



Mathonga Elizwe – Spirits of the Land

Mathonga Elizwe – Spirits of the Land, a project supported by an NIHSS Catalytic Research Project grant, highlights the ongoing struggles of South Africa's labour tenants. Despite decades of democracy, these former labourers still face oppression and obstacles to accessing the farmland they have worked on for generations. The slow pace of resolving labour tenant land claims is driven by ideological and political factors, reinforced by the misconception that these claims are only about small pieces of land near their homes. The exhibition and documentary expose the current oppressive social relations on white-owned farmland, while elevating the voices of former labour tenants and challenging the myths that undermine their recognition as skilled farmers.

This film tells a true story of the last remaining Black people living under oppression on white owned land in South Africa today. In pursuit of land justice, Mathonga Elizwe narrates how Black people lost land in the first place, and how they became workers, and landless tenants on the land of their ancestors. Embers of thriving Black lives prior to colonialism are rekindled, and the future imagined. The film ends on a optimistically sobering note, a realisation of white resistance to land redistribution in South Africa today, and what can be done about it, symbolised by the rising sun shining light onto the land, awakening the spirits of the land, and raising land politics consciousness for future generations.

The film is centred on three cases of landless former labour tenants who are demanding the land of their ancestors. Two cases in Kwazulu-Natal: Hilton and Koubad. One is in Mpumalanga: Wakkerstroom.

Hilton

Hilton College, one of the most prestigious schools in South Africa has been involved in a land theft scandal for the past 154 years.

The school obtained land with the aid of the British colonial army officials who were awarded land for helping the British army to massacre indigenous people and take over their land.

The people of Nozekela, on the banks of Umngeni River found themselves living under British occupation and were called upon to work in building Hilton College from the 1870s onwards. They were compelled to bring their livestock (cattle) as well to help transport heavy building material. From the beginning they could stay on the land only if they provided free labour to Hilton College.



During the later 1950s, and early 1960s, Hilton College ordered the people of Nozekela to vacate their place of origin and relocate closer to the school. Many decades later, their land was converted into a game reserve: Hilton College Nature Reserve. It is common practice for white landowners to convert land into nature reserves with imported wildlife. They do this to block land reform because the government generally protects nature reserves from land redistribution.



The people of Nozekela never gave up their struggle to return to Nozekela, the land of their ancestors. They have resisted the court order offering them alternative land. They want the land of their ancestors. Hilton College wants them completely off the land.

Koubad

In 1995, a Black community was ordered to relocate onto the most marginal part of the farm, Koubad. They followed their white landlords' orders. They relocated. They lost most of their belongings during the forced relocation, especially artisanal fragile artefacts which they had held dear for centuries. They left behind good quality land on which they had thriving livestock herds, and stunning cropping fields. The Black community of Koubad is demanding their land back. They are demanding back their dignity they lost with land dispossession. They articulate a clear vision of what to do with the land on their return: To reinvigorate a thriving agricultural community they once were. For example, they currently live under livestock herd restrictions of no more than five head of cattle per family. These restrictions will be uplifted once they gain land ownership.

Wakkerstroom

The Nkambule family of Wakkerstroom has been struggling for two decades for the resolution of their land claim. They are determined that victory is eminent. They believe in the new legal processes that will help them get their land back. But they are occasionally harassed by the white landowners.

The film shows a horrific scene where white landowners attempt to disrupt a funeral of their loved one. This is not the only incident of daily oppression. Beyond odds the Nkambule family is determined that they'll one day get to own once again the land of their ancestors.

In all three cases the characters are determined to get land for farming to thrive and prosper economically for the current and future generations. All three cases show how the white landed elite are adamant in their resistance against land reform. The land claimants on the other hand have the judiciary in their favour, since the dawn of democracy. However, the wheels of land justice are moving at a snail's pace. Many elders have passed away, and it is in the best interests of the current white landed elite to make sure that the children forget the dreams of their forebears towards land justice. Mathonga Elizwe intervenes against forgetting, and preserves the relentless voices of the elders, and those that have passed on towards amplifications of their land struggles.



Who is Dr Mngqobi Ngubane?

Mngqobi Ngubane was raised on a former German mission station in Muden, KwaZulu-Natal, by his maternal grandparents. His grandmother, born into a family of labour tenants in the 1930s, sought refuge on a mission station to escape the oppressive conditions of white-owned farms. His grandfather was a migrant worker in Durban and Johannesburg. The stories his grandmother shared about life on labour tenant farms deeply influenced Mngqobi's scholarship in rural sociology.

Current Research

Mngqobi's work focuses on the land and agrarian question in South Africa, with comparative insights from the Global South. His current projects include:

- Counter Agrarian Reform in the Global South
- Illuminating Labour Tenants' Struggles for Farmland in South Africa (documentary and exhibition)
- Political Economy and Law, with a focus on land reform law
- The Lesotho Land Question and Southern African Borders Question

Exhibition Catalogue

Blacks Can Farm

Curated by Mngqobi Ngubane & Nala Xaba



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NELSON MANDELA UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES
The Raymond Mhlaba Centre for Governance and Leadership invites you to a

SCREENING OF THE FILM
SPIRITS OF THE LAND – MATHONGA ELIZWE

Date: Monday, 2nd September 2024
Time: 13:00 - 15:30
Venue: Nelson Mandela University, Dome, Ocean Science Campus

RSVP: Mawenkosi.Lange@mandela.ac.za

* Popcorn will be served
Trailer link: <https://vimeo.com/1004046679/679f89eeb2>



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