

The Medu Art Ensemble in Gaborone, 1978-1985

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Although the ANC was never allowed to operate formally in the Bechuanaland Protectorate and Botswana, it nevertheless maintained a small, loose structure in the country following the armed uprising by Umkhonto We Sizwe (MK) in 1961. Much is already known about the activities of this group in the 1960s, due to the publication of the memoirs of Fish Keitseng, the local MK point man.¹ By the early 1970s, though, Keitseng was too well-known an operative to be used for more than occasional help. As a result, the ANC was to establish a new structure in Botswana in the years following the 1976 Soweto Riots. Since it could not operate openly, it created a cultural front group known as Medu Arts Ensemble.² The story of Medu is far murkier and perhaps less entertaining than the sensational exploits of Keitseng and his small band. Nevertheless, in the seven years that it operated in Gaborone, Medu was a successful front. It not only played an influential role in shaping the ANC struggle, but it stimulated the growth of arts in Botswana itself.

The story of Medu is not an easy one to write, although the group published its own magazines and books.³ Undoubtedly the main reason for this is that MK tightly controlled the leadership of the organization, while the vast majority of the membership came from the ranks of the Batswana residents of Gaborone as well as various expatriates working there on short-term contracts. As a result, the story told by the few surviving

¹ F. Keitseng, Comrade Fish: Memories of a Motswana in the ANC Underground. Ed by J. Ramsay and B. Morton (Gaborone: Pula Press, 1999).

² Members of Medu referred to their organization either as an acronym or as Medu Arts Ensemble.

³ Most notable was the Medu Journal, which was easily obtainable in the early 1980s but is now very difficult to find. A nearly-full set is owned by Elizabeth Morton. Outside Botswana, the only full set is owned by the Smithsonian African Museum, Washington D.C.

members of the Medu leadership differs dramatically from both the group's propaganda and the memories of the former members (who were essentially treated as fellow travelers). A combination of sources, though, including interviews of the former leadership,⁴ some of Medu's own documents (which are in private hands),⁵ and the published materials the group generated, provide a clear picture of its eight-year history.

The Founding of Medu

Medu's origins lie in the aftermath of the Soweto Uprising, when large numbers of young South Africans fled north either to join the liberation movements or to escape heightened repression that followed. A number of these displaced young South Africans ended up in Gaborone, whose location adjacent to the border made it easy for them to see their relatives frequently.⁶ Some gained entrance into the University of Botswana, a number of whose lecturers were black South Africans. In this intellectual atmosphere, several small groups formed putting on plays, poetry readings, and concerts.

In June 1977 they were joined by Mongane Wally Serote, who was to become the leading ANC member in Botswana during the Medu period. A recent graduate of the Columbia University, Serote had become recognized as South Africa's leading young poet after publishing three influential works in the early 1970s.⁷ Serote had been active in

⁴ Most were interviewed in 1996 by Elizabeth Morton (nee Gron).

⁵ Based on photocopies of the documents in the hands of Albio Gonzalez, now resident in Spain, a former Medu member. Medu's headquarters was destroyed by the South African army in the June 14, 1985 raid.

⁶ Much of the following is from E. Morton (nee Gron), "South African Cultural Exiles in Botswana: Medu Art Ensemble, 1976-1985" (MA Thesis, University of Botswana, 1997), 10-22.

⁷ W. Serote, *Yakhalinkomo* (Johannesburg: Renoster Books, 1972); *Tsetlo* (Johannesburg: AD Donker, 1974), and *No Baby Must Weep* (Johannesburg: AD Donker, 1975). Serote applied for "political asylum" on 17 June 1977. Refugee Advisory Council, Gaborone, Item 6, OP 27/16, Botswana National Archives (hereafter BNA).

the ANC as early as 1969, and he moved to the country explicitly both to be near to South Africa and to join the armed struggle.⁸ Unable to find formal employment due to his political history, Serote and other exiles formed the Tuka Cultural Unit in late 1977, which continued to put on other anti-apartheid plays and sent a multi-media art exhibit to Sweden.

Tuka failed to get off the ground for several reasons. Its continuing links to the University made its life problematic following the 1978 student unrest there, following which the government deported two of Tuka's members on the faculty. Additionally, it became increasingly difficult for South Africans without formal employment to obtain housing and residence permits. Meanwhile, the Botswana police occasionally raided exile homes, while the authorities had decided to move all South Africans without jobs to the remote Dukwe camp in eastern Botswana.⁹ Serote was shielded by these pressures since his wife worked as a high school teacher, but most of his friends and colleagues were not. Hence, Tuka was an organization with some potential that faced serious challenges.

During 1978 Serote and his closest colleagues in Tuka approached the ANC and received the go-ahead to create a new cultural organization. In the words of Serote, "First it was very important to begin debates inside South Africa on cultural matters. And also we thought that we should have an organization which can train in the various art forms, become a platform of debate, and a sort of reception centre for all sorts of cultural workers, whether coming from abroad or South Africa or Botswana."¹⁰

⁸ E. Morton, Interview with Wally Serote, Cape Town, March 7, 1996.

⁹ Morton, "South African Cultural Exiles", 16-18. The Dukwe camp was opened in 1978, and in 1979 concerted efforts were made to round up South African refugees not in employment or in school and place them there. See Simon Hirschfeldt to Permanent Secretary, Office of the President, November 14, 1979, item 178, OP 27/15, BNA.

¹⁰ E. Morton, Interview with Wally Serote, Cape Town March 7, 1996.

The new group, Medu¹¹ Arts Ensemble, which formally registered in order to create legitimate jobs and residence permits for its members. Its founders were all ANC members—Wally Serote and his wife Phetho, Tim Williams, and Mandla Langa.¹² The Botswana authorities, wary of the members’ political affiliations, initially refused to register the group on several grounds, but eventually licensed it on the proviso that the group’s membership be “forbidden to take part in political activities.”¹³ Initially a large portion of the membership consisted of Pan Africanist Congress members, many of whom quit later in the year in an ideological row over whether to admit White members to the group. Thereafter, all the South African members belonged to the ANC.

Serote, Medu’s first president, was determined from the outset to make his organization an official part of the ANC. This wish coincided to some extent with the exile movement’s new plan of “armed propaganda” that first emerged in 1978. Based on consultations with the Vietnamese, who had managed to defeat the United States in a protracted guerrilla war, “armed propaganda” took as its basis the fact that MK could never win a military campaign against the powerful South African armed forces. It simply lacked the soldiers, technology, and resources to do so. Instead, the war would have to be won by other means. Without going into all the ins and outs of the strategy, it sought to foment unrest and resistance against apartheid in South Africa itself.¹⁴ Additionally, the ANC sought to discredit apartheid around the globe in order to utilize

¹¹ The name “Medu,” which means “roots” in SePedi, was chosen by Serote.

¹² Williams had worked with Serote in ANC activities in the early 1970s, and by this time was an MK member who had received military training. He was never an artist, although he did some occasional photographic and journalistic work for the group. Langa was, like Serote, a young writer who had gone to university overseas. He did not stay with Medu long, however.

¹³ Quoted in Morton, “South African Cultural Exiles.”

¹⁴ See S. Ellis and T. Sechaba, *Comrades Against Apartheid: The ANC and South African Communist Party in Exile* (London: James Currey, 1992): 100; and H. Barrell, *MK: The ANC's Armed Struggle* (London: Penguin, 1990): 40-1.

international and diplomatic pressure to isolate South Africa. Armed propaganda did not rule out military action. Militarily, a small number of spectacular but well-publicized attacks were to be carried out. Politically, front groups were to be formed inside South Africa to mobilize the population. More broadly, the arts and other social forums were to become part of the political offensive, both at home and abroad. Hence, in late 1979, the ANC office in Lusaka awarded official status to Medu, although this affiliation was never made public.¹⁵

Gaining official recognition gave Medu a much more solid foundation. The ANC itself provided only occasional, meager funds. However, Medu was soon able to begin to solicit funds from liberal nations that sympathized with the anti-apartheid cause. These included Sweden, Norway, and Canada—all of whom had NGO's in Gaborone.¹⁶ During 1980 Medu was able to raise substantial funds for the first time and hire full-time employees. The most notable of these was MK operative and graphic artist, Thamsanqa (Thami) Mnyele, whose artwork has recently received significant posthumous attention.¹⁷

With official recognition and increased funding in hand, Medu's fortunes further improved in early 1980 with the arrival of Gordon Metz to work for the Botswana National Museum. Metz, a white draft evader whose father was a senior South African military official, was an Art School graduate who obtained a contract to run one of the National Museum's sections. Metz became a Medu and ANC member, and instigated a

¹⁵ Morton, "South African Cultural Exiles," 57-8. It was probably not a coincidence that ANC recognition came at the very time when the Botswana Government was making concerted efforts to relocate unemployed ANC members to Dukwe.

¹⁶ A significant portion of the extant Medu Papers (in possession of Albio Gonzalez) deal with fund-raising issues of this nature. See also interview with Sten Rylander, Swedish ambassador to Botswana (1979-1981) on the website *Nordic Documentation on the Liberation Struggle in Southern Africa* <http://www.liberationafrica.se/intervystories/interviews/rylander_s/> accessed 15 September 2007.

¹⁷ D. Wylie, "Making Art in a Time of Struggle," *African Arts*, 37, 4 (2004): 56-96; E. Morton, "Thami Mnyele and the Birth of Liberation Art in South Africa" (Paper presented at the College Art Association Annual Meeting, Atlanta GA, 2006).

number of joint Museum/Medu art projects. This connection gave Medu free access to the National Museum's facilities and also enabled donors to fund Medu by allotting resources for the official projects that they were involved in. Metz's dual role was to be critical in keeping Medu's true nature under wraps.

Medu's Cultural Activities

Medu was involved in a wide array of artistic activities between 1980 and 1985, ranging from music to art exhibitions. In doing so, it provided Botswana with the most dynamic arts scene that it has ever experienced in its fifty years since independence. And in several areas of the arts, Medu was to pioneer art forms that are still in evidence today in Botswana. Prior to Medu's arrival in Gaborone, the capital had a minimal cultural scene with expatriate groups and schools holding occasional plays and concerts. With imported television only available in 1980, public entertainment centered around attending movies and churches. Medu, with its abundance of South African talent, thus sought to create a flourishing arts scene from scratch.

Medu was also involved in a host of artistic activities. It created five distinct 'units', each semi-autonomous and committed to reaching local audiences. These were the Mahube (also Boiteko) Theatre Unit, the Itumeleng Film Unit, Ngwedi Graphics Unit, its Music unit composed of the Shakawe and Kalahari bands, and the Mahube (also Naledi) Writers Workshop. From Medu units emerged several films, including a version of Serote's play, *From Maseru*, in 1983, and also held regular film screenings—often of obscure documentaries by anti-apartheid and other leftist activists. Various art and photography exhibitions, puppet shows, poetry readings, and multimedia presentations

for important occasions were held. Medu published only one book, *The Night Keeps Winking* by Serote and illustrated by Mnyele, in the field of literature. Graphic arts, music, and theatre were to become the most successful units.

The group also trained a large number of people in various art-related workshops, such as in writing, poetry, and the graphic arts. Medu had many small-scale successes in this regard, because it exposed and turned on many individuals to their own potential in the arts. For example, Mnyele held regular art classes for inmates at the Gaborone prison. As a result, he ended up training George Nene, a Zimbabwean who later became a leading painter and muralist in his home country.¹⁸ Another artist who arose from these classes was Speedo Gaotlhalelwe, an uneducated desert-dweller who went on to create a unique brand of folk art.¹⁹ It was the success of many Medu art workshops, often done in collaboration with Gordon Metz of the National Museum, which convinced the Ministry of Education to adopt art classes for all Batswana children for the first time.

True to its ANC roots, Medu observed a non-racial, non-ethnic policy in its membership and operations, without claiming to be an ANC organization. Its minutes were used to record rather than the Medu Art Ensemble wished to “identify the organisation that is leading the people,” concluding that “apparently the ANC has come to the fore.”²⁰ Its members represented a cross-section of southern Africa, of all stripes. Black, Coloured and White South Africans participated, as did Africans and Europeans who were either citizens or residents of Botswana. It appears to have attracted, however, few if any members of non-ANC political groups, though it avowed “cooperation” with “independent African countries.” Some PAC members belonged for a time, but withdrew

¹⁸ E. Morton, Interview with George Nene, Bulawayo March 26, 2002.

¹⁹ E. Morton, interview with Speedo Gaotlhalelwe, Kanye, February 22, 2002.

²⁰ Medu Annual Seminar 1981: 3. (Copy in the possession of Elizabeth Morton).

when Medu attracted whites. PAC's Tim Williams was the exception, but he had left the PAC before Medu came into existence and had already joined the ANC. No evidence that any members of other liberation groups, such as BCM, SWAPO or ZANU/ZAPU etc. took part in Medu activities, though stated Medu policy was "to accommodate the broad liberation movement of South Africa, including PAC and BCM and all other progressive groups."²¹ After all, Medu gained traction in Gaborone as a cultural, not political, organization, and made no public claims to be other than a sum of its cultural units, albeit committed to "liberation" throughout southern Africa.

Literature was an area that Medu took very seriously, especially since Serote himself was a poet. As a result the publication of the *Medu Arts Ensemble Newsletter*, published from 1979 through 1985, took up a considerable amount of the group's time. The newsletter, which was cheaply produced using stencil-mimeograph techniques, had a wide distribution in Botswana (which then had very little non-governmental media). Thousands of copies were also sent to South Africa, where the journal was officially banned in 1982. Following this event it gained in popularity, and copies had to be smuggled across the border.

The *Newsletter*, like most radical organs of its era, was essentially a didactic and browbeating venture. From its first issues, it conveyed Serote's conviction that culture was a critical area for anti-apartheid activists to be engaged in. In a situation like apartheid South Africa, where Bantu Education had systematically denigrated all aspects of African life, it was undoubtedly critical for the anti-apartheid movement to redress the situation. Without going into all the nuances of the argument, Serote and Medu essentially postulated that the arts represented an area for the oppressed to express

²¹ Bachama Mokoena and Kush Modan report, undated [1979?]. Copy in possession of Elizabeth Morton.

themselves. Hence, the arts could counter South Africa's government propaganda and the apartheid authorities' control of all media as well. Additionally the arts had the ability to educate the oppressed and to increase their overall potential.²² Education was taken seriously by Medu, who held ongoing art workshops for all interested parties. Finally, Medu continually stressed the importance for all artists and cultural members to become part of organized art groups, which would then be linked to the wider struggle. Art should, therefore, serve the interests of the movement.

In retrospect, the pages of the *Newsletter*, not unlike other left-wing publications of its era, make for dull reading. The introduction of didactic elements into any form of art is almost always guaranteed to reduce the aesthetic pleasure felt by the audience. As a result, the journal is far less interesting, for instance, than art magazines that came out of Makerere University in the pre-Amin era. Even so, a number of well-known artists appear in the newsletter's pages. Serote contributed numerous poems and short stories. Mandla Langa, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Keorapetse Kgositsile, and Dennis Brutus also make appearances, while the identities of various pseudonymous authors remain unknown. Some highlights of the journal would include candid interviews with Johnny Clegg of the musical group Juluka,²³ musicians John Selolwane and Jonas Gwangwa, and with graphic artist Thamsanqa Mnyele.²⁴ There were also a number of contributions by the Medu rank and file, including graphics, photography and art.

It is difficult to assess how much influence the newsletter had. Serote had close

²² Education also involved non-technical issues and moved into the realm of broader issues. Obviously inveighing against apartheid, racism, and tribalism were taken for granted as educational issues. Medu, like the ANC, was also militantly anti-sexist in rhetoric, and many of its issues reflect this.

²³ See "Juluka iyaJuluka," *Medu Arts Ensemble Newsletter*, 5, 2 (1983): 8-16.

²⁴ Tim Williams, "An Interview with Thamsanqa Mnyele." *Medu Arts Ensemble Newsletter* 2, 1 (1980): 23-40.

links to the South African radical arts magazine, *Staffrider*, which was *de rigueur* reading for South African left-wing intellectuals in the 1980s. The editors of *Staffrider* were well aware of Medu's role in the ANC and occasionally reprinted articles. Additionally, *Staffrider* promoted a form of graphic art similar to that which Medu pioneered, of which more will be discussed below. So the *Newsletter* had a small resonance amongst those who knew it to be an official ANC publication. But the poor quality of the printing, combined with the didactic, stiff tone of most of the articles, restricted its readership. It did however keep culturally aware activists inside South Africa reminded of the ongoing activities of this seminal organization.

Theater was an arena in which Medu was active and in which it spread an art form with no indigenous base in Botswana. South African academics at the University of Botswana and Swaziland (after 1983 University of Botswana) had been active in theater since the early 1970s, but Medu was far more active in putting on performances and also sending them out to towns outside the capital. The group had four stock plays: *Shades of Change*, *Marumo*, *Take a Look at the Child*, and a musical, *Anthem to Liberation*,²⁵ in addition to various other dramas. Serote directed most of the performances and seems to have written much of the material, which focused on anti-apartheid and women's liberation themes. Over time, after holding numerous theatre workshops, the group developed a core of Botswana actors—most of them women—who performed the vast amount of the on-stage work.²⁶ Under Serote's direction, the plays tended toward the *avant garde* rather than traditional drama, with extended time always being given for

²⁵See Morton, "South African Cultural Exiles," 59-60.

²⁶ See "Mahube Theatre Unit," *Medu Arts Ensemble Newsletter*, 6, 1/2 (1984): 17-20. One of these Botswana actors was the current Botswana President, Mokgweetsi Masisi, who had a number of lead roles.

audience interaction and question time afterwards.

While theatrical performances were relatively successful, it was in the area of music that Medu drew great popular attention as well as acceptance by the local population. Medu had two great bands, Shakawe and Kalahari, who worked under its umbrella, headed respectively by Jonas Gwangwa and Hugh Masekela—both exiled jazz legends. Once again, prior to the formation of these groups, Botswana had not had any popular music groups—with choir music being the dominant form. Prior to Medu, most live music performances in Botswana were typically put on by headlining South African *mbaqanga* acts such as Mpharanyane, Black Mambazo, and Soul Brothers.

Gwangwa, a jazz trombonist who had toured with the famed *King Kong* musical in the West during the 1960s, moved to Botswana before Serote and was a pro-ANC member of Tuka Cultural Unit.²⁷ Initially, his brand of classic jazz did not meet with a wide local reception, and it was possible in the late 1970s to attend mesmerizing Gwangwa performances with only a handful of people in the audience. By the early 1980s, Gwangwa had adapted his style and moved toward an up tempo, guitar-driven Afro-Fusion sound that incorporated an *mbaqanga* element to the music.²⁸ Shakawe played almost every weekend at Gaborone's 500 Club for many years, drawing big crowds including many South Africans who crossed the border for concerts.

With the arrival of Hugh Masekela in Gaborone in 1982, Medu formed its second act, Kalahari. Although many of the musicians were South Africans, Gwangwa had to recruit and train many of the members to fill out the bands' rosters. All of Botswana's first professional musicians, such as guitarist John Selolwane, got their start playing with

²⁷ Gwangwa discusses his exile years candidly in an interview with I. Mandaza, "Gwangwa: The Trombone that Liberates," *South Africa Political and Economic Monthly*, 9, 3/4 (1995-6): 5-10.

²⁸"Exploring the Community-Band Bond," *Medu Arts Ensemble Newsletter*, 6, 1/2 (1984): 27-9.

the two Medu bands.²⁹ Kalahari and Shakawe were by far the most popular artists in Botswana during their day, and played in a wide variety of Medu and other venues. A sign of this popularity was when Gwangwa was hired by the government to organize the official President's Day festivities in 1985. It was a far cry from the early days in the late 1970s when most Medu members faced deportation to the refugee camps.

It is probably in the field of graphic arts that Medu had its most profound impact on the anti-apartheid struggle. If one were to examine photographs of ANC protests and rallies held in South Africa before the advent of Medu, one of the striking features of them is how little visual imagery the protestors used. Generally speaking, the ANC masses wore ordinary clothing and used large banners with protest slogans written on them. Moreover, the ANC itself used very amateurish logos and symbols.³⁰ If one were to contrast these pictures with those of the typical anti-apartheid rally later in the 1980s, the difference is striking. Most members of the crowd would be wearing mass-produced clothing that combined forceful images and text, while large banners sent forth additional messages in a similar poster style. The white ANC t-shirt, with the organization's distinctive green and yellow logo, which was produced by the millions, would invariably be worn by many. Undoubtedly the protest itself would have been advertised by posters as well. It was the graphic arts section of Medu that developed these techniques and taught them to the pro-ANC United Democratic Front.³¹

The individual behind the switch to new graphics was Thamsanqa Mnyele, who

²⁹ E. Morton, Interview with Jonas Gwangwa, Johannesburg September 10, 1996; and Morton, "South African Cultural Exiles," 84-5.

³⁰ See for example, the many pictures in *Unity in Action: a Photographic History of the African National Congress South Africa 1912-1982* (London: African National Congress, 1982).

³¹ Much of the following is based on E. Morton "Thami Mnyele and the Birth of Liberation Art in South Africa."

had had a short stint at Rorke's Drift Art School before he worked for an advertising firm in Johannesburg and, after 1976, joined the struggle. While at an Umkhonto camp in Angola in 1978, Mnyele obtained a number of Cuban and Eastern European posters. On his arrival in Botswana as a Medu employee, he found the group led by Cuban exile Albio Gonzalez using a rudimentary silkscreen at the National Museum.³² The most common use for the silkscreen printing was to create posters for the group's various performances. The Medu *Newsletter* also used a poster format for its covers.

While Mnyele's own artwork was far removed from a poster style, he nevertheless set about creating new, hard-hitting, techniques. Behind his Medu art was the philosophy that any new anti-apartheid form of graphic design had to utilize *realism* to be successful. "The artist should involve himself in reality."³³ This was actually a revolutionary idea, because the art world had systematically stifled the production of realistic art across Africa based on the idea that it was "un-African" and therefore inauthentic.³⁴ Mnyele and his colleagues at Medu believed, however, that abstraction, mysticism and primitivism not only alienated artists from the masses, but also contributed to the artists themselves becoming depressed and socially alienated.³⁵

The typical Medu poster fused strong images with large bold text. The images generally were simplified, with fists and AK47s often portrayed in the foreground. At times, rather than use a new drawing, stock photographic images were borrowed and altered. Before 1985 Medu produced many dozens of these posters, most of which were

³² Gonzales, a Swedish citizen, was employed by the Department of Town and Regional Planning in Gaborone. He assisted Medu in silk-screening and poster-making and left the group in 1983.

³³ Williams, "An Interview with Thamsanqa Mnyele," 36.

³⁴ Ibid, 20. Most promoters of African art preferred their students to be uneducated, untrained, and unexposed so that they would not be "contaminated" by western art. The result was either "authenticity" or amateurishness, depending on how one looks at it.

³⁵ Ibid, 27.

smuggled into South Africa. Similarly, the ANC logo that Mnyele designed was simple and direct. Using a spear gripped firmly, a wheel, shield and flag he created a new symbol that eventually achieved something like global brand recognition.



The Art Toward Culture and Resistance Symposium and Art Exhibit

The height of Medu's influence came with the July 1982 Art Toward Social Development, Culture and Resistance Symposium/ Festival, which Medu organized and hosted in Gaborone (with financial backing from SIDA and NORAD). This event drew together several thousand pro-ANC cultural activists, writers and artists from South Africa, and can be seen as a key event leading to the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF)—an umbrella group that launched challenges to the apartheid authorities after 1983. The July Symposium was the outcome of Medu's efforts over the previous three years of promoting cultural development in a host of localities in South Africa and maintaining communication links with thousands of persons becoming attuned to the potential of art in various forms as an effective tool in the liberation struggle. The Art Symposium gave this sprawling network, however, a much clearer sense of how large and committed a group had come into existence, and energized the cultural movement.

Held over five days on the Gaborone campus of the then University of Botswana and Swaziland, it featured panels of formal (written) presentations and discussions revolving around poetry and fiction writing, poetry recitations, dramatic and musical performances, and photographic and other artistic displays. An exhibition of South African Art, held at the nearby National Museum and Art Gallery ran in parallel (from June 10 to August 10), featuring the work of tens of liberation artists (in the fine arts, graphic art, and photography) active inside South Africa. Its significance for the ANC was understood from the planning stages, and Thabo Mbeki flew in from Lusaka to attend.³⁶ Luminaries of the South African cultural world, such as jazz flugelhornist Hugh Masekela (then based in the U.S.), Nobel winner novelist Nadine Gordimer, actress Mabel Mafuya, pianist Abdullah Ibrahim, satirist Barry Gilder and saxophonist King Force Silgee, were among the symposium attendees. In an artistic sense, the convergence in Gaborone of some of South Africa's richest talent was a one-off event, never since repeated in southern Africa even in post-apartheid South Africa.³⁷

From this Symposium and Art Exhibit four distinct major results can be traced. First, following a symposium resolution, the cultural boycott movement got underway in South Africa, where artists and performers, national or international, not openly supporting the movement were isolated, and their concerts and exhibits explicitly targeted for non-support by the public. Secondly the conference demonstrated to the ANC that it could no longer ignore the importance of art in pursuing its aims. Within months after the conference, the ANC created its Department of African Traditional Culture and placed

³⁶ Botswana High Commissioner, Lusaka, to Office of the President, Gaborone, telexes, 18 Jun., 5 and 7 Jul. 1982, items 235, 239, OP 27/1, BNA.

³⁷ A follow-up conference was held in December 1982 in Amsterdam (The Cultural Voice of Resistance), including the purpose of spreading a cultural boycott, though with many fewer artists and writers involved.

Medu director Wally Serote at its head, with headquarters in Gaborone. Soon thereafter, the ANC adopted its now-famous logo, created by Mnyele. But most importantly in the overall context of the ANC-led popular resistance inside South Africa was the post-conference dissemination and mass production, using inexpensive silkscreen techniques, of posters and T-shirts in the graphic style honed by Thami Mnyele in Gaborone. Many activists who attended the conference received silkscreen training, or returned later to Gaborone for training workshops. To this radical shift in visual protest, aimed not only at molding the aims of large crowds of protestors, but of reaching the national and international media and through it national and international public opinion, one must credit the tiny group of activists in Gaborone. Until Medu, with its infusion of art into the regional struggle, and its talent at organizing activists in South Africa, the ANC lacked an understanding of how to communicate its messages clearly and concisely, to wide audiences. The mass protests of the 1980s, under the UDF umbrella, were an energizing cocktail of focused graphic art, song and dance that were capable of mobilizing thousands of all ages and both genders, unarmed, to oppose heavily armed police and soldiers across the barricades.

Medu and the ANC

In spite of the clear commitment of Medu members to cultural activism, the top tier of the leadership also regarded themselves as responsible for assisting the ANC in its established operations, particularly MK efforts to infiltrate South Africa through Botswana. The Medu that Wally and Phetu Serote, Tim Williams, and Thami Mnyele

created served as a cover for their underground activities.³⁸ It was well known that the Botswana government had since its independence maintained a strict policy on political refugees from the surrounding white-dominated regimes of Rhodesia, South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, and Southwest Africa. While permitting refugees to live in Botswana, the government expelled those it considered who were using Botswana as a base to launch military operations across the border. Gaborone, still a tiny capital, was home to hundreds of South Africans who were to be found in all sectors of society. Their skills were of great importance to this still poor country, which had but a handful of college graduates and remained dependent on outsiders to staff its government offices, teach in its schools and new university, run its hospitals, and develop its fledgling private sector. Following the 1976 uprisings, however, Gaborone became the first stop-over for the thousands of teenagers and other youth fleeing across the border to sign up with the ANC. The ANC had no organized presence in Gaborone and Botswana lacked the capacity to absorb the influx and transferred those unable to get sponsorship to attend schools, to Dukwe refugee camp near Francistown in the north of the country (many of these were eventually snapped up by the ANC and sent north for training or, in some cases, further education). The government became more insistent, too, that any refugees inside Botswana, if not on contract or in some legitimate way self-supporting, would not be permitted to reside in the capital or its other towns.

When Serote arrived in Botswana in 1978 after attending Columbia University (New York, USA), he quickly set about joining the ANC and getting its support to help set up his Medu unit. Mnyele, a trained MK fighter then residing in Zambia, was reassigned to Gaborone, and Tim Williams, though PAC-trained in Algeria, quickly

³⁸ The following is based on Elizabeth Morton's interviews with Mongane Wally Serote and Tim Williams.

joined the ANC and helped Serote and Mnyele get Medu on its feet. As Williams put it, creating Medu as a legitimate operation allowed the Medu South Africans to keep their residences in Gaborone, whereas others were being transferred to Dukwe or deported. And by design, Medu helped the ANC establish a foothold in Botswana's capital, which was situated just a few kilometers from the South African border. After 1978 and until June 1985, the ANC used Medu as its advanced base for penetrating South Africa. The nature of Medu's organization, which divorced the executive from Medu's five cultural units, helped to keep new Medu members, drawn mainly from the local residents, unaware of the role Wally Serote, Tim Williams, Thami Mnyele and Phetu Serote played as ANC operatives under Medu cover. Medu's physical presence was also dispersed, with no main building for its activities. For its workshops etc. it utilized such venues as the National Museum, the national university, and the Swedish embassy, and its members moved about town in an unmarked kombi. Though well known in Gaborone through its staged events, Medu purposely operated on a day-to-day basis out of view.

Details of MK operations channeled through Gaborone's Medu leadership are still unclear. Serote and Williams, when interviewed by the author, were vague on these matters. It is altogether possible that, given the cell structure deployed by the MK command, these two and Mnyele were in three separate cells. Serote, who did not undergo military training, and Williams, who had been trained by the PAC before joining the ANC, were probably less important to MK operations than was Mnyele and his wife Rhona Segale, who came straight out of the MK system. As distinct from his posters (which were produced for the express purpose of being smuggled into South Africa for mass replication), Mnyele's role in fomenting resistance inside South Africa was also

pursued along established guerrilla lines. On two occasions, at least, he is credited with slipping into South Africa and pulling off bombing incidents in Rustenburg and Pretoria. The South African police regarded Mnyele, too, as a marked man. Rona was also known to South African police as an MK operative, training others in hand-grenade use.³⁹ Medu in Gaborone no doubt was an important ANC shuttle point, for MK operatives and arms.

Eventually, Medu's cover was well enough known for Botswana officials to be aware. Botswana's police kept regular tabs on its South African residents—particularly those who were outspoken on political matters. Several university lecturers had been deported after being associated with student protest. But Medu's membership took no part in demonstrations or protests in Botswana and confined their visible stand against South Africa to its publications and art, which were regarded as non-threatening. It is more likely that Botswana's police learned much more about Medu from South African authorities than from its own surveillance. South Africa and Botswana maintained regular contact, and because of Botswana's avowed no-armed-struggle policy within its borders, it would have been useful for South Africa to lodge its suspicions of Medu's clandestine MK program. Of course, Botswana itself may have been dubious as to the reliability of such reports if they were made. Gaborone was visited often by black South Africans of all sorts, some of whom were suspected of spying for the South African government or supplying them with false or unreliable information.

Umkhonto We Sizwe was definitely using Botswana as a staging ground for raids and infiltration into South Africa. The South African army shut down other potential

³⁹ Truth and Reconciliation special hearings on the 14 June 1985 Raid, 2-4 October 2000, available on <http://www.thuto.org/ubh/news/trc01.htm#proceedings>, 15 November 2007. According to the testimony of ex-South African police, its agents had penetrated Medu.

infiltration routes used in the past, such as through Swaziland and Mozambique. So in order to get arms to its soldiers into South Africa, MK had to smuggle them across Botswana's border with South Africa. According to Fish Keitseng, who frequently was involved in this activity, large pits were dug on remote sections of the border and filled with arms brought down from Central Africa.⁴⁰ These caches were then used by South Africa-based operatives. Moreover, MK was continually sending its operatives through Botswana into South Africa. Medu looked after many of these individuals for short periods, apparently shielding their activities by using them as roadies for its music bands.⁴¹

In 1985 when South Africa decided to take matters into its own hands, it was clear to Medu members that Botswana police were being alerted that something was afoot. Mnye and Williams were both approached by policemen and encouraged to leave the country. Mnye had recently received notice of being granted a scholarship to study art in Europe, and had been released by the ANC to leave Botswana, but the day before he was to depart for Zambia and eventually to France, he was still residing in Tlokweng, a suburb of Gaborone, when a South African commando unit burst across the border in the early hours of June 14 and sought out what Pretoria officials later claimed were ANC targets. Fourteen people died in this raid, including Mnye and ANC member and Medu treasurer Mike Hamlyn. The house of Tim Williams, who had moved out recently, was destroyed. That the raid was intended to target Medu there can be little doubt. On the front pages of South African dailies appearing on June 15, 1985 were photos of Maj. Craig Williamson (South African spy who had penetrated ANC operations in Europe and

⁴⁰ E. Morton, interview with Fish Keitseng, Gaborone December 22, 1997.

⁴¹ Mandaza, "Gwangwa: The Trombone that Liberates," 9.

who led the June 14 raid) standing in front of Mnyele's house and holding some of Mnyele's artwork that was being stacked for burning. These photos capture the twin objectives of Medu and underline the point that Medu posed a major threat to the apartheid regime, both as an MK through point and source for popular resistance on the streets of South Africa.

The End of Medu

Following the raid, Medu quickly collapsed. Many South Africans associated with the organization fled Botswana while others went underground inside the country. Tim Williams moved to Zambia's ANC office, while Wally Serote, who remained in Botswana for a time, moved to London and served as Head of the ANC's Political Committee. Meanwhile, the five Medu units, made up almost entirely of Botswana, lacked the funding and professional leadership Medu had provided, soon fell into disarray and stopped production. Thus, this cultural organization, which originated in 1979 as a small group, and rose to probably no more than fifty active writers, artists, musicians, thespians, and artists, ceased to exist after six short years.

Such was the nature of resistance. As each organization became more successful, so its risks and visibility increased along with the odds of retaliation. As the considerable achievements of Medu demonstrate, however, a good idea can easily survive and spread without serious hindrance across many boundaries. We refer, of course, to the importance of visual art in resistance. Without straining the point, it is hard to discount the importance of Medu in forcing the pace of popular opposition to Pretoria

in the crucial, dying years of apartheid.

The high esteem in which the ANC regarded Medu's contribution is testified by its recognition of Serote and Williams in the new South Africa, where they hold the positions of CEO of Freedom Park (where Thami Mnyele is duly recognized) and Pretoria Assistant Commissioner of Police (Investigative), respectively.