

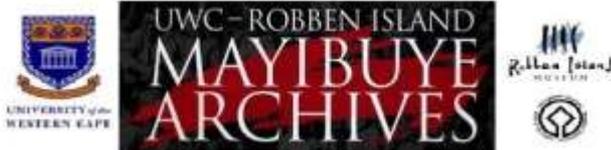
Ruth First Papers project

Interview with Govan Mbeki

An interview conducted by **Don Pinnock** on the 16th of May 1988. Part of a series carried out at Grahamstown University and held at the UWC/Robben Island Mayibuye Archive.

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DP: When did you get involved in - or how did you become a journalist? Did you become a writer first and then a journalist? How did you get into writing?

GM: I got into writing as a student. I was then at Fort Hare. I started off writing in Xhosa, but that material unfortunately got destroyed. Only one part of it has survived, I was going through it the other day. Now I had written a play which I had submitted to the **[indistinct]** and they wrote to me after I had already left Fort Hare, in '37 or so, to say that it had been accepted by their committee, but they asked me to translate it into Zulu or Sotho. But by then I'd already shifted from Xhosa to writing in English. So I gave it to a friend to translate that thing into Zulu or Sotho, but he never found the time. I remember one of his criticisms was that it was too serious a tragedy, and that there was no relief. He felt there should be some scenes where there was a relief from the tragedy. So I said well alright, you put those scenes in. I no longer have the time to put them in. But he never managed to do it. So that manuscript ended up **[indistinct]**.

DP: Do you think it still exists?

GM: I don't know. It would be a good thing. Unfortunately I didn't ask them if they made copies. I spoke to them about a month ago and I forgot to ask them. So there was that, and then now and again - I remember **Umsebenzi** was still there. **Umsebenzi** was edited by SP Bunting, Brian's father. I wrote an article or so there, but it wasn't - I wasn't really playing the role of a journalist. I wrote because I wanted to consider something that appeared in the paper. But when now - in 1936 I wrote a manuscript which was intended to be a reply to a publication by - who was this chap? **[sounds like Howard Pym]**. I think at Fort Hare there's a library, a Pym library. He had published a book about the Transkei. So I thought I couldn't handle this in a column in a newspaper, so I started writing something which was finally published in 1939 in the Transkei. So from then on my writing career had started. In 1938, at the time when the **Guardian** was starting, there were two chaps who had a printing business. And I took the Pym manuscript which was

published in 1939 and it was serialised in a magazine in Durban. **[indistinct]**, and I think you have a new outlook. So they asked me for this news and we said we will have a serial. Then they promised they would pay me a guinea per page, which they never did! So we called off that series before they had run their course. But these two chaps saw those things and felt that that was time they started a newspaper. They had been having their printing work, but it was unadvertised, so they wanted a newspaper to advertise their work. But they said at the same time we are not writers. We have seen your series, you are a writer, and you like to get your ideas across. Let's start a newspaper, you can run that thing, but it will also advertise our work.

DP: Is this in PE?

GM: No, this was in Durban. So that's how - from then on, continuously I wrote.

DP: Now what newspaper was that?

GM: It was called the **[sounds like Territorial]** magazine.

DP: And who were those two people?

GM: They were **[sounds like Katanzima Mzwai]**, and another was **[sounds like Jonga]**. Both of them had come from the Transkei.

DP: Where were you at the time?

GM: I was teaching in Durban.

DP: I've never heard of that newspaper! **[indistinct]**

GM: However, it got started, and I think by 1939, 1940, it changed it's name to **Inkundla ya Bantu**. But it started off as **Territorial Magazine**. Then I left for the editorship round about 1946. Then these two opened an office **[indistinct]** and the other chaps now became **[indistinct]**. So they got someone else as an editor, who was Jordan Mgubane.

DP: And were you a member of the CP by then?

GM: Not exactly, but my association with the CP was as short **[indistinct]**.

DP: Because you met Eddie Roux when he was camping outside Fort Hare?

GM: Yes, I met Eddie there, and then our association continued. Then in 1940, I was made one of the directors of the **Guardian** newspaper.

DP: How long were you on that board? Until it closed?

GM: No, until - I became an acting chairman for the **New Age**. That is happening in 1954, '55.

DP: And where were you based during this time? You were in Germany for some of the time?

GM: Some of the time I was in Germany, some of the time I was in the Transkei, some of

the time I was in PE.

DP: And were you writing then for the **Guardian, when you were director?**

GM: I wasn't really writing, except on occasions. In 1943 the government issued the White Paper on betterment schemes for the Native Reserves. Now I wrote a critique of this, and we ran a series on it in the **Guardian**. **[indistinct]** for the unemployed.

DP: When did you come back to PE?

GM: 1955.

DP: Oh, as late as that? And when you were in the Transkei, where were you?

GM: I was operating in the Idutywa district.

DP: As a teacher?

GM: As a **[indistinct]**, **earlier on**. Then I started teaching. I started teaching, writing down **[indistinct]**, the big hotels available on the seaside. So that's how I started teaching. **[indistinct]**. While there I was on the Wild Coast in the Transkei, teaching in a training school, not a high school.

[remainder of tape mostly inaudible]