Although his childhood was spent in Xhosaland (the territory of the Transkei, as one should start calling it, following the historical developments to be recounted), the Union of South Africa, formed in 1910, was the backdrop of Mabona’s entire youth and young adult life. I will start by situating the new country in an international perspective, then I will describe some of the major developments during the first four decades of its existence and gradually zoom in again on the situation in the Transkei region where our protagonist was born.

1. International and Union politics

With unification in 1910, the Union of South Africa was created as a self-governing dominion of the British Empire, so it remained a more or less willing member of an alliance of semi-autonomous communities under the British monarch.\(^1\) The question of its borders had not been settled definitively, since the question of whether some neighbouring states and territories were to be incorporated within its borders\(^2\) had not yet been resolved. Also, for some time to

---
\(^1\) Thompson, *A history of South Africa*, p. 160.
come, internal and external politics had to deal with the complex considerations of determining the Union’s strategic belonging to, or resistance against, the British Empire and possible alliances or conflicts with the rising power that was Germany.

Internal politics was dominated by two issues: the relation between the former enemies, the Boers/Afrikaners and English-speaking people, who shared power among themselves, and the relations between this unlikely pairing and the other inhabitants of the country.

The first issue focused on such issues as class relations, national symbols and the relation to Britain. Afrikaners still felt the after-effects of the devastating South African War (coupled with the worst drought in ages), and had to address the development of so-called “white poverty” and difficulties in adapting to urbanisation. On top of this, they were in competition with cheap black labour. But, through tough struggles, the white labourers succeeded in guaranteeing that they held positions involving semi-skilled work. The issue of making the Union officially bilingual (English and Dutch, then Afrikaans) was therefore no trivial matter: apart from the symbolic value of recognition, it effectively opened the civil service (and subsequently private positions) to Afrikaans-speaking people. At the time, nobody in power dreamt of elevating any African language to the same level – creating yet another barrier to prosperity for the speakers of these languages.

At the time, Afrikaners were the majority electorate and they succeeded in making this count. As a group, their material fate improved (but never to the level enjoyed by their English compatriots); nevertheless, this did not prevent many from enduring significant poverty, associated, amongst other things, with the 1929 depression. Afrikaner politics ensured that Afrikaner interests and ideals remained on the stage of formal politics. Meanwhile, numerous organisations were founded to promote the interests of Afrikaners in an array of social domains. Particularly from the 1930s, a specific form of Afrikaner Nationalism formed, out of which the National Party victory of 1948 would grow.

Afrikaner interests sometimes overlapped with those of the English-speaking population: for some, the overlap was the relation to British power (which led to South Africa’s support for Britain in the Second World War); for many, it was

4 Thompson, A history of South Africa, pp. 159–160; Southall, South Africa’s Transkei, p. 31.
5 Freund, “South Africa: The Union Years...”, p. 213.
7 Freund, “South Africa: The Union Years...”, p. 231.
economic interests; for the overriding majority, it meant the consolidation of white power over black autonomy.\footnote{Freund, “South Africa: The Union Years...,” p. 234.}

The second issue, “race relations” as it came to be called, concerned the Coloureds and Asians/Indians, but primarily revolved around blacks (my use of these terms, henceforth, has to be understood as reflecting the historical classifications). Whatever remnants of representation remained for these groups (particularly in the Western Cape) were destined to be eliminated in the decades after the formation of the Union. The Union was designed for white domination of black people, as in other similar places shaped by British colonial influence, albeit in different ways, such as in the United States and Australia.

Legislation was passed to separate groups, maintaining social inequality where they interacted. The essence of these laws concerned land ownership, the establishment of areas for black settlement, the regulation of movement and settlement, the regulation of labour, and variants of all these categories to be applied to “Coloureds” and “Indians”\footnote{Freund, “South Africa: The Union Years...,” p. 235, also summarised by Elikia M’Bokolo, “Les pratiques de l’apartheid”, in Marc Ferro (ed.), Le livre noir du colonialisme. XVIe – XXIe siècle: de l’extermination à la repentance. Fayard/Pluriel: Paris, 2010, pp. 627–639.}. These laws of segregation were developed later in apartheid legislation in the strict sense after 1948. The underlying idea of “separation” should be used circumspectly.\footnote{See also my comment on the contradiction of colonial power above (pp. 30) and the similar irony at work in apartheid (p. 105).} One should not be hasty to typify these laws of unequal privilege and segregation as mechanisms of exclusion, since excluded people cannot contribute their labour to the economy and cannot be subject to taxes.\footnote{On taxes, see, for example, Bonner, “South African Society and Culture...,” p. 284.}

Manuel Castells has demonstrated how marginalisation is also a form of inclusion,\footnote{Manuel Castells, “The rise of the fourth world: informational capitalism, poverty, and social exclusion”, in End of millennium, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998, Chapter 2. The fact that his argument is based on more recent events does not invalidate this insight.} and this is the point here: the “non-whites” were integrated into the economic and state system of the Union of South Africa, but this was overwhelmingly at their expense and in order to make them productive for the Union’s economy.

Focusing on land, successive laws restricted black ownership to just under, then just over, ten per cent of the country’s land surface. In both cases, this is roughly similar to the division of land in Southern Rhodesia, but considerably lower than the situation in France’s North African colonies.\footnote{According to Frémeaux, Les empires coloniaux, pp. 147–148.} In these black-
owned areas they enjoyed limited autonomy and could practise subsistence farming, under conditions instated before the Union (see Chapter 1, pp. 29-30). The flip side of this is that the majority of black men had to migrate to wage-earning work for their livelihoods. The consequence is that they lived for most or all of the year in white-owned territories as foreign labourers – where no land ownership was possible for them. From the point of view of their employers and of the state, this movement of labourers had to be regulated carefully.

2. The economy

Despite recurrent recessions, especially the Great Depression of 1929, which started with the Wall Street Crash in the United States and cascaded to the rest of the world, and its aftermath, which lasted well into the 1930s, the country enjoyed slow but uneven economic growth. Mining (primarily gold, but also diamonds and later coal) was ahead of the other sectors of the country (agriculture, infrastructure, commerce) and was to serve as the driver to develop other sectors of an otherwise largely undeveloped country. Initiatives which had proven successful earlier, such as the production of ostrich feathers and wool, ran into difficulties, but the textile industry took off. Generally, the South African economy resembled that of other colonial territories in consisting to a very large degree of the exportation of primary materials and foodstuffs. Nevertheless, important groups with a local base were established, such as De Beers and Anglo American in the mining sector or Standard Bank and Barclays Bank.

The state subsequently succeeded in establishing significant institutions: the national electricity provider (ESCOM), a state-owned steel industry (ISCOR), the Reserve Bank, the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). All date from the middle of this period. Communications infrastructure was set up, and a transport network was developed (e.g. tarred roads and railways). Later in this period, in

---

16 Freund, “South Africa: The Union Years…”, p. 211.
17 Freund, “South Africa: The Union Years…”, p. 221.
19 Freund, “South Africa: The Union Years…”, p. 248.
the 1940s, the state also augmented its social spending (notably in its systems of school feeding, pension, and disability) on all population groups, but as can be expected, without changing the discriminating structure of distribution.20

More generally, labour laws steadily increased income rights and possibilities for white workers, while excluding most black people from these advantages. The same holds for housing, schooling, and access to medical services. Coloureds and Indians did marginally better than black people, having a few more social privileges, and in general earning a bit more too. Initially, Coloureds enjoyed more rights in the Western Cape than Africans; Indians faced fewer obstacles to enter business.21

Urbanisation increased steadily. Although urbanisation among Africans was less advanced than in the other population groups, by the end of the Second World War, they outnumbered other groups in the cities. Subsequent developments would gradually see the dismantling of racially mixed slums in the cities in favour of a typical urban development pattern in South Africa, where “locations”, “informal settlements”, and other residences of black people were located several kilometres away from the residents’ places of work in the (separate) white and more affluent towns, cities, and suburbs.22 Together with the reserves, this pattern of differential settlement was based on a legal order, and resulted in a racial differentiation of lifestyles that patently resembles the world described by Fanon at the beginning of the Wretched of the earth.

3. Separation – reserves – labour

The reserves were places of severe constraint. Generally, they were overpopulated and badly managed, and services were scarce. Wide-ranging poverty prevailed.23 The situation increasingly deteriorated, making life hard and making it almost impossible to sustain any income-generating activity.24 The population grew,

21 Thompson, A history of South Africa, p. 171.
23 Southall, South Africa’s Transkei, pp. 80–81.
24 Freund’s assessment on this point (in “South Africa: The Union Years...”, p. 221) seems a bit more positive in general and reflects less deterioration than in Thompson, A history of South Africa. However, the overall picture remains bleak.
amongst other things because farm labourers were expelled to the reserves; at the same time, unequal trading conditions made it increasingly difficult to maintain the existing commercial agriculture in the reserves. Bonner describes the Transkei region as reaching more or less subsistence-level self-sufficiency.

In some cases, as in the Ciskei, the system of traditional leadership suffered a loss of legitimacy and vitality under the pressures of migration and the interference of the administration. However, this does not mean that the traditional system of chiefs overall was dead or was reduced to a complete object of manipulation by powerful authorities from the outside. In other places, such as the Transkei, chieftaincy remained an object of contestation, depending on the region, the kind of chief in question, and the needs of the people. What remained of traditional life was as much an instrument people could use to advance their own interests as it was an object of de- or re-tribalization in the service of external political or economic interests. The point is that despite extreme constraints, local populations in the reserves were not mere passive objects, nor was the form of traditional culture static.

The general model of indirect rule imposed on the reserves has to be qualified in the case of the Transkei in this era. When historians describe this situation rather as one of direct rule, they have in mind the fact that the region was administrated by a team of (white) regional magistrates under a Chief Magistrate. Overseeing tasks was delegated to appointed non-traditional headmen, rather than to white administrators.

---

28 This point is argued by William Beinart, “Chieftaincy and the concept of articulation: South Africa circa 1900-1950”, in William Beinart and Saul Dubow (eds.), *Segregation and apartheid in twentieth-century South Africa*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, pp. 176–188. Bonner (in “South African Society and Culture...”, p. 275) summarises the major trends: “Nevertheless, some broader patterns or traditions are discernible beyond the chaos. The best known of these are the Transkei model of direct personal administration by white magistrates, sidelining chiefs and using appointed headmen, and the system of indirect rule through chiefs granted civil jurisdiction, which prevailed in Zululand and Natal. A much more diffuse Transvaal model ruled through chiefs and not headmen but was then reworked in each locality through the whims and idiosyncrasies of individual sub-native commissioners. The Orange Free State’s one tiny reserve area had no tradition at all and was left largely to administer itself.”
than to traditional chiefs. The functions of the magistrates ranged from tax collection and dispute arbitration to the management of agriculture and promotion of political stability. Headmen took charge of tasks such as allocating territory, arbitrating civil disputes, and dealing with matters of private life through customary law.

This system was designed to undermine the authority of the chiefs. Yet, an unintended consequence was that the chiefs, sidelined by the magistrates and headmen, were less compromised through involvement with the adversary and could thus retain “backstage” authority and influence – unable, however, to oppose the erosion of the chieftaincy in the long run. However, in the late 1920s, when government opposition to remnants of traditional government had been successful, and a need for stricter control over reserve populations was identified, legislation was passed to reinvigorate tradition. In effect, this meant introducing measures for greater standardisation of customary law, according to its new legal status and power. This meant that the Transkei was effectively “retribalized”, and this process was guided by the Natal model of indirect governance. Hence, the whole process was subject to what is called “the Shaka fallacy” – essentialising traditional culture to a particular preconceived patriarchal and authoritarian

29 Southall, *South Africa's Transkei*, pp. 88–89. Mamdani also recognises the initial establishment of direct rule in the Transkei (CS, p. 66). He qualifies the subsequent system of administration through magistrates and headmen in the same region as “a form of rule that would closely approximate French-style indirect rule” (CS, p. 86).

30 Switzer, *Power and resistance*, p. 95; Bonner, “South African Society and Culture...”, p. 275. It seems that Mabona intended his generalisation to apply to all eras of Xhosa cultural life when he explained: “Most of the law among the Xhosa-speaking peoples is customary law. There is and has been in practice very little legislation. If any reference is made to some form of legislation, it will be in terms of umthetho wa nkundla ['the law of this court'], whereas the paterfamilias will speak in terms of umthetho walo mzi ['the law of this household']. Thus the guardians of legal customs are inkosi ['the chief'] and his amaphakathi ['councillors'] and izibonda ['local headmen'] at the national or tribal level, and abaninimzi ['the heads of homesteads'] at the family level. The role of diviners in the purely legal machinery is very indirect and the ancestors constitute really only the ultimate sanction in the public sphere” (DP, p. 251).

view of it. Since such engineering is designed to undermine people's ability to adapt to changing circumstances, Taiwo calls it social freezing, or socio-cryonics. According to the new dispensation, a council, representing mainly the reserve's upper class, existed alongside the administrative order. In principle, it deliberated on non-political matters; in practice, it made pronouncements on political issues, but it remained conservative and had no real powers. In 1955, the council system was replaced by a Territorial Administration, which promoted the re-establishment of the chieftaincy at the expense of the headman system. Headmen were subsequently subordinated to the chiefs, but were still incorporated into the Bantu Authorities system. The chiefs, in turn, had to negotiate their intermediary role between the population and the white state, the responsibilities of their office and the temptation to take advantage of a position of relative privilege and power. Thus the strategy of indirect rule was deployed.

The large-scale migration of men to the cities, which implied that more than half of working men were absent from the Transkei, had a significant knock-on effect, as women, children, and the elderly had to maintain subsistence farming. Work opportunities existed outside the homestead, in commerce, in domestic service, in industries, or on farms where many of the people resided in any case, living, as Thompson observes, under circumstances fluctuating between paternalism and exploitation. At the same time, the mines flourished, drawing on an ever-widening web of labourers from the reserves – the Transkei provided a third of all labourers in mines but also from other southern African countries.

In 1936, when Mongameli Mabona was school-going age, a quarter of the male population, more than half of the work-aged men, were absent from the Transkei

---

32 Bonner, “South African Society and Culture...”, pp. 275–283; Southall, South Africa's Transkei, pp. 104–105 (for Transkei). This fallacy is to be contrasted with a more anthropologically sound view provided by Terblanche, discussed in Mamdani, Citizen and subject, p. 45.
34 Southall, South Africa's Transkei, pp. 90–95.
36 Southall, South Africa's Transkei, p. 114.
37 Bonner, “South African Society and Culture...”, p. 293; Southall, South Africa's Transkei, p. 77 (whose statistics refer to the mid 1930s).
38 Thompson, A history of South Africa, pp. 164–166. See also Bonner’s depiction of paternalism as “involving some measure of quasi-kinship between farmer patriarch and labour tenant families” (South African Society and Culture..., p. 285).
39 Southall, South Africa’s Transkei, p. 78 (again referring to the 1930s).
most of the year. These migrant workers, for whom the reserves were still something of a “home”, lived most of their lives in a decidedly different urban or industrial world. At the same time, these conditions formed the backdrop for notable class differences within the Transkei, based primarily on differences of land and livestock ownership. Only a few found jobs were in the homeland itself, mostly as employees of the state, teachers, or members of the clergy.

4. Transkei: Culture, religion, education

In both the Transkei and Ciskei, two distinctive cultural strategies emerged: “red”, traditionalist, leaning towards being anti-modern; versus “school”, leaning towards Christianity, often with formal education. These strategies were reflected in people’s dress, food, housing, and lifestyle choices. However, these approaches were not mutually exclusive, but rather denote tendencies on a spectrum.

Numerous cultural shifts took place under the influence of experiences in the cities, changing circumstances in the rural areas and negotiation between them, based on migratory labour: traditional forms of authority were challenged here; new dances were introduced there. New forms of sport (such as cricket) coexisted with old forms of sport (such as stick fighting).

New religious movements were formed, either exclusively home-grown, with messages of repentance and ethical reform (for example, the movement led by Nontetha Nkwenkwe) or with some institutional church influence or ideas from Marcus Garvey from North America (for example, those led by Enoch Mgijima and Wellington Buthelezi).

---


41 Southall, *South Africa’s Transkei*, pp. 85–86.

42 Southall, *South Africa’s Transkei*, p. 88.


In this era, the expanding Christian missions played an increasingly important role in the unfolding of South African history in general, and in the Transkei in particular. Mass conversion to Christianity started only at the end of the nineteenth century, and then African Christians also produced their own strains of conviction and expression, notably in Zionism. The established churches, through their missions, were to play a significant role in practical matters: they constructed institutions such as residences and hospitals, and continued the study of local languages. Arguably, their most significant influence remained in the field of education.

Formal education of black children was not widespread. Where there was any such education, the overriding majority of school-going black children were in mission schools. The South African Native College (later Fort Hare University), founded in 1916, had strong mission ties, and was the only resident institution for tertiary education for black students in South Africa (it also received many students from other African countries) until the end of the 1950s.

Out of oral historical traditions and the spoken word emerged a historiography written by Xhosa scholars in Xhosa (notably by Samuel Mqhayi and J.H. Soga). Their work appeared in the first Xhosa newspapers in the mid nineteenth century. The beginnings of Xhosa newspapers are as synonymous with J.T. Jabavo as Christian spirituality is with Tiyo Soga. The printing of Xhosa texts was initially supported by missionary infrastructure (notably the Lovedale Press), before being ironically undermined for some time by the same infrastructure. As these examples show, the mission institutions helped form the tiny non-traditional African elite. From their circles came many of the black opponents to the segregated state.

It is also worth noting the establishment of institutions to provide medical care by several mission societies in a region where public facilities were sorely lacking.

---

48 Dischl, *Transkei for Christ*, p. 40 catalogues these institutions.
5. Resistance nationally and in the Transkei

The critical voices (of different degrees of distance and audibility) derived their justification from four main sources: liberalism, Marxism, the missions, and the lived experiences of black people. Each either had international networks or strove to establish them. From the variegated forms of resistance, two may be selected to illustrate these divergent approaches.

The South African Native National Congress, later the African National Congress, like other early protest movements, benefited from leadership that had received formal education, often in mission institutions. This enabled the leaders to articulate their claims in the language of liberal values, which they claimed for the whole population. Typically, their strategy consisted of pursuing constitutional reform through strategic lobbying and some labour action. They also sent delegations to London and participated in other international forums to express and promote their causes. In the same vein, a regrouping of people of similar political fate occurred. A number of “non-European” conferences were held from the late 1920 onwards to facilitate consultation between racially segregated groups. One can read the young Mandela’s grave reservations about the efficiency of these and other subsequent peaceful means of resistance in his speech from the dock during the Rivonia Trial.

The Industrial and Commercial Workers Union (ICU) was the first national trade union for black members. It was started in Cape Town and became a reasonably sized, more radical movement. Besides championing labour rights on farms and industries, it also opposed the successive pass laws. Compared to the aforementioned movements, its ideas were more pronouncedly Africanist and its agenda for land reform was more radical.

---

50 Thompson, A history of South Africa, p. 174.
51 Thompson, A history of South Africa, p. 175.
52 Johns and Gerhart, Protest and hope, pp. 44–45.
53 Johns and Gerhart, Protest and hope, pp. 63–66.
55 Johns and Gerhart, Protest and hope, p. 69.
56 Thompson, A history of South Africa, p. 176; Johns and Gerhart, Protest and hope, pp. 74–75.
Regarding the ANC, ICU, and Communist Party in the 1930s, Johns and Gerhart conclude that they “fell into disarray, undermined by their own internal disputes and harassed by government authorities”\(^{57}\). Later, from the 1940s onwards, labour movements grew stronger again, but faced the combined resistance of industry and government. A similar fate befell the ANC, which gathered momentum again in the 1940s. It is also worth mentioning that Ghandi’s first experiments with passive resistance\(^{58}\) had an important impact on the way people thought about resistance.

Focusing more specifically on the Transkei region, there were recurrent incidents of protest and resistance. Three examples suffice to illustrate this point. More than once, movements of passive resistance arose as a response to increased taxation to fund the “dipping” of livestock during outbreaks of the rinderpest (1897 and 1912–1913).\(^{59}\) In the early 1920s, Christian women led boycotts against shops.\(^{60}\) Finally, Mgijima’s Israelites millenarian group, stationed at Bulhoek, refused to evacuate public land and attempted to protect themselves with rudimentary arms. They were ejected by the police and many were killed in what is now known as the Bulhoek Massacre of 24 May 1921.\(^{61}\)

Lastly, one should not forget the resistance to injustice by individuals, within the limits of their abilities and insight, in their everyday actions.

---

\(^{57}\) Johns and Gerhart, *Protest and hope*, p. 69.


\(^{59}\) Southall, *South Africa’s Transkei*, pp. 95–96.

\(^{60}\) Southall, *South Africa’s Transkei*, pp. 96–97.