

**“AH! WHAT A BEAUTIFUL PLACE! IT IS TOO GOOD FOR HIM. WE
SHALL SEE TO IT THAT HE LOSES IT (FARM)”:
THE EXPERIENCE OF FR JULIUS UMKOMAZI MBHELE (1879-
1956)**

George Mukuka

Faculty of Arts, Design & Architecture,
University of Johannesburg, South Africa

Abstract

The paper examines the experience of the fourth indigenous Catholic priest in South Africa - Julius uMkomazi Mbhele. To begin with, the two theoretical frameworks by James C Scott and the Comaroffs are introduced, then a brief background to his life is outlined. The article then examines the farm which Fr Mbhele bought near Ncala mission, in Ixopo. The “farm” caused some conflicts with his superiors - the conflicts are looked at in the light of the conceptual tools. The article concludes by stating that although the authorities in the church, who were highly influenced by the church’s structure and the colonial background, tried to impose their power on Fr Mbhele in most cases Mbhele resisted.

1 INTRODUCTION

In this article I will examine aspects of the fourth indigenous Catholic priest in South Africa - Julius uMkomazi Mbhele. He was ordained in Rome in 1907 together with Fr Andreas Ngidi. Earlier in 1898 and 1903 Frs Edward Mnganga and Alois Mncadi were also ordained in Rome. This article examines the life of Fr Mbhele. To do this, I shall introduce the conceptual frameworks to be used in the paper and then provide some background information on Fr Mbhele. I will proceed to examine the farm issue and show how this affected his ministry. The paper uses two theoretical frameworks, by James C

Scott and the Comaroffs. I shall introduce Scott's theory in the next section.

2 "PUBLIC" AND "HIDDEN" TRANSCRIPTS

The "public" and "hidden" transcripts are well illustrated by James C Scott¹ in his book *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts* (1990). According to Scott, throughout history, life basically is acting. People are designated different roles and they act accordingly. In a social grouping, the public performance of the dominated will take the form of pleasing or fulfilling the expectations of the dominant. Scott calls this the "public transcript" which is a "way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate ... "Public" here refers to action that is openly avowed to the other in the power relationship, and "transcript" is used almost in its juridical sense of a complete record of what was said. This complete record, however, would also include non-speech acts such as gestures and expressions" (Scott 1990:4). Usually, the public transcript is unlikely to tell the whole story about power relations. It is in the interests of both parties to misrepresent what could transpire. For the subordinate, the greater the force of power emanating from the dominant, the thicker will be the stereotype of the mask that is the public transcript of the dominated.

In our case study, taking into account the South African situation during the period in question, I consider the black priests to be subordinate to the missionary priests since the whole of process of evangelisation usually aligned itself to the conquest of indigenous communities.

It is evident then, that the public transcript does not give us a true picture of what transpires. In some cases the dominant can discount the authenticity of the public transcript believing that those below them are liars by nature, shamming, and deceitful. Another interesting process of interaction is that the key roles are played by "surveillance and disguise". This is crucial to the understanding of cultural patterns of subordination and domination. The subordinates have to conduct their behaviour in ways that will toe the line of the dominated, as Scott (1990:4) writes:

The theatrical imperative that normally prevails in situations of domination produces a transcript in close conformity with how the dominant group would wish to have things appear. The dominant never control the stage absolutely, but their wishes normally prevail ... it is in the interest of the subordinate to produce a more or less credible performance, speaking the lines and making the gestures he knows are expected of him ... It is precisely this public domain where the effects of power relations are most manifest, and any analysis based exclusively on the public transcript is likely to conclude that the subordinate group endorse the terms of their subordination and are willing, even enthusiastic, partners in that subordination.

So then, how can we know the full picture of what transpired through the public transcript? This is almost impossible unless one speaks to the performer offstage or there is a rupture in the performance, that is, the actor declares that what occurred was just a pose. The discourse that occurs offstage is termed by Scott the *hidden transcript* which (Scott 1990:4)

characterises discourse that takes place “offstage”, beyond direct observation by power holders. [It] is thus derivative in the sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript ... the hidden transcript is produced for a different audience and under different constraints of power to the public transcript. By assessing the discrepancy between the hidden transcript and the public transcript we may begin to judge the impact of domination on public discourse.

Scott then suggests that all known and observed relationships between the subordinate and the dominant are a representation of the encounter of the public transcript of the dominated and the public transcript of the dominant. However, there are three characteristics which emerge from the hidden transcripts: the first is that “the hidden transcript is specific to a given social site and to particular set of actors”. Secondly, “that it does not contain only speech acts but a

whole range of practices". And thirdly, and critically important for our article is that (Scott 1990:14):

it is clear that the frontier between the public and hidden transcripts is a zone of constant struggle between dominant and subordinate - not a solid wall. The capacity of dominant groups to prevail - though never totally - in defining and constituting what counts as the public transcript and what as offstage is ... no small measure of their power. The unremitting struggle over such boundaries is perhaps the most vital arena for ordinary conflict, for everyday forms of class struggle.

The analysis of the hidden transcripts of the dominant and dominated unearths the "contradiction and possibilities", and looks below the complacent surface "that the public accommodation to the existing distribution of power, wealth, and status often represents" (Scott 1990:15). For instance, the powerful also have a hidden transcript which is very different from the public transcript. "It consists in those gestures and words that inflect, contradict or confirm what appears in the public transcript." We shall now look at the Comaroffs' theory in the next section.

3 THE COMAROFFS' THEORY

For the Comaroffs, the study of Christianity is more than the mere analysis of religious change. It is part of the process in historical anthropology of consciousness, colonialism, culture and power, "of an anthropology concerned at once with the coloniser *and* the colonised, with structure *and* agency" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1995:11). In their study, they critically examine the evangelisation of the Tswana people, among whom a group of British missionaries thought they were to make history for an African community, and help them on the road to civilisation. This encounter was not far removed from the missionaries' life-world; it was "an integral part of the cultural and social revolution that accompanied the rise of industrial capitalism, an expression of the expansive universalism that marked the dawn of modernity" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1995:21).

In their investigation, a discussion of culture plays a vital role since, in culture, we find products that determine our day-to-day interaction, such as power, ideology, and consciousness. Drawing greatly on Gramsci (1971:21), the Comaroffs “take culture to be the space signifying practice, the semantic ground on which human beings seek to construct and represent themselves and others - and hence, society and history” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1995:15). Culture is a very important medium in which human beings interact; it is not only a collection of messages, a hotchpotch of signs to be flashed across a *tabula rasa*. Culture has “form as well as content; it is born in action as well as thought; is a product of human creativity as well as mimesis; and, above all, is empowered. But it is not all empowered in the same way, or all of the time” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1995:22).

At this point, we need to examine the Comaroffs’ understanding of ideology and hegemony. They suggest that there is a triangular relationship between culture, ideology and hegemony. Having placed power at the centre of their analysis, they see hegemony and ideology as the two faces of power (West 1998:23). The Comaroffs (1995:21) proceed to argue that power is Janus-faced. “Sometimes it appears as the (relative) capacity of human beings to shape the actions and perception of others by exercising control over production, circulation, and consumption of signs and objects, over the making of both subjectivities and realities”. But most interestingly, power hides itself in the forms of everyday life. These are usually ascribed to entities beyond us - transcendental, “suprahistorical forces (gods, or ancestors, nature or physics, biological instincts or probability), these forms are not easily questioned” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1995:21). They seem to serve human needs and are too natural and ineffable. This type of power is termed *nonagentive* and it propagates outside the domain of institutional politics and is to be found in things like aesthetics and ethics, medical knowledge, built form and bodily representation and amorphous usage. It may not even be experienced as power at all because there is no apparent compulsion. But most importantly, these things (Comaroff & Comaroff 1995:21),

are internalized, in their negative guise, as constraints; in their neutral guise, as conventions; and, in their positive

guise, as values. Yet the silent power of the sign, the unspoken authority of habit, may be as effective as the most violent coercion in shaping, directing, even dominating social thought and action.

Relying on Marx, Bourdieu, Gramsci, and others, the Comaroffs (1995:23) define ideology and hegemony in the following way:

Hegemony ... refers to that order of signs and practices, relations and distinctions, images and epistemologies - drawn from a historically situated cultural field - that come to be taken-for-granted as the natural and received shape of the world and everything that inhabits it. It consists ... of things that go without saying because, being axiomatic, they come without saying; things that, being presumptively shared, are not the subject of explication or argument.

Hegemony is habit forming because its power lies in what it silences, "what it prevents people from thinking and saying, what it puts beyond the limits of the rational and the credible" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1995:23). Usually it is hardly ever directly contested except in the dreams of revolutionaries. However, once "its integral contradictions are revealed, when what seemed natural comes to be negotiable, when the ineffable is put into words - then hegemony becomes something other than itself, it becomes an ideology ... *which* is an articulated system of meanings, values, and beliefs of a kind that can be abstracted as [the] 'worldview' of any social grouping" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1995:23). It acts as an organising scheme or, as the Comaroffs put it, a "master narrative for collective symbolic production." The reigning ideology of a period of time and place is that of the dominant group and it is likely to be protected and enforced to its full extent. Other subordinate groups (for instance, communal identities and, in our case, local clergies) also have ideologies; if they want to overturn the existing relations with the dominant, they too, must call up their ideologies. Such a struggle, though, seen to be political, is an ideological struggle, "for it necessarily involves an effort to control the cultural terms in which the world is ordered and, within it, power legitimized" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1995:24).

A basic difference between hegemony and ideology is that “the first consists of constructs and conventions that have come to be shared and naturalised throughout a political community; the second is the expression and ultimately the possession of a particular social group, although it may be widely peddled beyond”. Hegemony is beyond direct argument and not negotiable, whilst ideology “is more susceptible to being perceived as a matter of inimical opinion and interest and therefore is open to contestation. Hegemony homogenises, ideology articulates. Hegemony at its best is mute; by contrast ... all the while ideology babbles on” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1995:24). The two are interdependent. The making of hegemony involves the control over different types of symbolic production, with things like education, ritual processes, socialisation, political, legal, style and self-representation, public communication, bodily discipline, and health. This control must be sustained over time to such an extent that it becomes invisible. In the words of the Comaroffs (1995:24), “for it is only by repetitions that signs and practices cease to be perceived or remarked; that they are so habituated, so deeply inscribed in everyday routine, that they may no longer be seen as forms of control - or seen at all”.

Hegemony then, “is always intrinsically unstable, always vulnerable” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1995:27). Once something leaves the area of hegemony it usually becomes a major site of ideological struggle. Sometimes there can be no well-formulated opposing ideology, nothing clearly and consciously articulated among the subordinate groups, but a struggle, a contest (Comaroff & Comaroff 1995:26-27), an “unremitting struggle” as Scott says, may still occur - in the form of refusal, trying to reverse things, and a negation of the known genre (Scott 1994:14). Scott illustrated this point quite well in his book as we saw earlier.

From this outline of the Comaroffs’ conceptual framework, the aspect pertinent to our investigation is the fact that hegemony is always unstable, and very vulnerable. Once the hegemonic realm is shaken, it becomes an ideological struggle - which can be expressed in the form of a refusal, an attempt to reverse things, and negations. Hence, there is always a struggle for ideology, by different hegemonic groups. But the one which is triumphant at any given time is that of

the dominant. This struggle for ideology, the threat of a constant danger of usurping the existing hegemony is the main focus in the establishment of the black Catholic clergy. This struggle still continues today.

I shall now give some historical background to the early ministry of Fr Mbhele. After the background, I shall proceed to link Mbhele's ministry to the "public" and "hidden transcripts" as described by the theories of Scott and the Comaroffs as well.

4 BACKGROUND

Julius uMkomazi Mbhele was born in 1879 into the Amabela tribe. He was received into the mission station at Lourdes in 1894 and baptised in 1896. In 1899, at the age of 20, he entered the Collegium Urbanum in Rome.² On his return from Rome in 1907 and continuing until 1924, Julius Mbhele was involved in mission work at Mariannahill. In 1910, while working at Mariannahill, Mbhele was incarcerated to Einsiedeln near Eston (between Richmond and Ixopo - KwaZulu-Natal) and was not allowed to practise as a priest. Mbhele had problems staying at any mission because of the differences with the rectors and the bishop of Mariannahill. In the same year, Mbhele wrote a letter to the abbot in which he said:

Now I beg to ask what will become of me when the station will be transferred to Inhlazaka as I understand there is no room there. But even if there were room, I would still ask how long will my incarceration last? Of course, you have made your appeal to the bishop about this, but I still fail to see how does he come in now in this matter while he was not required for my incarceration here. Once defamed in one place I do not believe in being forced to defame myself or at least to confirm my defamations in another place by staying in a mission without working as missionary, as it has been the case so far. I think what I am asking it's only reasonable in as much as I ask what everybody would ask being in a similar condition as I am in. The letter of his Lordship has left me first in the dark since I do not know anything definite now just as I did not know before.³

The reasons for the incarceration are not stated in the letter.⁴ In the early 1920s, Mbhele bought a farm near Ncala mission, for two main reasons. Firstly he felt that, since he was being ill-treated at several mission stations in Mariannahill, it would be preferable for him to buy a farm. Then, if he left the priesthood, he would still have a home. Secondly, he also wanted his farm to be a base for future ministry among the Zulu people.⁵ As he says:

these farms may serve as bases for future mission work when the native priest will be able to take charge of the work just as Mariannahill contend that they need farm to that effect and the bishop himself had declared to you that we could not be put in charge of their properties since we are outsiders.⁶

5 THE FARM

By the end of 1924, he was transferred to St John's parish in Umgodi where he worked for two years. The farm became a major concern for Bishop Fleischer and, in 1924, the bishop wrote a letter to Mbhele in which he suspended him and asked him to dispose of the farm:

As you today declared before me, Fr. Superior here and Fr. Aloys Mncadi that you did not try nor are willing to do so in future, to dispose of your farm. Although I ordered you under the 4th of September this year to do so before this Christmas, I suspend you from saying Holy mass. At that 4th of September I declared to you that I hold it a duty of conscience to give you that order. On the 6th again, on the 7th of the month I repeated it saying you are on the way to hell by your continued stubborn disobedience to your bishop who wants to save your soul by order. P.S. I told you next month you have opportunity to put your case before the apostolic delegate who comes here.⁷

Mbhele refused to sell the farm and then, in November 1924, appealed to the apostolic delegate. The delegate wrote back saying that, according to Canon 127 and 142, a priest was supposed to obey his bishop when commanded. In the same year, Andreas Ngidi and

Mbhele wrote a petition to the apostolic delegate on their right to own property. Not much was achieved through this petition, however.

In 1927, Mbhele was transferred back to the Monastery. During this period he also wrote a great deal for the local newspaper, *Izindaba Zabantu*⁸ and was involved in the translation of the Bible. As Mncadi wrote:

As his Lordship has an exceptional talent in the person of A.N. (Andreas Ngidi) and J.M. (Julius Mbhele), especially the intellectual gift of Rev. Mbhele might use them for translating the New and Old Bible into Zulu. These two are the best in the whole South Africa even I may in all earnestness and fairness say that they are the best and unique machinery for that purpose in the sub-continent”.⁹

In 1933, Mbhele left Mariannahill and joined the Zululand Diocese. He worked at Inkamana for a year and the following year was transferred to Entabeni. In Zululand he experienced similar problems relating to his farm. Between March 1933 and October 1937 Bishop Spreiter wrote numerous letters to Mbhele concerning his farm near Ncala Mission. We will see that there were other allegations, too, which the bishop brought forward, concerning Mbhele’s involvement with women and drinking.¹⁰ On 30 March 1933 Mbhele replied to the letter from Bishop Spreiter in which the bishop had stopped him from saying Mass and demanded once again that he sell the farm. He wrote:

I do say holy mass here not for the people. I consulted a certain professor on this matter and he wrote back, “... saying holy mass in a private residence occasionally when the church or chapel is 4 miles or more away does not need any permission”. The prohibition in this case is manifestly unjust and such being the case I am bound to appeal to higher authorities. As to selling the farm, I have no intentions of doing so for the reason that it was the ill-treatment I always received at the hands of the Mariannahill authorities which made me think of buying the farm.¹¹

Seven months later another incident occurred, in which Mbhele was once again threatened. If he refused to do what the bishop said, he was to be sent back to Mariannahill.

Bishop Spreiter wrote to Mbhele saying:

... yesterday I heard that you on Friday have been in Vryh. (Vryheid) until 12 o'clock and that you have brought the case of Martin (?) about the 30 silverlings (Judas) to the court. I don't know what is the truth about it, but if so as reported, then it is real a cause to feel indignity ... Dear Father I adjure for the sake of the salvation of your immortal soul, be careful. Do not force me to send you back to your bishop. You know that your future will be ruined. Somebody said about you: you are the most intelligent¹² of the four Native priests but also the most imprudent. You are too proud ...¹³

We see from the reply of the bishop that he was going to enforce a "swift stroke of repression" if Mbhele did not obey his commands.

6 JULIUS MBHELE VERSUS SIXTUS WITTEKIND

After 1935 there was a series of accusations about Mbhele's farm. Bishop Spreiter received numerous letters concerning Mbhele from Sixtus Wittekind, a priest at the Ncala Mission Station. On 27 March of the same year, Mbhele received a letter from the bishop which accused him, *inter alia*, of having a divorced woman living with him in his house, and that he had bought a barrel of wine and taken it to his farm. The bishop therefore ordered him not to go to the farm until the truth was established. "Your honour as a priest demands too, that you are not going to the farm."¹⁴

In response to these accusations Mbhele sent a long letter explaining that these were all misconceptions and it was a personal vendetta of Sixtus Wittekind. He argued that, since Sixtus was always showing such delicacy of conscience about casks of wine, "can he maintain with all conscience - if he has any - that in the whole of his Vicariate there is not a single priest who drinks? Who are those friends to

whom I gave wine? Who are his informers? I want their names now.”
He continues:

“That woman was there” does he want to repeat the same lies that she lives in my house? If he is a bonus pastor, as he pretends to be, why is that he never tried to convert his erring sheep instead of using her as a weapon against me behind my back? On the contrary, when I at last succeeded in persuading her to go to him, instead of receiving her like a good shepherd, he drove her away saying that he did not like even to see her. Thus it is clear that he wants to hear one side only, and that only which is damaging to his neighbour.¹⁵

Mbhele claimed to have some proof that Sixtus employed spies. For instance, on 12 March 1936, a girl came to his farm apparently sent by Sixtus. She pretended to want confession the following day. She never turned up on the 13th, however; instead she wrote a letter to Sixtus on the state of affairs at the Mbhele farm. According to Mbhele, she was “well known to be a spy, and one of the worst characters”. Mbhele continued in his letter to the bishop stating that Sixtus not only wrote down what people told him spontaneously and employed spies but also went “so far as to interrogate people ... in the confessional”. He did not even determine whether these allegations were true or false but immediately proceeded to write to his bishop.

The trouble between Sixtus and Mbhele had started almost twenty years previously. In the words of Mbhele:

... some 20 years ago, when I had the misfortune to be with him at Reichenau. He did not mention what he did against me then, but only told of the trouble I gave him about *utshwala*, which, by the way, was a mere fabrication of his. When I saw that it was impossible to stay any longer with him, I simply left for Mariannahill. Since then several young fathers have been sent as assistant to him ..., but none of them has found it possible to stand (him) ...¹⁶

Ever since Mbhele left Mariannahill, Sixtus had tried to get hold of “*isigaxa*”, which means to get hold of something or information to harm Mbhele’s reputation. But, since he could not find any, he fabricated one, according to Mbhele. Sixtus said that Mbhele had told people at Reichenau that Sixtus had been married before he came to South Africa. The superior asked Mbhele about this and he replied, “What! Was Fr. Sixtus ever married?”¹⁷

The issue of the farm had been a big problem since 1924 onwards. According to Mbhele, Sixtus travelled past his farm in 1925:

... coming from Maristella M.S., where it had been decided to compel the late Father Alois and myself to dispose of our farms, passed my place, and admiring it said “*Au! Kanti lihle kangaka, alimfanele; sengati kungaba elemakosana ansundu. Sizobona, uzolilahla.*” Which roughly translated means “Ah! What a beautiful place! It is too good for him. It would just be the place for the Native Sisters (and therefore be in his charge). We shall see to it that he loses it.” “*Invidia clericalis!*”¹⁸

According to Mbhele, Sixtus made some grave mistakes: Sixtus accused him of saying mass in 1932 in front of a gathering of natives when he was suspended; he abused the confessional; he announced in church that he (Sixtus) was too old and sickly, and that people should not come to him with sick calls. As a result of this some people died without receiving the last sacrament. In addition, Sixtus was in court because he had tampered with other people’s private correspondence. As Mbhele continued: “How did he extricate himself from his unenviable position? I am told that he instructed a boy to tell a lie in court in Fr. Sixtus’ defence by saying that it was he, the boy, who had opened the letters.”¹⁹

Sixtus sent numerous accusations to the bishop about Mbhele, stating that he had come with a Monsignor Arnoz and found Mbhele in a situation in which a priest should not be found. He claimed that “there were drinking-bouts nearly every day, also brawls. The prestige of the *Amaroma* is sinking down such orgies”.²⁰

In reply, Bishop Spreiter said that Mbhele's allegation about the abuse of the confessional by Sixtus was a serious matter, as he knew that many natives did not speak the truth. He advised him again to sell the farm and put the money in the bank. To some of these Mbhele replied:

... it seems that Fr. Sixtus is trying to enlist Your Excellency's influence to compel me directly or indirectly to yield to Mariannahill's desire that native priests should have no farms. Hence he is trying to make out a farm as the source of all evil, but he forgets that I know all the great scandals some of Mariannahill members have given from its foundation till now and these scandals are not few. Are these scandals caused by the farm?"²¹

The visit with the monsignor, Bishop Spreiter, also conveyed the message that the monsignor supported the claim that owning a farm was a bad thing.

On the case of finding him with a woman in "a situation", Mbhele wrote that he sued Sixtus and the monsignor in a court of law but lost the case. As he says "and they did not find me in that situation as he says otherwise it would have been very foolish of me to sue them and they would have not found it necessary to engage a lawyer as they did. To lose a case is not always a proof of guilt."²² Mbhele then goes on to give an example of a missionary priest who was actually found in a similar compromising situation with a woman:

In the same year this same Fr. Sixtus was sent with other 2 priests to a certain mission station to investigate the charges brought against a certain priest already well known to be a concubinarius who had a regular harem on the mission station itself. He was not visited at night time, but was informed a week before hand, of the coming visit and since one of the said harem was already in a family, the parents having failed to obtain justice at Mariannahill, they brought the matter to the local court. The said priest having been reinstated in the same mission as if nothing had happened. The Magistrate had to intervene, it was

only through this intervention that the said missionary was sent to Europe. Suffice to mention this glaring case out of many.²³

In this letter Mbhele alleged that the parishioners had petitioned the bishop to remove Sixtus, because he refused to do his job. But Sixtus still continued to send letters of complaints to the bishop,²⁴ to the extent that in 1935 Spreiter wrote a letter to Mbhele asking him to solemnly declare that he was not living with the woman. On 16 October, Mbhele replied saying:

I solemnly declare before almighty God that the woman in question has never lived in my house but always lived with her children in a house in which other people were living. She applied and was accepted by me as a tenant like others but since she has no one to pay her rent for her I gave work of sewing. There is nothing wrong.²⁵

Mbhele believed that Sixtus' aim was to literally destroy him by employing spies against him. In one of his letters to the bishop, Sixtus clearly states this intention when he says:

As I always did, when R.F Julius was still under our Bishop, so I wish to do now if I get no advice to the contrary. The thing I reported was: wine is on the way to R.F. Julius farm.

A consignment note in open envelope has arrived again dated 25/11/36 from a Durban firm ... for wine to the amount of £1-13-0, sent to St. Anthony's ... If it is agreeable to get such notification, the way how it is discovered must not be revealed, or better, no mention at all must be made of wine.²⁶

This letter indicates that Sixtus was either employed as a spy by the previous bishop, or had himself appointed someone to spy on Mbhele. It is indeed very difficult to know what really happened between Mbhele and Sixtus. Oral testimonies on this are not available. The only available sources are in the archives. However,

the important point is that we are presented with opinions and facts from both sides.

The problems between Bishop Spreiter and Mbhele made the latter leave the diocese of Zululand at the end of 1937. He went to stay on his farm for a year. However, since he still wanted to work as a priest, he did not like to stay on the farm and said that, although materially, he could be as free as a bird,²⁷ it was “not conducive to the salvation” of his soul. In December 1938 Bishop Spreiter wrote a letter to Bishop Romuald M. Migliorini, the vicar apostolic of Swaziland, a Servite of Italian origin, recommending Mbhele. He said:

Repeatedly being asked by Exc. Bishop Fleischer Mariannahill I consented to take the three Native Priests from Mariannahill to Zululand, in order to help the bishop. One of these three died, one is still with us and Rev. Julius Mbhele I have dismissed on the 12th Dec. the reason was that he molested women and a girl. He did not the worst. But the people has been angry about (sic), and that the more, as one of our brothers on the first of November has left the Mission for *peccata contra sextum*, on the same very Mission. Therefore I have been obliged to dismiss him. As he wrote, he will save his soul, he will not remain there. I think he has a right. Julius belongs until now to the Vicariate of Mariannahill. Rt. Bp. Fleischer has several times asked me to take him over in my vicariate, but I could not do that, fearing that one day troubles will arise.²⁸

From the letter, we see that Bishop Spreiter briefly summarised the problems Mbhele had experienced in Mariannahill and Zululand. In addition, he cautioned Bishop Migliorini that having black priests in his country might create problems, stating: “To see a Black priest on the altar would perhaps develop amongst your boys the desire to become also a priest.”²⁹ In 1939 Mbhele went to Swaziland and worked at Bremersdorp for six years. In 1945, he was transferred to Mbabane in Swaziland, where he worked until the early 1950s before returning to retire on his farm near Ncala Mission shortly before his death in 1956.

7 MBHELE'S CONFLICTS

In this section I shall describe the different conflicts that Mbhele experienced with his fellow priests and the hierarchy of the church.

8 ISSUE OF LAND OWNERSHIP

Most of the conflicts encountered by Mbhele revolve around the ownership of a farm near Ncala Mission. The conflict first occurred with the abbot of the monastery and later with Bishop Fleischer of Mariannahill from 1907 to 1933.

The conflict started in 1924, when Bishop Fleischer forced Mncadi and Mbhele to sell their farms. The priests believed he was depriving them of the right to own property. The bishop's contention, however, was that farm ownership among native priests could be open to abuse; according to the priests this was not borne out by the facts. For instance, Mncadi had been in possession of a farm for more than ten years and nobody complained about that matter, nor was the situation abused.

Mbhele took up this challenge head-on and challenged not only the bishop, but even the apostolic delegate, about his right to own land as a diocesan.

Although Mbhele was incurring the wrath of his superiors, he did not receive support from his fellow black priests. For instance, on the reaction of Alois Mncadi to the issue of farms, Mbhele wrote:

I cannot understand Fr. Alois, he seems to imagine that because he is only nominally the owner of that farm at Mhlabashana, this farm is my personal concern. I explained the whole situation to him but till now I got no answer from him, while to the explanation I had given him before he went to Mariannahill he replied by heaping blames against me as if I was fighting for direct administration of the farm instead of leaving this to others. Even if that were the only aim I had it would be unreasonable seeing that I must see to it that the farm is beneficially

used so as to pay the instalments for itself. It is a pity to have to cooperate with a man who changes like the moon.³⁰

Mnganga, on the other hand, refused to help or cooperate for the reason that he was under the Natal Vicariate. He wrote:

As personally concerned I am working under Natal Vicariate not under Mariannahill thus not implicated in the present affair. Moreover his Lordship Bishop Fleischer wrote his statement concerning the farms of only two native priests, thereupon mentioned, why should we all four sign a retaliating letter to the Delegate Apostolic.³¹

Mbhele did not welcome such reasoning. For him, these were not reasons at all. He had a universal approach, in the sense that, if a problem affected a native clergyman at the present time, then it was quite possible that it would affect any future native clergy as well. So it had to be addressed by all native clergy, in order to set a precedent for native priests in the future. As he explains:

This can be seen from the order of His Lordship which says 'I think a farm is a very dangerous thing for a native priest' and from His pointing to the bishop of Uganda. Will they not use the same cavillation in Rome? Of course this is no argument against the universal law which is in favour but what if they were to say: oh no! We do not intend to exclude the African priest from exercising the right for all time, only these of the present generation for the reason that they are not yet in a position to take charge of the work among their people etc ...³²

9 A PETITION TO THE APOSTOLIC DELEGATE

In 1924 a petition was written by Ngidi to Archbishop Jordan Bernard Gijlswijk,³³ the apostolic delegate, entitled "Farm-ownership by Native [diocesan] Priests in South Africa."³⁴ Mnganga was reluctant to sign it. An existing copy of this petition shows only the signatures of Ngidi and Mbhele. However, this was in all probability a copy produced

before the petition was finalised, and the other two priests may have signed it later. The introduction of the petition states that the Native [Diocesan] Priests of the Mariannhill Vicariate were concerned and alarmed at “the attitude our beloved Bishop is taking towards us in general, and Mbhele in particular”. Seven points are put across for the delegate’s consideration, *inter alia*: that the priests were being forced to sell their farm; that farms could be abused by black priests; that canon law supported land ownership, and that the farms were bought before the bishop had been nominated.³⁵

10 INTERPRETATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE CONFLICTS

In this section I shall interpret the conflicts in the light of the conceptual framework outlined earlier.

11 THE FARM ISSUE AS HIDDEN TRANSCRIPT MADE PUBLIC

We shall apply our conceptual framework to explain the interaction which has occurred. It was established by the bishops and the apostolic delegate that black priests should not own land. But Mbhele contested and contradicted this ruling, refusing to sell the farm he owned near Ncala Mission right up to his death in 1956. As Scott suggests, by refusing to sell the farm Mbhele and Mncadi made public the “hidden transcript”. They found a way to protest against what they believed to be an unreasonable demand by the bishop, by writing letters to the abbot, to bishops and to the apostolic delegate, and asking advice from Ngidi. Instead of talking about the situation amongst themselves, and disclosing how dissatisfied they were with the proceedings against them, they decided to bring their dissatisfaction into the open. What was “hidden” or “offstage” thus became publicly debated. In effect, by refusing to act as they were supposed to, or expected to, in the face of power, Mbhele and Mncadi mounted a challenge: they rebelled. For Scott, “such moments of challenge and defiance typically provoke either a swift stroke of repression or, if unanswered, often lead to further words and acts of daring”.³⁶ For Mbhele, this repression took the form of his incarceration in 1910, when the bishop denied him the privilege of saying mass. Mbhele rebelled against this, and wrote a letter to the abbot about the incarceration³⁷

12 THE FARM ISSUE AS A STRUGGLE FOR HEGEMONY

Mbhele and Sixtus's cultural elements - or "signifiers" - were worlds apart. In the type of relationship they had, power plays a salient role, and this made the behaviour and community life of Mbhele "susceptible to the appropriation of authority" and "woven tightly into an integrated worldview". This can be seen from the letters which challenged the worldview of Mbhele, as an African with communal values and beliefs. It is clear that Sixtus wanted to impose a Western individualist worldview on Mbhele by trying to dominate the black priest's life, and by making him a subordinate who would give in to, and accept, Sixtus's ideas. Hegemony is achieved in situations of "consensus"; however, in this particular situation, "consensus" was not achieved because of the extent of the resistance of the black priests.

For the Comaroffs, power is distinguished into agentive and non-agentive modes. The agentive mode refers to "the command wielded by human beings in specific historical contexts". The non-agentive form of power, on the other hand, is "the silent power of the sign, the unspoken authority of habit, (which) may be as effective as the most violent coercion in shaping, directing, even dominating social thought and action" (Comaroff & Comaroff 1995:21).³⁸ The enforcing of this silent power is clearly seen in the case of Mbhele and Mncadi in their farm ownership ordeal. It was taken for granted that farms could only be owned by white missionary congregations, for instance the Mariannhill congregation or the Benedictines. Seeing the local clergy owning farms disturbed the white priests and the bishop of Mariannhill and Zululand to the extent that they opposed it vehemently and used the laws of the church and the political situation to impose their authority. The political situation is linked to the enactment of the Land Acts and several other pieces of legislation. The black middle class were systematically dispossessed of all property (Davenport 1987:259).

According to the Comaroffs, hegemony - or political domination - is rarely contested. This is true of Mbhele and Mncadi's case, except perhaps in "roseate dreams of revolutionaries".³⁹ But the constant harassment of Mbhele, and his incarceration in 1910, was just the

beginning of his problems and the enforcement of the silent power. As we saw earlier, in 1924 Mbhele was reprimanded for owning a farm. Even after being reprimanded Mbhele wrote, "his Lordship has taken a definite step against me by indefinitely denying me jurisdiction solely because I refuse to give up my right to land ownership". By doing this he turned the silent aspect of political domination into a contest which could be openly debated. He put forward this appeal to the bishop:

His Lordship could show that the native priests are blameless as long as they have no farm but as soon as they become landowners they invariably become bad priests and that this change for the worse is proved to be attributable solely and exclusively to the fact that they have farms then and only then His appeal to His conscience might be intelligible.⁴⁰

These words suggest that, to Mbhele, this was a natural and logical step. In fact, it challenged the hegemonic situation and, in doing so, turned it into something other than itself. In the words of the Comaroffs: "It turned into ideology and counter ideology, into orthodoxy and heterodoxy."⁴¹ Such struggles remain the struggles of symbols, especially when used for immediate resolution. In this case, we have the German missionaries whose dominant influence was closely linked to the church and the South African socio-political background. But the subordinate groups also had ideologies. And "as they try to assert themselves against a dominant order or group, perhaps even to reverse existing relations of inequality, they too must call actively upon those ideologies".⁴² For instance, Mbhele's punishment for refusing to sell the farm was extended to other things, but he continued to resist. As he says:

I have also written to His Lordship protesting against the insinuation that I may not go to my farm unless under the escort of Fr. S. and against interference with my correspondence. I shall never go back again on these points since he has shown that his appeal to conscience is false unless of course he takes conscience in a political sense.⁴³

When hegemony is imposed it is not on a clean slate but rather on the ground where other prior power structures have existed before. Since the new form does not totally replace the old one, it is never totally imposed.⁴⁴ In Mbhele's case this is seen in the following letter he wrote to Ngidi:

It seems that the Delegate is trying to make reconciliation at our expense which will never do. I am not surprised though for I was informed here that the bishop had obtained the consent of his Grace to take the step he is taking. I am also informed that you, Father Alois and myself are supposed to be aiding each other in this and other matters and that we are making it hard for His Lordship to continue with His native clergy programme and you may be sure His Excellency has been informed accordingly against us. That is the view of His Lordship and his confreres I was told this very morning. Again you must know that His Lordship is not alone but whole of Mariannahill is with him of course there are some exceptions. Thus you see what tremendous odds we have to face.⁴⁵

A common pattern which is followed is that once something leaves the domain of the hegemonic, it frequently becomes a major focus of ideological struggle.⁴⁶ This was implied by Mbhele when he wrote:

consider also this trick i.e. His Lordship first declared that - He will not allow us to have charge of Missions - then therefore we cannot have that aim in view when we buy farms *ergo implicamur negotiis saecularibus! ed. quidem sine necessitate* (sic) since they support us. Of course I don't say it is logic but that is the trick.⁴⁷

13 CONCLUSIONS

It is important to note that, although the authorities in the church, who were highly influenced by the church's structure and the colonial background, tried to impose their power on Mbhele, in most cases Mbhele resisted. He actually contradicted the articulated principle of

the missionaries. As stated earlier on, once there is resistance and contestation, there can be no hegemony. It is only when there is sufficient “consensus” amongst the subordinates that we can say a new hegemony has been established. Whenever, Mbhele was told to do something which he considered contradicted his worldview, he articulated his objection and gave his reasons. This brought what had been a silent power, into the open and challenged his superiors, be they abbot or bishop. These actions made his life very difficult. He was repressed in many ways, yet he never gave up. Here we see a priest whose consciousness was colonised but who, at the same time, used his consciousness to fight the oppression within the church. He wanted to fight not only for himself, but also for the whole native clergy.

Building on the analysis of the Comaroffs and Scott, I believe we need to see beyond the mere stories of the conflicts between the local clergy and the missionaries. Their interaction was characterised by contestation, compliance, repulsion and fascination. The missionaries proved to be more capable of imposing their cultural background on the colonial clergy; however, the black priests were not passive recipients of the European culture - they resisted. For the Comaroffs, the modes of resistance extend across a wide spectrum. According to them, “At one end is organised protest, explicit moments and movements of dissent that are easily recognisable as ‘political’ by Western lights. At the other are gestures of tacit refusal and iconoclasm, gestures that sullenly and silently contest the form of an existing hegemony.”⁴⁸ The form of resistance of the black priests can be linked with the latter: they resisted the missionaries’ campaign to reconstruct some aspects of their everyday lives, and struggled to retain control over words, space and the use of the Zulu language itself.

I believe it is vital to distinguish between the different forms of resistance in society. More advanced forms of resistance usually bring about change because they question - and sometimes even overturn - the whole power structure. In the Roman Catholic Church, even though the first priests resisted and contested the foreign worldview imposed on them, in reality they did not bring about any long-term change. I suggest, in fact, that to some extent these

priests, as Catholic priests, used survivalist tactics in order to cope with the crisis in the church.

WORKS CONSULTED

Archives

Archives of Mariannhill Monastery
Archives of the Archbishop of Durban: File on the first Black Clergy
Inkamana Archives, Vryheid
Archives of St Mary's Minor Seminary, Ixopo
Natal Archives, Pietermaritzburg

Newspapers and periodicals

Izindaba Zabantu, 1912-1929

Southern Cross 1920-1957
Umafrika 1929-1957
Vergissmeinnicht, 1885-1957

Books

- Brain, J & Denis, P 1999. *The Catholic Church in contemporary Southern Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster.
- Comaroff J & Comaroff J 1995. *Of revelation and revolution: Christianity, colonialism and consciousness in South Africa*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.
- Davenport, T R H 1987. *South Africa: A modern history*, Braamfontein: Macmillan.
- Denis, P 1998. *The Dominican Friars in South Africa: A social history 1577-1990*. Leiden: Brill.
- Gramsci, A 1971. *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Scott, J 1990. *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Tom, Z (ed) 2005. *Race relations and the Catholic Church in South Africa a decade after Apartheid*. Pretoria: SACBC.

West, G. 1998. Discerning the contours of domination and resistance in liberation hermeneutics: Do the poor and marginalized speak? *Bulletin for Contextual Theology in Southern Africa and Africa* 4(3), December.

ENDNOTES

-
- 1 James C Scott was the Eugene Meyer Professor of Political Science and chairman of the Council on Southeast Asia Studies at Yale University. Among his previous books are *The moral economy of the peasant: Rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia* and *Weapon of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*.
- 2 "Ein freudiges Ereignis," in *Vergissmeinnicht*, 1907, 194. Archives of Mariannhill Monastery.
- 3 Julius Mbhele's letter to Right Rev. Abbot, Einsideln, 31/10/1910. Archives of the Archbishop of Durban: File on the first Black Clergy.
- 4 See letter by Mbhele to the Abbot, Einsideln, 31 October 1910. Durban Archdiocesan Archives.
- 5 See Letter from Mbhele to Ngidi, Umgodi, 23 November, 1924. Inkamana Archives, Vryheid.
- 6 Julius Mbhele, Letter to Fr Andreas Ngidi, Umgodi, via Highflats, 7 November 1924, Archives of Inkamana Monastery, Vryheid: Andreas Ngidi; File 1.
- 7 Aldabero Fleischer letter to Fr. Julius Mbhele, Mariannhill, 28/9/1924. Archives of the Archbishop, Durban: File on the first Black clergy.
- 8 See articles entitled "*Kuka' Kam nenzalo yake' Um Afrika* (17 & 24 April 1925).
- 9 Aloysius Mncadi, A letter to the bishop, Mariatrost, Via Highflats, 13/3/1930. Archives of the Archbishop of Durban: File on the first Black Clergy.
- 10 Letter from Bishop Spreiter to Mbhele, Inkamana, 5 June 1937. Inkamana Archives, Vryheid.
- 11 Julius Mbhele, a letter to the Excellency Thomas Spreiter OSB, St. Anthony's PO Incalu, 30/3/1933. Archives of Inkamana Monastery, Vryheid: Clergy; File 1.
- 12 This fact was also attested by Aloys Mncadi, when he wrote to Bishop Thomas Spreiter, saying, "As His Lordship has an exceptional talent in person of both Reverend A N & JM, especially the intellectual gift of Rev Mbhele it might use him for translating the New and Old Bible into Zulu. These two are the best in the whole of South Africa even may in all earnestness and fairness say that they are the best and unique machinery for that purpose in the sub-continent. (Letter from Aloys Mncadi to Bishop Thomas Spreiter, Mariatrost, 13/3/1930. Archives of Inkamana Monastery, Vryheid: Clergy; File1.)
- 13 Thomas Spreiter, Bishop, A letter to Fr Julius, Inkamana, 1st October 1933. Archives of Inkamana Monastery, Vryheid: Clergy File 1.
- 14 Thomas Spreiter, Bishop, a Letter to Father Julius, Inkamana, 27th March 1935. Archives of Inkamana Monastery, Vryheid: Clergy File 1.
- 15 Julius Mbhele, A Letter to His Excellency Bishop Th. Spreiter O S B, Gonzaga, PO Qudeni Zululand, 20/4/1936. Archives of Inkamana Monastery, Vryheid: Clergy File 1.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Thomas Spreiter, Bishop, Letter to Father Julius Mbhele, Mission Inkamana, Vryheid, 16th April 1935. Archives of Inkamana Monastery, Vryheid: Clergy File 1.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Julius Mbhele to bishop Spreiter, Cach Mission Entabeni, 23/4/1936. Archives of Inkamana Monastery, Vryheid: Clergy File 1.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 See Thomas Spreiter, Bishop, Letter to Father Julius Mbhele, Mission Inkamana, 8th October 1935; Thomas Spreiter, Bishop, Letter to Herr P Sixtus Wittekind, Mission Inkamana, 9th October, 1935; Thomas Spreiter, Bishop, Letter to Herr P Valentin, Inkamana, 9th October, 1935; Julius Mbhele, Letter to Thomas Spreiter Bishop, Catholic mission, Entabeni, 11th October 1935; Julius Mbhele, Letter to Thomas Spreiter Bishop, Catholic mission, Entabeni, 12th October 1935; P. Sixtus, Letter to Bishop Spreiter, Zululand, 13th October 1935. Thomas Spreiter, Bishop, Letter to Father Julius Mbhele, Mission Inkamana, 14th October 1935. Archives of Inkamana Monastery, Vryheid: Spreiter (26) African Priests.
- 25 Thomas Spreiter, Bishop, Letter to Father Julius Mbhele, Mission Inkamana, 14th October 1935. Archives of Inkamana Monastery, Vryheid: Spreiter (26) African Priests.

- 26 F. Sixtus, Letter to Right Rev. Bishop Spreiter, Eshowe, Mary-Help M.S., Incalu. Archives of Inkamana Monastery, Vryheid: Spreiter (26); African Priests.
- 27 Julius Mbhele, Letter to Thomas Spreiter, Bishop, St. Antony's, Incalu, Ixopo, Inkamana Archives. Archives of Inkamana Monastery, Vryheid: Spreiter (26); African Priests.
- 28 Thomas Spreiter, Letter to Right Rev Mgr Romauld M Migliorini OSM, Prefect Apostolic, Swaziland, Inkamana, 20th December 1938. Archives of Inkamana Monastery, Vryheid: Spreiter (26) African Priests. The letter continued saying that "Julius is, so far I know over 50 of age, and the fire in the flesh, perhaps will go down. In all the about ten years and more I had only once a little difficulty with him, and since he was always a good old priest. He has no powerful voice since he is slowly, and not very healthy. I would ask you to help him in so far – when Bishop Fleischer has no objection – to make a test with him and to tell him, if this test will be a failure, that he has to leave at once ... The native priests have been with us, as in Mariannahill, in the Refectory, and had their own rooms. They got nor other money from us as the stipends for Masses, mostly each Mass with a Dollar."
- 29 Letter from Bishop Spreiter to Bishop Romuald M. Migliorini, Inkamana 20 December, 1938. Inkamana Archives, Vryheid.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 Edward Mnganga, a Letter to Julius Mbhele, 10/11/1924. Archives of the Archbishop of Durban: File on the first Black Clergy.
- 32 Julius Mbhele, a letter to Ngidi, Umgodi, 21/11/1924. Archives of Inkamana Monastery, Vryheid: Andreas Ngidi; File 1.
- 33 Jordan Bernard Gijlswijk (1870-1944) was appointed apostolic delegate in 1923 until he died. For a full discussion on Gijlswijk see Philippe Denis, *The Dominican Friars in South Africa: A social history 1577-1990*. (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp.147-201.
- 34 For a full discussion of the apostolic delegate see Denis, P. *The Dominican Friars in Southern Africa*.
- 35 Petition to His Excellency, Archbishop Gijlswijk Delegate Apostolic, "Farm ownership by Native Secular Priests in Africa", undated. Archives of Inkamana Monastery, Vryheid: Andreas Ngidi; File 2. The are the seven points elaborated in the petition:
1. His Lordship Bishop Fleischer was forcing the Reverend Fathers A. Mncadi and J. Mbhele to sell their farms, and this seemed to deprive the Native Secular priests of the right to own property.
 2. The bishop's contention that farm ownership among Native Priests could be open to abuse was not borne out by the facts, as the Rev A Mncadi had been in possession of one for more than 10 years and nobody had ever had reason to complain about that matter.
 3. In the case of Rev J Mbhele, no argument could be made, because it was His Lordship himself who made it impossible for Mbhele to stay at any other mission of Mariannahill after their differences at Mariannahill. Even if it could be construed that the farm was in any way involved in the matter, that would only concern the abuse and not farm ownership itself.
 4. They feared that the general prohibition on the Native secular clergy owning land was an arbitrary and wanton use of superior power not warranted by both Divine and Canon Laws, which allowed secular priests to own property.
 5. European missionaries were allowed to own land in Africa and everywhere else. Only the African priests were prohibited from ownership in their mother country. Didn't this discrimination smell of the colonial colour bar policy?
 6. As the facts and experiences failed to carry weight with His Lordship in the above matter, all four most reluctantly found themselves having to work as missionaries at the stations of Lourdes, Centocow, Mariathal, St. Michael, Himmelberg, St Johannes and Mariatrost. They declined to submit to his Lordship's order, as being *ultra vires*, unjustified and uncanonical and, therefore ... begged the Apostolic Delegate to intervene and indicate to them what course of action to take under the circumstances
 7. In conclusion they stated that both these land transactions were concluded before His Lordship's nomination and consecration, thus rendering all his actions ... impossible of a retrospective affect.

- 36 Scott J, *Domination and the arts of resistance*, 9.
- 37 Julius Mbhele's letter to Right Rev. Abbot, Einsideln, 31/10/1910. Archives of the Archbishop of Durban: File on the first Black Clergy.
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 Jean Comaroff & John Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution: Christianity, colonialism and consciousness in South Africa*, 24.
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 Julius Mbhele, Letter to Fr Andreas Ngidi, Umgodi, via Highflats, November 7 1924. Archives of Inkamana Monastery, Vryheid: Andreas Ngidi; File 1.
- 44 Comaroffs, *Of revelation and revolution*, 26.
- 45 Julius Mbhele, a letter to Fr Ngidi, Umgodi, November 10 1924. Archives of Inkamana Monastery, Vryheid: Andreas Ngidi; File 1.
- 46 Comaroffs, *Of revelation and revolution*, p.27.
- 47 Julius Mbhele, a letter to Fr Ngidi, Umgodi, November 10 1924. Archives of Inkamana Monastery, Vryheid: Andreas Ngidi; File 1.
- 48 Comaroffs, *Of revelation and revolution*, 31.