

Migration, Exile and the Anti-Apartheid Movement

Ruth
Mompoti

RESOURCES





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Above: Ruth Mompoti, by Jasmine Laverick, 2023. From the Strength in Unity online exhibition, Anti-Apartheid Legacy: Centre for Memory and Learning.

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The Life of the Late Dr. Ruth Segomotsi Mompoti

Excerpt from Profile of Dr Ruth Segomotsi Mompoti (www.gov.za)

Mama Ruth, Sis Ruth, Auntie Ruth, Mme Ruth and Mane, as she was affectionately known, was a nurturer, a guardian and selfless principled leader. She was a firm, strict but structured, balanced and gentle human being. She was also a devout Christian. She was a loving mother and grandmother to all and always carried herself elegantly. True to her name Segomotsi, which means 'Comforter' in Setswana, she was to play the role of mother, and, sister, friends and grandmother to the hundreds of young and old who found themselves separated from their own as a result of apartheid brutality.

Ruth Segomotsi Mompoti was born in Ganyesa Village in the District of Vryburg in present day North West on 14 September 1925... From 1937 to 1940 she attended the United Vryburg Higher Primary School, where she completed Standard 6.

Two years later, she enrolled at the Tiger Kloof Educational Institution, where she received her Native Lower Primary Certificate. She started her teaching career at Dithakwaneng Primary School near Vryburg in 1944 at the age of 19. In 1948 she was transferred to the United School in Vryburg, where she continued her teaching career. When she got married in 1952 she lost her job as a teacher because the apartheid laws regulated that married black female teachers were not allowed to teach.

Work in the African National Congress and Exile

Mompoti moved to Johannesburg in 1952 and it was at this stage that she officially joined the ANC and was a member of the

Orlando branch. In 1953 she was employed as a secretary by the first black law partnership Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo, attorneys at law. In the words of the late president of the ANC, Tambo, known for his perfectionist approach on anything: 'Sis Ruth is the best secretary we had'.

In 1954, Mompoti became a member of the national executive committee (NEC) of the ANC Women's League (ANCWL) and, together with Helen Joseph and Lillian Ngoyi, was among the founding members of the Federation of South African Women.

Mompoti was one of the central figures in organising the historic 9 August 1956 march by over 20,000 women of all races to the Union buildings in Pretoria. The show of force to demonstrate against extension of the hated passbooks for women was honoured by the day being declared national Women's Day by the democratic government. As an active member of the ANC, Mama Ruth also received the unwelcome attentions of the apartheid regime security police. When the ANC was banned in 1960 the law firm for which she worked underwent complete transformation. Tambo was assigned the task of leaving the country to mobilise international solidarity and Mandela was detailed for five months in terms of the state of emergency the regime declared after the sharp film massacre. Mama Ruth, working under the direction of Moses Kotane, was among the group of cadres who set about reorganising the ANC as an underground movement.

Mama Ruth Mompoti went into exile in neighbouring Botswana (then known as Bechuanaland) for a planned mission of a few months. While she was in exile, the South African police arrested top ANC leaders during a raid of the underground headquarters of Umkhonto we Size (MK) in Rivonia, Johannesburg. The movement

decided it was too risky for her to return. She was amongst the first women to join MK and underwent military training in the Soviet Union in 1963. While in exile she held office as secretary and head of the women's section of the ANC. Between 1966 and 1973, Mompoti served on the executive committee of the women's section. During 1966, she was transferred to the ANC's office in Zambia, but continued commuting between Tanzania and Zambia during the course of her work in ANC president Tambo's office.

Mompoti – The Global Activist for Women's Rights

In 1976, the ANC sent her to represent South African women at the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF). It was while in the role that she displayed immense leadership roles in the struggles for women, children and oppressed peoples of the world. She fought fiercely for the struggles of the people of Palestine, Western Sahara and other areas of conflict... Alongside colleagues at the WIDF [Mompoti] coined the theme of the decade for women (1980-1990), which was Equality, Development and Peace.

Homecoming and Role in Government

In 1990, she was chosen to be part of the ANC delegation that negotiated the peaceful transition with the government of FW de Klerk at Groote Schuur.

She addressed the United Nations special committee against apartheid in August 1992 on the subject of women. The UN declared the day an International Day of Solidarity with Women in South Africa...

... In 1994 she was elected to the National Assembly and served as a member of parliament from 1994 to 1996. From 1996 to 2000, she served as ambassador to Switzerland.



Ruth Mompoti

Ruth Mompoti, Lusaka 1990

Excerpt from *The Rift: The Exile Experience of South Africans* by Hilda Bernstein (1994)

She looks like the school teacher she once was, with an air of gentle authority. She is on the national executive of the ANC and was the chief representative in the United Kingdom for three years.

“I have six aunts. The first one had about 12 children herself, and the others had six, five, four. I have a whole army of first cousins. Where we lived, a little village called Ganyesa in the district of Vryburg, the nearest school was 6 miles away. And my father left Ganyesa to go and work in town because he wanted us to go to school. It always surprised me that he moved for that. My father never went to school himself, he taught himself to read and write in the mines. But as we grew older we got to learn that my father felt that we will be more free if we were educated - we will live better lives...

... At that time, you either became a nurse or a teacher, or you went for domestic science, which really meant being a glorified domestic servant. And so my mother decided that we should become teachers. When I qualified I went to teach in a small village called Tlhakgameng. It was very nice village with this spring running, almost dividing the village into two. It was very beautiful and had a rich soil. Light grey wheat, you know, in that type of climate, you can have two crops a year. They grew vegetables - all kinds of vegetables, beautiful. And they had fruit trees. The first fruit was in November which was apricots, and the last fruit was in April, quinces... It was one of the villages that was chosen under apartheid as not suitable for black people to

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live in. It has been removed now. My father died when I was 14, my mother had to work. My father, he believed in cattle and goats - not in money in the bank. When he realised that he was going to die, he said to my mother, don't remove the girls from school. I know people are going to discourage you and tell you that they are going to get married. Let them go to school until they finish, and they will look after you.' And that's exactly what my mother did.

“the hardest thing - I missed the childhood of my children.”

I love teaching because I love children. So I think if I had to live my life all over again, I would still choose teaching. Perhaps I would look for higher qualifications, but I think I would teach. I went to teach and I joined the teachers union. We women were paid less than men, and as soon as you got married, your post became temporary, because you were supposed to go and sit and look after your husband and have children. So we used to discuss most of this - and, of course, also better teaching conditions. And when we began to look at the Bantu Education Act itself, a number of teachers felt that they couldn't teach under Bantu education. But then I got married in 1952 and I moved to Johannesburg, where I immediately joined the ANC. Towards the end of 1953 I got a job with Oliver Tambo and Nelson Mandela in their lawyers office,

yes. I was always interested in women's questions. The position of women always seemed a challenge to me...

... In 1962 - I was sent out for political training. After my training I was to return. I had been divorced in 1959, and had custody of the children. I left my two sons with my mother; also my sister helped. I told them I was going to school. I said, 'no, I'm just going to school, I want to further my studies. I'm coming back after a year.' At the end of the year, in July, I was preparing to come back when I came across a newspaper which says people at Rivonia had been arrested. I was shattered, because of so many of the leaders had been arrested that it meant it was going to be difficult to get home. But I still continued with my preparations. And then I saw in the newspapers that Batholomew Hlapane was giving evidence for the prosecution... That shattered me even more. I didn't believe it. He was my contact and we had worked together during the state of emergency, right through. But I just didn't believe it until I came back to Africa. I went to Tanzania. And then many more arrested, people I'd worked with. But I still wanted to go back, because I left a baby of 2 1/2 years, and a child of six years. And I just couldn't think of not going home. When they said, 'No. You'll be arrested,' I said 'So what? I'll go. I'll be released after some time.' They said, 'You have got a very big sentence coming. Hlapane's Singing. You will go in for a long time. It's a waste - we need people outside now, in the external mission. I said, 'no, we need people. But you don't need me. I need my children; my children need me at home.'

It was very difficult but it was decided I should stay in exile. And in the first years,

contact was very difficult. I didn't have contact with the children. The organisation suggested that I should try and get the children out. I thought it would be easy. But it took a very long time - 10 years. 10 years! 10 years of real agony. Sometimes I would be so sick, just because of the children. I remember when once I spent the whole time preparing a little sort of... I would prepare albums, you know, by little books and put pictures in - because





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you don't know what to write to children - with birds and animals. And then send it to them on their birthday; And things like that, because what else could I send them, living in exile independent on solidarity for everything?

In Tanzania we had already a mission and some 21 South African nurses who had come to teach in Tanzania so we formed a very strong women's organisation. then I got involved with international work in West Africa, Sudan, Ghana, Malia, Nigeria, yes. I met women representatives from Guinea Bissau... We built a relationship with women's organisations in Mozambique. More people began to arrive people from the leadership like J.B. Marks, Duma Nokwe, Moses Kotane. Oliver Tambo moved from London to work from Africa. And then the MK people started arriving - people who came for training young people. You know, you saw these young girls coming in, and he had to say to them, 'But you can't be going for military training. Have you come for school?' They said, 'no. We've come for training.'...

... then in 1972 I went to Botswana again - this time I had no problems. They were beginning to get used to the ANC and being independent. So I went there, and wrote a letter to my children, and I told them, I'm in Botswana. I'd very much like to see I'd also like to take you along with me, but this is a choice which you must make. You, the young one, are 12, your brother is 16. And you must decide yourselves whether you're going to come with me. It won't be an easy life. But I really would like to see you. Even if you can't go with me, I'll be very happy if you both come and meet me.' And they came to

meet me. They just came. They packed their bags, crossed the border somewhere - they didn't come legally. They just came. And then they agreed to go with me. But it was such a shock. I left babies, and when you see grown up people. Tall! My elder son was tall, 16, he was taller than me! And the baby who was 2 1/2 was 12 years old, although he was on the small side for 12 years; But he was grown up. It was a real shock to see this. We don't imagine growth of children. No. You only see your babies, and you would like to receive those babies. I suppose it would have been terrible if I'd met the children, still 2 1/2 and still 6! After 10 years! [Laughs]

But that's what I felt I missed. I missed my babies, that I could cuddle. It was difficult, I mean we didn't know... Well I suppose also it was not so much that we didn't know each other. I think we were also conscious of the fact that I don't know them, and they also forced up I was not their mother, I was there aunt as far as they were concerned. My sister had played the place of mother for 10 years. And my mother, there granny, those are the people that they need. I was a stranger. I think... me, I suffered. I think I suffered more, because they had had substitutes. I hadn't had any substitute babies. I now had grown up children, he became my children as years went on. But I hadn't had any young babies who became mine, who I could take as substitute for my babies. I had to behave normally; I couldn't behave the way I felt. I couldn't cry all the time. Couldn't cry in front of them as I felt like doing. And they were so... you could see that they were a little restrained. They were watching me, and I was watching

them. But I think on both sides we consciously built a new relationship. I'm like my sister, so they had no problems in relating to me. And after some time, we just... we formed a family, yes. They stayed with me in Zambia first up they got into school in Zambia. We stayed together as a family fortunately for several years come out until the younger boy left for school until the elder boy left for higher education. For me the hardest thing of my life in exile was a separation from my children - to miss the childhood of my children. I don't wish it on anybody..."

Video: [SABC News feature on Ruth Mompoti's life and the Pass Law March](#)





Ruth Mompati

Migration, Exile and the Anti-Apartheid Movement

Ruth Mompati 1925 - 2015

African Oral History Archive
(africanoralhistory.com)

There are some individuals who work in a quiet and understated way and yet, they change the face of a nation. One such individual is Dr Ruth Segomotsi Mompati. Her first job was as a typist in the law firm of Mandela and Tambo Attorneys – a role that put her amongst the great African visionaries of the 20th century.

Mompati was a founding member of the Federation of South African Women, and helped organise the momentous 1956 Women’s March to protest against pass laws for women. In the early 1960s, Dr Mompati became one of the first women to leave for exile, telling her mother and young children that she would return in a few months. Instead, she rose to become a driving force in its international liberation movement. After 27 years in exile, Dr Mompati became a member of parliament, ambassador and mayor of her home district in Vryburg, North West Province.





**Ruth
Mompoti**

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The ANC Women's League held its first National Conference in Kimberley on 24 - 28 April 1991.

South African History Online (sahistory.org.za)

"There are different views within the League on the role of women. Some accept traditional roles. Some want to see women liberated from serving men. Which view will guide the programmes of the League is yet to be seen."



Above: Left to right: Ruth Mompoti, Ray Alexander, Albertina Sisulu, Gertrude Shope.
Photo: Dynamic Images



About this resource...

Migration, Exile and the Anti-Apartheid Movement

This presentation is part of a resource collaboratively developed by **The Anti-Apartheid Legacy: Centre of Memory and Learning (CML)** and **UEA**. It is part of the CML's work to promote the legacy and values of the Southern African liberation struggle, whilst supporting contemporary discourse around social (in)justice, inclusion and multi-racial collaboration for social transformation

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The University of East Anglia

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The Anti-Apartheid Legacy: Centre of Memory and Learning (CML) promotes the legacy and values of the Southern African liberation struggle and the UK's central role within this world-changing history, whilst supporting contemporary discourse around social (in) justice, inclusion and multi-racial collaboration for social transformation.



AAM ARCHIVES

Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives

Forward to Freedom tells the story of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement and its campaigns to support the people of South Africa in their fight against apartheid. The AAM also campaigned for freedom for Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Angola, and against South Africa's attacks on its neighbours.



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