

Amakomiti

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Grassroots Democracy in
South African Shack Settlements

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1

Introduction: Disrupting Private Land Ownership?

If the success of a land invasion is the entrenchment of a new land occupation, Marikana was certainly successful.¹

Fundis Mhlongo is an interesting character who enjoys respect and support as the leader of his community. He is the one-man committee of Ekupholeni, a very small shack settlement located in Durban, a populous South African city on the Indian Ocean coast. Tonight he has agreed for me to accompany him to a community meeting that will take place in Bottlebrush, a nearby shack settlement that is much bigger and older than Ekupholeni. Both settlements are located at the edges of Chatsworth, a sprawling suburb where only 'Indians' were supposed to live under apartheid laws. Like everything else in South African shantytowns, there is a story and a history in the relationship between the two settlements. However, for now, let us go to the meeting with Mhlongo and see what happens.

The crowd turns out to be excitable. Not a big crowd, mind you, about 40 or so people standing under cover of darkness next to a brick structure in the midst of Bottlebrush shacks. A murmur of approval lowers the tension at the sight of Mhlongo joining the meeting – it is the tension of an arrow awaiting release. He has a calming effect on people and is obviously an old hand at handling high-stakes community meetings. The meeting has only one agenda item, namely hatching a plan to invade a piece of land that lies on the eastern border of the Bottlebrush settlement.

'Only you can help us, Njomane!' pleads one man, using Mhlongo's clan name, a sign of respect and, if you like, flattery.

An agitated youth cannot wait to take action and does not really understand why they had to call on Mhlongo. 'We must just go there now and put up our shacks,' he harangues the crowd.

Mhlongo is in his element and relishes the discussion; his interventions are well timed and articulated, and despite divergent views concerning the when and how of the land invasion, his suggestions enjoy unanimous support. He patiently makes the meeting go over the reasons for the planned action, perhaps also for my benefit because I am the researcher who has been interviewing and shadowing him for about a week now. Ethnography is my thing. In any case, going over the reasons proves to be a good tactic because it reminds the people of what unites them – overcrowding, high rents, harsh landlords – making it easier to agree on the tactics of the land invasion. By the end of the meeting, Mhlongo is the one chairing and summing up the decisions taken. The invasion will take place early in the morning of the following day despite some people not having gathered enough material to stake their land claim. You need some planks, nails and corrugated iron in order to set up a structure that marks out your stand. Not to worry, Mhlongo advises, the police are going to come anyway and pull down the structures and confiscate the material, it is better to use less rather than more of your building material, plastics will do just fine. The meeting ends on a high note. Mhlongo announces that he will not personally lead the invasion. When we leave the meeting, people are busy discussing what to do the next morning and leaders who will be at the forefront of the invasion emerge organically.

The next morning, the invasion happens as planned and without Mhlongo. I arrive a couple of hours after it has started. I can see the occupied land while standing on the downward slope on the eastern border of the shack settlement; the land is on a hill a couple of kilometres across the valley. Flimsy-looking structures made up of planks, corrugated iron, plastics and sacks dot the hill, wavering in the wind. As I move closer, I can make out stones, wires and wooden pegs on the ground; these serve as improvised markers of the ‘stands’ parcelled out by the invaders. Some people have scraped the ground, removing grass and making the earth flatter to map the *stoep* of their dream homes.² I am busy taking in the scene, taking pictures, fascinated by what I see, when, lo and behold, disaster strikes. The police are here! In the form of the eThekweni Municipality Anti-Land Invasion Unit.

A longish moment of silence ends when uniformed black-clad men descend from their cars and trucks, then proceed to swiftly and ferociously attack the structures that are people’s future homes. Not so many people are there to be indignant at what is happening because not all the land invaders are around, many having left the area after putting up their struc-

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tures; maybe they went to work or did not wish to face the music, or were observing proceedings from Bottlebrush across the valley, it was hard to say. The anti-invasion invaders, some armed, some wearing welding gloves, not finding any resistance to speak of, systematically and efficiently dismantled the planks and plastics. Within half an hour or so, they had collected most of the material and had it in a pile on the ground. The man in charge, wearing the eThekweni Municipality Metro Police uniform, issued the incendiary order and a plume of smoke went up to the blue sky, and that was that.

Mhlongo appeared from nowhere and began talking to the small group of stony-faced would-be land occupiers. His calmness suggested that he had seen it all before, and he probably had. Placating them, he shared his idea of organising a march to the city hall soon to protest the burning of building material and to demand houses for the people. He also spoke to the officials who were hanging around. The top official seemed to know him. It could be that burning the material was signalling a harder line by the municipality against land invasions. Afterwards, dejected like soldiers from a battle that did not go too well, and with Mhlongo in front, we walked back to Bottlebrush and Ekupholeni, both settlements born of land invasions. The action had failed; a Che Guevara aphorism came to mind: 'battles [are] won or lost – but fought'.³

Indeed, perhaps it was not all for nothing, because when I visited Bottlebrush again three years later, the hill across the valley was covered with shacks. Still around, Mhlongo told me that pressure had made the municipality relent a couple of years after this invasion and many other failed attempts. The City Council had allowed people to build a hundred shacks in a site-and-service scheme, and as Mhlongo put it, 'Shacks are mushrooms, they multiply before dawn. There are 6,000 now.'⁴ Mhlongo had also in the meantime seen his star rise as a community leader, but more about this later.

ARE LAND INVASIONS SPONTANEOUS OR PLANNED?

Some academics wonder aloud whether land invasions are spontaneous or organised affairs; in this respect, a distinction is sometimes made between rapid invasions and slow 'encroachments'.⁵ Underlying the debate, of course, is the age-old disagreement about the role of spontaneity and organisation in the struggle for human emancipation (by the masses). Well, the Bottlebrush

land invaders are people who found living in overcrowded and overpriced shacks increasingly intolerable; they decided enough is enough and took matters into their own hands. They organised a meeting and invited a leader from a nearby settlement to advise them and give them support. Mhlongo had lived in Bottlebrush until a couple of years before the invasion. He had left Bottlebrush to establish a new settlement at Ekupholeni, which means 'a place of bliss', because of irreconcilable differences with the local African National Congress (ANC) branch executive committee, the undisputed local power structure in Bottlebrush, of which he had been a member. This committee had gone bad and been sucked into the semi-corrupt and highly exploitative shack landlordism that thrived in the settlement. For the committee, overcrowding was not a problem, but a potential source of profit as rents soared in the area and they, as the sole local power, thrived by milking and aiding the exploitative reign of the shacklords. The land invasion indicated that Mhlongo still had support in Bottlebrush, but he told me that he had not wanted to lead the invasion because he had to be cautious with his former committee. His political stratagem seems to have paid off from his point of view because a couple of years later, he was elected chairperson of the ANC branch committee whose jurisdiction covers Bottlebrush, Ekupholeni and adjacent parts of Chatsworth. The ANC even nominated him as its candidate for ward councillor in the 2011 local government elections, but lost the ward to the Democratic Alliance (DA). From these observations and machinations, we can see elements of both spontaneity and organisation in the aborted land invasion.

There is a high rate of community protests in South Africa.⁶ The country arguably also has a notably high rate of land invasions and land occupations. My research suggests that a substantial proportion of informal settlements are established through invasions.⁷ The occupation of land can be through newsmaking land grabs, usually involving a large number of people doing so at the same time, or through less dramatic and slower land encroachments where a few shacks gradually increase in number until hundreds or even thousands live in the area.⁸ According to government statistics, about 7 million people live in shacks in South Africa, some in backyard shacks erected behind 'brick' houses in built-up working class townships, and others living in 'stand-alone' shack settlements.⁹ It is the latter category of shacks that are established through land occupations, although, as we will see in the story of Duncan Village in Chapter 4, there have been instances

where backyard shacks have been erected *en masse* through self-organisation and against the wishes of the (apartheid) state.¹⁰ Given the reluctance of the apartheid state to provide adequate housing for the black working class in 'white' South African cities, people suffered from housing shortages, as not everyone could live in the deplorable single-sex compounds and hostels. Self-organisation and large doses of spontaneity have been crucial in the not so easy feat of housing millions of people in the face of state failure to do so.

In the literature, the academic debate that opposes spontaneity to organisation is related to broader conversations about the role of political organisation and the party in the struggles of the masses on the one hand, and the desirability of bottom-up rather than top-down leadership of social movements on the other. The argument against organisation as such does not hold much water because *amakomiti* do exist, and apparently in most shack settlements, as this book attests. Also, in the general literature on social movements, this position is unsustainable for all sides, although we do find echoes of it among those preferring 'horizontal' and 'loose' forms of organisation as opposed to 'hierarchical' and 'tight' organisation, for example the Occupy Movement.¹¹ My research findings on *amakomiti* will hopefully shed some light on these questions. Furthermore, some writers have suggested that shack dwellers only engage in 'those strategies and associations that respond directly to their immediate concerns' rather than any grand designs for broader or fundamental social change.¹² This is a position against ideology and organised politics, seen as emanating from 'intellectual elites', that appears to limit and diminish *a priori* the political agency of shack dwellers by discounting the existence of organic intellectuals. Empirical findings go a long way in clarifying such questions, although the rub often lies in the researcher's interpretation of the data.

A study by Rayner Teo of a land invasion and establishment of a shack settlement in Philippi, Cape Town, the city where the Indian and Atlantic Oceans meet, illustrates the usefulness of evidence-based debate while bringing out the subtle influence of ideology and perspective.¹³ The study provides a detailed picture of the establishment of the 'Marikana' settlement in this city, from which one can draw out the general pattern and strategy of invading and occupying a piece of land for residential purposes in the country. It also sheds some light on the question of spontaneity and organisation. In his analysis, Teo distinguishes and maps the trajectory between the process of invading the land and a subsequent period of 'consolida-

tion' of the settlement.¹⁴ His main finding and argument is that although there was undeniable evidence of organisation and planning, the occupation of land was largely spontaneous. He bases this on the fact that only about a hundred people would participate in planning meetings, but when the invasion happened, thousands turned up. These thousands did not access their knowledge of the invasion through organised channels, but rather – and he regards this as his important empirical discovery and conceptual contribution – through 'the passive network'.¹⁵ The latter concept is borrowed from Bayat,¹⁶ and it excludes organised 'activist networks' as sources of information for the invaders, but points to 'atomised individuals' acting collectively because of 'common, overlapping identities and recognising a common interest between each other'.¹⁷ Bayat has argued that the poor 'seem to be uninterested in any particular form of ideology and politics',¹⁸ and in his later work conceptualises their social movements as 'non-movements', defined as 'the collective action of dispersed and unorganised actors'.¹⁹

The Marikana residents elected a 'task team' to organise defence against eviction by the Cape Town municipality during the invasion process.²⁰ The team had to take on more tasks, including sorting out 'town scheme' problems – 'the people they just builded [*sic*] shacks in front of others, [so] then we start to strategise, saying, we must have some committees'.²¹ Later, they elected a committee with a broader mandate of exercising 'grassroots governance' during the consolidation phase of the newly established settlement. Teo distinguishes between the 'functional' purpose of the task team and the more generic 'grassroots governance' role of the later committee.²² The latter's duties included crime prevention and liaison with external bodies such as the City Council. Teo emphasises the disjuncture or discontinuity between the committees formed during the invasion and those formed during the consolidation phase. While noting similarities and some liaison with local committees or civics operating in Cape Town's working-class townships, he emphasises the peculiarity of the Marikana committees born of the specific conditions associated with the establishment and mode of life in the shack settlement. Nevertheless, he concludes, that *amakomiti* in the shacks and 'street committees' in the townships share a common history and culture.²³

The research I present in this book corroborates this general outline in the development of *amakomiti* in the informal settlement. My book com-

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plements and benefits from Teo's close-up portrait of a single case. In my research, I visited dozens of informal settlements and reported findings from 46 settlements, including in-depth investigation of four case studies. I find Teo's distinction between the land invasion and consolidation phases of the settlement illuminating. I also find his argument for conceptualising shack committees as 'grassroots governance structures' persuasive.²⁴ As to be expected, a bigger sample adds more colour to the picture he paints. For example, I found that in some settlements there were indeed notable changes in the character and personnel of different committees existing at different periods in the development of a particular settlement. In the case of Nkaneng, a shack settlement in Rustenburg's platinum belt, to which I devote a chapter, the leader of the invasion left after the establishment of a competing committee. The new committee was itself later violently dissolved by the community in a kind of shack *coup d'état*. In other cases, the original leader might thrive beyond the invasion into the consolidation phase and beyond, as was the case with Jeff of Jeffsville, and Boyana of KwaBoyana, discussed in the next section. There are a variety of experiences, approaches and intrigues to self-organisation in the informal settlements. For every committee that emerges or disappears, there is always a story and a history. I find this fascinating and inspiring; this is what led me to conduct the research presented in this book.

SHACK SETTLEMENT LEADERS AND AMAKOMITI

Comrade Jeff of Jeffsville is proof that in some instances, leaders of the invasion continue serving in the grassroots governance structures of shack communities beyond the process of establishing the settlement. I visited him in his home in Jeffsville, located in Pretoria, the capital city of South Africa. He told me how he had led the successful occupation of land that gave birth to the shack settlement named after him. The ingredients of victory were researching and surveying the land earmarked for invasion, liaising with surrounding township community structures for support, and tenaciously warding off repeated eviction attempts by the Pretoria municipality. He is the chairperson of the people's committee in the thriving settlement. The committee maintains ties with civics, movements and political organisations in Pretoria and beyond. The notion of solidarity and a perceived communal-

ity of the struggles of all working-class communities came through strongly in what he said in the course of the interview.

Baba Boyana, leader of the KwaBoyana ('at Boyana's') shack community near Vryheid in the KwaZulu-Natal midlands, earned recognition by having the place named after him because of being among the first in the settlement established through gradual encroachment rather than dramatic invasion.²⁵ He negotiated with the farmer who owned the place, winning security of tenure for the people. Like Jeff, he is part of the local *ikomiti* and has been since those early days. I have not met a humbler and gentler soul in my life.

Strong leaders have often caught the attention of commentators to the detriment of a balanced characterisation of leadership and organisation in the shack settlements. Part of the problem is the apartheid government's stigmatisation of shack settlements as 'squatter camps' that had to be eradicated like a *boer* fighting vermin on his fields. Political violence during the apartheid era also gave some shack settlements a bad name, especially the notorious 'warlords' who ruled over these areas. Who can forget the brutality of the Crossroads leader, Johnson Ngxobongwana, whose reign of terror in this Cape Town shack settlement during the 1980s left many dead.²⁶ His feared militia, the Witdoeke, became part of the apartheid strategy of black-on-black violence aimed at crushing opposition in black areas. Peace-loving leaders like Jeff of Jeffsville and Boyana of KwaBoyana, because of the respect and recognition they enjoy in their communities, could easily be mistaken for undemocratic big men lording it over their settlements. In any case, a focus on leaders very likely diverts attention away from community self-organisation and the *amakomiti*. This book sets out to explore and present a more nuanced picture of leadership in the settlements through its focus on self-organised grassroots governance structures.

The most famous leader of shack dwellers in South African history is undoubtedly Mr James Sofasonke Mpanza, known as the 'father of Soweto'.²⁷ Famous for riding his horse around Orlando 'native location', today part of Soweto, the biggest working-class township in South Africa, he made a name for himself by his local political antics and irreverent attitude towards the white state. Like Malcolm X, who began as a petty criminal, Mpanza had a rather shady background, once sentenced to death for murder. He made history in 1944 when he led a large group of people 'across the River Jordan', establishing a big shack settlement near Orlando, earning himself the name *Magebhula* ('grabber' of municipal land).²⁸ He was responding to

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the cries of the people who were suffering because of the foot-dragging of the white state in building houses for the black working class in Johannesburg. The massive 'squatter camp', named Sofasonke Village, lasted for 16 years; it spearheaded a broader squatter movement in the city and forced the government to embark on housebuilding projects for the urban proletariat, thus changing the face of the city. In the history books, the larger-than-life Mpanza drew all the attention, but less known are the committees that ran the settlement.²⁹ *Amakomiti* go back a long way in the history of the shack settlements of South Africa.

The 'charisma' and 'controversy' associated with big 'squatter leaders' like Mpanza sometimes hide the organising skills, political acumen and ideological underpinnings involved in leading shack dwellers. (More about Mpanza's talents in this regard in Chapter 2.) Besides, researchers who are sympathetic with and correctly focused on the grassroots may, as I have noted with Bayat, deny the ideological underpinnings of the struggles of the 'poor', including James Scott's well-meaning but debatable 'weapons of the weak' conception.³⁰ By so doing, they may miss the class content, transformative and prefigurative aspects inherent in subaltern struggles and organisations. The bane of social movement theory, Colin Barker laments, is its denial of the revolutionary potential of grassroots self-organisation because of its preoccupation with 'cycles of protest' and 'waves' without consideration of the possibility that movement organisations can 'nurture and expound the ideas of transcending "militant petitioning" in favour of "taking over"'.³¹

Simphele Zwane of Thembelihle, a settlement in Lenasia, in the south of Johannesburg, cut her teeth in the struggle during a difficult time in the life of the settlement when it fought against relocation and forced removals initiated by the post-apartheid democratic government, a threat it never faced from the apartheid regime. She became a member of the Thembelihle Crisis Committee (TCC), the organisation that was made by leading the victorious struggle against the relocation. Courage, determination and ideological clarity delivered the community's victory against the bulldozers. Since then, Zwane and her comrades have built a social movement organisation that has made a name for itself leading protests and, rarely for *amakomiti*, explicitly espousing socialism as its ideological compass in the struggle of shack dwellers. Its progressive role during the 2008 and 2011 xenophobia violence against migrants was recognised by the state; the TCC was awarded the 'Mkhaya Migrants Award: Most Integrated Community' in South Africa.³²