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A Reflection on the Process of Research and Writing on Human Rights Violations in Venda
Working paper - Thembeka Mufamadi

Introduction

The paper focuses on the process of research and writing on human rights abuses in Venda. It deals with problems encountered when conducting research on human rights violations in Venda. It also concentrates on the challenges faced in writing up a history of repression and resistance which led to the perpetration of those human rights abuses there.

An attempt is made to look among other things at questions of time frame; the level of readiness and openness by South Africans to come forward to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). More importantly, the paper tries to interrogate the nature of sources of information in reconstructing that past.

The TRC was mandated to investigate and document gross human rights violations which occurred in and outside the country, over a period of thirty-four years. The commission had to complete such an enormous task within a limited space of about two and a half years. It set up various departments such as statement taking; data capturing; investigation, research and so on, with specific functions which were performed in order to report and record that past. The TRC's final report provides accounts of the functions of these departments.[1] This paper focuses specifically on constraints with regard to the proceedings of research and writing of human rights in Venda.

Time Constraints

In places such as Venda which were covered by the commission, the researcher had approximately about four to six weeks in which to collect data and produce research documents. The researcher had to research and produce a very short (one or two page) document outlining key local political events such as:

[1] Check Volume One Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, chapter 11 &12 The primary functions of the researchers are outlined in pp 374-381

- the 1979 Venda independence:
- the 1981 Bomb blast at Sibasa ;
- the 1989 Ritual or medicine killings and so on .

The purpose of the outline document was to assist the commissioners; committee members, statement takers,; investigators and others to have some idea about the political history of the area. This was a critical initial proceeding of the commission. The outline document was therefore an extremely important piece of information particularly to commissioners and committee members who had to go and introduce the work of the commission to various stake holders.

The outline was equally important to statement takers who had to go to Venda and obtain submissions reflecting violations from various groupings such as supporters of the liberation movements, the Venda government, and official Venda opposition. Pressed with time, it took a couple of days to a week to look, find relevant data and compile such a critical piece of information. This consequently affected the quality of research and writing on human rights violations to be elaborated upon later.

The second major research document produced, contained relatively detailed information. It had a Venda chronology, specific events and themes such as :

- the Formation of Venda Students Association;
- the Role of the Church;
- Venda independence in 1979
- The role of the Church
- Underground Operations;
- Ritual Killings and so on.

These events and themes dealt with the historical and political context within which human rights violations took place. This document provided the commissioners with a 'fuller', chronological and thematic political history of the area. It helped to contextualise the statements which were received from the victims of human rights violations.

The role played by the Lutheran Church in politics in Venda is one example. It was gathered that around 1976-1977, politically conscious Christians in Venda formed the Bold and Evangelical Christian

Organisation (BECO). BECO was aimed at furthering the struggle against Apartheid. Pastors and members claimed to have worked closely with student movements and other structures, to fight for political liberation from the old South African and later Venda regimes. Churches such as the Beuster Centre were used as venues for political meetings. As a result, the old regimes saw the church serving as a front for the liberation organisations.[2]

The TRC received a number of submissions from former members of the Lutheran Church. Tshifiwa Isaac Muofhe who was the president of BECO, a member of the Lutheran Church and allegedly an underground agent of the ANC, was arrested and detained several times by both the South African and Venda police in 1977 and 1978.[3]

When a bomb exploded at Sibasa police station in October 1981, the Venda police received information that the MK cadres who planted the bomb had been accommodated at Beuster Centre. Beuster is located within five kilometres from Thohoyandou. Several people including Muofhe and three pastors Simon Farisani, Petrus Phaswane[4] and Phineas Phosiwa[5] were arrested and detained for this event.

Muofhe was severely tortured and he eventually died in police custody. His corpse was found in a sitting position in a toilet. A post mortem performed indicated that his death was caused from internal bleeding. Members of the Venda security force, Captain Ramaligela and Constable Managa were subsequently charged for his murder. They were found not guilty and were discharged after an inquest which was held at the Sibasa magistrate court in August 1982.[6] The TRC however found them responsible for Muofhe's death and for gross violations of human rights.[7]

Yet the credibility of the above historical account was largely influenced by the sources employed during the process of research and writing on human rights abuses in Venda. The nature of sources is the pertinent question to be explored in the following section.

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[2] Interview with Z. Nevhutalu, 26/8/2996
Interview with S. Farisani, 30/10/1996
[3] Matamela Annah Dladlama, HRV statement, (JB/00540 NPVEN)
[4] For their submissions, See TRC of South Africa Report, Volume 3, pp 586 -588
[5] Phineas Phosiwa, HRV statement, (JB/0150/02NPVEN)
TRC Human Rights Violation Transcript, Venda Hearing, 4/10/1996
[6] Ibid.
[7] TRC of South African Report, Volume 3, p588

NATURE OF SOURCES

Limited Media Coverage

Reflecting on the actual process of researching and writing on human rights abuses, there was very little media coverage on Venda. Newspapers such as **The Star,** the **Sowetan** and so on did not have an office or representatives in Venda. This is possibly because geographically, Venda is a peripheral and predominantly rural area.

The level of high repression particularly after the Venda independence in 1979, is another possible explanation of limited media coverage. Journalists from outside homelands were often restricted from covering so-called independent homeland news. This was the case certainly in Bophuthatswana under Lucas Mangope's rule. Perhaps it was a similar case in Venda under Patrick Mphephu.

The lack of media coverage in Venda compared with other places elsewhere explains why the country and the world new little about political developments of that area. For example cases of people such as **Alfred Denga, Samuel Radamba, Samuel Mugivhela** and others did not receive much if any media coverage. Yet they reflected extremely important political events in Venda.

These people were black farmers who owned orchards that produced fruits, vegetables and tobacco. It was gathered that the farmers were recruited to the ANC underground operation network. The large pieces of lands the farmers owned enabled the freedom fighters to hide and to establish arms caches with minimal detection, in those orchards. These farmers also assisted in transporting the freedom fighters to cross the borders. These farmers sold their products to other farmers in areas such as the then Rhodesia and Botswana. Behind this trade, the Venda farmers communicated with the liberation movement representatives in exile. They passed on information on what was happening inside the country. They also received banned literature to bring back in the country.[8]

Denga and others were arrested by the Venda police in 1983. They were detained and accused of assisting ANC 'terrorists' and were charged

[8] Interview with Rashaka Ratshitanga, 14/01/1997

under section 3 of the Terrorism Act. Others were charged under Internal Security Act of 1982. Some were found guilty of treason.[9]

The commission received a statement from Denga's wife. Denga himself is presently mentally handicapped as a result of severe torture by the Venda security members. He was arrested because he helped in transporting three ANC cadres from Thohoyandou to Tshihwadza, up in the mountains, where they were to be taken to cross to Zimbabwe. Denga was taken by police officers Managa and Nemakonde to Masisi Police Station in Mutale. His wife reported that Denga was locked up, kept alone in a dirty cell and was given food mixed with faeces. For that reason he refused to eat for several weeks. When he was released the following year (1984) in March, he came back permanently mentally deranged. [10]

Samuel Mugivhela was also arrested by the Venda and the South African Police, for harbouring and feeding "terrorists" in his orchard. The submission was made to the commission by his wives and brother. They told the commission how police, including white police came to search the orchard for weaponry and machines. They described how they (wives) were interrogated to find out whether they were cooking for the "terrorists".[11] Mugivhela died in detention on the 20 January 1984. The Venda National Force refused to take responsibility for his death. They claimed that he died from diabetes or typhoid.[12] His brother however believes that he was beaten up as his neck seemed to have been strangled before he died.[13]

It is possible that if these incidents had taken place elsewhere in the old Republic of South Africa, they would have been covered prominently. Also important and peculiar about these historical accounts, is the persons providing the information. This is the subject of the next section.

Constraints with Primary sources

In the case of Alfred Denga, we got to know that he was involved in clandestine operations with the ANC. It is unlikely that he informed his

[9] Race Relations Survey, 1984, pp 549-552
[10] Tshinane Denga, HRV statement, (JB/01414/02VEN)
TRC Human Right Violation transcript, 3/10/1996
[11] Tshivhase Ntsundeni Sophia, HRV statement, (JB/01361/02NPVEN)
[12] Race Relations Surveys, 1984, pp 549-552
[13] Edward Mugivhela, HRV statement, (JB/02024/02NPVEN)

wife Tshinane about such activities. Notwithstanding its value, Tshinane's account of events is limited. With Denga mentally disabled, the whole truth of what happened at the time, will possibly never be known.

With Samuel Mugivhela's case as well, it is from his wives and brother that we hear more about his death in police custody. Similarly to Denga, we can only speculate whether Mugivhela's family members were aware of his secretive involvement in the ANC underground network. The account the TRC obtained is thus incomplete, even though one could never take away its worthiness in reconstructing the past.

Gathering information on underground operations unavoidably presented a number of problems to the process of research and writing on human rights violations in Venda. The questions of anonymity and reluctance to talk came up.

Anonymity

As there was very little written documentation available, oral interviews were conducted to obtain more information on the political developments of the area. One of the key happening was the granting of political independence to Venda in 1979. This posed a serious problem to freedom fighters as Venda and other homelands located along the border areas were used as 'springboards' to flee and infiltrate the country. We got to know about some black farmers who were involved in the ANC underground structures.

However, information on how the underground cells were set up, how they functioned, who was involved, accounts of specific events such as the 1981 bomb blast at Sibasa police station was withheld. The interviewees felt that they could talk generally about underground operations without disclosing specific details. They were willing to talk broadly about the plans of underground operations in Venda: How some people left the country and went to countries such as Botswana to investigate the possibilities of armed struggle; how such people organised networks and raised funds in order to assist those who wanted to leave the country for military training and or a better education. They talked about the recruitment of black farmers because of their particular attractive large pieces of land to hide freedom fighters and arms caches.

The researcher was thus faced with the challenge of the information's credibility. However, at that time (1996-1997) the interviewees felt strongly that it was not safe yet to talk openly about MK underground activities. They had good reasons to feel so because the new democracy was still very young and a possibility of a counter-revolution by the right-wing element was not inconceivable. Perhaps now that we are nearly in the second round of a democratic government, those people would be more open and ready to provide the details needed for a fuller and credible understanding of the history of human right violations in Venda.

There was also a deafening silence from those who were on the side of the former Venda government, especially members of the security forces. The low number of amnesty applications from former security force members testify to their reluctance to come forward and talk about that past.

Reluctance to talk

It is not known how the supporters of the old South African and Venda regime understood and thought about the political developments of that area during 1960-1994. It is also not known how the official opposition of the Venda regime interpreted the political events of that time.

Yet it became known that the old South African government saw Venda as a 'buffer state'. South Africa took particular care to keep the homeland security under its control. A strip of land at Madimbo, along the Limpopo River was placed under the jurisdiction of the South African Defence Force (SADF).[14] Lieutenant Colonel Mulaudzi who was a former South African policeman, was appointed commander of the Venda National Force in 1979. He announced that Venda would not hesitate to call on assistance of the SADF as insurgents from the borders were threatening their so-called independence.[15]

Chief M.B. Rambuda who was the Minister of Justice also called for the enactment of Proclamation R276, which placed restrictions on the holding of meetings unless authorised by the magistrate. An anti insurgence unit was added to the Venda National Force which was

[14] R. Southall & G. Wood , **Control and Contestation: State Security in South Africa's Homelands**, unpublished paper prepared for the TRC, September 1997
[15] Race Relations Survey, 1980, p90

already engaging in anti guerrilla duties by 1980.[16] These were all attempts to limit potential strategic dangers to Venda independence.

Where is the voice of these personalities, from the former SADF and Venda National Force?

In a statistical analysis done on the various forms of human rights violations in Venda, a graph showed a peak in levels of torture from 1979. This could be attributed to threats from insurgents across those borders, when Venda was granted its political independence. Torture particularly peaked around 1987, possibly because of the intensification of underground operations by the liberation movements. A number of submissions were made by victims who were severely tortured by the Venda police because they were alleged to have been either hiding arms caches, recruiting or harbouring "terrorists'.

The names of police officers such as Ramaligela, Nesamari, Managa consistently came up as the perpetrators of gross human rights abuses, in the submissions. Yet information obtained from their joint Amnesty application is very brief and vague. The applicants sought amnesty for assaulting several people when they were executing their duty. No one applied for killing Muofhe who died in police custody. Perhaps when the Amnesty committee gives them a hearing, more information will come out.

Other constraints

Judging from the limited amount of references in the narrative document, there was clearly a lack of records, especially from the police. The TRC report has a chapter focusing on the destruction of records. [17] Also evident in the thin bibliography is a lack of academic work on Venda.

[16] Race Relations Survey, 1980, pp212, 399-400

[17] See TRC of South Africa Report, Volume 1, chapter 8

Conclusion

This exercise was to highlight some of the problems that were encountered during the experience of researching and writing on human rights violations in Venda. These were problems essentially to do with presenting a potentially biased perspective on the historical account of human rights violations in that area. Some of the constrains had to do with reluctance or and the fact that some people were or still are not ready or willing to disclose their past activities to the whole world.

The intention of this exercise is in no way to take away the worthiness, usefulness and invaluable work achieved by the TRC. This paper has hopefully exposed the gaps which need to filled to reconstruct a balanced past of our country, by all scholars. The TRC report is pointing out direct relevant areas of research which hopefully, research departments at universities and other research institutions will take up.