

'*Ma-guerrilla a nnete*: Umkhonto we Sizwe's "true guerrillas" and South Africa's liberation'

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In the early 1960s a group of approximately 50 boys or young men from a village called Dinokana in the Lehurutshe region (in what is today South Africa's North West Province) were sent to neighbouring Botswana, at the time still a British Protectorate. The elders of their community instructed them to leave so that they to be close to their exiled chief (who had recently been deposed by the white authorities in the aftermath of a rural uprising in the area) and to join the military wing of the African National Congress, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK). At the time they left, these young men (aged between 13 and 16) had just gone through initiation or were about to (according to recent research, joining MK became in some cases a substitute for initiation) and were looking after their families' cattle at grazing outposts near the Botswana border. They only spoke Setswana, had never been to school (hence could not read or write), and their worldview largely coincided with that of the village and the cattle post (although they knew of the nearby white town of Zeerust, most of them had never even been there). Thirty years later, on the eve of South Africa's transition to democracy, most members of the group, also known as *ma-guerrilla* or 'true guerrillas', returned home to their villages, bringing back with them nothing except for the families they built during their long absence, a period spent for the most part in ANC military camps in Tanzania, with spells in various socialist countries to undergo training. Using life history interviews, this paper traces the extraordinary life trajectories of a group of MK veterans and their families today living in Lehurutshe and explores the meaning(s) of liberation through the memories of those in the front line of the struggle against apartheid. The paper also reflects on the current social and economic marginalization of this group as well as the selective appropriation of their memories for political purposes in the post-apartheid context.