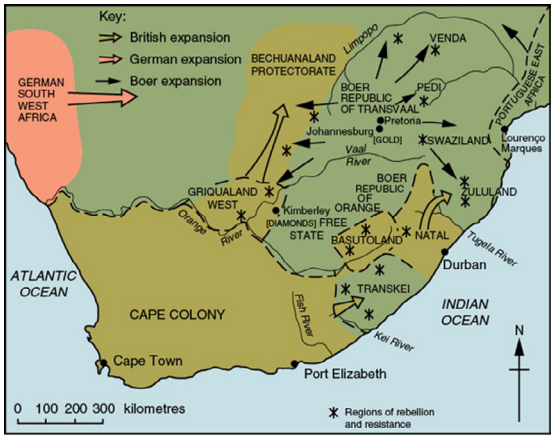
South Africa

Introduction

The subject of this lesson is the South African singer and activist Miriam Makeba. Makeba was born in Prospect Township outside Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1932. She was raised during the rise of Apartheid, a legal system of state-sponsored segregation run by South Africa's white-minority government. She started singing in her primary school's choir and, by 1960, had become so famous overseas that the Apartheid government canceled her passport and locked her out of her home country. Living in exile for the next three decades, between 1960 and 1990, Makeba recorded dozens of albums and toured the world as an internationally renowned singer. She became a spokesperson for Black South Africans overseas. During these years, she learned to use her voice as an artist and her platform as a celebrity to speak out against the injustices of the Apartheid regime in ways that were both subtle and overt. This work is at the center of our lesson.

Colonization and Resistance in South Africa

While no two African nations have quite the same histories of colonization and resistance, there is perhaps no nation whose colonial history is as peculiar as that of South Africa. By the time of the Berlin Conference in 1884–1885, white settlers had lived in South Africa for roughly 230 years. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to visit the region in the 1480s. However, they mostly bypassed South Africa because their intended destination was South and East Asia to trade for goods like silk, porcelain, and spices. When the Dutch followed over a century later, they saw South Africa as a strategic midway point between Europe and their new colonies in what we today call Indonesia. The Dutch East India Company established a provisioning station on South Africa's Western Cape in 1652. Over the next century and a half, the company's soldiers turned into settlers and developed their own distinctive culture. They created a dialect of Dutch that would come to be called Afrikaans and adopted the name *Boers*, a word meaning "farmer" in both Dutch and Afrikaans. Settlers known as *trekboers*, or "traveling farmers," then migrated eastward across South Africa. In the process, they fought, enslaved, and dispossessed indigenous peoples.



Map of South Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. This map shows the extent of British colonization, the Boer Republics of Transvaal and Orange Free State, German expansion in what is today Namibia, Portuguese expansion in what is today Mozambique, and various points of resistance by native South Africans, including Xhosa, Zulu, Tswana, and Sotho peoples.

Key Terms:

Miriam Makeba

South Africa

Apartheid

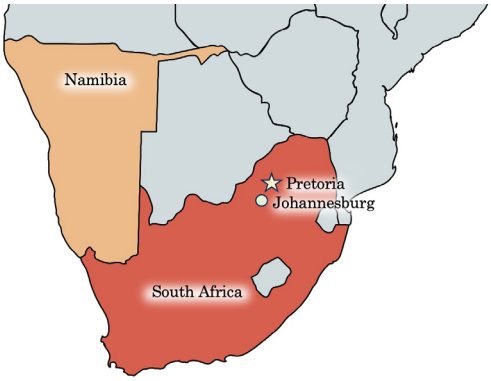
Sharpville Massacre

Come Back, Africa

United Nations Testimony, 1963

Miriam Makeba: My Story

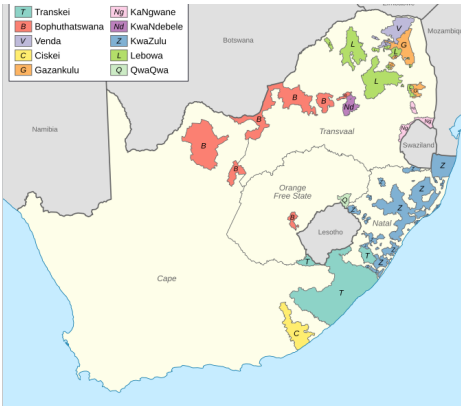
The Dutch were joined by the British at the end of the 18th century. By this time, India was becoming Britain's most profitable colony, so Britons settled in South Africa for the same reasons the Dutch had in the 1650s: to establish a waystation en route to Asia. Despite their shared European heritage, however, the Dutch and British did not coexist harmoniously. A generation of *Boers* known as the *voortrekkers*, or "front travelers," fled the British by relocating to northern plateaus where they established two republics called the Transvaal and Orange Free State. Then, when settlers discovered diamonds in that area in the late-1860s, a subsequent mineral rush brought the Dutch and British into two brutal conflicts called the Boer Wars. Eight years after these wars ended, in 1910, the Dutch and British set aside their differences and joined their four South African colonies into a single, white-settler nation with its capital at Pretoria. Called the Union of South Africa, or UOSA, the nation was initially subject to British law but declared independence in 1934.



Map of South Africa, showing the borders established in 1910 with the Union of South Africa .

The UOSA was a white-settler state based on the oppression of South Africa's non-white residents. In 1948, a hardliner white supremacist faction, known as the Nationalist Party, won political power and formally initiated the Apartheid government. An Afrikaaner word that translates to "apartness" or "separateness," Apartheid was not actually the start of segregation. Instead, what the Apartheid government did was institutionalize segregation as national policy. Like Jim Crow's (in the United States) "separate but equal," South Africa's Nationalist Party adopted a slogan of "separate development" and passed about 150 segregationist laws between 1949 and 1970. These laws treated Black residents of South Africa as colonized subjects rather than citizens entitled to equal rights. Laws governed all aspects of peoples' lives, from what jobs they could apply for to whom they could marry. Writing in 1971, the anti-Apartheid activist Steve Biko phrased it this way: "No average black man can ever at any moment be absolutely sure that he is not breaking the law. There are so many laws governing the lives and behaviour of black people that sometimes one feels that the police only need to page at random through their statute book to be able to get a law under which to charge a victim."

Segregated signs at a train station in Apartheid South Africa, before 1972.



Bantustans in South Africa as of 1994.

Like Jim Crow in the United States, South African Apartheid was first and foremost a legal system. The system was dense, but two laws formed its foundation: the Native Lands Act (1913) and the Group Areas Act (1950). The first law limited where non-whites could live in the country, while the second did the same for the cities. Although they constituted 80% of South Africa's population, non-whites were only permitted to live or own property on 7% of the land (raised to 13% in 1936). Initially, the government called these areas "tribal reserves." Later, they called them "homelands" and informally they were known as *Bantustans*. The remaining 87% of South Africa was reserved exclusively for whites. Because the cities were also reserved for whites, Black people were forced to live on their outskirts in poor, unsanitary, and unplanned communities known as townships.

Members of South African Native National Congress (SANNC) delegation to London in 1914: Thomas Mapikela, Walter Rubusana, John Dube, Saul Msane, and Sol Plaatje.

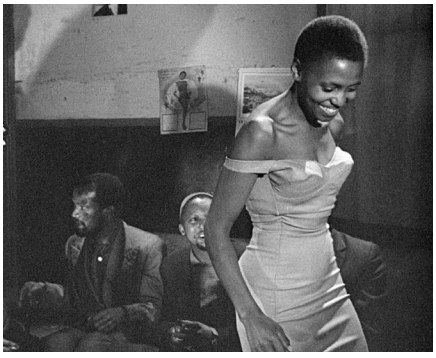
Of course, South Africans had resisted their oppression militarily since the first settlers arrived. By the turn of the 20th century, however, Europeans had "pacified" most indigenous kingdoms and warfare was much less feasible. Instead, a new class of men who had been educated under colonial rule took up the mantle of resistance. They formed a political party called the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) and worked "within the system" to lobby for reforms. Then, in 1952, everyday South Africans launched a campaign of radical, non-violent resistance. Like those who later served in the US Civil Rights Movement, members of the Defiance Campaign openly violated segregationist laws by staging sit-ins at white-owned restaurants and marching in white-only areas.

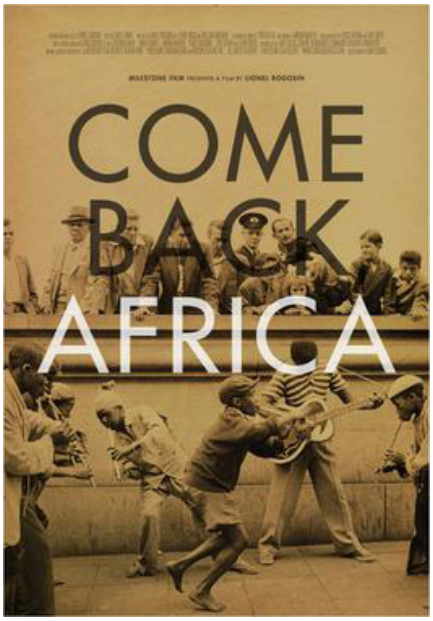
Painting memorializing the Sharpville Massacre in the South African consulate.

All of this changed in 1960 with an event known as the Sharpeville Massacre. When thousands of Black South Africans demonstrated peacefully at a police station, the officers reacted by opening fire on the crowd, killing 69 people and wounding another 180. The event shocked the world. Leaders issued public statements against the Apartheid government; Pretoria responded by defying UN directives, leaving the British Commonwealth, and cracking down on internal dissent. They banned the nation's Black political parties, detained 18,000 protesters, and passed a terrorism bill that empowered them to arrest anyone they deemed guilty of "treason." Determined to silence icons of the Black community, they also exiled a singer and rising star named Miriam Makeba.

The Artist as Activist

Miriam Makeba was born in a township outside Johannesburg in the midst of Apartheid. She began singing in the choir at Kilnerton Training Institute, the all-Black Methodist elementary school she attended in Pretoria. In or shortly before 1953, at the age of 21, she launched a professional music career. She sang American and South African songs with harmony and jazz bands based out of Johannesburg. In 1958, Lionel Rogosin, a US filmmaker who had been inspired by the Defiance Campaign, visited South Africa to direct an anti-Apartheid film entitled *Come Back, Africa*. After seeing Makeba perform in a local variety show, he asked her to sing in the movie. Makeba's only scene, just five minutes long, involved her playing herself and serenading a group of Black men at an underground bar. In 1959, Rogosin invited Makeba to attend the movie's premier at the Venice Film Festival in Italy. The trip was the first time she left the continent. It was also the last time she saw South Africa for over thirty years.





A still of Makeba performing in Lionel Rogosin's 1959 film, Come Back, Africa (above); and poster art for the film (below).

Makeba took on three identities in quick succession over the course of 1959 and 1960: a curiosity, a celebrity, and a criminal. As a curiosity, she discovered that most of Venice's residents had never interacted with an African woman, let alone a young and beautiful film star. Seeing her as different and non-threatening, they followed her in the streets, stared in fascination, asked to touch her hair, and even chanted "Africa" when she walked the red carpet. These experiences taught Makeba that much of her appeal outside of Africa would rest on her perceived "exoticism," and that she would be seen by whites as a representation of the entire African continent. These lessons were embodied in the early audiences she drew, comprised largely of white people and people studying Africa.

At the same time Makeba was becoming a curiosity, she was also becoming a celebrity. At Venice, it became clear that Rogosin had been using Makeba to promote *Come Back, Africa*. Although she only had a cameo in the movie, she was featured prominently in its trailers and marketing materials. Rogosin also told her that he had screened the film in the US, where her performance had attracted the interest of talk show hosts and nightclub owners. From Venice, Makeba flew to London, where she met Harry Belafonte, a Black American singer, actor, and civil rights activist. Belafonte offered to serve as Makeba's sponsor in the United States. Arriving there in November 1959, she appeared on the Steve Allen Show in Los Angeles and began singing nightly at New York clubs. Meanwhile, Belafonte secured her formal representation, tour dates, and a recording contract. By the time she released her first studio album in May, she was already becoming a household name.

Miriam Makeba featured on the cover of the 1967 issue of Time magazine. Makeba, who just released her critically acclaimed album Pata Pata, had become world famous by 1967.

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Finally, to her dismay, Makeba discovered that her rise as an international celebrity paralleled her designation as a criminal by the South African government. *Come Back, Africa* was critical of the Apartheid regime. As a result, it had to be filmed at night and Makeba's travels to the premiere had to be arranged in secret. Once Makeba was famous, however, it became impossible to conceal her activities. When she tried to arrange a trip back home to attend her mother's funeral in 1960, the authorities at the South African consulate in New York exiled her by canceling her passport. A few years later, they went even further by outlawing the importation and sale of her records.

Makeba testifying befor the UN General Assembly in 1964. She testified several times during the 1960s.

The Apartheid government had reasons to fear Makeba. Her climb to fame coincided with the rise of independence movements across Africa. Perceiving Makeba as a non-threatening representative of the continent, audiences naturally wanted to ask her about subjects like colonialism and racism. Makeba embraced this role while downplaying her importance and presenting herself as apolitical. This persona was its own kind of performance, a way of getting audiences to let their guards down so that they might be more receptive to her political ideas. The contradictions in this self-fashioning were on display in 1963, when Makeba first testified at the United Nation's Special Committee Against Apartheid. After imploring the UN to put sanctions and boycotts on Pretoria, she demurely assured the press in attendance that she was "just a singer" and "not a politician or a diplomat."

Makeba with her then-husband Kwame Ture, formerly Stokely Carmichael, and her grandson in Algiers, Algeria, 1969.

Even though Makeba sometimes protested Apartheid overtly, her resistance was often much more subtle. The more she traveled in the "West," the more she came to see that colonialism was upheld by a monolithic image of Africa, which she referred to as ideas taken "right out of a Tarzan movie." Embracing the role foisted on her as an ambassador for the continent, she turned her performances into opportunities to combat stereotypes by introducing her audiences to African culture in a joyful and nonconfrontational way. She explained that she did not want to alienate audiences by "hit[ting] them on the head with a hammer," but instead preferred to "inject a little message here and there, subtly if I can." Always intentional in her appearance, she blended Western and African aesthetics in ways that unsettled her audiences' preconceived ideas about what it meant to be "authentically" African. She liked to wear long, tight-fitting evening dresses with designs that played on the ways her audiences sexualized and exoticized her, including a leopard print dress she wore in the 1960s. Meanwhile, she maintained her individuality by wearing her hair natural and keeping it cropped short, even defying Belafonte when he tried to get her to straighten it early in her career.

Makeba performing at the seaside resort Deauville in France, July 20, 1991. Standing behind her is the iconic American trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie.

Makeba's work to refute Western stereotypes about Africans generally, and Pretoria's stereotypes about South Africans specifically, translated to her music. For example, she liked to introduce one song by announcing playfully that white people called it the "click song" because they could not say "Qongqothwane," its actual name. The song exposed audiences to native South African culture through the Xhosa language. Another one of her hits, "Pata Pata," was named after a popular dance at Johannesburg's nightclubs. Makeba modeled this dance as she sang and even paused during the interlude to explain its meaning. Later in her career, Makeba would record songs that were explicit indictments of the Apartheid government, the most famous of them being "Soweto Blues" in 1977. However, her musical critiques of Apartheid were more often veiled. One example is a Zulu song she performed in *Come Back, Africa* entitled "Lakutshon' Ilanga." On its face, the song is a ballad of a woman mourning the loss of her lover. Under the surface, the song's lyrics and melody invoke the dream of returning to a South Africa that had existed before European settlers arrived.

The War Abroad

South Africans line up to vote, 1994

Like Drif and Otieno, Makeba believed there was power in telling the story of her resistance in her own words. While still in exile in the late 1980s, she was interviewed at her home in California by an American journalist. Their conversations became the basis of *Miriam Makeba: My Story*, the first of Makeba's two autobiographies. Unlike Drif's and Otieno's memoirs, however, *Miriam Makeba* was written to encourage hope in the face of colonialism, not to celebrate its end.

The year after *Miriam Makeba* was published, the Apartheid government's defiant prime minister, a man named P.W. Botha, suffered a stroke and was forced to abdicate his office. His replacement was a more liberally minded politician named F.W. de Klerk. Caving to the weight of international sanctions, de Klerk dismantled Apartheid. He unbanned the ANC, released its leaders from prison, and started the nation's four-year transition to multiracial democracy. After 27 years in prison, Nelson Mandela walked to freedom on February 11, 1990. One of his first acts was to invite Makeba home. She arrived that June and remained until she passed away 28 years later.

Makeba being greeted by the Israeli politician Yaakov Uri on the tarmac of Ben Gurion Airport in Israel, 1963.

For three decades, Makeba's exile had paralleled the imprisonment of revolutionaries like Mandela back at home. All the while, Black people in white settler colonies like South Africa and Rhodesia (today Zimbabwe) never stopped their armed resistance. Even though Makeba was banished from the settler colony, she served these resistance movements from overseas by working on the front lines of their public-relations campaigns and propaganda arms. She showed Westerners through her recordings and performances that Africans had cultures that were under attack and worth protecting. As she explained in a confident interview she gave in Finland in 1969 (linked below), the war on Apartheid was only one battle in a much broader fight against anti-Blackness. Neither of these struggles were confined to the borders of a single nation. Rather, they played out in the global court of public opinion, where Makeba worked tirelessly as a lead prosecutor.

Explore More..

To see more of Miriam Makeba's appearances, check out the following videos:

- Makeba at the United Nations, New York , July 16, 1963
- Interview with Miriam Makeba, Finland, 1969

Further Reading

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Image Citations

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Cover art, Lionel Rogosin, *Come Back, Africa*, 1959, Milestone Films, Fair Use, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Come_Back_Africa_FilmPoster.jpeg
Still from Lionel Rogosin, *Come Back, Africa,* 1959, Fair Use.

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Cover, *Time Magazine*, 1967, Fair Use, https://medium.com/@kgaurav07/ooohe-makeba-makeba-ma-qu%C3%A9-bella-df47230e2dad
Miriam Makeba during her speech before the United Nations Special Committee on Apartheid, 1963, New York Public Library Digital Collections, Public Domain, https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/920ed940-5912-0130-ca8d-58d385a7b928

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Miriam Makeba, Kwame Ture, & others at a restaurant in Algiers, 1969, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Miriam_Makeba,_Kwame_Ture,_Algiers,_1969.png
Ronald Godefroy, Miriam Makeba and Dizzy Gillespie in concert, Deauville (Calvados, France), July 20, 1991, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Miriam_Makeba10.JPG

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Anti-Apartheid demonstration in Amsterdam, June 11, 1988, Dutch National Archives, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anti-apartheidsdemonstratie_in_Amsterdam_de_kop_van_de_demonstratie,_Bestanddeelnr_934-2645.jpg