

Amabutho members
Uitenhage, eastern Cape
Early 1986?
Interviewed by Mark Swilling

[Amabutho refers collectively to quasi-military formations of township youth who were also often known as "comrades" or "young lions." Mainly active in urban areas, especially in the eastern Cape, most were unemployed school-leavers who supported the United Democratic Front during the years of its ascendance, 1983-88. Often they lacked the political sophistication of school students, but with little to lose and time on their hands to roam the streets, they became the most militant and daring element within the UDF. Amabutho played a central, often unpopular, role in policing stayaways and consumer boycotts. The toyi-toyi, a high-spirited warriors' dance, became their political trademark at mass gatherings, marches and funerals. Between 1985 and 1987 they were responsible for rendering many townships temporarily off limits to state authorities—"ungovernable," in township parlance. Mark Swilling interviewed these youths when doing research for his doctoral dissertation.]

You can start by telling us when Amabutho emerged and why they are called Amabutho. Just give us a brief history of Amabutho.

Comrade: The name was conceived last year in Langa (Uitenhage township). The reason we call ourselves *Amabutho* is that we are forever ready to listen and solve people's problem. At times we get woken up at twelve midnight, listening to the problems. We don't solve the problems on our own. We first of all consult with the executive and the street committee. Whatever actions we take, we first of all consult with our leaders.

Comrade 2: Firstly *Amabutho* are disciplined. We have high discipline among ourselves. When we talk to elderly people we give them respect. We know that our parents have suffered too much. We also have a big problem because some of us are not educated. And the conditions at some of our homes are bad—we have suffered too much. So because of this, in our struggle we have to push too hard to get equal rights. The action committee consults with the executive and area committee. We tell them what we want and so on. We tell them about our problems. We tell them about street problems, light problems, food problems and all the problems.

So the area committees and the executive take up political and civic issues?

Comrade 2: Yes, they take up these issues and come back to us to report what is happening and so on. There was also the issue of buses. We said we don't want the buses because the police would hide in the buses to come into township and kill people. We had a problem with our taxis. The prices are too high. At first we thought this was because the price of petrol was up, but when it went down the price did not come down. So *Amabutho* decided to make a delegation to the taxi board.

Why didn't you ask the executive to take up the taxi price issue? Why did Amabutho do that and not the executive?

Comrade 2: The executive is aware of this problem. The meeting we had with the taxi people consisted of the executive members and *Amabutho*.

When was the action committee established? Was it last year or this year? Was the action committee established long before the [March 1985 Uitenhage] Massacre? So the action committee is only for the Amabutho?

Comrade 1: No, it is not only for Amabutho, it is for everybody in the eastern Cape. It is for anybody who has a feeling to take action. It is not only for the youth, it is also for the adults. Anybody who wants to take action we call that body an action committee. Everybody is in the action committee.

Comrade 2: Our parents cannot take action because they cannot run like us, that is why the youth is in the front of most of these actions. We the Amabutho and the youngsters are responsible for action.

What do you mean by action?

Comrade 1: Actions like destroying the wrong things in the townships. The parents use the area committees and the executive of the civic association to take action.

Comrade 2: Their responsibility is to look at problems of our parents like divorce and such things. The aim is to practice communal living and socialism. We don't take issues to the police anymore, we try and solve our own problems.

If there is a dispute between a husband and wife, where will they take that problem to? Do they come to the Amabutho or what?

Comrade 1: When people have such problems, they must first go to the street committee, then to the area committee. If it also fails, then they must go to the president of the executive.

What happens if there is somebody who has committed a murder?

Comrade 2: Big crimes like murder, people must take them to the police, We don't mind them going to the police for such crimes. The area committee has stopped us to kill people here in the township. The people we want to kill are informers who live in the towns.

Are they white informers or Black informers?

Comrade 1: Black informers. We hear that they live like prisoners, six in a small house and they suffer more compared to us.

Comrade 2: If we hear that there is an informer in the township, we go to that person to test him. Otherwise, we will be in big trouble.

What is the main conflict between Amabutho and the civic? When do you not agree and what sort of issues?

Comrade: No, we don't have conflicts because before we do anything we go to the people and tell them. If they refuse, we stop, because it is the people who must govern, not *Amabutho*.

The civic is the top body. If they say Amabutho must not do something, doesn't it make Amabutho angry?

Comrade 1: Amabutho won't be angry. When the executive decides on anything we take that decision. When they want us to help them, we help them.

How do you discipline your Amabutho; what do you do with dissidents?

Comrade 1: If we have dissidents, we discipline them by telling them that for three weeks you won't be working with us, and we don't talk to them. But, I can assure you they will come to us and apologize. Then we accept them back.

Comrade 2: We show them that we have the power. If he has done something really bad, he will feel sorry, then he has to apologize to the people.

Is there a difference between Amabutho and the Youth Congress?

Comrade 1: No; there is no difference. It is the same thing.

Then why do they call it Amabutho?

Comrade 1; The reason is to confuse the police. Today he will hear me say youth come here; tomorrow, he will hear me say *butho* come here.

How do you think you have been able to discipline Amabutho so well, because I know in other places they are having much bigger problems between Amabutho and the civics.

Comrade 1: When somebody refuses to do what the executive says, we try and hold a serious conversation with him. We try and show him how to work with us. If he refuses to do what the executive says, we try and hold a serious conversation with him. We try and show him how to work with us. If he refuses to understand we suspend him from our structures.

Do the Amabutho from other townships use the same strategy and do you meet with Amabutho from other areas?

Comrade 1: Yes. they use the same strategy. The *Amabutho* from Uitenhage we try and consult with *Amabutho* from Port Elizabeth. If they have a new method, we try and discuss that method with them. If we feel it is right, we then explain it to our *Amabutho* and adopt it.

Comrade 2: If we see that one of us is drunk, we take him home because the enemy will destroy him. If he refuses, we force him. We don't want to work with drunk people.

Do the Amabutho have a hierarchy? Do you have Senior Amabutho and rank and file Amabutho? The guy who was addressing you as the Chief Commander, was he joking or what?

Comrade 2: No, he was not joking. My work in the *Amabutho* is to organise food, and transport for funerals and whatever. If I see one of the *Amabutho* doing something wrong, it is my responsibility to take him to the people. If I say go to that house, they go. They do everything I tell them to do.

What I am trying to find out is how do the Amabutho think of themselves. For example, in Port Elizabeth Amabutho see themselves as the military wing of the political organisations. The organisations are in command; they are in the leadership and Amabutho see themselves as the military wing.

Comrade 1: We see ourselves the same way. We have a commander who serves as a link between us and the executive. The commander is respected and listened to.

The news they always show overseas is the necklace [method of killing informers with petrol-soaked tyres set alight]. The people in England are saying how can we give power to these people. Look what they are doing. What have you got to say to these people?

Comrade 1: We in the townships, we use the necklace in the right way. The problem is that the police use the necklace and say its the youth; but we have stopped using the necklace because of that.

Who does the system use the necklace on; on you, on the Amabutho or who?

Comrade 1: If the people don't see you, they take you and the necklace and claim that it is the youth.

When do the Amabutho use the Necklace?

Comrade: Amabutho use the necklace on informers like Nkosi and on vigilantes. Most of the people in the *Amabutho* are 15-year-olds. And all they have seen since 1976, because this thing has been going on for the past 10 years, all they have seen is being shot in the streets, blood and killings. So one can understand how they have become so insensitive. Actually it is the anger that people have especially for informers.

If somebody has stolen a TV set, they take the matter to the area committee. If the area committee cannot establish who has stolen the TV, will the Amabutho go out and investigate and try and find the criminal?

Comrade 1: Yes, *Amabutho* will do that, *Amabutho* will go door-to-door looking for the stolen property. If we get it, we take the people responsible together with the stolen goods to the area committee for discipline.

Do the Amabutho run their own people's court?

Comrade 1: No we don't do that except when *Amabutho* have to discipline one of the *Amabutho*.

There has been a lot of talk about the forthcoming removals [in Langa]. The system will be coming in with bulldozers and caspirs [armored vehicles] to remove people by force. But, what the system is worried about is the response of the Amabutho. They know that the Amabutho are going to fight. What I want to know is do the Amabutho see themselves as soldiers who are prepared to fight?

Comrades in concert: Yes, we are prepared to fight and die.

How many people in Langa feel the same way? Can you give us a number?

Comrade 1: I can say the whole people in Langa. We are prepared to talk with them, but if they kill we are also going to kill them. One thing we know is that the people shall govern and they [whites] are not going to govern our townships.

Are you planning, are you having discussions on how you are going to attack them?

Comrade 1: Yes, we plan. We don't sleep. We all go there—all *Amabutho* go there.

Is it men as well, or boys alone?

Comrade: Boys alone, men are afraid. When they see the caspir they run away. We try and involve them in area committees so that they can be politicised.

In Nicaragua and Mozambique women fought alongside men. Why can't they join you here?

Comrade 2: We try to involve them, but we are avoiding to have them killed. The police shoot everyone. Women and boys. When we are discussing a serious issue, they must be with us and hear what we say.

Why this separation? As I said, in other countries they involved the women. Women died too. Why not in South Africa?

Comrade: The main reason is that when we are having a meeting and the police come, we tell people not to run away. They must sit down. The women won't do that, they will start running away then they start shooting. But, if we are sitting down, they won't do a thing. We will send one person to them and tell them our demands.

Comrade 2: We have a women's organisation in Uitenhage and we have been trying to get women to join that organisation.

If you get rid of apartheid and get rid of capitalism, but you would still have men as the bosses, the poor women would still have a hard time.

Comrade 1: With political development we will realize these things and more women will be brought into the struggle. We are still in the learning process. So in the process there will be that realization of working together with women.