Morrow, S., Brown, M., & Pulumani, L. (2004). *Education in Exile: SOMAFCO, The African National Congress School in Tanzania, 1978-1992.* Pretoria: HSRC Press. Pages: 230 Price: R160.00.

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"Anyone present will remember the scene in Freedom Square, Fort Hare, on 21 September 1992. A lorry from the port of Durban deposited a large container in the square. A knot of university dignitaries and others gathered around while a workman broke the seal with a crowbar. The doors swung open, there was a scatter of applause, and there was a pile of apparently unorganised papers and objects, with a typewriter balanced on top. The container seemed to exhale the breath of another time and place. These were the records of SOMAFCO, raw from Mazimbu."

Historian and educationist Seán Morrow, then Director of the Govan Mbheki Research Resource Centre at the University of Fort Hare, and history graduates Brown Maaba and Loyiso Pulumani, set themselves the daunting task of sorting through this material. The result is a broad survey of the accomplishments of SOMAFCO, the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College, set up by the African National Congress (ANC) at Mazimbu in Tanzania to accommodate the educational needs of young South Africans forced into exile during the apartheid era. The authors raise a number of fascinating issues in their brief but comprehensive overview, providing only tantalising glimpses into the difficulties, achievements, and the sheer extent of the SOMAFCO project. Any one of the topics covered in the course of the book "could be the subject of a lengthy separate study," something the authors say about their chapter on sources of funding (p. 158). Nevertheless, they have found a practical and efficient way to organize a mass of remarkable material and make it accessible for the richer and more detailed analyses that the material warrants. The writing is clear

and the approach is open; both the failures and the successes of the project are considered and discussed.

The book starts with an overview of SOMAFCO's *raison d'etre* and the writers begin to address some of the general and pedagogical concerns raised by the school. Opened in 1978, the project was a response to the mass exodus of students in the wake of the Soweto Uprising of 1976, when high school demonstrations against Afrikaans-medium schooling were violently suppressed. SOMAFCO helped to bridge the educational gap for students exiled by the growth and spread of anti-apartheid schools' demonstrations, and the later school boycott campaign of the 1980s. It also managed scholarships enabling many of the students to continue their post-secondary education abroad, and constituted a vision of promise and possibility for those still struggling against the Bantu education system back in apartheid South Africa. Built with considerable international support on land some 200 kilometres inland from Dar es Salaam, the complex developed into a self-contained compact community of 5,000 with a series of schools and a social service infrastructure. The complex also had an advanced agricultural unit to provide for some of its food requirements, as well as small furniture, clothing and leatherwork factories, and initially attempted to incorporate basic vocational training and production skills into the education of its students. The Dakawa Development Centre, built later as a reception centre for incoming and in some cases difficult students, housed a number of the vocational training schemes. The book deals in turn with each of the education facilities established at the complex, including the Charlotte Maxeke Children's Centre, the primary school, and the secondary school. But the secondary school was its real educational focus. Subsequent chapters cover a range of issues thematically, including the educational philosophy of SOMAFCO, the social life of the students, the relationship between SOMAFCO and its host country, the role of women at the complex, the Dakawa Centre, sources of support and funding, and the eventual demise of the project. With the release of Nelson Mandela

in 1991, the Batlagae Trust began to repatriate and integrate learners back into the South African education system. SOMAFCO closed in 1992, and much of the infrastructure left behind was absorbed into Tanzania's Sokoine University of Agriculture.

Many of the philosophical issues raised in the book are pertinent to current debates on the cultural and ideological nature of the education process. SOMAFCO was a school in exile, catering for exiles of a highly politically and ideologically motivated struggle, and the problems confronting it were enormous. Its remote location, dependence of outside aid, and deep seated problems inherited from its South African past exacerbated a number of enduring contradictions that SOMAFCO was never able to overcome. Yet it was also an extraordinary experiment in schooling, and at least potentially, a prime opportunity to create a truly democratic educational institution. It was home to the many exiled, sometimes orphaned, and often traumatized children of the anti-apartheid struggle, and the authors set out how, repeatedly, the staff found that they could not accommodate both the needs of their charges and their own aspirations for educational change. Likewise, inheriting years of the Bantu education system and its deficits in maths and science teaching was difficult to balance with new democratic classroom practises and the need to develop curriculum that provided relevant political and historical background to the current struggle. Another enduring set of problems arose from the anomalies in wealth the project's presence in rural Tanzania created. Local tensions inevitably developed between the young urbanite SOMAFCO inmates and their profoundly poor rural neighbours. Many long-term exiles had established families abroad, so the SOMAFCO community was in itself far from homogenous. Although priority was given to the wealth of skilled and trained South African exiles sympathetic to the ANC, there was still a crippling and perennial shortage of teachers. Many countries supportive of the anti-apartheid struggle—in Africa, Europe, North America, and elsewhere—supplied teachers and technicians, as well as equipment, and this added yet another dimension to the heterogeneous and locally discordant cosmopolitan

nature the SOMAFCO community. It also contributed considerably to the difficulties SOMAFCO had in developing and sustaining a pedagogic style and system in consonance with the principles of the ANC struggle for democratic freedom back in South Africa. The overarching aim of SOMAFCO, however, remained constant. As much as many youths longed to join the armed resistance wing of the ANC, Umkhonto we Sizwe, SOMAFCO was about developing the potential to bring about the new South Africa, once the struggle was won. To this end, the many teachers, administrators, and students that passed through the Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College committed their time and energies for over a decade, and the authors conclude with a retrospective assessment of the aims, achievements, and shortcomings of the enterprise.

Expatriates and the authors alike judge these achievements harshly. "The attempt to make a new educational system [may have failed] because what we were trying to do was impossible," says Patrick Mtshaulana, quoted on the final page of the book. Yet the example of the Freedom College, as set out here, provides some very thought provoking material for discussion both in university classrooms and among policy makers, inside South Africa and beyond. The authors see the SOMAFCO experience as being "a historical, not a policy study" because of its unique and specific context. Nevertheless, they point out, "in the current moves to align South African education with trends in other parts of the world...it would be regrettable if the experience of South Africans and their supporters...in the extraordinary experiment in Tanzania was to be overlooked." More than a container of papers was opened that day in Freedom Square. Morrow, Maaba, and Pulumani praise the commitment to openness demonstrated by the ANC in allowing free access to the unexpurgated records of the school complex. Hopefully, the debates raised by the existence of Solomon Mahlangu Freedom College and touched upon here will tempt a number of future scholars to explore the rich potential of the SOMAFCO papers now held in the archives of Fort Hare.