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SASO's Reluctant Embrace of Public Forms of Protest, 1968–1972

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Abstract

This article suggests that the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) began its life committed to a policy of non-confrontational protest and that – until 1972 – its leaders sought to prioritise strategies of negotiation over strategies of public protest. This general policy was confirmed in SASO's response to white student protests in 1968 and 1970, as well as in a series of discussion documents and General Council resolutions proposed in 1970 and 1971. This policy was, however, challenged by the events that took place at the University of the North following the expulsion of Onkgopotse Tiro in 1972. A wave of seemingly spontaneous student protest forced SASO's leaders to reconsider their apparent suspicion of public, confrontational forms of protest and reluctantly to accept the necessity of committing the organisation to such protests. I argue that this reluctant embrace was the product of contingent circumstances and pressures from below, rather than the result of an ideological or theoretical shift on the part of SASO leadership. This in turn suggests an alternate approach to the history of SASO, an approach that focuses less on a process of ideological development and more on the contingent details of its institutional history.

Key words: South African Students Organisation (SASO); black consciousness; student protest; public protest; confrontation; University of the North (Turfloop); Onkgopotse Tiro

This article describes the adoption of public forms of protest by the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) in the first period of its existence – that is, between 1968 and 1972. The first date represents SASO's formation; the second its third national General Student Council and the subsequent formation of the Black People's Convention (BPC) – an event which inaugurated a new phase in the history of the organised black consciousness movement.

This account is thus situated at the intersection of two bodies of literature: that of the political history of protest against the apartheid state, and that of the intellectual history of black consciousness ideology. In political histories, this period has generally been understood in terms

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of quiescence.¹ The protests of black students have been treated as relatively insignificant, at least in comparison with the events of June 1976 and after.² Insofar as black consciousness organisations feature in these accounts, they are primarily seen to have been important for their contribution to the organisation of political action in a later period.³

In contrast, histories of black consciousness have emphasised the development of the movement's core ideas.⁴ The early period of student organisation is thus often understood in terms of the increasingly tense relationship between SASO and the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). This period is seen as being transformed when – at its inaugural national convention, in July 1970 – SASO withdrew its recognition of NUSAS as the sole representative national student union, and announced its determination to act independently. The following years are then defined by SASO's combative relationship with liberalism, and its attempts to develop an ideology of black self-determination.⁵

Both these emphases have obscured SASO's attempts to develop new forms of public political action, and have thus emphasised its responses to other student organisations over its developing responses to the apartheid state and its lieutenants in their university administrations. Histories of black consciousness have also given excessive emphasis to the apparent consistency of SASO's ideologies. By examining the process through which it came to adopt public forms of protest, I seek not only to indicate the complexities of SASO's responses to both NUSAS and the apartheid order, but also to describe the ways in which contingent factors and events shaped the development of black consciousness ideology and practice in this period.

1. This is particularly notable in political survey histories, including: T. Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983). See also the five volumes of T. Karis, G. Carter and G. Gerhart, *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1883–1990* and in the three volumes of the South African Democracy Education Trust's (SADET's) *The Road to Democracy in South Africa*. The SADET project aims to rehabilitate the history of this period, but replicates much of its norms by focusing on underground and external organisations. Nonetheless, it does provide a more detailed history of the years between the banning of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Soweto uprising than most other surveys.
2. See, for example, the discussions of SASO in J. Kane-Berman, *Soweto: Black Revolt, White Reaction* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1978); B. Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash: The Soweto Revolt: Roots of a Revolution?* (London: Zed, 1979); Lodge, *Black Politics*; C. Bundy, 'Street Sociology and Pavement Politics: Aspects of Youth and Student Resistance in Cape Town, 1985', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 13, 3 (1987), 303–330.
3. This may be most visible in recent biographies of political leaders, including – but not limited to – N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (London: Little, Brown, 1994); E. Sisulu, *Walter and Albertina Sisulu: In Our Lifetime* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002); R. Mhlaba, *Raymond Mhlaba's Personal Memoirs: Reminiscing from Rwanda and Uganda, as Narrated to Thembeke Mufamadi* (Pretoria: HSRC, 2001), and others. In the absence of new academic histories, the narrative of the 'Struggle' presented in these biographies has come to stand as the default popular account of the period.
4. G. Gerhart, *Black Power in South Africa: The Evolution of an Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), S.C. Nolutshungu, *Changing South Africa: Political Considerations* (New York: David Philip, 1982), R. Fatton, *Black Consciousness in South Africa: The Dialectics of Ideological Resistance in White Supremacy* (Albany: SUNY Press 1986).
5. T. Karis and G. Gerhart, *From Protest to Challenge: A Documentary History of African Politics in South Africa, 1882–1990. Volume 5: Nadir and Resurgence* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1997); A. Mngxitama, A. Alexander and N.C. Gibson, *Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacy of Steve Biko* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

The Context of White Student Protest

Between 1968 and 1970, white student activists increasingly sought to organise and participate in public forms of protest. The visibility of the nine-day occupation of the University of Cape Town's (UCT's) administration building – to protest against the influence of the government in the university's withdrawal of its plan to appoint a black candidate, Archie Mafeje, to a senior lectureship in anthropology – had emboldened NUSAS's leadership.⁶ At the end of 1968, Neville Curtis (the new NUSAS president) announced that the coming annual conference would discuss the organisation's reorientation. At this conference, delegates agreed to consider expanding and clarifying NUSAS's political remit; in addition, they decided to consider further the adoption of confrontational forms of public protest.

An opportunity to do so occurred early in the following year.⁷ After the detention of Winnie Mandela and 21 others in February 1970, the Black Sash had embarked on a long series of public vigils; these were held every Monday, and were planned to continue until the detainees were either charged or released. At the start of May 1970, NUSAS decided to involve itself in support of these ongoing protests. Curtis called upon students to observe a 'national day of protest' on Monday 11 May.⁸ This coincided with the Sash's weekly vigil. This day was to be marked by a national 'student strike' – lectures should be boycotted, pickets manned, placards displayed, pamphlets distributed and a day-long public vigil held.

At the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), the student representative council (SRC) decided to extend the protest into the following week. On Tuesday 12 May, the president of the Wits SRC, Kenneth Costa, wrote to the Johannesburg town clerk to request permission to hold a public march on the following Monday, 18 May. Permission was in fact granted, so long as the march followed a specific route, was uninterrupted and disciplined, and 'any posters to be carried or displayed by marchers [should] be in good taste'. On Sunday, however, the acting chief magistrate for the district unexpectedly overruled this decision and forbade the planned march. The magistrate claimed to have 'reason to apprehend that the public peace will be seriously endangered by the assembly of a public gathering in a certain public place'. His notice did not describe this threat in any greater detail and – having also been delivered notably late on Sunday afternoon – left the SRC with little opportunity to argue against it.⁹

On the next morning – Monday 18 May – the SRC convened a public meeting on the campus and announced that the march had been prohibited. They asked the student body to pass a motion condemning this prohibition, and empowering 'a delegation to visit the Minister to protest against various aspects'. This did not appeal to many of the students; several stood to oppose the motion, and 'spoke vaguely about other action, without specifying what in particular they meant'. As the debate continued, some of the more radical students walked out of the meeting, congregated on the steps of the Great Hall, and gathered up a number of apparently pre-prepared posters

6. See F. Hendricks, 'The Mafeje Affair: The University of Cape Town and Apartheid', *African Studies*, 67, 3 (2008), 423–451; L. Ntsebeza, 'The Mafeje and UCT Saga: Unfinished Business?' (Paper given at History and African Studies Seminar Series, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 12 May 2009).

7. The following protests are barely discussed in the thin literature on white student protest in the period. For a recent (if brief) synoptic account, see M. Legassick and C. Saunders, 'Aboveground Activities in the 1960s', in SADET, *The Road to Democracy in South Africa* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2004), 661–689.

8. *NUSAS Newsletter*, 8 May 1970.

9. University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers (hereafter WHP), AK3166/11 (Raymond Tucker, Attorney), correspondence.

and placards. They decided to continue with the now-illegal march, thus risking a potential confrontation with the police.¹⁰

A large group of students fell in step behind them, and the march left the campus along the route originally prescribed by the town clerk. It continued peacefully until just outside the police headquarters, John Vorster Square – where the march had always been planned to end. Here, the police finally intervened and instructed the marching students to seat themselves on the street and pavements; all the students complied with this instruction. Their compliance, however, did not prevent the police from arresting them in large groups, harassing them, beating several, and finally – after some hours in detention – releasing them on their own cognisance. In all, 357 students, academics, and bystanders were arrested.

* * *

Both the march and the mass arrest received a great deal of attention in the national press. That weekend, the *NUSAS Newsletter* announced triumphantly that ‘the last week has been the most significant in the history of student protest in South Africa’. This statement was printed in capital letters across the publication’s front page. The accompanying article pointed out that the march had taken place ‘in defiance of prohibition’ and had resulted in ‘the first mass arrest of students (357) in the country’.¹¹ The size of this arrest was taken by NUSAS as a sign of the protest’s efficacy; it was also seen to attest to the ability of white students to disturb the unquestioned exercise of the state’s legal and extra-legal powers. The mass arrest, and the resultant press coverage, was thus claimed as a badge of honour.

Thus buoyed by the unexpected success of these protests – and flattered by the attentions of the state – the national executive of NUSAS attempted to capitalise on their examples. The publicity surrounding the march and the novelty of the mass student arrests seemed to provide the organisation with the opportunity to position itself firmly at the centre of oppositional student politics; it communicated with other student groups – including SASO, which had not yet formally broken with NUSAS – and challenged them to join the protest.

SASO’s Demurral

In response, Steve Biko – SASO’s president – circulated a statement to SRC presidents across the country, analysing the recent protests by white students and explaining both why SASO had not supported these, and why it would not support any future such protests.¹² First, he condemned the assumption – thought by SASO to be held by the NUSAS executive, and to have been communicated by their challenge – that black students should automatically support the protests of white students, even in this case, when the protests had been organised in support of black detainees. ‘We hold it as absolute arrogance,’ he wrote, ‘for any student leader from the privileged group to give a directive reading what black student leaders should do at times like these.’ He explained that the issue at stake in SASO’s refusal to participate was neither ‘whether the 22 are released or not’ nor ‘whether the Terrorism Act is repealed or not’ but a ‘far more basic

10. *Ibid.*, affidavits.

11. *NUSAS Newsletter*, 22 May 1970.

12. A significant biographical literature has developed around Biko: see, for example, D. Woods, *Biko* (London: Paddington Press, 1978), H. Bernstein, *Number 46 – Steve Biko* (London: IDAF, 1978), B. Pityana *et al.*, *Bounds of Possibility: The Legacy of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness* (Cape Town: Zed, 1990).

issue' – the 'disinheritance and dispossession' of black agency implicit in the ability of white student leaders to claim to represent and lead the struggles of black students. Biko insisted that SASO would act on its own behalf, at a time of its choosing, and in a manner of its choosing – and not at NUSAS's bidding.¹³

After establishing this fundamental point, Biko proceeded to develop a pointed critique of the proposed protests. He argued that protests aimed at pricking the collective conscience of the white electorate – and thus spurring them into taking action against the government, perhaps by voting it out of authority – were in themselves pointless: 'we do not recognise the South African "electorate" as it is presently constituted. Nor do we believe that they have any conscience that anybody can appeal to.' Next, Biko argued that any protest or campaign that limited itself to opposing only one aspect of the apartheid state – whether that be the Terrorism Act or the detention of the 22 – could never prove capable of dismantling that state. This type of protest, he suggested, 'focuses all strength on one item' and thus 'invariably leads to frustration'. Frustration would follow whether or not the protest was effective: if it did not succeed in changing that particular aspect of the state (as, more often than not, it would not), then failure would demoralise the participants in the protest and limit their future activities. If, however, a protest did succeed in changing the approach of the state – as was ultimately the case for protests against the detention of Winnie Mandela and the 21 others – then this would still leave the armature of the state intact, once again demoralising even this successful protest's participants and limiting their future acts.

It is worth noting that Biko's comprehensive dismissal of the relevance of NUSAS's targeted protests was not unprecedented. A similar critique of the 1968 UCT sit-in had been made during SASO's first formation school – a kind of political training and leadership retreat – held in December 1969. In the report of the proceedings of this session, the sit-in was described as a 'reactionary type of protest' that 'fails to change the situation' and thus 'leads people to believe that the value of protest is little'.¹⁴ It suggested that 'protesting at the fact that Mafeje's appointment has been cancelled is different from protesting against the erosion of academic freedom' and that the two were not necessarily compatible. Therefore: 'NUSAS must always differentiate between the specific and the general' in designing its campaigns of protest; unless it did so, the two would become tangled up and the failure of a protest to alter a specific issue would lessen the likelihood of a more general protest attracting support.

The terms of both this initial critique and Biko's slightly later variation were once again reiterated at SASO's first General Student Conference (GSC) held in July 1970. (At this same council, SASO withdrew its formal recognition of NUSAS as the pre-eminent student union.) The 67th motion discussed sought to define SASO's official opinion on 'the public protests and demonstrations being aimed at the white press and public'. The motion restated the organisation's sceptical treatment of these protests, and stated that they were 'deficient' because they 'did not involve a strategic and continuous attempt to change the status quo'. The motion recommended that black students not take part in such protests, 'particularly at this stage in South African politics and especially where student interests are not directly involved'. Instead, 'if protests are to be held', then black students should only choose to participate if these were 'directed primarily at the Black population' rather than at the white electorate; in addition, any organisation planning

13. WHP, A2675/III/744, Memo. Re: Recent Protest [1970].

14. *Ibid.*, Memo. Re: Critique of NUSAS [1969].

a new protest should first consider whether it should ‘possibly adopt a new form’. This new form of protest was not at this time to be specified.¹⁵

SASO’s Proposed Forms of Activism

SASO’s critique of NUSAS was not far removed from the terms of NUSAS’s own self-reflexive critique.¹⁶ Both were concerned with the extension of public activism beyond immediate protest and towards a general engagement with the political order of apartheid. Neither believed that isolated protests would lead to any significant political change. NUSAS responded by undertaking an internal reorganisation and re-orientating itself, attempting to broaden the contents of its protests beyond student matters; however, the forms of these protests – marches, picket and student strikes – were not to be challenged. SASO, on the other hand, believed that the forms of these protests needed to change – that public provocation was not sufficient to effect change. It did not yet have an alternative to offer and so – instead of risking the potential dilution of its message – SASO chose to withdraw from public forms of protest until such a time as a new form of activism could be developed.

The debate at the first GSC had made it clear that whatever new form of protest SASO might choose to adopt in the future, it should not resemble those currently being organised by NUSAS. It should not be aimed at the white electorate – and thus would not necessarily need to court the white press. It should not confuse responding to specific crises with a general challenge to the apartheid order. Finally, it should – unlike NUSAS’s protests, at least as seen through the eyes of SASO’s members – ‘involve a strategic and continuous attempt to effect change’.¹⁷ SASO’s national executive continued to struggle with these ideas after the GSC had ended. A confidential report on the proceedings, circulated among the executive, suggested that future considerations could not be bound by the limits imposed by the GSC. This report emphasised that although it did not immediately propose altering SASO’s policies of eschewing public protest, nonetheless it would be important to consider the policy’s limits. The report suggested that non-involvement could be abandoned under certain circumstances: ‘the only time where we can modify our approach is with reference to local authorities and even there with the obvious goal of encouraging group action’.¹⁸ In this statement, it is clear that the aim of encouraging popular and community participation in SASO and its activities could come to trump the organisation’s public circumspection.

This exception was again raised in a second document, circulated later in 1970. Titled ‘Practical Applications of the Ideology of Black Consciousness’, it seems to have been intended to serve as a discussion document for a formation school.¹⁹ Its contents were thus intended to spark debate and to enable the participants to delineate the overall outlines of SASO’s policies. Indeed, the paper specifically notes that its four categories for discussion were ‘but a few that one can think of’. These categories set out to define a range of possible practical actions – i.e., the types of action that could be undertaken by SASO and its members in accordance with

15. *Ibid.*, Resolutions adopted at the 1st SASO General Students’ Council, July 4th–July 10th [1970].

16. See, for example, Curtis’s remarks in 1970: N. Curtis, *NUSAS Newsletter*, December 1970.

17. WHP, A2675/III/744, Resolutions adopted at the 1st SASO General Students’ Council, July 4th–July 10th [1970].

18. *Ibid.*, Reports to the 1st GSC.

19. *Ibid.*, Practical Applications of the Ideology of Black Consciousness.

its guiding principles. These categories were: (1) directive politics, (2) infiltrative politics, (3) orientation projects and (4) self-reliance projects.

The first two categories suggested ways in which students involved in SASO could engage politically either with rival student groups or with non-student communities. Directive politics, for example, involved 'vocalising and popularising the idea of black consciousness'. Students should therefore testify to their self-belief to as wide a public as possible – black consciousness 'must be tackled by its advocates as a religion' – so as to convert neutral observers. SASO local groups should demonstrate 'the strength of group action' through 'publicity stunts' such as slogans ('Black man, you are on your own!') and the 'cultivation of images' (on SASO t-shirts, for example). These tactics should be used to direct the attention of neutral groups towards SASO. Infiltrative politics, on the other hand, described actions that were aimed not at neutral communities, but rather at fellow-travellers and rival organisations – that is, at 'a group of people who direct themselves to only part of the overall goal you share with them'. Infiltrative actions were intended to engage with these other groups and move them towards adopting SASO's agenda. Students should act either from outside of these groups – applying 'constructive criticism calculated to provoke some kind of action' – or should consider acting covertly within a group, by the 'deliberate planting of our own people in the midst of such a group' and thus shaping their policies.

The second two categories of action listed in this document – orientation projects and self-reliance projects – aimed to organise communities. If the first two categories of action aimed to convert people to the causes held by SASO, then these second two aimed to establish what it was that these new converts should be doing. Orientation projects were designed to address the ways in which black history had been distorted, and would aim to establish 'black facilities and resource centres' that would promulgate new 'educational, cultural, religious and economical' approaches to understanding black experiences. Black Theology would be taught to aspirant priests, and 'black cooperative enterprises designed for the benefit of Blacks' would be encouraged. Communities would 'marshal ... economic resources' and use 'the pooled strength of the economy to the advantage of that group'. This would enable community self-reliance, leading to the integration of local communities in the national struggles of black consciousness, and a 'physical and practical demonstration of the fact that salvation and emancipation of a group ultimately lies in the hands of that group'.

Implicit across the four approaches to practical action presented in this document was the beginning of a coherent approach to the mobilisation of a community-based activism. Although the preponderance of tautologies in its definitions of orientation and self-reliance projects may suggest that SASO was not entirely clear on the processes by which it would put these plans into practice, nonetheless it is clear that these approaches all emphasised ideological unity while simultaneously arguing for the creation of localised structures to respond to immediate economic and social needs. The eventual end of such a programme would be the creation of a distributed institutional base that reached beyond university campuses to involve black men and women other than students; this distributed structure would resemble those of the organised opposition movements of the 1950s, which might also suggest that SASO was beginning to see itself not only as an alternative national student union but also, in time, as a successor to those nationally recognised opposition movements.

The Question of Confrontation

The development of a new form of activism and of its associated institutional structures could take, as SASO acknowledged, 'a lifetime of application'. This implied period of development, however, could also include a similarly extended delay between the present and the moment in which SASO would choose to take up confrontational forms of protest. The national executive found it difficult to say clearly when it would be ready to embark on such protests; in the meantime it proposed – in GSC meetings and in private discussions – that any unnecessary confrontation with the state be avoided until such a time as SASO had been able to succeed in creating a broad national institutional structure. According to Biko's later testimony in court, during the trial of Saths Cooper and six others during 1975 and 1976, these first years of SASO's existence were marked by a determination to avoid such confrontations: confrontation, he suggested, 'has a self-destructive content in it, in that side issues become main issues' and, consequently, the initial meaning of a protests is soon lost.²⁰

In this testimony – undoubtedly shaped by the judicial context – Biko emphasised that the probability of police violence and the distracting effects of any reaction to it had been a major factor in SASO's general reluctance to involve itself in any public forms of protest. 'There is a basic fear in the Black community,' he told the court, 'which tends to regard the police as trigger-happy'.²¹ This potential violence had not in itself been sufficient to cause SASO to refrain from embarking upon protests – however, it was felt that it would divert attention away from SASO's ongoing work and towards momentary eruptions of violence.

In place of confrontational forms of public protest, SASO proposed to follow what Biko described as 'a third idiom' of protest. It would aim to conduct itself 'within the ambit of the law' – avoiding the attentions of the state as much as possible – and in such a way hope to avoid repression and violence for long enough to be able to put its plans into practice. Nonetheless, Biko had to concede in response to the judge's final examination that this policy of avoiding confrontation had been a subject for debate within SASO and its sister organisations. In the years between 1970 and the trial, there had indeed been 'a progressive change in thinking on this question'.²² Biko's example of this change was notably minor – a debate over whether public pamphleteering counted as courting confrontation – but this was a consequence of the courtroom and his desire to avoid implicating the defendants – arraigned as they were on charges of organising illegal public rallies in September 1974.

In 1970 and 1971, however, there was as yet little sign of this future change in thinking. In this period, SASO continued to advise its members to refrain from engaging in protests outside of their university campuses, and to avoid protesting against issues that did not directly affect them as students. The aims of student political action were to be five-fold: 'to record dissatisfaction and to express opinion'; 'to instil confidence'; 'to rally adequate bargaining power'; 'to spread the front for activism'; and to rouse 'the consciousness of black people'. The last two items of this list bound student political action into the broader community networks that SASO was aiming to form; the first three, however, explicitly limited action to the space of university

20. S. Biko, *The Testimony of Steve Biko*, ed. M. Arnold (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1979), 85–87. For more information on this trial, see M. Lobban, *White Man's Justice: South African Political Trials in the Black Consciousness Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

21. Biko, *The Testimony of Steve Biko*, 85–87.

22. *Ibid.*, 265.

campuses themselves. They emphasised that bargaining and negotiation were preferred forms of engagement – but that, in certain cases, the limited use of ‘placards, statements, meetings’ in addition to boycotts could be allowed.²³

These instructions presumed a continuing relationship between student activists and university administrators. SASO encouraged students to work towards the development of a unity of purpose between students and faculty: its advice presumed that – as such a shared unity developed – the ‘difference in ideals’ which had led to conflict on any given campus would be resolved. Over time, then, an accord would develop between campus stakeholders; it was not therefore in the interests of students to be over-aggressive in confronting the university administration with problems. It would be better instead to persuade administrators to alter their own ideas and move towards a shared consciousness.

SASO was therefore – in avoiding confrontation and public forms of protest – seeking to lay the foundations for a lengthy period of future struggle on campuses and in communities. This struggle would eventually develop into a confrontational phase – but only once national institutions had been built and once a national support for black consciousness had been mobilised. The organisation thus seems to have been considering structuring community activities into a series of campaigns, each stage of which would entail different types of action and protest; it was clearly not considering embarking upon sudden protests.

‘Turmoil at Turfloop’

During the second half of 1971, a series of disputes at the University of the North (known informally as Turfloop) revealed some of the limits of this approach. In response to these disputes, SASO wrote to the university’s rector suggesting a number of actions that might resolve the apparent problems at his university.²⁴ (SASO’s letter does not seem to have been solicited in any way by the university’s administration.) SASO suggested that the university’s staff be Africanised – that is, the university should move to ensure that the majority of the teaching staff at the university were black – and that black academics already at the university should be promoted to senior administrative positions, including that of rector. A commission should be established ‘to look into university education’ and to propose a redeveloped curriculum for the university; the administration should also recognise SASO as an organisation that represented black students on the campus, and enter into a dialogue accordingly. There is no evidence that any of these recommendations were taken seriously.

In March 1972, then, the university administration ordered that the SASO Manifesto and Declaration of Student Rights be removed from the diary distributed by the Turfloop SRC. In response, students proceeded to burn their diaries in a public show of protest.²⁵ Soon afterwards, the students also elected Onkgopotse Tiro – the previous year’s SRC president, then a graduate student at the university – to address the annual graduation ceremony on their behalf. Given that

23. WHP, A2675/III/748, Memo: The politics of protest for black students.

24. *Ibid.*

25. The background to these events is covered in M. Horrell, D. Horner and J. Kane-Berman, *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa, 1972* (Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1973).

Tiro was active in SASO at the time – although he did not hold any formal office – his selection was a response to the university's earlier attempt to censor it.²⁶

Tiro's speech was designed to be controversial. He began by quoting the prime minister, B.J. Vorster, suggesting – somewhat disingenuously – that in South Africa, 'no Black man had landed in trouble for fighting for what is legally his'. Tiro proceeded to condemn the Bantu Education system, to highlight the disrespect shown by the administration of his university to the parents of black students, and to point to the relative absence of the university's black academics from its decision-making bodies. He told his audience – made up of administrators, faculty and students, as well as parents – that 'the system is failing'. He sought to suggest solutions to this failure and quoted Helen Suzman, then the Progressive Party's lone member of parliament and thorn in the side of the government, saying that whatever other power the state might have, 'the Minister ... cannot ban ideas from men's minds'. Tiro concluded his speech, saying:

Let the Lord be praised, for the day shall come when all shall be free to breathe the air of freedom which is theirs to breathe and when that day shall have come, no man, no matter how many tanks he has, will reverse the course of events.²⁷

Three days after this speech – on 2 May 1972 – the university's disciplinary committee expelled Tiro. A petition calling for his reinstatement was quickly circulated among the student body and then presented to the administration; it was rejected and the students began a sit-in at the university's main hall. The administration suspended the authority of the SRC and banned all public meetings; when this did not convince the students to move, the university announced that all 1 146 protesting students were to be immediately expelled. To enforce this order, the administration then invited the local police onto the university.

Despite this threat, the students refused to abandon their sit-in. The police cordoned off the hall, preventing food from being brought in, and the administration cut off the building's water pipes. The police then prevented the occupying students from accessing the adjacent toilets, and confined them within the central (water-less) building. This campaign of attrition continued overnight and into the next day, until the students finally found themselves forced to abandon the hall – and, consequently, expelled from the campus. The police allowed them to leave, then sealed the campus to discourage anyone from returning. By 6 May, only two days after Tiro's expulsion, the university was deserted.²⁸

SASO and the Spread of Protest

The news of this series of events – Tiro's speech, his expulsion, the student protest and the university's heavy-handed response – spread rapidly across the country and galvanised black student reaction. On 5 May 1972, for example, the student council at the University of Durban-Westville (UDW) held an emergency mass meeting, in part to condemn an article that had

26. Okgopotse Abraham Tiro's biography is touched upon in Karis and Gerhart, *From Protest to Challenge, Volume 5*, 125–127 in particular. A documentary, *Blues for Tiro* (2007) also exists; more details can also be found in the submissions to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by his family, accessible at: <http://www.doj.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/methodis/tiro.htm>.

27. 'Graduation Speech by O.R. Tiro at the University of the North, Turfloop, 29 April 1972' (1997).

28. Horrell, Horner and Kane-Berman, *Survey of Race Relations*, 1972; see also Karis and Gerhart, *From Protest to Challenge, Volume 5*.

appeared in the local press but further to 'support the students of the University of the North' – who, at that moment, were still occupying their university's hall. This expression of support was to be followed by a student boycott of university-provided food services, as well as of lectures at the university. These were planned to occur on 7 and 8 May.²⁹ Similarly, students at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) held a mass meeting on 5 May to pass a resolution supporting the stand taken by the students at Turfloop; this resolution announced that all UWC students would 'symbolise their solidarity by staying away from classes throughout Tuesday 9th May'.³⁰

In both these cases, the immediate protests in support of the Turfloop students – occupying the hall when these protests were announced, having been expelled from the university at the time the protests were held – were bound up with disputes internal to these universities.³¹ It may have been these ongoing disputes that enabled the local SRCs to mobilise their fellow students in support of the students at Turfloop; it may also have been that the absence of similar mobilising disputes at a national level could help explain SASO's apparent reticence: it was only on 13 May – nine days after Tiro's expulsion – that SASO released a statement.

This statement was produced by 40 delegates at an emergency meeting convened at the regional formation school being held in Alice, near the University of Fort Hare. The delegates concluded – despite their apparent hesitation before issuing this statement – that 'the wait and see attitude ... will be a betrayal to the Blackman's struggle in this country'. They believed that the event at Turfloop should not be viewed 'as an isolated incident' – after all, 'Black students have long suffered under oppression'. Given this history, the singular event at Turfloop had the potential to 'be escalated into a major confrontation'. Spurred by this event, SASO would now embark on such a confrontation, and SASO thus called upon 'all Black students [to] force the Institutions/Universities to close down by boycotting lectures ... with effect from June 1st'.³² This statement – the Alice Declaration – stands as a significant break with SASO's official policy of avoiding either reacting to singular events or risking confrontation with the state; this contradiction, however, was not yet to be resolved.

The 40 delegates to the Alice formation school had already been outpaced by events at other black universities across the country. The protests at UDW had already expanded, and a further two-day boycott of lectures had followed the initial protest; likewise, students at UWC – buoyed by the successes of their boycott of lectures – were openly planning a boycott of university food services. On 12 May – the day before the release of the Alice Declaration – students at the University of Natal's Non-European Section had begun an indefinite period of boycotting lectures in support of the Turfloop students. In the week after the declaration was released, students at the University of Zululand picketed their graduation ceremony and on 22 May 1970, students at Fort Hare began an eight-day boycott of lectures.³³ At these universities, students had already abandoned SASO's official policy of favouring dialogue and negotiations and had embarked upon confrontation.

29. WHP, A2675/III/749, Minutes of Emergency Mass Meeting.

30. *Ibid.*, SASO Fact Paper: The Student Crisis. See also H.E. Isaacs, 'Full Circle: Reflections on Home and Exile' (MA thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 2002), 35–36.

31. For details, see Isaacs, 'Full Circle'; Horrell, Horner and Kane-Berman, *Survey of Race Relations*, 1972.

32. WHP, A2675/III/749, The Alice Declaration.

33. These events are detailed in *ibid.*, SASO Fact Paper: The Student Crisis; see also Horrell, Horner and Kane-Berman, *Survey of Race Relations*, 1972.

These all also took place before the date on which SASO had proposed that a coordinated nationwide boycott of lectures should begin – 1 June 1972. An unnamed student at UDW summed up the attitude of black students across the country in these weeks, saying that ‘the air is thick with protest’.³⁴ The only institution apparently willing to delay starting protests on its campus until 1 June was – according to SASO’s records – the Springfield College of Education; with the obvious exception of the University of the North, black students at all other listed campuses were already embroiled in public confrontations with their administrators. It was expected that the University of the North would in fact reopen on 1 June – a coincidence which may explain SASO’s willingness to delay starting a nationwide protest until that date – and that its students would most probably join in the national action.

* * *

It is clear, therefore, that by moving away from its stated policy of negotiations and dialogue SASO was attempting to respond to the actions already being taken by its members across the country. Its plan to coordinate a national boycott thus seems to represent an attempt to regain control over the development of student protest, and to begin to manage its progress. Although it did not succeed in doing so – while most black universities were indeed protesting on 1 June, they had been doing so for some weeks already and few were able to sustain their protests long after this date – nonetheless this assertion of SASO’s potential authority laid the basis for further action. This can be seen in a number of documents produced by SASO in the weeks and months immediately following the Alice Declaration.

On 19 May, Barney Pityana – then the general secretary of SASO – wrote to the president of the UWC SRC, hoping to solicit his support for SASO’s proposed national boycott.³⁵ Pityana began by regretting that UWC had sent no representatives to the Alice meeting, but emphasising that – at that meeting – UWC’s ‘show of solidarity with the exiled students of the University of the North was warmly applauded by all those present’. The delegates to this meeting had, he suggested, been inspired by the example of protests at UWC and UDW and, as such, had determined that ‘it was essential that black students throughout the country demonstrate solidarity and pressurise the university authorities to “rethink”’. This demonstration could only be coordinated by SASO: ‘the final execution of it will remain with students leaders at a local level. Then it cannot be said that students didn’t act when events dictated that they do.’ He ended by asking UWC to support ‘the principles behind the Alice Declaration’ and by urging ‘all black students to stand together, differ in togetherness’. Five days later, on 24 May, Pityana circulated an almost identical memo to all SRCs and SASO local committees, asking them to join in supporting the national boycott.³⁶

As noted above, these communications failed to coordinate a simultaneous national protest; following this failure, a meeting of SRC presidents from black campuses across the country was convened in Durban on 17 June. Here, the presidents grilled SASO for its perceived lack of leadership. They complained that the Alice Declaration had been ‘published in the Sunday press even before the SRCs were consulted’ and that this pre-emption of discussion by SASO suggested that it had been trying to ‘intimidate’ students into following its agenda, and not allowing them to make their own plans themselves. It was agreed, however, that

34. Quoted in WHP, A2675/III/749, SASO Fact Paper: The Student Crisis.

35. *Ibid.*, Correspondence: Pityana to Lamoela (19 May 1972).

36. *Ibid.*, Circular: Re Alice Declaration on Turfloop Crisis.

as a national organisation whose aim it is to cater for and protect the interests of black students, SASO found itself in a dilemma where the leadership called upon SASO to keep out as issues were local ... However, as the activities escalated, the students were looking for direction from SASO.

This meant that SASO had often acted – in the eyes of the SRC presidents – either inappropriately or prematurely. Its intervention was at first unwanted, and then inadequately planned: ‘the Alice meeting never undertook any planning for follow up on the protest nor did it perceive or give direction to the future. This tended to make demonstrations boring and unproductive.’ Therefore: ‘there was a lack of co-ordination’.³⁷

This meeting concluded by deciding that a new council of SRC presidents should be established so as to assume ‘all powers of decision regarding direction ... in the event of decisions requiring mass student support’. A representative of SASO’s executive would be invited to be present at these meetings, and would then be responsible for ensuring that ‘detailed programming and strategy during whatever action is being undertaken should primarily be the responsibility of the SASO Secretariat whose machinery should be made available to the council at no cost’.³⁸ In the joint report presented by the SASO executive at its annual GSC – held from 2 to 9 June 1972 – the creation of this SRC presidents’ council was acknowledged and officially welcomed; its proposal that SASO act in future as a coordinating, rather than originating, organisation was not summarily dismissed. However, the executive did find it necessary to note that many of the criticisms levelled against SASO in the course of the crisis had arisen from the fact that ‘at local level SASO was kept out of the picture by the leadership which shunned “agitators” infiltration” charges by the authorities. This effectively kept SASO out of the picture’. To prevent a recurrence of this, the executive proposed developing policies for coordinating and planning national protests, for consulting and organising at grassroots level, and for laying out a formal ‘follow up machinery’.³⁹

Thus, the sequence of events that had begun at the University of the North and that had proceeded to galvanise local protests on already strained black campuses across the country had led to SASO’s executive proposing a significant shift in the organisation’s priorities. Instead of working towards laying a national foundation from which later, as yet undefined, protests could be developed, SASO now sought to consider how to shape and control already existing protests. It was lurching towards adopting the same kind of policies which – only two years earlier – it had dismissed: those in which its primary function was to react to unpredictable moments of protest and attempt to manage their volatile development.

The Context of Black Universities

These protests did not occur in a vacuum, however. At black universities, administrations generally assumed responsibility for suppressing protest that took place on their campuses. Protesting students were either expelled or suspended for an indefinite period of time, and consequently were forced to leave the university grounds – and often to abandon their studies. When students did not willingly obey the university’s expulsion order and chose to remain on the campuses,

37. *Ibid.*, Minutes (17 July 1972).

38. *Ibid.*

39. WHP, A2675/III/750, Executive Report to the 3rd Annual GSC (July 1972).

the administrators rarely hesitated before inviting the police onto their campuses to enforce their shaky authority. The events at the University of the North provided the most dramatic example of this process; similar sequences of events marked the conclusion of protests at UDW, UWC, the Springfield College of Education, the Transvaal College of Education and the M.L. Sultan Technical College. Students at these institutions were suspended until they submitted letters of apology to the university; they were only readmitted under newly stringent regulations.

It is important to note that the presence of the police on each of these black campuses was significant. Their actions at the University of the North have already been described. At UWC they were invited onto the campus to detain and interrogate members of the local SASO committee; at Fort Hare, they were again able to enter the campus and arrest the head of its SASO committee, apparently at the instigation of the university administration. They conducted night raids, and sought to disrupt ongoing student boycotts of food services and lectures.⁴⁰ Importantly, the police did not enter these campuses as interlopers, but rather as representatives of the university administration – thus binding the authority of these administrators ever closer to that of the state. Protests against the state and against the administration of black universities were policed in the same way, and by the same forces.

It must be noted that the presence of the police on these campuses was a direct result of the institutional weakness of the administrators of black universities.⁴¹ The rectors and governing councils of these universities and colleges were appointed directly by the national state president, on the advice of the government and the Minister of Bantu Education. They were not, therefore, answerable to their academic communities, and they struggled to command the loyalties of either their academic staff or their students. The example of the University of the North is instructive. It had only recently, in 1970, been reorganised under the formal designation of a university – rather than its previous, lesser designation as a ‘university college’. It was administered by a rector, assisted by a governing council consisting of 17 people. This council consisted only of white appointees, at least until 1974. A second body – the ‘advisory council’ – consisted of eight black appointees who were expected to be available to the rector whenever he should decide that he ought to consult with them. They had no formal decision-making authority within the university’s structures. In addition, the state president and Minister of Bantu Education retained the power to appoint the rector, 15 of the 17 members of the governing council, and all eight black members of the advisory council.⁴² (Only two members of the governing council were elected; they were then the only academic appointees in the administration.)

A new rector had been appointed at the start of the decade – the second in the institution’s history. Professor J.L. Boshoff was taken from a non-academic position in the Department of Bantu Education; he had never worked as an academic and had never occupied any position, administrative or otherwise, in any tertiary education institution. His appointment was criticised by the university’s academic staff, as well as by the student body. In a set of ‘reminiscences’ printed for the university’s jubilee celebration, Boshoff observed that he had been perceived as

40. See the summaries of these protests in Horrell, Horner and Kane-Berman, *Survey of Race Relations, 1972*, 387–392.

41. For further information on the institutional history of these universities, see: M.A. Beale, ‘Apartheid and University Education, 1948–1970’ (PhD thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1998).

42. J.G.E. Wolfson, ed., *Turmoil at Turfloop: A Summary of the Reports of the Snyman and Jackson Commissions of Inquiry into the University of the North* (Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1976), 3–8.

an 'ogre' by both the faculty and the students of the university.⁴³ (He also maintained that he had eventually been able to overcome this characterisation.) Attempts were made to ease tensions by holding a series of official inquiries into the problems faced by the university in 1972 and in 1974 – years in which student protests occurred. Both inquiries reached similar findings, including noting 'the desirability of appointing a black chancellor and a racially-mixed Council' and 'the need for administrative staff to conduct themselves in a polite, tactful manner towards the students'. Both inquiries also emphasised that these problems – of the administration's perceived illegitimacy and its heavy-handed approach to student relations – had contributed significantly to the rise of protests.⁴⁴

The illegitimacy of the administration undermined SASO's early preference for a policy of negotiation between students and administrators. Once students had abandoned such consensual forms of protest in favour of confrontational forms, however, the institutional weaknesses of the university's administrators left them without the power to discipline students. They suspended and expelled in part because they were incapable of using less punitive means of discipline; likewise, their practical inability to enforce even these seemingly stringent measures led them to invite the local police forces onto their campuses, thus asking the representatives of the state to act on behalf of the university administration.

* * *

In addition to these administrative and policing contexts, the spatial contexts of black university campuses played a role in the development – and policing – of SASO's protests. Unlike protests undertaken by white students at UCT or Wits – such as those described in the opening section of this article – the protests at the Universities of the North and Fort Hare took place almost entirely within the confines of the universities' campuses. They took the form of boycotts of lectures and campus food services; these boycotts were rendered more effective – and more visible perhaps – by the relatively large numbers of students resident on campus. The relative smallness and isolation of the towns surrounding Fort Hare and the University of the North, too, may have contributed to containing these student protests on these campuses. Although students at some black universities – most notably at UDW and Zululand – adopted forms of protests, including picket lines that could be directed to audiences outside their campuses, these forms of protest were notable largely for their absence from the majority of black universities. Most of these protests were therefore contained and directed internally – at the administrators, and not at an external audience.

The responses of the university administrations can therefore be seen as attempts to suppress the protests by displacing the protesting students. They were expelled from the campus, and then kept away from the university – through a period of mass suspension – until the moment of crisis seemed to have passed. The actions of the police at the University of the North – expelling students and then preventing them from returning – fit into this pattern of response. Later actions, such as the harassment of SASO leaders at the University of Fort Hare, or the promulgation of

43. See C.H. Muller, ed., *University of the North Jubilee Publication 1980* (Johannesburg: University of the North, 1980), 17–18, 'Reminiscences of the Second Rector of the University of the North'.

44. Wolfson, *Turmoil at Turfloop*, 97. For a very detailed account of the frustrations of the black academic staff, see: G.M. Nkondo, ed., *Turfloop Testimony: The Dilemma of a Black University in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1976).

new regulations barring SASO from organising on UWC's campus, can all be seen to fit within this general pattern of political displacement.

The result of these actions was a radical curtailment of the already limited opportunities for black students to express any form of political protest; the new regulations at UWC, for example, prohibited students from either joining or belonging to any organisation that had not been formally vetted by the administration. They also prohibited the production or distribution of any pamphlets – or other written statements – that had not been examined. The university did not hesitate to enforce these regulations. In July 1972, the newly elected president of SASO, Jerry Modisane – a student at Fort Hare – attempted to visit UWC; on his arrival, the university administration summoned the police. Modisane was arrested and fined for trespassing on the university's property; other students involved in his visit were detained and interrogated by the security police, as were several black lecturers who had criticised the university's readiness to involve the police in internal university disputes.⁴⁵

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that black students began to abandon their formal studies. Tom Karis and Gail Gerhart note that more than half of the students at the University of the North refused to accept the conditions placed by the administration on their readmission, and vowed not to return. A fifth of these chose permanently to abandon their studies; 30 students at the University of Zululand also followed suit at this time. The figures offered in contemporary records vary widely, and these figures – as Karis and Gerhart note – are certainly conservative.⁴⁶ Horrell's annual survey suggests that up to 160 students may have left Fort Hare in the same month. For purposes of comparison, 1 146 students were enrolled at the University of the North, 837 at Zululand, and 2 004 at Fort Hare.⁴⁷ The proportions of students affected by suspension were high – and although in this first year of protests only a relatively small number dropped out, this number would increase over the coming years as clashes between students and administrators continued.

Conclusion

At the same SASO GSC held in July 1972, a number of the motions adopted by the delegates either reflected the events of the previous year or were recast into a new significance.⁴⁸ The delegates voted to allow expelled students to represent their original university bases, and to vote as equal members of the council. The GSC also voted to approve the formation of four new local branches of SASO outside of university campuses, in Durban, Springs, Pretoria and Kimberley. In addition, they elected three representatives to attend the inaugural meeting of the Black Peoples' Convention (BPC) to be held the following weekend; the BPC had originally been intended to provide a political home primarily for graduated students and other members of the general black public, supplementing and expanding upon SASO's coverage of black universities. After the events of previous months, however, it was perhaps inevitable that it would also come to provide an immediate institutional home for the newly politicised and formally expelled university students.

45. Isaacs, 'Full Circle', 42–52. Isaacs – then a student at the University of the Western Cape, and vice-president of SASO – was also arrested at this time, and has detailed his experience in this memoir.

46. Karis and Gerhart, *From Protest to Challenge, Volume 5*, 126.

47. Horrell, Horner and Kane-Berman, *Survey of Race Relations*, 1972, 383.

48. WHP, A2675/III/750.

Many of the actions taken by SASO and the BPC over the following years can be understood in terms of the increasingly confrontational relationship that was developing between these organisations and the apartheid state. The title of a document circulated by the BPC in 1973 summed up the atmosphere at this time: 'The System on the Attack.' This document listed the 19 members of SASO and the BPC who had been banned since the start of the year, including Biko, Pityana, Cooper and others. It also suggested that the state had launched an 'attack on blacks as a whole' and that the BPC's members would need to 'strengthen ourselves to defend our human dignity and freedom with more vigour and determination'.⁴⁹ The tone and content of this provides a notable contrast with the documents circulated in the period around 1970, in which SASO's leaders stressed the importance of circumspection, the avoidance of open confrontation and the necessity of planning for an ongoing, long-term period of proselytising, conversion and institution-building. Now, in the year following the mass outburst of black student protest nationally, the successors of these leaders – who were themselves now largely banned or detained – saw themselves as being locked in an ongoing conflict with the agents of the apartheid state.

It is also notable that NUSAS and the threat of its white liberalism were less commonly invoked in the period after 1972, and – in the rhetoric of SASO and the BPC – largely replaced by the threat posed by the state. In part this may have been a consequence of NUSAS's own reorientation and reorganisation – for example, having stepped away from attempting to organise black student protest and towards offering support to workers' protests through the various local wages committees. It may also have been in part due to NUSAS's general decline as a protesting force after 1973, and the banning of several of its leaders on the recommendations of the Schlebusch Commission.⁵⁰ In addition, the renaissance of black labour organisation in the wake of the Durban strikes of 1973 certainly played a significant role in shifting the general political climate.⁵¹ Undoubtedly, however, much of this was a consequence of the increasing pressure placed by the state on SASO.⁵²

Finally, it must be emphasised that SASO's shift from non-confrontational and negotiated forms of political action towards the adoption of public, confrontational forms of protest was not driven by its leadership. Instead, the relative ineffectiveness of SASO's attempts to negotiate with university authorities rendered its leadership vulnerable to the pressures developing among its constituent student memberships on various university campuses. The eruption of a dispute at the University of the North – while provoking perhaps an unpredictably severe response – served only as the catalyst for a number of different disputes and conflicts already occurring across black campuses throughout the country.

49. WHP, A2675/III/284, 'The System on the Attack'.

50. This shift is perhaps best captured in the pamphlet, 'The System on the Attack'. The increasing violence of the political context – beginning with the death of Mthuli Shezi, one of the founders of the BPC in December 1972, and, early in 1974, the assassination of Tiro by parcel-bomb in Botswana – was a central theme in the literature being produced by SASO and the BPC at the time. This assault – perhaps unsurprisingly – dominated public reactions, and came to define the discourse of the BPC.

51. See Institute for Industrial Education, *The Durban Strikes 1973 – 'Human Beings with Souls'* (Pietermaritzburg: Ravan, 1974).

52. These may also be connected in other ways, as Karis and Gerhart suggest that the fact of white student protest – and the state's particular focus on suppressing NUSAS – may have obscured the early activities of SASO and thus distracted the state from immediately suppressing it: Karis and Gerhart, *From Protest to Challenge, Volume 5*.

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It is clear from this account that SASO's embrace of public and confrontational forms of protest after 1972 – culminating, perhaps, in the pro-Frelimo rallies of September 1974, which in turn led to the arrest and trial of much of the organisation's leadership – was not the result of a considered development of ideas and practice by SASO's leaders. Instead, contingent factors forced those leaders to reconsider their stated policies of non-confrontational negotiations and to shift towards embracing more public forms of protest. These forms of protest were not in conflict with SASO's aims and ideals, but neither did they emerge smoothly from them. SASO's political development was not a planned progression from combating the assumptions of a paternalist white liberalism to challenging the foundations of the apartheid state. It was, instead, a contingent and uncertain process of evolution and change – and a process which has largely been overlooked in accounts of the development of the political ideology of black consciousness.

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