

Ambrose Makiwane, Cala, March 4, 1999, interviewed by Danny Massey

[Makiwane entered Fort Hare in 1955, when he was age 34. His family lacked the means to send him earlier, and he had been expelled from Clarkebury after a student strike. At Fort Hare he became chairman of the ANC Youth League branch, and in 1957 the president of the SRC.]

DM: What did you do in those years in between?

AM: I did my matric privately and then I worked in Johannesburg.

DM: And you were active politically in Johannesburg?

AM: Yes, politically and also in the trade unions.

DM: Was there any specific person or incident in Johannesburg that got you involved or had you already gotten involved?

AM: I was involved in strikes there. I was a secretary of the laundry workers union as well as the rope and canvas workers union. I was also an organizer for the South African clothing workers union. So I participated in all this. And I was a member of the Orlando Branch of the ANC when I stayed there. But when I moved to Pimville, I became a member of the Pimville Branch.

DM: And then when you got to Fort Hare it was a very tumultuous time for the university. When did you become aware of the impending Fort Hare Transfer Act and the takeover of Fort Hare by the government?

AM: Well, we were already aware by that time because the Nationalist [Party] enunciated the policies that it would follow when it took over power from the United Party. It was quite clear what they were going to do. And then we started campaigning against Bantu Education before it was even enacted. Bantu education as well as the Bantu Authorities Act. We were involved. We participated in all these. And even when I was teaching, in fact even before I went to Fort Hare, I taught for some time. And we were expelled because of that. Many teachers were involved, particularly those that belonged to the Unity Movement here in the Cape.

DM: What did you study once you got to Fort Hare? You had already been teaching.

AM: The courses I took at Fort Hare. Well, they were mixed up somewhere, were law courses. See, they were law courses. I took, it was English, psychology, criminal law, Roman Dutch Law. I also took up economics.

DM: What was the atmosphere like at the university when you got there due to the changes that were about to take place?

AM: Well, there was a great deal of dissatisfaction already. There was this awareness by the students and they were opposed to the whole thing. So it wasn't difficult to organize them, to involve the students.

DM: I read a statement that you made that referred to the multi-racial nature of Fort Hare and how this was exactly what the government was trying to stop. You mentioned some investigators that came to the university and even they were impressed by the way the school was functioning. So do you think that one of the reasons the government wanted to take it over was because Fort Hare was an example that their policies were off the wall?

AM: Yes, of course the policies followed at Fort Hare were against their own policies. They were against it. Although Fort Hare was being led by liberals. But it was definitely against. Also amongst the lecturers there, there were people who were opposed to it. Like Professor Matthews who was a top ANC man. And Mr. Mzamane. And the other lecturers, Mr. Ngcobo too, Professor Ngcobo. These were all ANC people. And there were those who supported the Unity Movement who were also against the policies of the government, like Ntlokos and the others. So [the Nationalists] hated Fort Hare.

DM: Do you remember what Z.K. Matthews's involvement was in this? Was he still active in terms of fighting against this bill?

AM: He was, he was active. He was very helpful in fact, Professor Z.K. Because in our organizational work, we were

using his car and petrol above all, because we had no money. So his transport was available to us. And that was a great contribution because there were some things he couldn't do himself or some meetings he couldn't go. So he was very helpful.

DM: It was also a time where he was on trial for treason. So he was probably going back and forth a lot between Pretoria and Alice. Do you remember him coming back with any stories of the Treason Trial?

AM: Well, we followed that closely. We followed that closely, the Treason Trial. It was well reported. I think he would report to the committee, telling us what was happening there, but he would tell us what we already knew. Because we had a great interest. And then at that time there was the *New Age* paper, which was reporting almost everything.

DM: Can you describe your personal involvement in fighting the Transfer Act as the SRC president?

AM: Well, we discussed it thoroughly as a student body and then at the same time, we linked up with the other forward looking universities like Rhodes, Wits, Cape Town etc. And we campaigned together against this coming act.

DM: What was the campaign like?

AM: We had the ANC, the political organizations, campaigning and then the student organizations also arranging meetings and conferences. We met both at Cape Town University, at Wits. Of course, we were a part of Rhodes, as it were.

DM: People keep telling me about a protest march that you led into Alice in 1958. Do you remember that?

AM: Yes, I remember that.

DM: Can you tell me a bit about it?

AM: These protest meetings were common those days because, what shall I say, the student body was moved, so it was easy to organize these marches. That was of course, then coupled with the fact that there was a Treason Trial which also moved everybody. So when we staged this march, a lot of people participated. We staged that march from Fort Hare into town and then back and then had a mass meeting there which I addressed.

DM: What did you say at the mass meeting?

AM: I spoke against the act and against oppression of course....

DM: Can you speak a little bit about the atmosphere at Fort Hare. I know that at the time you were there, there were coloured students and Indian students as well because this was before the government forbid them from attending. Can you speak a little about the atmosphere and the interaction amongst the different groups of people?

AM: It was very cordial. For instance, you find that at Fort Hare, there was no coloured organization, coloured student's organization. They belonged to the ANC. The Indians belonged to the ANC, some to the Unity Movement. So we interacted very cordially.

DM: And in terms of student life, everybody played together and whatnot?

AM: Oh yes.

DM: You speak a lot about the Unity Movement. I know that there was a little rivalry between the Unity Movement and the ANC Youth League at Fort Hare....

AM: It was a lot. And we finally crashed it, the Unity Movement. We rendered it helpless. The Youth League enjoyed the support of most students, even both coloureds and Indian. So, but there was no animosity. We were just political opponents. We were friends. You'd find that even a man from the Unity Movement, we were calling each other names and so on and still living together there at the hostels. When we had the meetings, we were quite strong against the Unity Movement. And they were also of course, most vociferous. The principal tried to use them to crash the ANC, but it couldn't succeed....

DM: At that time, were you targeted at all? As a student leader, were you targeted by the government at all?

AM: Yeah, yeah.

DM: I know post-1960, the students refused to elect an SRC because the leaders would be targeted.

AM: Oh yes, I was already targeted.

DM: In what ways?

AM: They tried to infiltrate the organization and I was censured on many occasions. Special Branch would visit me there and they would also ask for permission to search me, which we rejected. We refused. That the institution be searched by the police. This was rejected completely. Even if they are coming, they must come only when they are on duty to do what they want to do, but not to come and search. But we were very careful because the authorities were jittery. They were afraid. And also, they were against me now. The principal and others. In fact, I didn't get expelled there because of the registrar in particular and Professor Matthews and other lecturers like Professor Ngcobo and so on. Because the principal was very hostile to me.

DM: Was this Burrows?

AM: Burrows, yes. He was very hostile. But these now used to stand by me, were even admitting so. I don't know, we always clashed sort of. Because he was direct. Each time he would attack me directly and I would retort directly. At times he would even say the two of us students speak at the meeting because then there would be a quarrel, [inaudible]

DM: What was the contact with Lovedale like? I know that there was association with Lovedale as a high school and also with the nurses at Lovedale, at the hospital. Especially with the strike that took place in the late '50s, I know there was a lot of contact.

AM: There was a lot of contact. They were members of the branch there, Victoria branch. That's what made this contact. Also, the students at Lovedale, they belonged to the same branch there. So most of the things we used to discuss together with them. Yeah, they would leave Lovedale, come to the campus. The nurses likewise would do the same thing. We were meeting there at the college.

DM: Did they get involved in the protest against the separate universities act?

AM: They got involved in that. And also against the nurses act.?? There were demonstrations against that too. So in fact, the strike, now wait a minute, because the nurses were involved and they had become active members of the ANC, the authorities there put some junior nurses to spy on the nurses, particularly the senior nurses. And they resented this thing. Because they got to know. The thing was done very clumsily by those who were put there to watch over others. Boasting like they could deal harshly with them.

DM: Before you spoke a little about the liberal Fort Hare staff. But you speak favorably about people like Z.K. and Ngcobo. But in general, what was the staff like?

AM: Well in general, the staff was liberal. Because they were for the changes, that the changes must go. They must take place. They were very much afraid of action. There were those who would not expose themselves, who rather wanted to put us down as much as possible. They advised against what they called-- I don't know, there were so many phrases that were bandied about. We were being provocative to the government. All these phrases, we were being impetuous. All this, instead of encouraging the students. They never came out openly against the action of the students. Instead some were supportive. There was Ngcobo. As I say, there were very few. There was Ngcobo even though he belonged to the Unity Movement. He's late now. He became a lawyer in Natal. He was very helpful too. Whenever we wanted to distribute leaflets outside whatnot, we went and borrowed the cars....

DM: Was there any Communist Party activity at Fort Hare?

AM: No, there was none.

DM: Was it more underground?

AM: Not even underground. It was dormant. We were just meeting casually. We weren't even underground. But I knew all the members. We used to meet. We'd meet in front of the hall there towards lunch time or supper. Yeah.

DM: And then right after Fort Hare, you left the country?

AM: I left the country.

DM: Was that after 1960?

AM: It was 1960, during the State of Emergency. Yeah. When I left Fort Hare, I went to PE to serve articles under Jacobs and the government there expelled me from PE. And I went to East London. The same thing happened. And meantime, Matanzima was attempting to get the government to keep me in my father's farm. But he didn't have any power. He tried to use Chief Sabata, who was then the paramount chief of Thembuland. And Chief Sabata refused. In fact, he quickly sent a letter to my father to tell me that there was this move by Matanzima. So I could hardly work because they were following me everywhere.

DM: Just a little more about Fort Hare. Were you involved in any activities outside of the ANC, outside of the SRC?

AM: No.

DM: Or was politics the whole game?

AM: Always politics. Because I used to play tennis, but since I had appendicitis and I was operated on, I stopped in that completely....

DM: I noticed in the archives at Fort Hare that all the SRC documents are written by you. There's all these big manifestos written up with your name on the bottom. [Makiwane laughs] Did you write those personally or were they group written?

AM: Well, I wrote some of them. However, we were a collective. We would sit down, discuss the facts, then I write it out. We believed in this question of collective.

DM: There's this one interesting dialogue between you and a Professor Blackwell. Do you remember Professor Blackwell?

AM [laughs] I know Professor Blackwell.

DM: You as the leader of the student body drew up a proposal that you wanted to submit against the Extension of Universities Act, and he called you a pompous this and that and accused you of wanting to run the whole school.

AM: Yes. [laughs] Yes. And I don't know why he had a prejudice against me, Professor Blackwell. And yet I had known him before he came to Fort Hare, not as a lecturer, but as a judge.

DM: He was in parliament as well.

AM: He was in parliament as well.

DM: At one point, he wrote you a letter. He said, I've been in parliament 21 years, who are you to...[Makiwane laughs] Do you remember that exchange?

AM: Yes, Professor Blackwell.

DM: But in general, the staff was supportive of the protest against this act?

AM: Yes, it was supportive. It was. Even they themselves, the black ones really, were against it. They were not for it, but they belonged to the old school of gradualism I think. This was the trouble with them. Once you tow that line, you never get what you want.

DM: Once you got to Fort Hare, you were already very politically active. Did you kind of use Fort Hare as a forum to mature your political activism and to debate ideas and to grow yourself?

AM: Yes, I tried to.

DM: Would you say you grew up politically at Fort Hare?

AM: Yes, I would say that. I would say that.

DM: In what ways?

AM: It would be with regards to decision making and also the attempt now at really looking at the science of underground organization, what to do when things become tough. How to connect to each other, how not to act now as we did publicly. The age and stage of public speeches was gone. It was a stage of organization. The stage of propaganda had to be carried vigorously, but very carefully. So the art of doing the whole thing. Now we tried to practice that and we tried to get as much information as possible about the forms of struggle, the forms of struggle.

DM: You said that you joined the Communist Party before you got to Fort Hare. What was your involvement, if any, with the Party after Fort Hare?

AM: No, there was no involvement except the contact was there from outside because our contact was through PE and we would sometimes go there and have meetings. But at Fort Hare, no, no.