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Portraits of resilience : writing a socio-cultural history of a black South African location with the Ngilima photographic collection. Benoni, 1950s-1960s.

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Citation

Feyder, S. (2016, May 3). *Portraits of resilience : writing a socio-cultural history of a black South African location with the Ngilima photographic collection. Benoni, 1950s-1960s.* Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/39181>

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Issue Date: 2016-05-03

Epilogue

The Uncertain Future of the Ngilima Collection

My epilogue differs from the previous chapters in that I reflect on the future of the collection, thus entering to a certain extent the domain of speculation. The Ngilima collection is presently stored at Historical Papers at Wits University in Johannesburg. Its preservation and accessibility for national and international researchers is therefore guaranteed. But its presence in Benoni itself remains uncertain. It seems unlikely that people from Benoni with an interest in these pictures would make the effort to travel to Johannesburg simply to consult the collection. Alongside my research work, I used part of my time in the field to scout for possibilities to create a formal space for the collection within Benoni, without much success. This failure notwithstanding, I present here what I believe makes the Ngilima collection such a promising and compelling archive, compared to what is presently on offer in Benoni's rather limited panorama of heritage practices. I suggest that one of its unique characteristics is its ability to appeal to a large audience on an emotional and personal level, beyond the racial and class divisions.

“Tambo-mania”: Heritage Politics in Benoni

Towards the end of my fieldwork, in 2012, there was a new stir in Wattville. The construction of the brand new OR Tambo Narrative Centre (also known as the “OR Tambo precinct”) was about to be completed and inaugurated with great pomp. Having attended an early launching ceremony, Siphon Ngilima, Doreen Ngilima's son, was eager to show me around. From the fringe of the township, a smooth new road veers into a fenced-off complex, past a large guardhouse and its parking boom, before diving towards the shores of the Leeupan lake. From around the corner emerged three buildings of cutting-edge architectural design, with a sleek boardwalk snaking between them. Though unfinished, I could already make out the outlines

of an open-air amphitheatre and imagine the future nature reserve out of the heaps of turned soil surrounding the pavilions. With the right angle and distance, it was possible to photograph this dashing, fifty-four million rand complex while cutting out the neighbouring shacks from the frame (figure 7.1). As one journalist put it, the centre was “an oasis of modern development amid the poverty and squalor of the surrounding squatter camps”.⁶⁴¹



Figure 7.1: The new OR Tambo Narrative Centre photographed from the street. (Shacks are cropped out of the frame but are immediately to the left of the centre). Photograph by the author, 2012.

The purpose of this precinct was to be an educational centre revolving around environmental issues, such as the rehabilitation of the lake and its surroundings wetlands. The architects had thus adopted a design at the forefront of environmentally-friendly and sustainable architecture, using local material and traditional building skills. But the local council wished

⁶⁴¹ Eleanor Momberg, *The Star*, July 2 2012.

to combine these environmental concerns with a museum dedicated to the legacy of the ANC's former secretary general and president, Oliver Tambo. The new O.R Tambo Narrative Centre is to replace the Benoni Museum as the main history museum of Ekurhuleni (formally known as East Rand).

The consecration of an entire museum to honour Tambo's memory is the culmination of a much longer process of transforming this struggle leader into an icon. Shortly after the first democratic elections in the country, the new extension in Wattville was named "Tamboville". In 2007, the Johannesburg's international airport, in Ekurhuleni, was renamed the "O.R. Tambo international airport". The year before, Ekurhuleni decided to make October, Tambo's birth month, the Oliver Tambo Month, a month filled with various activities and events meant to remind us of his legacy, including what has become the annual Oliver and Adelaide Tambo Liberation Walk. More recently, Ekurhuleni's tourism department introduced the Oliver Tambo Route, which takes tourists from the OR Tambo airport to the elaborate gravesite where both are buried, and now to the new precinct.⁶⁴² The Tambo gravesite, located in the Tamboville cemetery, was declared a national heritage site in 2012.

This Tambo-frenzy is a reflection of the recent trend in the field of heritage, which perceives it as a potentially powerful generator of tourism and thus of development, leading to an increasing commodification of what has come to be known as "the heritage industry".⁶⁴³ Recent market research has shown that the struggle narrative was a major attraction for international tourism. The struggle against apartheid has become "the most significant and attractive lens through which to view the past" in South Africa.⁶⁴⁴ While the number of local oral history projects has greatly multiplied since 1994, government-sponsored heritage projects have tended to focus on the achievements of resistance leaders, following a conventional biography approach. Historical sites are thus selected in terms of their link to prominent ANC figures: the "Mandela Trail" for instance connects 'many places of significance' linked to Nelson Mandela's biography.⁶⁴⁵ It is thus no surprise that the Ekurhuleni municipality have made such effort to lay claim to this figure, by repeatedly

⁶⁴² <http://mg.co.za/article/2013-07-19-00-mama-tambos-legacy>

⁶⁴³ Nuttall and Coetzee, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa*, 6.

⁶⁴⁴ *Idem*.

⁶⁴⁵ C. Rassool, "The Rise of Heritage and the Reconstitution of History in South Africa," *Kronos* 26 (2000),1.

establishing the equation Tambo/ Ekurhuleni until it seems natural and beyond questioning.⁶⁴⁶ The Tambo icon has become a major part of the municipality's branding of the region. The City of Ekurhuleni has claimed Tambo as "one of its own", despite the fact that Tambo's ties to the area are in fact rather tenuous.⁶⁴⁷

According to Luli Callinicos, Tambo first moved to Benoni when he lost his accommodation in Johannesburg and was put up by his aunt Emma Way who happened to live in Wattville in 1950. After the Tambos married in 1956, the young couple were given a house on Maseko street.⁶⁴⁸ All in all, Tambo's time in Wattville seems to be a minor part of his biography, as he lived there only until 1959. Shortly after the Sharpeville massacre, he went into exile in England, where he would stay for the following three decades. On his return to the country, the Tambos allegedly considered moving back to Wattville, until they were offered accommodation in a wealthy white suburb north of Johannesburg. Most major websites dedicated to his memory, including the ANC's own website page, entirely omit to mention Wattville in the lengthy biography.⁶⁴⁹ More importantly for my story, his presence in the area is mentioned only briefly in half a line in Bonner and Nieftagodien's latest publication on the history of Ekurhuleni, somewhat surprising considering that local politics is the dominant topic of the book.⁶⁵⁰ Tambo's involvement with the ANC at a national level meant that he spent most of his time commuting to and often staying overnight in Johannesburg, or travelling to various political rallies in townships across the Rand. Judging from such written and my own oral sources, my conclusion is that Oliver Tambo is not really a significant part of Wattville and the Old Location's history; nor is the area a significant part of Tambo's

⁶⁴⁶ False information has been circulating on the web about Tambo's ties to Benoni. One South African website for instance goes as far as claiming that Wattville is "a birth home" of Tambo (<http://www.saweb.co.za/townships/township/ekurhuleni/ekurhule.html>). The British newspaper *The Independent* in a recent article refers to Wattville as the township "where Tambo grew up" (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/profiles/oliver-tambo-the-exile-394806.html>).

⁶⁴⁷ "The City of Ekurhuleni is truly honoured and blessed to claim Oliver Reginald Kaizana Tambo, known for the better part of his life simply as OR, as one of its own". <http://ortambonarrativecentre.com/>

⁶⁴⁸ L. Callinicos, *Oliver Tambo: Beyond the Engeli Mountains* (Claremont: David Philip Publishers, 2004), 168 and 233.

⁶⁴⁹ <http://www.anc.org.za/showpeople.php?p=5>

⁶⁵⁰ Bonner and Nieftagodien, *Ekurhuleni: The Making of an Urban Region*, 109.

biography. Why Tambo ended up being buried in Wattville is unclear, but it seems that it was ultimately Mrs Tambo's decision, based on her own relationship to the place.⁶⁵¹

When I last visited the centre in 2013, the permanent exhibition's display was still under construction, yet it was already clear that the overwhelming part of it would be focused on the life of Oliver Tambo rather than on the history of the place. Wattville and Actonville appear as merely the backdrop or stage for his actions, suggesting that these places were significant in so far as they connect the geography to Tambo.⁶⁵² The forced removals, Daveyton and Reigerpark, do not feature anywhere in the exhibition, nor in the website, probably because the forced removals took place only after Tambo left Benoni. It also conveniently omits the controversial role of the town council in the implementation of apartheid.

I informally addressed a few stakeholders of the local heritage sector, enquiring about the possibility of exhibiting the Ronald Ngilima collection in the museum and perhaps even have a digital version of the archive permanently hosted there. I quickly understood that the content and the use of the centre were the object of political wrangles, as the decisions regarding this matter fell upon local councillors, instead of an independent head curator or the museum's board. Considering that these local councillors were all ANC members, it was not surprising that the Ngilima collection failed to attract their attention, or the government officials of the heritage and culture department. It was initially unclear how this random sample of pictures could advance the purpose of celebrating ANC history. That is, until the town council organised a pompous celebration for the anniversary of Mary Moodley's death. As mentioned in the introduction, Mary Moodley happens to appear several times in the collection. Considering how few pictures of this famous ANC militant are publically available, one senior heritage official was very keen to obtain the Ngilima portraits of Mary Moodley, insisting on us meeting again before I left the country. This sudden flare-up in interest however died before long and I never heard from him again. Farrell Ngilima went through a similar pattern with the heritage department: initial interest, a first meeting, followed by dead

⁶⁵¹ According to Luli Callinicos, the author of Tambo's biography, the umbilical cords of his two sons are buried there. Mrs Tambo was also very involved in several charity funds in Wattville, including delivering food parcels to and organising Christmas lunches for local senior citizens. The Development Centre is named after her.

⁶⁵² "The narrative centre aims to share the significant people, places and events associated with the 20th and 21st century history of Actonville and Wattville (...). To this end, a prominent part of the exhibition is dedicated to Wattville, Actonville, and the wider Ekurhuleni area and their connection to Tambo." <http://ortambonarrativecentre.com/telling-the-story/>

silence. Prior to this event, the head of the heritage department approached historian Noor Nieftagodien with the proposal to set up a modest exhibition of the Ngilima. It appeared that the department urgently needed to spend the budget allocated before the end of the financial year and was ready to fork out large sums for the 2012 Heritage Month festivities. Myself being back in Brussels, Hemisha Bhana and Farrell Ngilima executed the task of setting up what turned out to be a very modest exhibition with very limited means, in a badly lit hallway at the fringe of the large venue. The fraught nature of this collaboration— or rather, the utter lack of real collaboration— with the Ekurhuleni heritage department made it clear that there were no real intentions nor any substantial interest in developing the Ngilima collection into a permanent, locally accessible archive.

The Absence of an Alternative Black Local History in the Public Sphere

Yet I am all the more convinced that locally establishing the Ngilima collection as an archive would correspond to a widespread desire to have public recognition of a local history, the kind that the black residents of Benoni could relate to. The present Benoni Museum, a derelict institution, clearly does not fulfil this mission. Except for Khubi Thabo, none of the people I talked to during my fieldwork had been there, and I cannot blame them. The Benoni Museum is surprisingly disappointing for being a post-apartheid institution, opened in 1994. The museum's permanent exhibition was conceived to commemorate the spectacular 1922 Rand Revolt, in which a generalized strike of white miners was violently suppressed with airplane-delivered bombs. More recently, the museum staff has added an exhibition called "Diversity in Benoni", composed of a few temporary panels set up haphazardly in a side hallway. It is a rather clumsy attempt to compensate for the white bias of the permanent collection, and to be more *en vogue* with the post-apartheid narrative of South Africa as a "rainbow nation" characterized precisely by the theme of "diversity". The forced removals are presented as a necessary state intervention, which ultimately benefitted Indians and Africans alike. It states that due to Benoni's incredible economic growth, "the Blacks began to take over the Asiatic Bazaar", suggesting that the Africans carried the responsibility for the unbearable situation of overpopulation, rather than the town council's unwillingness to intervene. It also denies the

role that Indian landlords played in this development.⁶⁵³ The forced removals are euphemistically described as “the move of the Blacks to Daveyton”, after which “the Asiatic Bazaar regained its original format” (whatever that means) and was developed as “a modern township”, with modern infrastructures such as tarred roads and sewage system. Another panel on “Blacks in Benoni” has a paragraph entitled “Daveyton, model township”, repeating the exact same slogan that James E. Mathewson, the architect of Daveyton and then the manager of Non-European Affairs in Benoni, put forward in his writings on his pet project, the first mass township planned according to the principle of ethnic grouping and zoning.⁶⁵⁴ The narrative of the panel puts the accent on the poor living conditions in the Old Location and neighbouring squatter camps, set in stark contrast with the modern infrastructure in Daveyton. The text brags about the speed of construction of “6000 houses built in 20 months”. A photograph depicting three Africans comfortably seated in a modern, spacious, and fully furnished sitting room, with the caption “A settled family”, is set adjacent to a photograph of dilapidated shacks from squatter camps. Apart from a short section on Harry Mabuya, Africans are typically presented as passive benefactors of state intervention; their struggle for housing and the local protest movement against the forced removals are barely mentioned. The Location is presented solely as a series of problems to be solved; its vibrant music culture, its experience of multiracial cohabitation, none of the elements that make ex-residents remember the place with fondness features in the exhibition. Rather, the temporary exhibition presents a history devoid of tensions or conflict, whether between the local government and its black population, or between the African, coloured and Indian communities. Incredibly, the story line it supports comes very close to propaganda like the 1956 publication entitled *Benoni Golden Jubilee: 50 Years of Progress*, commissioned by the Town Council to mark its 50th anniversary. Unsurprisingly, it is little more than a lengthy congratulatory presentation of the Town Council’s achievements in terms of bold (and

⁶⁵³ At various points have Indian landlords fought to keep their African tenants; see for instance Bonner, "Eluding Capture: African Grass-Roots Struggles in 1940s Benoni,".

⁶⁵⁴ In Daveyton, Africans were grouped according to ethnicity, which offended the cosmopolitan feeling that most Old Location residents had grown up with. Ethnicizing urban Africans was part of a larger strategy to confine Africans to their “traditional culture”, thus emphasizing the point that they were only temporary sojourners in town. The exhibition omits to mention this particularly perverse aspect of the project, which members of the Advisory Board and many others vehemently opposed. As the Advisory Board predicted, the politicization of ethnicity immediately lead to sporadic violent clashes between ethnic groups within the first months.

generous) social housing policies.⁶⁵⁵ Fifty years later, the museum offers no critical voice to counter this narrative.

A Popular Will to Remember

That the Benoni Museum was hardly visited did not mean that no one was interested in the history of Benoni. During my fieldwork, I came across various marks of enthusiasm regarding local history, which led me to believe there was indeed a popular will to remember. Musician Pops Mohammed, who grew up in the Cape Flats, named his music label Kalamazoo, after the mixed neighbourhood in present-day Reigerpark that was also forcefully removed for the creation of a coloured Group Area. Similarly, trumpeter Johnny Mekwa named one of his signature songs “Etwatwa”. Many of these discussions on the past denoted a certain pride for Benoni town, despite its legacy of white supremacy. One interviewee said for instance: “Benoni used to be the ‘Jewel of the East!’”, to which another replied: “Benoni had the best Christmas lights on Princess Street. People would come from all over the Rand just to see these lights”.⁶⁵⁶ Benoni, referring to the whole municipality (including Actonville, Wattville, etc), has clearly remained an important geographical reference in people’s sense of identity and belonging.

These expressions of nostalgia towards Benoni town are probably linked to the contemporary institutional, economic and cultural downfall of Benoni and of Actonville.⁶⁵⁷ The 1940s and 1950s are remembered as the “golden age” of an incredible economic boom, when job opportunities were abundant but, as none of my interviewees failed to mention, when “everything was so cheap!”. The accumulated frustrations relating to the present-day situation and the general disappointment that the 1994 “liberation” did not drastically improve the lives of poor black South Africans, clearly foster this nostalgic feeling. The anxiety of being materially marginalized from current economic and political centres translates into a perceptible yearning to establish that “Benoni also has its own history”, or in other words, that

⁶⁵⁵ See for instance the 1956 publication celebrating the 50 years of Benoni called “Benoni Golden Jubilee: 1906-1956”.

⁶⁵⁶ Samuel Msali in conversation with Khubi Thabo, 16.06.2011, Actonville.

⁶⁵⁷ See last section of chapter 6.

Benoni is part of history and that Benoni, and by extension Actonville and Wattville, (still) matter on a national scale. Khubi Thabo, among many other interviewees, felt frustrated that only Soweto and Sophiatown are acknowledged and repeatedly mentioned in the public domain as historically significant sites, while Benoni's Old Location seems doomed to remain in the depths of oblivion. As my associate Hemisha Bhana wrote in the press release for her history project on Actonville: "Memory becomes obscure in *a community hidden from history*".⁶⁵⁸ The fact that the "history of such places was seldom documented or formally recorded" was one of the motivation behind her 2014 "Portraits of Actonville" project.

Prior to Hemisha's project, other local initiatives revolving around local history emerged on a local scale in Actonville and Wattville, bearing witness to certain residents' keenness to have their local history acknowledged. In the course of my fieldwork in 2011, I met Samuel Msali, a tall man with a deep husky voice and a face that would be ageless, were it not for his whitening hair giving him away. Born in 1950 in the Old Location (and so was around fifteen when the removals started in the African section), he felt passionate about recording and disseminating the history of the Old Location. He told me that he acquired a passion for the Old Location during funerals and unveilings, where old people would meet and start discussing the rich history of music and politics of the Old Location. Funerals are traditionally a crucial locus of production and transmission of collective memory in the African community, providing "the elders" an opportunity to meet and remember together in a socializing framework. He later started an informal history group baptized "Ekasi Lase Etwatwa Project", consisting of a handful of people, mainly of Daveyton (I.e. the victims of the forced removals).⁶⁵⁹

Shortly after meeting Mr. Msali, I organized a meeting with him and two Actonville residents, an ex-politician and a storeowner, both of Muslim faith.⁶⁶⁰ My idea was to put in contact various people I had met during my fieldwork who shared a similar interest in local history. The ex-politician has been collecting information about the area for many years, compiling a

⁶⁵⁸ Hemisha Bhana, press release, November 6, 2014. Emphasis added.

⁶⁵⁹ Their ambition was, to say the least, humongous: to write a book, make a documentary, run a jazz festival, apply for massive grants to the Heritage Department to reconvert old buildings (such as the old prison for women) into heritage sites. As far as I know, the group never managed to make much progress on these projects.

⁶⁶⁰ This ex-politician was a local councillor for many years in the 1970s, under the colours of the NP. He then switched to the ANC after 1994.

chronology of the changes in location (which he then proceeded to read out to us *in full length* during the first meeting). Later, I realized that the ex-politician's chronology had a clear focus on the Indian community, and more specifically, the Muslim community: when the "passenger Indians" first moved to Benoni, when they received trading rights, when the first mosque was erected, when the first cemetery for Muslims was inaugurated...

As the previous chapter concluded, the notion of the Ngilima collection as site for collective memory is difficult to uphold, considering the fact that residents interpreted the collection in different ways. Nevertheless, I maintain that the Ngilima collection contains a unique and important symbolic dimension in that it represents the entanglement of all three communities living in Wattville, the Old Location, Cape Stands and Asiatic Bazaar and the neighbouring mine compounds. The lengthy process of identifying people in the photographs allowed me to understand to what extent Benoni's location was a central hub, where various social networks criss-crossed. Mrs (Tree) Joseph, who grew up on the State Mines compound, met Ronald Ngilima through her cousin Florence, who lived in the Cape Stands. Through Mrs. Joseph, Ngilima met other members of the sprawling family, including Charlie Tree and his wife Margaret. There are in total 74 photographs related to the Tree family. One of these photos is of Margaret's sister Nopie, who was on the netball team which Mrs Moodley was coaching. Ronald Ngilima's friendship with the Moodley family goes back from their time together at the Modder Bee mine compound, in the early 1930s⁶⁶¹, but was mainly developed during the years the Moodley were living on 3rd street. Both Mrs Joseph and Mrs Moodley ended up moving to the Asiatic Bazaar, despite being classified as "coloured". Many of the relationships Ngilima had established with his clients were sustained throughout the years, despite the frequent changes of residence. In other words, the Ngilima photographs are placeholders, material traces of the social relationships that Ronald Ngilima, an African, had knitted with members of all three communities. They are further evidence of the fact that the Old Location, Cape Stands and Asiatic Bazaar were increasingly merging together. Impossible though it is to consider the location as a single "community", I maintain that the Ngilima collection offers a diversity of material that ex-location residents across the class and race spectrum were able to somehow relate to, if on very different terms. Moreover, as

⁶⁶¹ This was not necessarily exceptional: in my interview with Perry Vierasammy, it also emerged that the families who lived together at the Chimes mine compound found themselves living in the same street in the Old Location and remained close friends. Interview with Perry Vierasammy, 23.02.2012, Actonville.

chapter six has shown, the Ngilima collection offers the opportunity for these residents to meet again and debate various interpretations of the past. After thirty years of Group Area Act (1965-1994), there are today few opportunities for younger South Africans to meet people from outside their racial group and have a meaningful discussion about this particular chapter in history of ambivalent cohabitation and forced removals.