Luka Jantjie, Galeshewe and Toto – their little known story of courage and bravery in defence of their people, land and livelihoods.

There is a large of body research and scholarly material on the subject and related matters, but what is sadly not easily available is a popular history of these events.

By Chris Matlhako
This year marks the centenary of the infamous 1913 Natives Land Act, which enacted a racist legal framework for further entrenching a protracted process of land dispossession, which began in earlier periods of European settler expansion into the interior of modern day South Africa and annexing the land of indigenous peoples. Land tenure and related matters have become an important socio-economic and political policy matter. Much of what would later become the Republic of South Africa was conquered, claimed, or settled by whites between 1830 and the 1880s.

The wall-to-wall history of colonial and apartheid conquest and its devastating consequences on African indigenous polities (land dispossession, imbalanced tenure, forced wage labour, etc.) must be contextualised properly and told in its entirety. We are aware also that there exist notions elsewhere presenting ‘the disputed land’ thesis, whose basis is to dispute conventional history and settlement patterns that have resulted in modern day SA. This thesis emanates from a particular set of historical perspectives which perpetuate decades-old imbalances in land tenure. Therefore, a comprehensible historical account of modern day SA has to be made accessible for broader engagement and debate beyond academia.

Forced wage labour, together with racist legislation, contributed to the worsening socio-economic conditions for the formative African farmer. Large tracts of government-controlled land were thrown open for purchase by whites only. Whites only legislatures passed laws designed to put pressure on African-indigenous landowners to evict them as tenants. This process reached its peak in 1913, when the racist South African government passed the Natives Land Act, which limited African land ownership, whether communal or freehold, at first to 7% and later to 13% of South African territory. African-indigenous peoples could also not be tenants or share-croppers.

The significance of the Langeberg ‘Rebellion’

The story of the Langeberg ‘Rebellion’ and the brutality dispensed during and thereafter, as part of the process of annexing lands and teaching the African indigenous population a lesson or two, must be told from the perspective of those who resisted with the odds heavily stacked against them, and despite these obvious disadvantages fought bravely and courageously with honour and dignity. This situation was further compounded with the discovery of diamonds in the area and the confrontations with the Boer South African Republic (Transvaal) 1858 war. Swanepoel and Mnqolo assert that; ‘... the history of the Bathaping is a classical example with which to analyse the complexities of the South African wars of resistance’. The Bathaping in the Griqualand West area, are said to be the first victims of the extension of colonial rule following the discovery of diamonds and minerals. The process of industrialisation in southern Africa was to be based on two crucial aspects: land annexation and ‘native administration’.

Kevin Shillington writes that violence (a feature of the process of land annexation and subjugation of indigenous peoples) was a political tool always available in the constant tension between ruler and the ruled. “Colonialists took it for granted that if the colonised did not submit to them, then force could be legitimately employed”. Cecil John Rhodes’ British South Africa Company conducted brutal campaigns of land annexation around the 1890s, annexing Lobengula’s Ndebele in what is now eastern Zimbabwe. Coupled with the deadly rinderpest disease outbreaks, colonialists were able to subdue indigenous Africans into culling herds and indirectly forcing them into a wage labour system.

Indeed a better understanding of South African history can inform and illuminate debates. The important intercession of historian Kevin Shillington’s Luka Jantjie, resistance hero of the South African frontier is indeed timely and picks up on previous works he has so diligently laboured on to provide a brilliant account of the primary organisations of resistance in the region, their leaders and the implications for SA. A scholarly piece, it elucidates the place and role of Luka Jantjie as an important historical figure during the anti-colonial resistance wars (in respect of the Langeberg ‘Rebellion’), and thus deserves reverence and mention in South African history. However, other primary records and key materials can be found in places like the African Library and the McGregor Museum in Kimberley.

The compelling story of Luka Jantjie, Galeshewe and Toto (individually and collectively) is important for a range of reasons and must be made accessible to a wider audience, as part of the history of anti-colonial struggles and wars of resistance waged by African peoples against the invading colonial force.

In fact as Shillington puts it; “... they were affected particularly radically by the first mineral revolution following the
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discovery of diamonds in Griqualand West in the late 1860s. The peculiar significance of their story is that they were caught in the eye of the storm of white accumulation earlier and more directly than most and suffered quite rapid spoilation of resources and ecological and economic decline”.

It is in this context that the courageous war of resistance by the Batlhaping and Batlharo - southernmost Tswana polities - should be seen. This epic story of huge historical and socio-political importance and relevance aptly captures the protracted processes of forceful land dispossession, the disarticulation of the African indigenous peoples’ aspirations to claim their rights in their own country and the brutality of an invading settler colonialist force. Land dispossession and the aspirations of the dispossessed, including land-hunger, continue till today and are reflected in various ways.

Jantjie was bitterly opposed to the White settler colonialist. Together with Galeshewe and Toto, he rebelled against British colonial rule and after some initial defeats, most of the surviving ‘rebels’ under Jantjie retreated into the Langeberg Hills. There they withstood a six month siege, before being defeated. The attack on Gamasep took place on 30 July 1897 and the Langeberg ‘Rebellion’ ended on 3 August. Following the death of over 1,500 men, Batlhaping positions were over-run by about 2,000 colonial troops, and the surviving rebel leaders were arrested or executed.

The southernmost Tswana societies had the misfortune to occupy land in the vicinity of Kimberley, where they bore the brunt of the forces generated by the diamond-mining industry, as well as experiencing pressures both from merchants using long-established trade routes from the Cape to the north and from Afrikaner farmers expanding in a westerly direction from the original settlements in the Transvaal republic. Progressively, they were subjected and impoverished. Much of their land lay inside the boundaries of Griqualand West, as annexed by Britain in 1871.

After 1880, when it was incorporated in the Cape Colony, the colonial government corralled the African inhabitants into reserves, thereby freeing land for white speculators. The De Beers mining company acquired no fewer than 400,000 acres. Transvaal farmers meanwhile were penetrating the territory between Griqualand West and the Molopo River, playing off one set of southern Tswana chiefs against another in the pursuit to encroach and claim more land.

Although much of what would later become the Republic of South Africa was conquered, claimed, or settled by whites between the 1830s and the 1880s, most blacks living in these territories did not feel the full effects of conquest until some decades later. In fact, African-run farms generally thrived until the 1880s, producing more tax revenue and food for market than European-owned farms did during this period. In later decades, however, the diamond (from 1870) and gold (from 1880) revolutions, as well as growing white settler control over the region’s governments, ultimately created a situation in which Africans were increasingly unable to live off the food they grew on their own farms. As a result, most Africans were forced to rely on wage labour to make up the difference.

White settler invasion of the interior of southern Africa

Until the 1830s, white settlement in southern Africa was almost entirely confined to the area of the present day Western Cape. Over the course of the following decades however, whites consolidated their control over the Ciskei in the Eastern Cape and pushed their settlement and land claims into what were to become Natal, the Orange Free State, and the Transvaal. Soon in all these regions, the consequences for African peoples were the same: the loss of the great majority of their lands, confinement to increasingly overcrowded reserves and later with the discovery of minerals, a growing dependence on wage labour.

Historians write that the Langeberg ‘Rebellion’ was most probably one of the most profound wars of resistance, waged towards the end of the nineteenth century in the southern subcontinent. The onset of European colonialism (and Boer encroachment, including abducting young children to labour in agricultural fields) brought about a systematic process of land dispossession as the governing forces, with superior military fire power set out to conquer more land for agriculture and eventually, minerals.

The settler expansionist forces were at various points met by resisting African peoples, and subsequent resistance wars waged by these courageous fighters with rudimentary weapons of war changed the face of South Africa and contributed towards the complexities that would characterise the future South Africa.

Langeberg reserve, officially designated in 1886, was one of the largest blocks of reserve land in the colony. It enclosed the whole of the northern Langeberg: almost fifty kilometres north and south and stretching east of the mountain range by forty kilometres to the Gamogara River. The Batlharo, who inhabited the land, were not surveyed for several years and suffered little if any interference. Thus, they were able to hunt freely and graze the vast expanse of fertile soils, from the northern Langeberg, Koranna Berg and the lower Kuruman valley, as far as modern day borders of southwest Botswana and Namibia.

On the 27 November 1896, seventeen head of cattle, six of which were infected with rinderpest, strayed out of the Taung Reserve and were shot. This incident precipitated the Langeberg Rebellion.

On 16 November 1895 the Cape Colony annexed the former Crown Colony of British Bechuanaland. In December and January 1896, barely a year later, revolts erupted

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in the territory, took root in the following months in its Langeberg Mountains, and were finally suppressed in August 1897 after an arduous and costly campaign. These revolts are jointly known as the Langeberg Rebellion8, write Saker and Aldridge. Furthermore, they argue;

One of the several important African rebellions which occurred in the southern subcontinent in approximately the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Langeberg Rebellion is perhaps alone in having been completely ignored by scholars and writers. This is unfortunate because, in addition to its more obvious historical interest, the Rebellion is a valuable field of study for students of primary resistance movements in Africa9.

Joining forces in the Langeberg Mountains, Batlhaping and Batlharo resisted a large government force for six months. The reason for their resistance was based on the long-standing grievances of the Batlhaping and Batlharos in the region. These seem to have arisen mainly out of competition for land and the concomitant white administration. There was acute distrust of the Cape Colonial government, fears of loss of land, and anxiety concerning threats to their growing involvement in a market economy.

Finally the consequences of a rinderpest epidemic coupled with dynastic politics appear to have tipped the scales in favour of rebellion. For example, Galeshewe had refused to countenance the shooting policy. He took the view that the cattle had often died of disease in the past and he saw no reason to hasten the slaughter by shooting healthy cattle10. The land and cattle were both culturally and economically very important commodities and resources for the people. Vital though agriculture was to the economy of most the population, it had less importance in their eyes than cattle-keeping. Cattle not only provided milk, meat and skins but constituted a form of capital that could be accumulated and which would increase itself. Cattle had a critical social value in these polities. The annexation and encroachment presented the most direct attack on their livelihoods, as well as challenging the existing tribal authority, law and jurisdiction.

Shillington makes the point about the significance of the Langeberg Mountains to the people who settled, when he says; “[T]he colonial authorities of the 1880s and early 1900s considered the Langeberg ‘the most lawless part of the territory’ but from the Batswana perspective, it was far from lawless, it was merely remote from exploitative colonial law. And it was this, combined with Toto’s defiant attitude that would have attracted a man like Luka Jantjie”11.

In this period the colonial powers ensured taxes were more effectively gathered, further land was expropriated, cattle that strayed from the locations were impounded and more game was exterminated. This created a desperate situation for the population and many of them looked to their chiefs for answers. The southern Tswana, in the face of African kingdoms conquest, faced growing impoverishment, and turned to their traditional leaders. Several of them began to vent anger against local storekeepers and to tear down beacons marking their reserves. Rumour and fear filled Bechuanaland. Then in 1886 the authorities ordered the shooting of cattle to prevent the spread of rinderpest. Full-scale rebellion broke out.

The eight-month Langeberg campaign was launched to wipe out any African opposition to the colonial regime. The chiefs who led the ‘rebellion’ – Toto, Luka Jantjie and Galeshewe – were captured. Jantjie was beheaded and the others imprisoned. To the north, Montshiwa stayed out of the hostilities, but his followers were confined to smaller reserves and subject to the demands of the Cape government. The last remnants of southern Tswana independence had effectively been removed. Kgosi Galeshewe was captured in 1878 following an attack on Cornforth Hill near Taung, a raid in which Francis Thompson and his nephew were savagely murdered, and was subsequently sentenced to twelve years imprisonment for his part in the uprising. In 1897, during a rinderpest outbreak, he again clashed with the police and military at Phokwane near Hartswater. As a result, he was imprisoned for his part in what became known as the Langeberg ‘Rebellion’. He died at Magogong, north of Hartswater, in 1927.

Together with Galeshewe and Toto, Jantjie rebelled against British colonial rule and after some initial defeats most of the surviving ‘rebels’ under Jantjie retreated into the Langeberg Hills. There they withstood a six month siege, before being defeated.

The leaders were captured and Jantjie was beheaded while Toto was imprisoned on Robben Island, where he died. According to the Cape Argus of Wednesday the 25th of August 1897, in the aftermath of the battle, even though he died with courage and honour, Luka Jantjie’s body was treated abominably. It was reported that Luka Jantjie’s back was broken, and that the mutilated body was treated with great disrespect (www.mahala.co.za/culture/the-last-stand-of-a-south-african-hero).

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Jantjie’s death marked the collapse of the Tswana resistance. About 4,000 Tswana men, women and children were taken captive and sent to the Western Cape to work as unpaid labourers for local white farmers.

Galeshewe, Toto and Jantjie played pivotal roles resisting the increasing White (colonial-settler) authority land incursion, myriad of taxes and rinderpest control – which were measures to create obstacles to African peoples’ lives advancement and dismantle their way of life, which later was to be inserted into wage-labour system with the discovery of minerals.

Langeberg – stronghold of ‘native lawlessness’, is perhaps one of the most critical resistance chapters, given the determined intent on the part of the British colonialsists (both in Cape Town and its representatives in the area) to apprehend Galeshewe, and the subsequent closing of ranks between the Batlhaping and Batharo in the face of attempts to sew divisions and dissention in their ranks. The colonialists had the intention to close down the reserve and confiscate the Langeberg reserve and initiate a final confrontation with that most defiantly obdurate and unwilling colonial subject, Kgosi Luka Jantjie. However, it is reported that Jantjie, on the other hand, held the view that he and his people had only been acting in self-defence.

Besides a few places named after these warriors, their (individual and collective) contribution is not understood in the same vein as the other historic events, such as the 1906 Bambatha Rebellion among others. This anomaly must be corrected and a popular series of this history covering the entire tapestry of our peoples’ lives must be made available in a variety of forms and platforms, not only in scholarly and research forms. The mentioning and observance of Anglo-Boer wars and other important battles, must connect to these important chapters of our heroic peoples’ resistance and battle against colonialism and its rapacious manifestations in the earlier periods of the making of modern day democratic South Africa.

There is a large of body research and scholarly material on the subject and related matters, but what is sadly not easily available is a popular history of these events, which could form a sound basis for both appreciating our history and enhance our collective efforts towards nation-building.

Also, the naming of the soon-to-be opened university in 2014, in Kimberley (the Northern Cape) after Sol Plaatje is another such significant development, whose implications could allow us to take steps to further advance the project of constructing a coherent new non-racist, non-sexist and democratic South African nation. Plaatje himself wrote numerous accounts detailing the precarious conditions his people faced and their struggles in that period. This heritage and focus is indeed a veritable source for contributing towards a fully comprehensive history and heritage of the formerly oppressed peoples.

We argue that, it is in understanding the resistance wars waged against the marauding white colonial settlers by among others, the little celebrated and courageous men and leaders like Jantjie, Galeshewe and Toto, that we can get a good grasp of the imperatives for reversing the negative consequences of land dispossession and contribute towards nation-building, so that the country is able to transcend the emotive basis of the land and land question. Such stories deserve appreciation and should be told more broadly. The planned Sol Plaatje University in the area will be obliged to add this to its bouquet of study-offerings in order to continue to enhance our heritage and nation-building process.

Out of this, the emotive issue of land and land restitution in our democratic SA continues as a great challenge as the process of transformation and democratisation unfolds. Its complex interconnections and the interplay of the fundamental contradictions of race, class and gender are even more vividly expressed in this arena of engagement. However, in order for the process of transformation and democratisation to move forward, these challenges will have to be overcome and a just and equitable social-economic framework for addressing them must be drawn up and implemented. This will enable us to create an inclusive transformation and democratisation trajectory which will impact in a significant manner with the systemic contradictions of SA that still feature almost two decades into democratisation.

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