Explaining Social Consciousness : The Case of Mrs Molefe
Madame Belinda Bozzoli

Résumé
B. Bozzoli — Expliquer la prise de conscience : le cas de Mrs Molefe.
Cet article traite de la prise de conscience d'une femme noire sud-africaine, Sets-wammung Molefe, et vise, en même temps, à
critiquer les analyses des mentalités qui prévalent dans la théorie sociologique. Se fondant sur l'histoire orale pour expliquer la
prise de conscience de cette femme, cet article tente de définir les notions de bien et de mal, d'honneur et de honte, de devoir et
de responsabilité, de soi et de l'autre, de féminité et de masculinité. L'auteur montre également que si la conscience politique de
Setswammung Molefe a pris forme pendant son enfance et son adolescence, elle a connu une mutation décisive au moment de
l'instauration de l'apartheid.

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During the 1950s, a Mrs Setswammung Molefe became a vociferous supporter of the African National Congress (ANC). Mrs Molefe was a Tsawan woman, a Mofokeng, in her fifties, who lived with her husband and children in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg. She was, she said, a “Mayibuye woman”:

“A policeman could never even think of standing in front of a ‘Mayibuye woman’. We were militant. Even in town, the bus drivers used to clear the way for us, so that we could go in without having to stand in a long queue. They used to say, ‘Make way for Mayibuye women’. Then we would go in without any problem. We enjoyed it”.

Mrs Molefe supported more than one Alexandra bus boycott, and the ANC’s “pound a day” campaign. She believed the ANC was quite right to advocate a potato boycott as well. It had to protest against the brutality of farmers of the Eastern Transvaal. She believed that:

“The Boer who farmed with potatoes had the habit of knocking down his ‘lazy’ labourers with his tractor. He did not bury them, instead, he used them as compost in his potato farm. We were convinced that what we heard was true, because even the potatoes themselves were shaped like human beings. They were not completely round. Then we had to boycott potatoes... we argued that eating potatoes was the same as eating human flesh”.

Mrs Molefe’s mystical vehemence on the issue of potatoes was exceeded only by one thing—her passionate support for the Federation of South

* This paper is a slightly modified version of my inaugural lecture given at the University of the Witwatersrand in March 1991. The material for it is taken from a larger study, Belinda Bozzoli, with the assistance of Mnantho NKOTSLE, 1991: Women of Phokeng, Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migrancy in South Africa, 1900-1993 (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann/London: James Currey).

1. It is not her real name.
2. From the slogan “Mayibuye Afrika”—“Come back Africa”—uttered at innumerable ANC meetings and during the campaigns of the turbulent 1950s. For further insight into this period, see Tom Lodge, 1983: Black Politics in South Africa since 1945 (Johannesburgh: Ravan Press).
African Women’s campaign against passes for women. When the residents of Alexandra township met and resolved to resist the imposition of passes, she said: “I joined the campaign because I couldn’t imagine a woman carrying a pass like a man”. She continued: “Women were furious, no-one could stop them from doing what they thought was right... They said: ‘Bus boycott; we don’t apply for passes’”.

She realised, as she put it, that “women were militant... we didn’t care what could have happened to us. Whites lost hope of ever being able to control us”. She marched in protest, together with 20,000 other women, to the Union Buildings, where, she said, they “demanded Verwoerd”, through song and prayer, insisting “that he should come out and explain the pass system to us... We told him that we were going to bewitch him, so that he could be knocked down by a car”. She was jailed briefly for her part in a protest in Alexandra and tried and fined. The campaign was lost in the end. In her eyes this was both through the lack of solidarity of people like Shangaan and Pedi women, who would not join the struggle, and the power of the “cruel Boers” and police. But there were some successes. Verwoerd, for one, she said, naturally did not live long after he had been bewitched. And the Mayibuye spirit survived to give her and others confidence and courage in later years.

Life Strategy and Social Explanation

Mrs Molefe’s story could be echoed by those thousands of other ordinary Black South Africans of the time. Her consciousness, her world view, were captured and transformed by the passion and magic which the ANC embodied. A social movement, the African National Congress, which had a particular ideology of its own at the time, appears to have successfully entered into the mind of at least this one of its followers. Indeed, it altered her very sense of self—she became a “Mayibuye woman”. How is it that the respectable daughter of respectable well-off peasants, from a deeply Christianised community, which, as we shall see, is what Mrs Molefe was, found it necessary and possible to call herself a “Mayibuye woman”: to strike, boycott, march and actively court prison; to shout ANC slogans, sing militant songs, wear ANC clothing and admire ANC leaders, and to sustain this commitment throughout the repressive 1960s and 1970s into her old age? What were the sources of her beliefs, the consciousness, of this extraordinary ordinary person?

3. This campaign was launched in the mid-fifties, when the Afrikaner Nationalist government introduced laws to force women to carry passes, from which they has previously been exempt. For further information, see C. WALKER, 1982: Women and Resistance in South Africa (London: Onyx Press). The Federation of South African Women was independently formed, but associated with the ANC.

4. He was, in fact, assassinated soon afterwards.
Sociologists have long been interested in explaining how and why external, or "derived" ideologies, such as that represented by the ANC, interact with "inherent" ideologies, such as that represented by the existing state of mind of Mrs Molefe, to produce a passionate and deeply-felt set of beliefs. This is a subject of particular relevance to South Africans today, when a large variety of social movements is seeking to make precisely this connection with the mentalities of ordinary people. How are we to understand the chaotic, apparently random and often internally inconsistent beliefs of a social movement's supporters? Like Mrs Molefe these supporters sometimes make it difficult for us. They may articulate prejudices which are incompatible with the public ideology of the movement. ANC supporters may turn out to be racists. Inkatha supporters may express an urban working-class consciousness rather than a rural one. Rampaging gangs of murderers and criminals may call upon symbols such as "Zuluness" to justify their acts. The supporters of a movement do not always behave in ways we expect. In a volatile society such that of South Africa, these apparently random patterns of belief are often confusing and even frightening.

What can the sociological imagination suggest that will advance our understanding of the beliefs and prejudices of ordinary people? In answering this question, the paper takes a particular methodological and explanatory route in looking at the life and world view of Mrs Molefe. It does not attempt to "measure" her consciousness, as, say, would a positivist and universalist social scientist, through examining a speedily completed and easily analysed questionnaire given to her on her beliefs. Instead the paper pursues a more complex, longer and more difficult route with several components to it.

First, the paper gives a very brief outline of Mrs Molefe's life, derived from in-depth interviews with her. Then it looks in more detail at her story in two phases: her youth—the period during which her personality was formed and her life strategy evolved; and then her adulthood—during which her life strategy was implemented in complex and changing circumstances. The paper also examines the stories of some of Mrs Molefe's contemporaries, the cohort of women who underwent similar experiences to her own, several of whom were also interviewed in depth. Finally, the paper examines whether and how Mrs Molefe's story helps us in our search for explanations of consciousness—and how it forces us to ask questions about the nature of sociology itself in African settings.

5. This essentially Gramscian question is explored by such writers as George Rude, 1980: *Ideology and Popular Protest* (London: Lawrence & Wishart); and George Larrain, 1983: *Marxism and Ideology* (London: Macmillan).
6. I would like to thank Mmantho Nkotsoe for her assistance with these interviews, which are, together with interviews of several other women, some of whom are also cited in this paper, lodged in the Oral Documentation Project, African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand.
An Overview

Setswammung Molefe was born in Phokeng, a small Western Transvaal village near Rustenburg, in 1904, of comfortably-off peasant parents. She remembered cooking, housebuilding, sewing, washing and cleaning in the home. After her mother was widowed, the family hired workers to do the ploughing and harvesting on their land. Setswammung went to the local Lutheran mission school and reached Standard 2 in 1922. Then she went to Johannesburg. She worked as a domestic in the suburbs, where she had a number of friends from Phokeng, including Joseph, her future husband, who had been at school with her and who at the time worked on the Kimberley mines. Some time in the early 1930s she moved with Joseph to Alexandra Township, while he took a job as a shop assistant in Johannesburg, and they stayed there for the subsequent thirty years. They married in 1935, and had five children, of whom four survived. Setswammung gave up full-time domestic work and became the archetypal informal sector worker, brewing beer, hawking apples, sewing, and taking in washing to boost the family income. She never fulfilled her ambition of buying a stand in town.

Setswammung Molefe enjoyed life in Alexandra in the earlier years, but during the late 1940s she began to change her vision of things and, as we have seen, to evolve a fairly militant political consciousness. In spite of experiences of jail and repression, she remained loyal to the spirit of nationalist causes in her later life. Finally, however, the threat of removal from Alexandra to Soweto led the family to building a house back in Phokeng. The village had declined from its former wealthy agricultural status, but platinum and chrome had been discovered in the area and were to boost the Bafokeng economy once more. In 1962, before the house was completed, Joseph died, and soon afterwards one of Setswammung’s sons was murdered in Alexandra. Mrs Molefe moved back to Phokeng alone. She began by cultivating their fields, but gave up, out of a combination of fear of attacks by mineworkers from the nearby Bafokeng mines, a desire to care for her grandchildren, and the difficulties of farming in her old age. She lived on a tiny pension in Phokeng when she was interviewed in the early 1980s, and remained actively involved in Christian affairs.

Roots of Resilience

In our second examination of Mrs Molefe’s life, we shall start with her early years. It is not as if we can, in Freudian fashion, explain everything that Mrs Molefe thought and did in the 1950s by referring to her childhood in the 1900s. It is rather that we need to see her life as a series of linked episodes with her as the central character making crucial choices at crucial moments. Such choices are not arbitrary, but have their roots in her evolving self. Let us now reexamine her life story in the context which both shaped her and gave her the possibility of choice, and see if in that
we can find the sources of her later world view. In doing so we are pursuing an essentially sociological and historical understanding of the woman, rather than a psychological one.

Setswammung Molefe was one of a generation of women who experienced living in a pre-capitalist world in the throes of transition. The Bafokeng had a long-standing claim to residence in the Western Transvaal, having been there since the 16th century. They were brutally subjected and dispersed by Mzilikazi during the 1820s and 1830s, but they regrouped and reestablished themselves at Phokeng, made a deal with Hendrik Potgieter, the Voortrekker who drove Mzilikazi from the area, and began to restore their previously prosperous agricultural economy. The legendary Bafokeng chief of the time, Mokgatle Mokgatle, took a pragmatic—some might say collaborationist—stance towards the newly unfolding order of the late 19th century. He chose to bargain with the Boers for Bafokeng survival, even if it meant that some of his citizens were contracted as free and rightless labour on white-owned farms, or as soldiers to help in the crushing of the Sekhukhuni war. Mokgatle’s alliance with Potgieter was followed by one with Kruger himself, whose farm Boekenhoutfontein was just around the corner from Phokeng. This strategy gained the most important commodity of all for the Bafokeng land. Kruger gave them farms which are still occupied today.

Mokgatle was equally pragmatic towards the missionaries who came to the area. He invited the Lutherans to establish themselves in the area in 1867, and members of the royal family were amongst the first to be baptised. The missionaries provided three important things which had numerous and sometimes contradictory effects upon the Bafokeng: the Christian faith itself, a new discourse which provided ideological and cultural opportunities for different groups within the Bafokeng, particularly women; literacy and skills, through the schools and farms they set up, which enhanced Bafokeng competitiveness on job markets; and a paternalistic umbrella—useful in times of increasing racial restrictions on land ownership—under which the Bafokeng could pursue the strategy Mokgatle had started with Kruger: the acquisition of land. Mokgatle sent regiments of young men—of whom Joseph was probably one—to work on the Kimberley mines, and levied them a portion of their wages. Thus the tribe accumulated money to pay for the farms they wished to buy, while the missionaries registered them in their names. While Mokgatle probably had no inkling that on these farms were valuable deposits of platinum and chrome, which gigantic corporations still mine and haggle over today, his strategy provided a buffer for the Bafokeng from the very earliest times.

So, the Bafokeng had reasonable and relatively fertile land holdings, a progressive and far-sighted chief, and proximity to the massive market of the Rand. This enabled them to transform their economy during the late 19th century from a subsistence to a peasant one. Setswammung Molefe’s family was not unusual. By the time she was born in 1904, Bafokeng families were producing up to 200 bags of sorghum per season; and some
owned as many as 200 head of cattle, and hired labourers to work for them. As one woman said, “my father owned so many cattle, we had to ride a horse to be able to see them all”. The Bafokeng, said one observer at the time, were a “progressive tribe”: there were five stores doing good business on their land, and the people were “thriving”. Mrs Molefe said of her childhood: “farming was Number One”.

Not only did the Bafokeng avoid total economic annihilation at this stage: but they were also not fully culturally “colonised”. They had never been militarily conquered by anybody except the Matabele. They were heavily Christianised, and of course this meant peoples’ mentalities were transformed. But the missionaries had been invited in by the chief himself, because of the perceived advantages they would bring. This peasant society was engaging with mercantile capitalism and colonialism partly on its own terms: and although there were unequal relationships to land between Black and White on a broader scale, the Bafokeng themselves were still acquiring their own land, admittedly using subterfuge to do so.

It is not surprising, thus, that most Bafokeng were confident people, for whom Christianity had other meanings than those associated with abject subordination to external values. They were well-placed to make their own way within the emerging capitalist order.

These changes were accompanied by certain inner transformations in Bafokeng society itself. Like most other African societies, it was crosscut in several different ways. Chiefs were deemed superior to commoners, men to women, and elders to juniors. Someone who was young, a commoner and a woman—like the young Setswamhung—was very much at the bottom of the heap, and bound to stay there as long as the society was untouched. But Christianisation and peasantisation began to fracture these precapitalist rigidities. The transformations of the late 19th century offered unprecedented opportunities for women to pursue their own interests—often in defiance of the patriarchal order within which they lived. Modernity inserted itself like a wedge between the sexes. Admittedly Tswana women had a start over those in Nguni, North Sotho, or even Boer, societies, where male powers over women appear to have been greater and more sternly enforced. The milder patriarchy of the Batswana was indeed more easily dented—and the women lost no time in making the most of it. The mothers of Mrs Molefe’s generation took part in trade, profited from farming sales and earned their own incomes in town. The peasant household required a nuclear rather than an extended family. Parents had to assume greater authority over their children, and both mothers and fathers became disciplinarians—a dubious kind of sexual equality. Their daughters—Setswamhung’s generation—went much further. In their childhood they would have been unrecognisable to the average first year social anthropology student, because they did not confine themselves to traditionally female tasks on the farm, but took part in such allegedly male tasks as cattle herding and ploughing. They were quick to
see the advantages of literacy and actually wanted to go to school. One of Setswammung’s friends said she hated her mother for trying to send her to traditional initiation school. Instead she secretly took herself off to the Reverend Penzhorn’s Lutheran school. “All my peers were attending school. I was tired of being an errand girl”, she said. It was far better to go to “real” school, and learn the skills necessary for the future. To this generation, Christianity was an alternative ideology which allowed them to find salvation as individuals, outside the confines of Bafokeng traditionalism. It gave them access to the much treasured virtues of literacy and numeracy. In fact, even Lutheranism did not always provide enough for these ambitious girls. Some of them had no hesitation in bunking the Reverend Penzhorn’s Setswana classes when a black American missionary opened a rival school nearby which taught them English, the essential *lingua franca* of the future.

So, Setswammung grew up in a time and place where a generalised Tswana economic and cultural resilience was accompanied by an increased female assertiveness and independence. The young girls of the Western Transvaal were indeed a cheeky lot. But do we have an explanation here? Did Setswammung support the ANC in the 1950s because she was able to stand up for herself in 1915? No. Surely the increased assertiveness of Bafokeng women in the early part of this century provides a necessary, rather than a sufficient explanation for what they became forty years later. We do have to look further.

**Establishing a Life Stance**

The next phase of Setswammung’s life saw this assertiveness evolve in new settings. Young women of her generation left home and went to work in town in large numbers as soon as they had completed school. Most of them reached Standard Three or thereabouts—a relatively high degree of education for any Blacks at the time, let alone for girls. The elders of the village continued to express disquiet at their behaviour. The girls were wilful and disobedient. They were likely to get pregnant. They would fall into corrupt and evil company. They would refuse to marry the man chosen for them. So while it required courage and initiative, going to town was not, for Setswammung’s generation, a humiliating experience, born of economic suffering—as it was for young Afrikaner or Basotho girls in the 1930s and 1940s, or as it is for squatter women today. Mrs Molefe specifically and repeatedly denied that she had gone to town in her youth because of economic hardship: “No that wasn’t the cause”, she insisted: “Going to Johannesburg or any of these towns was like a means to an end, it also had some adventure in it... there was a sense of freedom about staying on your own in Johannesburg”. Work, even within the confines of domestic service, gave the women access to their own incomes and freedom from constraints.
Going to town was also a means of improving their bargaining position as potential wives—another way of undermining patriarchal controls: "We had all seen our older sister returning from towns with beautiful dresses, shoes, plates, cups...", said Setswammung; such goods improved one's chances of making a good marriage. For, said one woman of Setswammung's age, "who would marry you if you were not working, being just a bag of lazy bones without a stick of furniture?" Many young women, including Setswammung, used their greater bargaining power and independence to resist the marriages their parents arranged for them, and to choose husbands who were more urbanised and distinctly younger than those their parents would have them accept.

The women fended for themselves in the city. Assertive they may have been; disreputable they were not. "We used to enjoy working as domestic servants because we paid each other a visit", said Setswammung. "We had boyfriends but we didn't want them to sleep in our rooms. Whenever one of us knew that her boyfriend would be likely to pay her a visit, she would organise her friends to come and spend the evening with her so that the boyfriend could be inconvenienced... [This made it] impossible for the boyfriend to sleep with his girlfriend and [it prevented] pregnancy in a way. One would sometimes find ten people sleeping in one room". The men who made advances to these respectable, if rather closely packed, girls also did so through more courtly and Victorian methods—writing letters being one. But as one of Setswammung's contemporaries said to a younger interviewer: "Boys are problems but we always declined the advances. We weren't as accommodating as you young ones tend to be". And of those who escaped this culture of decorum and respectability and did get pregnant, most married the child's father later. But still, it is remarkable that of fifteen elderly women interviewed in the early 1980s, the average age of marriage was as high as 27, and this was without large numbers of premarital pregnancies. While they may not have avoided marriage they certainly delayed it, and were able to establish themselves in the city beforehand.

Their consciousness of their womanhood was complemented by another consciousness—that of the city. The Bafokeng were by no means the poorest Blacks in town. By the 1920s, the men of the village were safely ensconced in some of the best upper-working class jobs in the city—as shop assistants, drivers and delivery men; while the women, with their high levels of literacy and of English, took the better-paying jobs in domestic service in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. This relative privilege in comparison with the lot of other poorer strata of black urban society—fed by the Christian ideas that they had adopted—shaped the world view of the newly urban Bafokeng. The ideology that emerged was one of "respectability". In comparison with their "reference group"—other Africans—the Bafokeng saw themselves as respectable and relatively well-off; they tended to view their jobs—including those within the
paternalistic institution of domestic service—as occupations which served other ends, rather than as exercises in humiliation. They constructed their ideas about urban hierarchy around these notions. To women like Setswammung, the really evil people in the cities were lower-class gangsters, or the unscrupulous men who made unwanted sexual advances. They were not the more socially distant Whites. These evil people preyed on the respectable, and were seen as outsiders as a result. These aspects of the women’s consciousness were to develop into more elaborate motifs in later life.

We have seen how Setswammung’s background had allowed her to develop a different definition of what femininity entailed. Educational attainment, personal access to money, and defiance of traditional authority, were now possible. But this expansion of her self-definition was accompanied and tempered by two other strands of “self” which had emerged during this period. Firstly, she, like other women of her generation, showed a strong tendency to identify her emerging strength as a woman with a vision of herself as a wife, mother, and even matriarch, within the household she intended to construct. For all their independence of spirit, and for all the doubts about their morals expressed by their elders, young migrants like Setswammung wanted marriage and they wanted motherhood—the question for them was on what terms they could engage in them. Secondly, she showed the beginnings of a notion of “respectability”, by which she began to identify herself. She was an upright and purposeful Christian, and this provided her with a moral guide. Her Bafokeng “chutzpah” was indeed complexly intertwined with, and at times contradicted by, her purposive pursuit of propriety. Her household would reflect her uprightness, and protect her newfound assertiveness.

So by their late teens and early twenties the daughters of Phokeng had established their broad attitude towards life and society—their “life stance”—a unique mixture of rebelliousness and conformism. By following this stance and its many contradictions through, we can begin to find an explanation for Mrs Molefe’s militancy in later times.

**Strategies for Reconciliation**

Let us now turn to look at the practical life strategies the women developed for pursuing their complex goals, as they carried on their lives in the context of the urban setting, a patriarchal, segregated and racist environment, in which industrial rhythms had a profound influence, and against the background of a declining economy at home. Then we will turn to the effects of this upon their consciousness.

After their marriages—arranged or otherwise—some women went back into the village, and one or two stayed there for most of the rest of
their lives, shunning the city. Others continued as domestics, and relied on their Bafokeng kin to care for their children. But the Bafokeng economy had, by the 1930s, been seriously undermined by state initiatives against black peasant farmers, by restrictions on further land acquisition, and by the growing population. The Bafokeng never lost their land—and still today the boundaries of Bophuthatswana are drawn to accommodate their landholdings. But most younger Bafokeng householders had to come to terms with the fact that a permanent relationship with the cities would be necessary. For the women, this meant a move out of domestic service, into the townships. They settled in Alexandra, Sophiatown, Fietas (or Vrededorp), Meadowlands, Emdeni, Dobsonville, Twa Twa, Marabastad, Julia Location, Kotiti, Vergenoeg and Malay Camp in the 1930s and 1940s.

The move from the suburbs to the townships did not entail a drop in the class position of the women and their husbands. The men remained in their upper-working class jobs. The women, like Setswammung herself, tended to enter into the informal sector. They became freelance washerwomen, hawkers or beerbrewers. These were ideal occupations for them. Freelancing meant that women could bear and care for children at the same time as earning money. Two of the elements of their life stance—household building and the retention of some sort of independence—could be satisfied. Keeping alive the third element—respectability—was slightly more complex.

In the early years of their stay in the townships—the early to mid thirties—the women established their families; and were indeed part of the “respectable” urban working class on the Rand. This class was built up from urbanised people from some of the stronger sharecropping and peasant households in the Transvaal, Free State and parts of Lesotho. These Bafokeng urban dwellers continued to portray themselves as upright people, and to live worthy working-class lives, going to church, constructing and maintaining relatively “nuclear” type families, in which men as well as women took at least some part in domestic labour, with two incomes; and associating with other “respectables”. Tswana people were often standholders, had connections with other standholders, and entertained the possibility of buying land there. But the women of this class did live with some personal contradictions. Their poverty made informal sector work essential—and yet how were they to reconcile the less than upright worlds of hawking, let alone illegal liquor-brewing, with the more respectable worlds of church and family? With difficulty, according to Setswammung:

“The Tswanas were shy to stand in the street selling fruits and vegetables. It was scandalous among Tswanas to listen to people saying ‘I have seen so and so’s mother selling fruits or vegetables in the street’... One day when I was busy selling, one man I was acquainted with shouted at me and said ‘Mma-Josefa, why do you stand there selling apples in the street when on the other hand Joseph is busy...”
working to support you and the children? I felt so humiliated that I could not even answer to that”.

To another woman, the worst humiliation was not being arrested for liquor brewing per se, although that was bad enough; but being arrested in her Manyano uniform, and facing the dreaded possibility that her church minister might see her going to the police station. Still, in spite of these problems of reconciling church and shebeen, Tswana uprightness and pavement hawking, the women managed to sustain a modus vivendi in the townships in the 1920s and 1930s.

The Crisis of Consciousness

But this was not to last. During the period from the mid-1930s to the late 1940s, the women’s capacity to reconcile their goals was shaken by two things: first a profound and large-scale altering of the social configuration of the townships. And second, the coming to power of the National Party in 1948, and its subsequent implementation of apartheid.

At first, to use the marine metaphor often used to describe proletarianisation, new “waves” of people “flooded in” to the towns. They came from severely impoverished communities in Lesotho or Natal. In other words a new, poorer, class of migrants, from rural areas with little or no resilience and resources, entered the townships. Many of them formed squatter communities, in a pattern which has been repeated in more recent times. This both elevated and threatened the position of the existing “respectables”. On the one hand, the “upper” working class were reinforced in their ideas about their own respectability by the contrast, for example, with the incoming Basotho, who were seen as being dirty and disreputable. As one of Setswammung’s friends said: “The poor ones lived in houses made of mixed patches of corrugated zins, cardboard boxes and plastics”. Furthermore, the “poor” were morally and spiritually undesirable, and their lower class position was invested, in this informant’s eyes, with an ethnic dimension:

“...Their manners and morals left much to be desired, and you could see that they were poor. I didn’t like to see my children grow up in such an environment. TwaTwa was full of Sotho people, and the Sothos are the dirtiest and most unruly people I’ve ever lived with”.

If the Bafokeng thought themselves superior, in the government’s eyes there was little if any difference between a so-called “respectable” black family, and a “disreputable” one. This racist blindness affected women in particular. The self-styled “superior” women of Phokeng found themselves lumped together with the lumpen-proletariat of Lesotho by the

7. Manyanos are the women’s societies within established churches.
state: and by municipal authorities increasingly anxious to bring illicit liquor brewing under control. In addition, with the growth in desperation and poverty in the townships, respectable families were subjected to more frequent attacks by gangsters who preyed on the population. These changes constituted a substantial threat to the position of the “respectables”. The things that had allowed them to attribute a certain security, consistency and meaning to their lives—the additional incomes created by the informal sector; the idea that they were respectable; and the notion that life could be pursued relatively peacefully in the townships, in spite of poverty and segregation—were thrown into turmoil during the late 1930s and 1940s. The women found themselves the victims of events—police raids, gangster attacks, imprisonment for brewing illicit liquor—that were unlike anything they had experienced before. Setswammung herself experienced a particularly brutal attack by the Msomi gang; and several raids and more than one arrest for liquor brewing.

Such experiences invoked feelings of horror and disbelief on the part of people who wished to live respectable lives. Indeed, they appear to have caused what might be called a “crisis of consciousness” amongst people like Setswammung. The self as constructed until then was so clearly threatened, that the individual was forced to reassert its importance, dimensions and character, in the new situation. In the interviews with the women in their old age, and particularly with Mrs Molefe, this “crisis of consciousness” manifests itself in the telling of elaborate and vivid tales—junction narratives, some have suggested such tales be called. The women tell a rich variety of anecdotes about policemen, gangsters, jail and the culture of subterfuge which liquor brewers were forced to construct to avoid raids. These reflect a need to reassert, redefine, the “self”, in the context of the threats it was undergoing.

The anecdotes are interesting reflections of subjectivity. They stand out remarkably against the rest of the record of the women’s life stories. They are based on traditional female habits of storytelling as much as upon modern replies to sociological inquisitiveness. In the early years, run the anecdotes, life in the townships was peaceful and harmonious: “Alexandra was a very good place for poor people. We used to love it for that”, said one woman; while another claimed that “Sophiatown could be compared with Phokeng, it was ‘England’. Life in Sophiatown was very enjoyable”. But in later times the “night wolves” would come out at night and prey on the innocent and good when the city was dark. The anecdotes are reflected in the more elevated journalistic tradition which emerged in the 1950s about places like Sophiatown. They portray how the good and innocent people and community, were being harassed by forces for evil, darkness and disrepute.

In Mrs Molefe’s case, the Msomi gang broke in one fateful night. They did not reckon with her Bafokeng cheek, not to say fighting superiority over her husband:
THE CASE OF MRS MOLEFE

“When [the gangster] landed inside he found me ready for him”, she said. “I pushed him to the stove, trying to burn his hand on the stove, he jumped, my nails still at his throat. They were deep in his throat. I did not know before that I was that strong until that night. Now, during that struggle I prayed to God that he should accept our soul because it was clear that they were going to overpower me eventually. I gathered strength and told myself that I had to open the door, no matter what would have happened. I left that man on the floor, pushed my husband away from the door, and swung it open. I said ‘People, why do you want to kill us’. One of them then said to the others, ‘let’s go’”.

Women like Setswammung claim to have been courageous—part of the image of herself she wishes to convey to the interviewer perhaps. But when it came to arrests for beerbrewing, even the brave township culture of subterfuge, in which beer and “White Horse” were hidden and police spies outwitted, did not prevent the women from feeling pain and humiliation. Some tales tell of how they swore at arresting policemen, or traitorous husbands, others of their humiliation at being charged for the offence “in public”, or “before Whites”; or of how their mothers were “heartbroken” to hear of their arrest. Not once did any of them internalise the attempts made by the law to cast them as part of the “undesirable” class. It was the law that was in the wrong, it was the police that were misbehaving. If ever there was a failure of legitimacy, this was it—a failure which undoubtedly helped women like Setswammung conceive of herself as a resister in later times.

The Second Crisis

By the late 1940s, the consciousness of the women was already transformed—you might even say softened up—as a result of the threats to security and respectability brought by the disreputables, the state and the municipal police. When the National Party came to power, it introduced a second crisis—a far more serious and fundamental challenge to black urban security. Three key elements of National Party policy were to affect “respectables” like Mrs Molefe: the destruction of townships like Sophiatown; the removal of particular groups of people—some say mainly activists were removed—from townships like Alexandra; and the introduction of passes for women. All three affected Mrs Molefe’s “cohort”. They threatened to undercut the basis for their income, and to destroy the compromises they had made between household building and personal independence. These were acts which fitted in neatly into the conceptions of good and evil already established in the women’s narratives about the police. The good, virtuous township dwelling families, earning their incomes and living stable and secure lives, were to be uprooted, or their lives disrupted, and rendered vulnerable to harassment and the permanent threat of insecurity.

Intellectuals and political organisers came into the lives of the women
of Phokeng for the first time during this second era of crisis--for the ANC and the Federation of South African Women (FSAW) were both prominent in trying to mobilise people against removals and the pass laws respectively in the 1950s. What until then had been personal and inner experiences, became the object of the concern of black intellectuals, politicians, and social organisations. How did the consciousness of "ordinary people" connect up with the ideologies of social movements, given the degree of crisis the women of Phokeng were experiencing? The ANC and the FSAW had varying degrees of success, at least amongst this cohort. The experiences of deprivation and hardship, removal and oppression, even when accompanied by powerful ideas about good and evil, did not translate themselves into acts of resistance easily. The culture of subterfuge was not automatically translated into a culture of protest. Oppression, of course, does not always and automatically lead to resistance. We may divide the responses of the women of Phokeng into three different categories.

Consciousness Transformed

The first was the most conservative response. The women displaying this response did not accept their own repression willingly. Nowhere do we find a full internalisation of subordination—a "Sambo" personality—amongst the women of Phokeng. But for some women, overt resistance was either too dangerous or too futile to engage in. One woman in this group actually took part in one or two early acts of resistance and was severely disillusioned by their defeat. Others talked of their great fear of the law, the government, the police; of how "it is useless for the people to go on strike against the laws, you cannot fight against the law". Added to the brute power of the state was in some cases the power of paternalism. Some were trapped in close and controlling relationships with domestic employers who sought to prevent them from resisting. But their resilience and defiance continued on a personal level—many of them left the city for Phokeng, expressing disgust and resentment at the way they had been treated. In the new Nationalist order, there would be, they felt, little place for the urban, respectable, independent woman, doing her washing or hawking her vegetables, living in inner townships near the white suburbs where piece jobs could be obtained. Pass registration and removal to distant Orlando or Meadowlands would put an end to that. And since, in one woman's words, "the white man cannot be defeated, he is the God of the earth", retreat rather than confrontation was the most sensible option.

A second was what you might call the "fellow traveller" response. These women expressed solidarity with and support for the social movements that were active--but did not actually take part in campaigns. One such woman had in fact remained in domestic service and not gone to the
townships, but the enlightened paternalists by whom she was employed actually engaged in a debate with her about the pass campaign, and did not exert the kind of control which other servants experienced. Still, her location in the suburbs cut her off from any direct identification with the problems of township people, and she confined her support to the symbolic realm, saying:

"We were essentially rural people with strong ties to our background, while they [the resisters] had chosen to be townspeople and had thus severed their ties with their rural origins... They had to [resist]. They were determined to live with their children where they worked, so they had a right to secure a future with their children."

The third group—the actual militants, people like Mrs Molefe, had not in fact cut off all ties with the rural areas; but they did live in townships, and had perhaps visions of their children, if not themselves, settling in town. It is amongst these women that we find people who had all the ingredients required for a transformation in consciousness. It is important to identify these ingredients if we are to understand this transformation fully. Firstly, these were, of course, women with a background in a society in which female assertiveness had become common, and in which women had acquired skills and strengths which would stand them in good stead in the townships. Secondly, they had a vested interest in the township life they lived, and thus an interest in protest—for their means of earning an income were being undercut and their stability and security attacked. Thirdly, they had a moral vision of themselves as respectables which was being undermined by a racist Afrikaner nationalism which rendered all Blacks equally inferior. Fourth, they had an association with a culture of subterfuge in which experiences of prison were common, and the police were cast as the enemy and as the embodiment of evil, making opposition to their actions—even if they involved imprisonment—both possible and legitimate. And finally, they had a base in the places—the townships of the Rand—where the discourses of protest were being promulgated most enthusiastically. It was both likely that such women would become resisters, and possible for organisations to reach their hearts and minds, to capture their consciousness because they were on the spot. Because they were neither in domestic service, with its long hours of entrapped labour and paternalistic ideology; nor in factory labour, with its equally rigid work demands, moreover, they had one thing the other women lacked—time. They received pamphlets, which their literate backgrounds allowed them to read and understand; went to meetings where they heard charismatic leaders give speeches; and took part in marches and campaigns where the movement’s ideology was reinforced and its hold upon them strengthened—through songs, clothing, slogans and common experiences of hardship and repression. For them, the township culture of subterfuge was transformed into a culture of protest. Parochial small-scale problems were
linked to national demands. The self was transformed and linked to other “selves”, in the evolution of the idea of “solidarity”. Fears of the police were transcended by the courage of the “Mayibuye women”. And the earlier stories of terror and persecution provided a legitimization for the evolution of a wider vision of social transformation. Now the evil could be exorcised by participating in the cleansing rituals of nationalist protest.

It is against this background that we need to recall the beginning of this paper—where Mrs Molefe’s statements of belief in the struggles of the 1950s were set out. It may now be obvious that not everything Mrs Molefe said she believed in was a mechanical reflection of the ANC viewpoint. The ANC’s essential rationalism would prevent it from portraying potatoes as embodying human evil, from recommending the bewitching of Verwoerd; or from advocating the kind of ethnic hostility which Mrs Molefe expressed towards other groups. Her consciousness may have been transformed—but this took place through an interaction between her own existing beliefs and those of the ANC, rather than through the complete colonisation of her mind.

Still, her transformation in consciousness was sufficient to cause Mrs Molefe to attribute a broader significance to her life story. She gives a clear sense of her belief that she personally played a part in history. She remembers how, when she finally applied for a pass, in 1963, after years of resisting it, the black clerk at the desk said to her: “Granny are you applying for the first time? People here have long been applying for passes. Where have you been?” And she replied to him:

“Mayibuye Afrika. I also took part in that struggle so that you could work as a clerk in the office like this one. I was not satisfied to see Boers only in the offices... Now that you are an office clerk you are going to be my mouthpiece. I do not think you could be sitting on that chair if it were not because of our efforts”.

It was people like Mrs Molefe who formed the backbone of the ANC of the 1950s. It was not a movement of the poorest and most recently and brutally dispossessed classes. Their movements, like James Mpanza’s squatter movement, were more millenial and charismatic in character.8 The ANC was based upon the more “respectable” strata of the townships—recently and only partially urbanised people, those who valued education, hard work, motherhood and social upliftment, even if they were themselves in working-class and “informal sector” occupations. South Africa’s largest women’s protest campaign ever, the 1950s anti-pass

campaign, was more about these things than about absolutes such as undiluted class, race or gender oppression. Of course we have seen how Mrs Molefe had been part of a cohort which showed assertiveness, which tried to redefine their own femininity. But the radicalism which women like her displayed came reluctantly, and from the extreme pressure their values were put under by the emerging and increasingly totalitarian apartheid state. It need hardly be pointed out that that state, incidentally, is now reaping the whirlwind of its brutal destruction or repression of this eminently respectable, and even cooptable, class.

The whole experience of the 1950s ultimately forced women like Setswammung into finally deciding about their relationship to the city. Were they to be permanent or temporary? Weakened as the Bafokeng economy was, it was still viable enough for the women to go home—itself perhaps a form of protest against what was happening in the city, as well as an unintentional legitimation for the emerging “homeland” of Bophuthatswana. Like Mrs Molefe, many of the women began to build houses back in Phokeng, and articulated a strong sense that the city was indeed both undesirable and unwelcoming in these new circumstances. They rediscovered, or recreated, an ideology of being Mofokeng, of being Tswana, of being rural people, and it was in Phokeng that they lived out their old age, grateful to have avoided some of what they saw as the horrors of township life, particularly under apartheid; living in the homes they had built, on meagre state pensions; looking after their grandchildren, and still gaining spiritual satisfaction out of attending church. The moment of protest passed, sadly leaving its mark more upon South Africa’s history and collective memory, and upon Mrs Molefe’s stalwart personality, than upon what was then the unstoppable juggernaut of apartheid.

What does Mrs Molefe’s story allow us to conclude about the nature of popular consciousness? Her story makes it impossible for us accept any derivationist theory of consciousness—one in which it is “derived” from other factors. In the first place, it cannot be derived from historicist assumptions. The case clearly shows how consciousness is not simply inherited from the past, but is subject to constant historical modifications and adjustments. The Bafokeng in general, and Bafokeng women in particular, embraced Christianity at first, an act which transformed their world views and which gave women a moral lever over the chiefs and patriarchs who controlled them. In later times, the women embraced new discourses—about propriety, motherhood, the family, the township, other ethnic groups and so on—which reflected more of what they had become as urban-dwellers than their so-called “inherited” Bafokeng characteristics.
It is not as if their past experiences had no effect at all upon their later consciousness. In fact the argument has been to emphasise the role of the past in influencing the present. It is rather that old discourses survive only when they are relevant and appropriate to new situations, and even then they may take new forms or be used for new purposes each time they are resurrected. While on the farms to be a "respectable" Mofokeng daughter might refer to one's educational attainment, dutifulness to one's parents, or parents in law, and devout Lutheranism, in the city this definition might undergo subtle changes, and come to refer to one's distinctiveness from "disreputable" people, one's adequacy as a mother, one's capacity to earn enough to keep the family at a suitably elevated level—and even, in the case of the resisters, one's willingness to oppose unjust laws. Back home in Phokeng in their old age, this definition of respectability changed once more. Elements from one's past life may persist, but never without such modifications, so that past symbols come to attain present-day meanings.

Secondly, Mrs Molefe's story also calls into question any notion that consciousness may be derived from an understanding of the nature of the social movements within which it is mobilised. We cannot see Mrs Molefe as having somehow been created by the ANC or the Federation of South African Women—the organisations to which she gave her allegiance. She created herself, within the context of her history and society; the ANC came later. Of course it mobilised her, conscientised her, and ultimately even transformed her. But it was able to do so only partially; and only because she was ripened for the picking by a whole host of other experiences and meanings which she gave to her life, as well as her particular circumstances in Alexandra. And even then, her ideology never reflected that of the organisation in mirror-like fashion. Social movements cannot exist unless there is a social base with some compatibility with them, something to which they speak. New ideas are only seized contingent upon other factors. Organisations make overt what may have been covert all along. They are but the tip of the iceberg of consciousness.

Thirdly, we cannot derive consciousness from an analysis of the nature or scale of oppression. Militancy is far from being the natural and inevitable product of oppression, of whatever sort. Where it appears it needs specific explanations; where it does not, the configuration of what consciousness is must be explored. In the case of Mrs Molefe, what is striking—particularly to the Southern Africanist used to attributing all revolt to a sense of absolute suffering—is the fact that it was more her relative than her absolute deprivation that was the trigger for her becoming militant—the prospect of a challenge to her independence, her household, and the relatively respectable life style she had been living. It was the possibility that her life strategy might be blocked, and that she might fall below a level which she perceived as her moral limit, that horrified her. But even this fear did not necessarily lead all township dwellers into militancy. In order to be successfully drawn into protest they had also
to be available to be mobilised, to be free of paternalistic constraints, to have time, to be psychologically predisposed to assertiveness, and many other things. There is no mechanical lever which, when pushed, produces a resistant consciousness amongst ordinary people.

Growing out of the more mechanistic notions of the determination of consciousness are two further common fallacies. The first is the idea that poor black South African women suffer from “triple oppression”. They suffer as Blacks, as women and as workers. The second is the notion, growing out of the more Stalinist varieties of Marxism, that consciousness that fails to attain perfection is somehow “false”, immature or underdeveloped; all resistance may be interpreted in a “hierarchy” of significance. But both of these are difficult to accept as ways of understanding Mrs Molefe’s world view. We cannot reduce such aspects of her being as her Christianity, her motherhood, her assertiveness, her respectability, her commitment to marriage, her ethnic chauvinism, her nostalgic nationalism or her sense of being a Mofokeng, simply to one or other of the three given, and highly oversimplified, variables. And nor can we place them in a hierarchy. All of these things contributed to her willingness to resist the imposition of apartheid, and cannot be in some way subtracted from the sum we do to assess her consciousness. And if we just regard her consciousness in terms of its deficiencies—was she a “real” feminist, how far short did she fall of “real” class consciousness—we risk never understanding what really motivated her at all.

Thus, we cannot deduce consciousness from other factors. We cannot derive it mechanically, from the unmodified application of theories which claim universality. Analysing consciousness is a matter for empirical research, and the adaptation of theories to the particular, in this case African, context. To discover its mainsprings involves mobilising a whole range of methodological, historical and sociological concepts and devices. The argument here is that these mainsprings are to be found in one core area; that of the evolution of life strategy. Mrs Molefe’s consciousness was born during the process of development of her complex strategy for life, which was examined as it unfolded, in relation to history, structure and experience. We can divide the various strands of her early consciousness (before the ANC experience) into her sense of herself as a Mofokeng, as an African, a Christian, a woman, a migrant, a junior and a potential wife. Each of these strands evolved over time, and their evolution was affected by where she thought she was going—what her life strategy actually was—whether she was capable of going there, as well as the outside ideas available to her. Her “peaks” of consciousness relate to rebellions against enormous challenges, by both township life and the apartheid state, to the “self” which had thus been created.

Clearly, examining something like a life strategy cannot be undertaken without a very intimate understanding of local particularities, of African social and political structures, of history and of experience. It requires an
epistemology that both recognises the presence of social structures—such as the family, the economy, education, religion and the like, within which someone like Setswamung was socialised—but which also allows room for human thought and its effect upon behaviour. It requires a research method sensitive to the maps of meaning of ordinary people—the kinds of tools of research used more often by phenomenologists and social anthropologists than by positivistic sociologists.

Because social consciousness cannot be explained by derivation, by reference to a few “universal” variables, or by the administration of a structured questionnaire, the discipline of sociology itself must be challenged before we can go deeper into the question of consciousness. For sociology tends to be structuralist, a-historical and positivist—particularly in African settings. Its very origins are in the industrial revolutions of the Western World, and it has not transplanted easily to Third World countries. Indeed its main manifestation there appears to be in the form of the essentially Eurocentric theories of “underdevelopment” and their effects. And yet we can best explain Setswamung Molefe’s consciousness by moving away from these things, while avoiding, of course, the clichés of a populist Third Worldism. To this end, this paper has sought a balance—between structure and agency; between economic history and African studies; between Marxism and phenomenology; between sociology and social anthropology. It thus seeks to suggest that African sociologists have an important task ahead: to humanise and to Africanise the intellectual and methodological foundations of their discipline.

Department of Sociology, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1991.