A post-apartheid (rural) citizen, 1986 – 1991

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Introduction

Historians and social scientists have portrayed the late 1980s as perhaps the most tumultuous and violent times in modern SA history, with valid reasons. In this political tragedy, KwaZulu-Natal experienced most of the political conflict in the dying days of apartheid. Simultaneous with this state of confusion and flux, there were other initiatives that sought to undermine the system of apartheid by beginning a process that would culminate – if successful – in the birth of a post apartheid (in this case) rural-citizen. According to one of the initiatives such a citizen would have access to land, acquire land rights or full ownership of the land they occupied and be literate. The Rural Transformation Association (RTA) was a champion of this vision.

 Using 7 of its 74 farms in Natal and Kwazulu the Catholic Church began an experiment in land ownership that anticipated a post-apartheid land ownership dispensation. This futuristic or foreshadowing work saw the leaders of the church establishing the RTA. The church's senior cardinal in the region, Archbishop of Durban, Denis E. Hurley, OMI chaired the founding committee. The Association saw itself as no ordinary non-governmental organization. In its "Vision Statement" it declared,

> Development in our context means more than agricultural production, more than housing and water supplies. It implies a redistribution of resources and the transformation of the institutions and power relations which are at the root of poverty. The Church should set an example of such redistribution and transformation.[1]

The founders of the Association sought to set an example of a fair redistribution of land, formation of residents committees on its mission farms, residents' participation in political structures and setting up of "survival projects" for local communities to discourage rural – urban migration. The RTA knew that it was not the first non-governmental organization to enter the field of rural development, unlike other fellow development participants,[2] its intervention would be anchored on a firm foundation by drawing on the theology of the land especially from the book of Genesis – the idea of a "promised land". The founders challenged not only those involved in development but also liberation theologians for not

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1 RTA, Annual Report, 1989, p1.

2 Mark Swilling and Bev Russell note that in the late 1990s there were 98 567 NPO in South Africa. See The Size and Scope of the Non-profit Sector in South Africa (Durban: Centre for Civil Society, 2002).

thinking carefully about a post-oppression South Africa. The RTA committee argued,

> In fact, in one sense, liberation from oppression is in itself no much more than a promise. What one is liberated for is landedness, rootedness, belonging, where one may live out one's covenant relationship with God.[3]

Here lies the Association's telling interventions in rural development. Unlike most development organizations, the RTA was overtly political and championed the process that sought to turn farm tenants into "political" communities. Among its aims was to "enable" farm residents to:

- Become creative, responsible communities

- Enjoy security of tenure

- Transform their social and economic situations;

- Collaborate with other organisations for political representation.[4]

The RTA hoped to carve a place for itself in a growing economy of development by using its expertise and moral standing as an association founded by one of the old mainline churches and major land owner in KwaZulu-Natal. Indeed, during the process of establishing the Association and during its short life, the church relied on its connections in Europe. One such reliable partner in this endeavor was Germany based development agency called Misereor. The long-standing association with church-led rural development projects suggests that Misereor shared some aspects of the RTA's vision.

Urban settings: A context

While the RTA wanted farm residents to see their lives firmly rooted in the countryside, there was a broader national context that the Association strived to keep away from its tenants. The public protests that intensified in 1984 signaled a new contest for the control of space(s) in South Africa. These were nationwide protests against the hegemonic control of the State. They took place predominantly in small towns, cities and townships. Most of the public rallies and gatherings were organized by the United Democratic Front (UDF), Trade Unions affiliated with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and civic organizations including churches linked to the

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3 RTA, ….

4 RTA, Annual Report, 1989, p12.

South African Council of Churches (SACC).[5] However, these public marches were not the first in South African history and,[6] neither did the organizers have a new political objective. But what distinguished these rolling mass actions from the previous protests, was a clear intention from the general public to contest public spaces with the South African State. These demonstrations were met with a very determined force from the State security forces. And it soon responded by declaring a State of Emergency in June 1986, which was extended to 1990.[7] This gave Security Forces "extraordinary powers of arrest, detention, censorship regulations and control of public assembly".[8] The definition of public assembly included, public gatherings, funeral gatherings and marches.[9] Reporting and talking publicly about the "unrest" was banned. Some newspapers like the New Nation and Weekly Mail were closed through the State of Emergency regulations.[10] The UDF was restricted from organizing its activities, and Cosatu was banned from taking part in political activities.

Seeing all the restrictions imposed on organizations to organize public meetings, the UDF and Cosatu formed a broad public based movement called Mass Democratic Movement (MDM). In late 1980s it was the MDM that organized rent and bus boycotts in the Townships, and consumer boycotts against white owned businesses. In 1989 the MDM organized a "defiance campaign against segregated facilities and restrictions on meetings".[11] As Pampalis writes:

> from August, black patients were organized to present themselves for treatment at white hospitals; most were, in fact, given treatment. This was followed by similar challenges to the segregation of schools, transport, workplace facilities, beaches and other public amenities.[12]

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5 John Pampallis, *Foundations of the New South Africa*, 288.

6 Since the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 different kinds of protests took place in various corners of South Africa. These protests culminated in the 1956 women demonstrations at the Union Buildings in Pretoria against pass laws, Sharpville march in 1960, Durban Workers strike in 1973 and the Soweto uprisings in 1976.

7 Desmond Tutu, *The Rainbow People of God: The Making of a Peaceful Revolution*, 97. And, John Pampallis, *Foundations of the New South Africa*, 288.

8 Desmond Tutu, *The Rainbow People of God: The Making of a Peaceful Revolution*, 97. And, John Pampallis, *Foundations of the New South Africa*, 97.

9 John Pampallis, *Foundations of the New South Africa.*

10 John Pampallis, *Foundations of the New South Africa*, 290.

11 John Pampallis, *Foundations of the New South Africa*, 295.

12 John Pampallis, *Foundations of the New South Africa*, 295.

The unbanning of all political organizations opened a space(s) for negotiations to take place. These negotiations took place over a period of three years. Formal negotiations began in December 1991, when 228 delegates from nineteen political organizations gathered at the World Trade Center, Kempton Park, Johannesburg.[13] The negotiations included participants from the homelands.[14] The participants in these negotiations called themselves the Convention for a Democratic South Africa – [CODESA].

However, even this space was not yet free and was once seized by the Afrikaner Weerstandbewiging(AWB). This group of right-wing "neo-Nazi storm troopers attacked blacks caught in the building".[15] This attack, which was beamed across the country during prime time, and the clear understanding that the anti-apartheid movements had not won the struggle through arms led to a need for a *compromise*. It was this political compromise that has made the South African political situation very engaging, challenging, and at certain moments it has presented interesting dilemmas. It made this new space ready for refashioning. This moment also bequeathed constraints and limitations.

The period between 1986 and 1990 was a crucial period or an intense moment of contests for control of public spaces.[16] It was in these spaces that the politics of South Africa in the late 1980s was staged and dramatized. The collapse of the system of Apartheid in 1990 signaled a 'new' beginning, and the freeing of spaces was a visible prediction of what – for the first ten years after the historic elections of 1994 was commonly referred to as a *new* South Africa – a *new* space.

Founding vision and a "common good"

The founders of the RTA recognized the need for "rural transformation" in areas that fell under the Catholic church. Part of this move was influenced by the conditions in the countryside not only in Natal but also in South Africa generally. The first meeting of the committee drew attention to such harsh conditions:

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13 Leonard Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, 247.

14 Homelands or Bantustants were enclaves within the Republic of South Africa that were created in the early 1970's to contain Africans' aspirations to power. Then the process of imagining a nation was only a reconciliation between races, it was also an attempt, I think, of trying to get people from these eight Bantustansts to imagine themselves as a nation.

15 Patti Waldmeir, *Anatomy of a Miracle: The end of Apartheid and the Birth of the New South Africa*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 238.

16 From that time ordinary citizens could occupy the spaces that they had, hitherto, been prevented by law.

> "The vast majority of people living in the rural areas of South Africa are denied the basic necessities that are taken for granted by a privileged minority."[17]

In mid 1980s South Africa such an observation was common among the left. Numerous studies had shown the collapse of the rural economy that was once believed to support the city. Seeing that the opening statement would be inadequate without highlighting those conditions that matter to life, the committee went on to stress that the "requirements such as adequate diet, shelter, clean domestic water, education and a stable family should be a basic right for all." In some ways this recognition pointed to the failure of the state to create conditions that allowed rural residents to fashion a good life. The emphasis on the lack of basic necessities of life meant that people led a precarious life.

In addition to these needs, the RTA thought all the above problems were a symptom of a big problem. For the members of the RTA, "land hunger, poverty and insecurity of rural life are, however, in the main symptoms of the ravages of colonialism, apartheid and an exploitative economic system which has consigned the majority of South Africans to the margins of economic life." To see to the amelioration of these conditions, the RTA saw a future of rural South Africa laying on the land. It made a commitment to give tenants residing on its land access rights or ownership full ownership of the land they occupied. In order to give life to this vision, the RTA appointed two transformation officers. These were Jean Ngubane and Marc Alcock. Their task was to do research, make recommendation to the RTA committee and implement the decision of the RTA. Both researchers were energetic and committed to the vision.

After all necessary preliminary work had been completed; the two RTA officers began work on 25 September 1989. Jean Ngubane was "mandated to care for St. Adelbero in the Diocese of Umzimkhulu, Besters in the Diocese of Dundee and Bergville in the Archdiocese of Durban." Marc Alcock "continued his involvement in four Mariannhill Mission farms"; namely Mariathal, St. Michael's, St. Bernard's and Kwa St. Joseph's. The spread of the farms would prove to be a challenge in the work of the RTA. Not only were these farms widely spread out, the size of the properties also varied greatly. Some farms fell under Natal Provincial Authority and were regarded as "white land" while other farms were on the margins of the KwaZulu homeland government. The RTA cultivated relations among farm tenants that discouraged private ownership.

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17 RTA, Annual Report, 1989, p1.

Once the TRA started its work, it identified a lacuna in the knowledge base of rural farm residents. Such a gap would be vital in its conceptualization of its development curriculum. For the organization saw poverty as a main problem on its farms. As it has been mentioned above, there was a lack of basic necessities. Indeed, "apart from the need to learn skills there [was] a poverty of ideas." Partly because of 'isolation' and lack money, farm residents lacked ideas that could change their conditions. The RTA attributed this condition to the lack of "exposure to development and its possibilities." As part of its vision, the RTA offered farm residents a way out of poverty through the training projects it provided. The curriculum offered "skills such as sewing, spring protection, gardening and literacy." These skills were vital to farm communities. Once the skills of sewing had been learned, women would be able to enter into a small rural informal economy. For the RTA spring protection and gardening would ensure that farm residents had clean water and used it to sustain themselves and their gardens. But after six months of training it became clear that the skills that residents required went beyond the need to sustain life. First the RTA discovered such courses did not equip residents with the knowledge to initiate small businesses. And for a few women who formed co-operatives they required knowledge of financial management and marketing.

To deal with these on-the-field challenges, the RTA introduced a second package of modules to respond to the "complicated needs" of farm residents. The package included "the role of committees, financial management, leadership training, social action and conflict resolution." Perhaps, due to the political violence at the time the later module was appropriate. While the first modules were important it was through the second set of courses that the RTA's vision of a rural – post apartheid resident came to life. Using its vast contacts the RTA made links with Legal Resources Centre, Built Environment Support Group based at the University of Natal, SAWCO project, KwaZulu Training Trust, the Valley Trust, Shade, Community Law Centre and Learn & Teach. Once agreement was established the RTA sent groups of residents to workshops across Natal. In addition to the benefits of learning under new environments, the organization also hoped such regular and planned workshops would establish "useful links" between farms.

Some of the workshops focused on map reading and research. Here literacy skills allowed participants to partake in the work of mapping the farms they occupied and seeing the distance and connection between themselves and neighbours on the map. Perhaps it was in such workshops where participants cultivated a particular sense of place – rootedness. Below is one of the maps that was used to help farm residents develop a sense of community, neighbourliness and the appreciation of the vast expanse of what the RTA regularly referred to as a "Zulu pastoral region."

Rural lands owned by the church

Amazwe asemaphandleni aphethwe yisonto
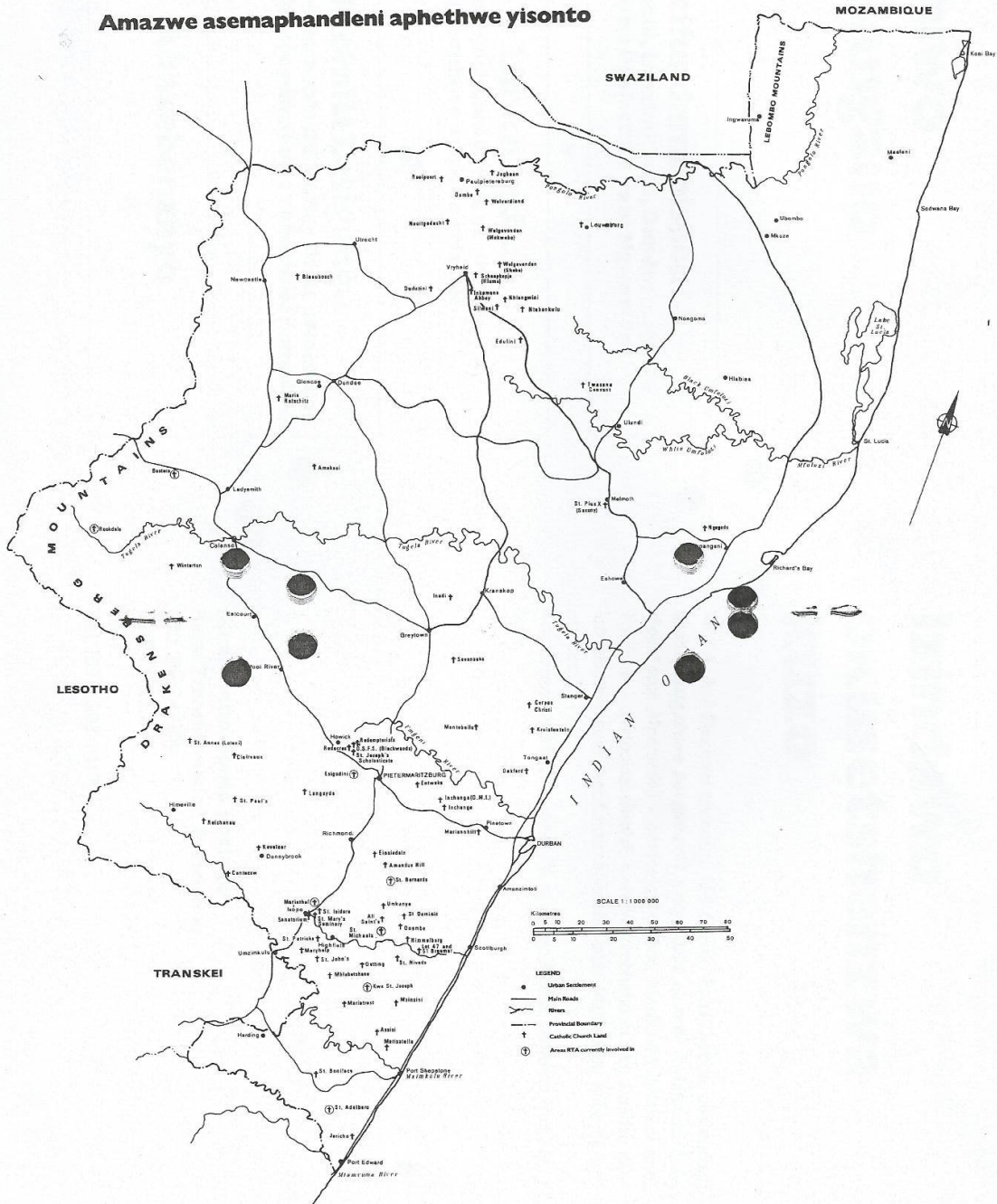
Such church holdings, dotted on the valleys and hills of the eastern seaboard of South Africa created a particular view of the reach and influence of the TRA. In this region of southern Africa, its influence stretched from Umtavuna River in the south to Kosi bay near Mozambique. On the western part the church's farms were protected either by the Drankesberg Mountain or the provincial boundaries both on its southern and northern parts. In the RTA's view there were very few urban settlements of note, much of the land was rural and perhaps pristine. All belonged to the church. But this mapping of Natal was not surprising considering the TRA's view on rural-urban migration. It discouraged farm residents from moving to the cities.

> ➢ Research continues …