

Peter Delius and Daniel Sher, *Mokgomana: The Life of John Kgoana Nkadimeng 1927–2020*. Auckland Park: Jacana (pb R260 – 978 1 4314 3398 8). 2023, 214 pp.

This is an important book. Unfortunately, it is likely to fall beneath the radar of many who should read it, such as those interested in the struggle against apartheid, the history of the twentieth century in Southern Africa, and the art of writing history. Based on decades of research by Peter Delius, bolstered by his colleague Daniel Sher, the book is replete with insights into a raft of hitherto underestimated and ignored issues that went into the making of contemporary South Africa. Much more than a biography, the book interweaves the story of a remarkable life with important – dare I say profound – insights into twentieth-century South African history.

The book is deceptive in that it is presented as a political biography of an activist many have not heard of, unlike the many books on Nelson and Winnie Mandela or other big names in the struggle against apartheid. Yet it seamlessly weaves the story of one man, John Kgoana Nkadimeng, his family and their boPedi communities into the larger story of the struggle for freedom that is now acknowledged as one of the greatest political stories of the twentieth century. It provides important perspectives on the history of the African National Congress (ANC), its struggle for freedom, and the rural (and migrant) dimensions of political organizing against apartheid, which have been woefully underrepresented in the historiography of South Africa.

The book tells the story of a remarkable man, John Kgoana Nkadimeng, equal to the more well-known giants of ‘the Struggle’, who worked tirelessly over decades from the 1940s until his death in 2020 to bring freedom and democracy to South Africa. It tells the story of the toll it took on his family (wife and six children, plus countless other relatives) and how they summoned the resilience to survive as a loving and strong unit. Woven into these accounts is a deep understanding of the history of the Pedi polity and how the deep-rooted respect for traditional rulers informed political mobilization in the 1950s and 1960s in a context shaped by the apartheid-era corruption of these traditional authorities. Migrant labourers, moving between urban centres and rural homes, played a much more significant part in the Struggle than is commonly appreciated.

Essential reading for anyone studying South African politics with little direct experience of rural African life, which is most of us, this book adds a whole new dimension to the history of the ANC, which has previously been told mostly from the perspective of educated urban African elites, who left behind copious written resources for scholars. The oral history, garnered by Delius over many decades, reveals that rural people and migrant workers from rural communities played a much more significant role in shaping the Struggle than is generally appreciated. It reveals important details about the crucial Congress of the People and the birth of the Freedom Charter, and shows how the work of underground Communist Party cadres, such as Nkadimeng, in organizing and educating activists was much more central than is generally known.

Perhaps most importantly, in revising the now commonplace history of the Struggle, the book shows how the origins of uMkhonto weSizwe, the armed wing of the ANC, were rooted in rural revolts, such as the Sekhukhuneland Revolt and

the Pondoland Uprising, much earlier than the standard narrative of their formation as a strategic response to the Sharpeville Massacre and ensuing state of emergency and banning of liberation movements in 1961. It also adds important context to the ways in which underground operatives of the ANC managed to survive the brutal years after the Sharpeville crackdown, particularly in Soweto, where Albertina Sisulu's role has been grievously underestimated in most accounts. It reveals, in granular detail, the ways in which the cross-border movements of activists were facilitated, particularly after 1976, and provides a fascinating insight into the politics of trade unionism in the 1970s and 1980s, when intense debates about the political role of unions took place.

For those interested in the complexities of the present, the book helps us better understand the ANC's deep connections with Cuba and Russia; the reasons why the stalwarts of the Struggle would be deeply disappointed in the behaviour of the ANC in government; and why key figures such as Nkademeng were not surprised by the greed many of the new ANC rulers have displayed.

Finally, the book is a methodological tour de force, demonstrating how important oral testimony is in narrative history, and how fragile that resource is as the bearers of historical memory grow old and die. But, further, there are substantial resources of oral history in South Africa that have already been recorded, if not well preserved, over the past fifty or more years. Many of these are falling into disrepair as tapes decay and those who might be able to transcribe them pass away.

Given the scale of this problem of oral history archives and the significance of attending to it, it is perhaps a pity that the book accords it only a passing mention in the 'Note on our research' at the end of the text. A clarion call to attention is surely what is required. All South African historians, no matter their interests, would be well advised to attend to the issues of the state of oral archives wherein the memory of their recent past is entombed and likely to be lost. If proof is needed, this book demonstrates the value of doing so.

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doi: [10.1017/S0001972024000937](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000937)

Juliette Leeb-du Toit, Ruth Simbao and Ross Anthony (eds), *Visualising China in Southern Africa: Biography, Circulation, Transgression*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press (pb ZAR 600/US\$80 – 978 1 77614 767 0). 2023, 376 pp.

The editors of *Visualising China in Southern Africa* have chosen no better time to release their volume than this era when the global South, with China as a main player, is initiating moves to balance global economic equation with the West. In the Introduction, Ross Anthony, Ruth Simbao and Juliette Leeb-du Toit set the stage