages with no support from the police forces. In May 1991 a second wave of violence, worse than the first, hit Mpophomeni, this time between two groups of local youths, dubbed 'Umgovu' and 'Umgoqo'. There was no apparent reason for this violence, which resulted in random death and destruction as the police once more remained passive. The violence mysteriously ended after a last string of murders in March 1993. To this day the causes of the second eruption of political violence remain obscure, with no proof, despite rumours, of a 'third

force' conspiracy[1].

As political violence took a higher toll, violence monitors started to visit the township and report on incidents of intimidation, police abuse, loss of property, injuries and murders. Some were linked to Christian agencies such as PACSA, the local Catholic parish or the Natal Church Leaders Group which included, among others, Michael Nuttall, the Anglican bishop, and Denis Hurley, the Catholic archbishop (Mbona 2010). Another regular visitor of the township was Radley Keys, the regional director of the Democratic Party, who directed the monitoring group Peace in Natal (PIN) between 1989 and 1994[2]. Also involved in Mpophomeni was the Unrest Monitoring Project, headed by John Aitchison, director of the Centre for Adult Education at the University of Natal. The Project's database, which covers the period 1984-1991, contains 139 entries related to Mpophomeni. They include newspapers articles, police unrest reports and reports submitted by individuals or monitoring groups. The BTR Sarmcol strike dominated the first three years of the database with respectively 2 (1984), 14 (1985) and 4 (1986) entries. The following two years were relatively calm with respectively 10 (1987) and 3 (1988) entries. The last three years, with respectively 56 (1989), 18 (1990) and 32 (1992), witnessed the highest number of incidents of violence[3]. Lastly we can mention the 24-hour Monitoring Group of the Midlands Crisis Relief Committee, an ad hoc monitoring group constituted in the wake of the Seven-Day War, a particularly devastating wave of political violence in late March 1990, which met from 25 March to 28 July 1990 (Political violence in the Natal Midlands 1990). The weekly reports list 27 entries related to Mpophomeni.

The incidents of political violence which struck Mpophomeni were thus recorded, if not all, at least many of them. But since political violence

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[1] In late 1993 a team from the London-based Amnesty International came to investigate but found no evidence of involvement of white farmers or renegade policemen as some community members had suspected. Chris Khoza, ANC chairman of Mpophomeni in the early 1990s, personal communication with the authors.

[2] See the Radley Keys collection at the Alan Paper Centre (APC, PC159).

[3] We express our gratitude to Professor John Aitchison who gave us access to his electronic database. On the Unrest Monitoring Project, see John Aitchison, Leeb and Vaughn 2010.

affected the entire Natal province and also, from early 1990, the Witswatersrand, the township did not attract the attention of journalists, academics and political analysts in any particular way. The residents rarely received a chance to tell their stories. On one occasion, a group of residents led by Stanley Mbambo, an union leader, applied – with success – to the Supreme Court for an interdict restricting the South African Police from assaulting, harassing and intimidating them. Nineteen affidavits from residents and four from concerned people from outside the township were submitted to the Court on the 24th of April 1989. They constitute one of few written sources available on political violence in Mpophomeni[4].

The second wave of violence, which caused the biggest number of deaths, with rival gangs attacking people at random, made no lasting impression beyond the circle of Mpophomeni residents, violence monitors and ministers of religion coming to the township for Sunday services. The only exception was an article by Radley Keys – a member of the future opposition to the ANC after the advent of democracy – in a volume of essays on political violence published in 1992. Entitled 'Mpophomeni: the ANC's dilemma' it traces the history of the conflict in Mpophomeni and describes, with some detail, the operations of the self-initiated 'people's court' and the gang warfare between the 'Mgoqo' and 'Mbovu':

> In the third quarter of 1990 the first reported death resulting from internal tension was reported. Gangs also developed. Reports emanating from Mpophomeni indicate that a few youths (boys) were initially involved in skirmishes. Labels of *Mgovu* (a word with connotations of scavengers, thieves and dogs) and *Mgoqo* (a word describing the barriers or obstacle placed at the opening of a cattle pen to prevent cattle from escaping or being stolen, also a connotation of bulwark or protection) were given to rivals in the skirmish. This expanded and drew in people from the wider community. What was initially a clash of individuals and small groups of gangs came to involve the parents of the *Mgovu* and the wider youth element of the *Mgoqo* (Keys 1992).

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[4] All the affidavits are kept at the Alan Paton Centre, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, APC, PC 159-7-1 and 2.

A New Dominant National Narrative

The fourth period in the history of Mpophomeni's memory, which corresponds to Nelson Mandela's presidency (1994-1999), was characterised by a desire, on the part of the residents and activists involved in the community, to keep alive the memory of their painful but victorious struggle against apartheid and political violence and to ensure that a proper understanding of the past was transmitted to future generations. With friends in government both at municipal and national levels, the Mphopomeni community, which continued to expand with a never-ceasing influx of new residents, made concerted efforts to retrieve and inscribe in the landscape its memories. The difference with the preceding period was that these memories no longer challenged the dominant national memory of the apartheid era. They aligned themselves with the emerging national memory of the rainbow nation, which the African National Congress government was busy articulating. The vision of history in favour during this period can be described as ideological in the sense of carrying a moral and political message: it was seen as part of a grand narrative of oppression, resistance and reconciliation which was meant to replace a European-centric view of history which relegated the experiences of African people to the margins. This vision of history also influenced Mphophomeni even though efforts were made to treat magnanimously the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), the former enemy, now at the helm of the provincial government in association with the ANC. No place was given in the official memory of Mpophomeni to the conflict within the ANC and to the various forms of abuse and violence observed in the township which were not attributable to the former regime's security forces and its surrogates.

In some way Mpophomeni anticipated the spirit, if not the methodology, of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which started its work in 1996[5]. Mpophomeni can claim to have created one of the earliest 'sites of memory' of post-apartheid South Africa, to use Pierre Nora's suggestive phrase (Nora 1984-1992). As early as March 1995 a group of residents, some of whom had been involved in the conflict between 'Mgovu' and 'Mgoqo' gangs, built on their own initiative and with virtually no external help a memorial to the victims of political violence, which was

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[5] On the creation of memory during this period, see Nuttall and Coetzee 1998.

inaugurated by Jacob Zuma, then minister of economic development in the KwaZulu-Natal provincial government. This self-made memorial was dedicated to Nokulunga Gumede, a six-year old child carelessly run over by an army vehicle on 21 March 1990, the anniversary day of the Sharpeville Massacre[6]. The organisers drew up a list of victims and asked the concerned families to authorise the inscription of the names of the deceased on the memorial wall. Eighty families responded positively. Even though the majority of victims were UDF/ANC members, the promoters of the project made it clear that, like the child who had lost her life, the monument had to be seen as apolitical.

Another manifestation of the spirit of this period was the oral history project of the Alan Paton Centre, now renamed Alan Paton Centre and Struggles Archives, which was carried out from 1995 to 1998. Veteran ANC activist Ruth Lundie interviewed for this project Stanley Mbambo and Philip Dladla, two MAWU shop stewards involved in the BTR Sarmcol strike who also played a role as community leaders in Mpophomeni[7].

Alternative Memories

The time for alternative memories was to come later, in the fifth and last period of the history of Mpophomeni's memory (2000-2014). This period is marked by the establishment of Zulu Mpophomeni Tourism Experience (ZMTE), a community-based organisation founded in the mid-2000S to stimulate heritage-based tourism and educate the youth about the history of the township. As we write these lines, Montrose Farm, the property of a white farmer until the area was expropriated by the South African government to make space for the new township, is in the process of being leased to ZMTE by the Municipality and already houses parts of the museum's collections.

This development is significant from the point of view of a history of memory. The Mpophomeni residents involved in the ZMTE project do not only have changing memories, they also make conscious efforts to retrieve and appropriate them. These memories do not always correspond to the narrative of oppression, unity and resistance promoted by the South African

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[6] Alan Paton Centre, PC159-7-3, statement of Fr Edgar Weinman, Catholic priest on the death of Nokulunga Gumede, 21 March 1990.
[7] APC, 98APB 20 and 21.

government through the establishment of new museums, the revision of the history curriculum, the renaming of cities and streets and various commemorations. Alternative memories of Mpophomeni's past find expression through the channel of community-based oral history projects. For lack of documentation it is difficult to establish whether these memories had been shared privately among residents in earlier times, although it can reasonably be assumed that they were. Stories of 'necklacing' and sexual abuse by 'comrades', similar to those mentioned here, already circulated in South Africa in the 1980s[8]. But in the tense atmosphere of the 1980s and early 1990s they could not be aired publicly in Mpophomeni.

In her doctoral dissertation Judith Singleton, an African-American anthropologist who conducted field research in Mpophomeni from February 2004 to September 2005 gives an image of Mpophomeni in stark contrast to the view commonly accepted since the days of the BTR Sarmcol strike (Singleton 2008). The topic of the thesis – coercion and consent in sexual relations in post-apartheid South Africa – lent itself to a re-evaluation of Mpophomeni's history. Gender has no place in the literature produced in the 1980s and 1990s on Mpophomeni[9]. One of Singleton's informants, a twenty-eight year old woman by the name of Mpumelelo, depicts an Inkatha member not as an oppressor but as an innocent victim. Residents 'necklaced' him, with a rubber tyre set on fire around his neck, in front of many people. Mpumelelo who was still a child was there. At the time, she was led to believe it was right. By the time of the interview, she knew it was wrong:

> Mpophomeni was terrible. It was violent. The IFP and ANC were fighting. It was very scary. People were dying like flies. My family was ANC because here we were ruled by [the] ANC and that's why they believed in [the] ANC. My mother protected us from the violence. People died in front of us. One day someone was

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[8] In a speech given in Munsieville (Western Transvaal) on 13 April 1986, Winnie Mandela, the wife of the imprisoned leader Nelson Mandela, endorsed the practice of 'necklacing' (burning people alive using tyres and petrol) by saying: '[W]ith our boxes of matches and our necklaces we shall liberate this country.'

[9] A few studies on political violence and gender were however conducted in other parts of Natal. See Campbell 1992; Bonnin 2002.

'necklaced' in front of my eyes. The called him *amagundane* – the rats. It means that they believed [he was] Inkatha. He was an old man and he worked. One day he rode the wrong bus. He was lost. He lost his way. They [knew] that he was Inkatha and they killed him. We were young and we liked to watch. Everybody watched. Old men killed him. They shot him and they put the tire around his neck and poured petrol over him and burned him (Mpumelelo 2005).

An observation made by many academics and violence monitors when they visited Mpophomeni during the time of the Sarmcol strike was that there was a strong sense of cohesion in the community. 'The neighbour shares with neighbour,' Leeb observed in the passage quoted above, 'and the more privileged feel a responsibility for those suffering' (Leeb & Radford 1987b: 20). While noting that, having lost faith in the state's judicial apparatus, the residents had started to take justice in their own hands and that in their repression of opposition UDF members committed atrocities in the name of the 'struggle', Keys also made the point that the people from Mpophomeni were united in the adversity. 'The community of Mpophomeni,' he wrote, 'grew together in the hard times after the dismissal of their bread winners. COSATU was a driving force in keeping the community disciplined and attuned to self-reliance until the hope of resolving the dismissals with Sarmcol management had been realised' (Keys 1992: 129).

The portrait Singleton gave of the Mpophomeni community on the basis of women's testimonies was somewhat different. Far from manifesting their opposition to the state as would have been expected in a community under the authority of the ANC, some residents, and particularly young women, developed links with soldiers. They despised the 'comrades', she was told, for not having enough money to buy them presents:

Most of the girls were in love with the army men. We left the boys in the township. We didn't care about them, we wanted the soldiers. The soldiers would buy things for us. I believe the men living in this township started hating women during that time. The girls would say to the township boys: 'We don't want you, we want soldiers. The soldiers have money and you don't. You are not working.' Sometimes when we were with our girlfriends we would meet the township guys. They would say to us: 'You are looking at us, you

bitch[es] of the soldiers. You are nothing. We won't ask love from you because you are nothing, you are sluts' (NoSipho 2005).

This statement demonstrates, Singleton commented, that 'not all black township women in Mpophomeni openly supported young black African men and the liberation struggle' (Singleton 2008: 158). By the time these interviews were conducted – mid 2005 – opinions challenging the idea of a community united in the struggle against apartheid could be openly held.

Not long afterwards community members recruited by ZMTE and trained in oral history methodology by the Sinomlando Centre, a research and community development centre of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, started to interview residents on their lives in Mpophomeni. Eighteen individual interviews and three group interviews were conducted between 2008 and 2011. This material is already available to researchers. Extracts of the interviews are on display in the Mpophomeni Ecomuseum at Montrose Farm. More interviews will be conducted in the years to come.

An analysis of the interviews conducted during this period reveals a diversity of opinions and points of view much bigger than during the years of the Sarmcol strike, mass mobilisation and political violence. The image of Mpophomeni as an UDF enclave in Inkatha territory, while basically correct, receives important nuances. One of the interviewees explained that, initially, all Mpophomeni residents were members of Inkatha. Things started to change after the dismissal of the Sarmcol workers and their replacement with people from Inkatha-dominated areas. But there was confusion on matters of political allegiance. In many instances the youth forced the elders to join them in the fight against Inkatha. 'When you tried to calm them down as elders,' a resident explained, 'they would tell you that you are old-fashioned. It was not easy to confront the youth because they carried big guns' (Mbanjwa 2009). One of the interviewees confirmed that 'necklacing' took place but he did not want to expand on the subject (Bhengu 2009). Another one referred to the practice of 'modelling' – forcing girls caught sleeping with soldiers to run naked in the streets (Khoza 2011). This echoes the testimonies collected by Singleton on township girls preferring soldiers to local boys because they had more money for presents.

One of the most interesting findings in the ZMTE/Sinomlando oral history project was that some of the former BTR Sarmcol workers had second

thoughts on the strike. They went on strike in the hope of being reinstated, but in July 1987 the Industrial Court dismissed their application. In March 1998 the Supreme Court of Appeals found that BTR Sarmcol had unfairly dismissed the workers and referred the matter back to the Industrial Court to determine the amount of the compensation to be paid to each worker. BTR Sarmcol tried to settle the matter with 1,5 million rand, that is, 1500 rand per worker. Some compensation money was eventually paid but not to the satisfaction of the workers. One of the interviewees expressed discontent at the manner the unions had handled the case:

> From what I heard, we need to say these people do not want the truth. We were supposed to go back to Sarmcol and we were supposed to go to the Industrial Court and the Industrial Court was going to determine how much we should get including our service. But there were people…, maybe our lawyers had teamed with Sarmcol because nothing happened until today though we were told that we would later get our money for our service but we ended up not getting it (Mtshali 2010).

They did not earn much at Sarmcol, he further said, but at least they earned something. 'If we did not go on strike it would have been better.'

A fellow resident concurred. If he had not gone on strike, he pointed out, he would still have a job. Finding another job proved impossible:

> The factory strike was very painful. If we did not go for a strike, we would not be suffering as we do now. People are struggling to get jobs but during our days nobody would be unemployed. You are now self-employed but most of the youth are unemployed. I was already working at your age but now you are struggling to get proper jobs (Mbanjwa 2009).

The strike was a futile exercise, one of the women commented in a tone of despondency. It was naïve to believe that the manager would change his mind:

> People kept saying; 'We must strike so that this *umlungu* can see that we are not playing.' So they had the strike but the *umlungu* did not

care. When they sat at work, he called the police to chase them (Nxumalo 2010).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to examine the various expressions of public memory in a community affected by forced removals, unfair labour practices and political violence. Compared to other areas of KwaZulu-Natal which had suffered from political violence in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Mpophomeni offered two advantages from a historiographical point of view. The first was to have generated a considerable amount of documentation after the shocking dismissal of the entire BTR Sarmcol worforce in July 1985. Secondly it is a locality where sites of memory, Montrose Farm and the Nokulunga Gumede Memorial in particular, are maintained and put on display by the residents themselves with minimum involvement of state institutions.

The archival sources, printed documents and oral testimonies we have examined show that the way in which the Mpophomeni residents have remembered and commemorated their common past has undergone significant changes during the period under review. Until 1985 the residents' stories received virtually no publicity. During the period of the BTR Sarmcol strike the Mpophomeni residents were presented as innocent victims of unfair labour practices and state repression struggling to survive in a context of extreme poverty with the assistance of a host of benevolent civil society agencies. The residents were interviewed by journalists, activists and academics on several occasions. Their memories can be said to constitute an oppositional narrative, that is, a version of events challenging the dominant national narrative of the apartheid regime. This manner of portraying the community was still in favour in the years of the Mandela presidency, as shown by the interviews conducted by Ruth Lundie for the Alan Paton Oral History Project. The difference was that the stories recorded during this period corresponded to a new national narrative articulated by the ANC government, in power since 1994. Alternative memories, however, started to find expression. As early as 1992 Radley Keys, a violence monitor with no link to the ANC, mentioned in an essay on political violence in Mpophomeni the existence of 'people's courts' dispensing justice in a summarily manner

and violent clashes between gangs of ANC sympathisers. In 1997 Simangaliso Kumalo heard from dismissed Sarmcol workers that they felt abandoned by the churches after a great display of solidarity in the early days of the strike.

Thanks to the presence in the township of an American doctoral student and the setting up of a community-driven oral history project, more stories were told in the following decade. The memories to which these stories give expression offer a more nuanced view of Mpophomeni's history. The community appeared as having been less united and less cohesive during the years of the Sarmcol strike than previous narratives led to believe. The Mpophomeni residents were not as unanimous in their opposition to Inkatha as was said. Ethically objectionable practices such as 'necklacing' and 'modelling' were remembered and spoken about. Lastly, and more importantly, some BTR Sarmcol workers, frustrated by the low level of monetary compensation received after the 1998 Appeals Court ruling, expressed the view that, in the end, joining the strike probably was a mistake.

The memories of township residents recorded by Judith Singleton and the ZMTE/Sinomlando interviewers during the past ten years differ on a number of counts from those recorded and put in form by the union leaders, academics and social activists who wrote and spoke about Mpophomeni in the mid-1980s in a context marked by political violence and state oppression. At the time a sample of BTR Sarmcol workers and other community residents were interviewed or surveyed – as part of two separate projects – by Debbie Bonnin and Wendy Leeb. If there were dissident views at the time, they did not take a public form. It was only later, in the 1990s and even more so in the 2000s and early 2010s, that a certain number of Mpophomeni residents distanced themselves, in oral history interviews, from the dominant narrative of oppression, unity and resistance promoted by the ANC government.

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