

**BLACK STUDENTS IN REBELLION: A STUDY ON THE STRUGGLE
OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS ORGANISATION IN ITS
EARLY YEARS, 1969-1972.**

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INTRODUCTION

During the 1960s, organised black opposition to apartheid had been highly reduced and controlled after the Sharpeville massacre and the imprisonment and exile of most of the African National Congress (ANC) leaders. However, the year 1969 saw the birth of a new organization exclusively formed by black university students: the South African Students Organization (SASO). “This was the beginning of the Black Consciousness Movement that focused on cultivating the ability of black people to change the oppressive situation in South Africa by rejecting the ideology (and eventually the system) of apartheid.”¹

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies developed by SASO (and its members) in the first years of the 1970s in order to penetrate the black community to build up an anti-apartheid resistance. Which was the extent of SASO’s politics impact beyond campus activity? How far were black students able to penetrate with their ideas the large black community? Understanding that the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) was born as an ideology in the sphere of higher education, directly related to the re-emergence of black students’ politics through the South African Students Organisation (SASO), it is of our interest, then, to analyse the extent to which the work of these organised black students had an impact in other spheres of the black community between 1969 and 1972.

Although it is certainly clear that by the late 1970s –and particularly after Soweto (1976)- the BCM was widely spread in South Africa as one of the greatest anti-apartheid organizations since the ANC predominance, not much is known about its first steps in the struggle. Particularly, the idealization of such anti-apartheid organizations usually tends to avoid talking about the difficulties that these might have faced in their beginnings. This is the reason why this study looks forward to analyzing the tactics SASO had until 1972 in order to expand the black consciousness ideology beyond the higher education community and the obstacles it might have found that contributed to changes in their anti-apartheid struggle.

In order to answer these questions, the research followed here consists on analysing and revising the existing bibliography on the subject but also analysing SASO’s own productions, such as the SASO Newsletters and other writings, including

¹ *Black Consciousness Movement*, in URL: <http://overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/multimedia.php?id=28>

minutes of Student Representative Councils meetings, the SASO Manifesto and declarations, etc.

HIGHER EDUCATION UNDER APARTHEID: 'ETHNIC' UNIVERSITIES

Every of the apartheid policies aimed at segregating blacks from whites. Therefore, education would not be left out in the National Party's scheme and soon enough different legislation acts would give shape to the black (segregated) education system in all its levels.

This education, of course, was to be under strict control of the government, specifically, of the Department of Bantu Education, created in 1953 through the Bantu Education Act. And to top it all, under the terms of the Extension of University Education Act (1959), different universities were opened for specific ethnic groups.² And thus, "African education was to reflect the dominance of the ideology of white rule and superiority."³ Not surprisingly, higher education options were limited mostly to the liberal arts, avoiding the possibility of blacks being trained in high-level scientific or technical fields, so that no real competition could take place between black and white professionals. In fact, courses on science technology were quite limited and almost directly involved with specific careers such as the ones of the University of Natal Medical School.

Moreover, the 1959 Promotion of Bantu Self-Government Act, would assure that those graduate students from black universities found jobs in the Bantustans administrations, deepening the segregation process. Thus, education was another necessary piece in the segregation machinery the apartheid government used to guarantee the **racial** division of labour existing in South Africa.⁴

² "University College of the North at Turfloop in north Transvaal was opened for Sotho-Tsonga and Venda peoples; University College of Zululand at Ngoye in Natal was opened for the Zulu and Swazi peoples; University College of Durban was designated for Asians (East Asians); and the University of the Western Cape in Belleville near Cape Town was opened for the Coloured (mixed race) population." Franklin, V.P. *Patterns of Student Activism at Historically Black Universities in the United States and South Africa, 1960-1977*; *The Journal of African American History*, Vol. 88, No. 2, The History of Black Student Activism (Spring, 2003), pp. 204-217. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3559066> Accessed: 19/07/2011 12:56. Page 209

³ Badat, M. Saleem. *Black Student Politics, Higher Education and Apartheid. From SASO to SANCSO, 1968-1990*. Human Sciences Research Council, Pretoria, 1999. Page 50.

⁴ *Ibidem*, page 54.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS' ORGANIZATION AND THE BIRTH OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

After the Sharpeville Massacre of March 1960, the course of action of organisations such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) was to change severely. The apparatus of the apartheid government was put fully at the service of repression of these two groups, as “raids, arrests, banishment and torture became the norm in dealing with political opposition.”⁵ In all spheres, including education, any attempt of organised black resistance was suppressed.

In this particular context, the 1960s is usually considered as a moment of ‘quietness’ as regards open black political unrest. However, the existence of liberal organisations, white-dominated, provided black intellectuals the possibility of experiencing certain spaces for discussion. This was the case of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS).

Formed in 1924 as an exclusively white student body, in the 1960s it progressively turned into a multiracial student organisation that –despite being dominated by whites- presented itself as sympathetic to the Black students cause. And so, black students began to join it. But it didn’t take long for the latter to understand the limitations of such an organisation. First and foremost, there existed a physical restriction: NUSAS was banned at black campuses, which meant that meeting could not be held publicly in those places. But what is more relevant, black students became increasingly dissatisfied with NUSAS inability to tackle the problems faced at the ethnic universities.

As a result, the combination of particular political circumstances as the relative political vacuum left by the ANC and the PAC, and NUSAS’ lack of response to the black students’ needs and demands, provided the conditions for the birth of a new organisation led by Blacks: the South African Students’ Organisation (SASO).

The formal decision was taken in 1968 by the members of the Student Representative Council (SRC) of the University of Natal (Black section), who decided to call for a conference exclusively for the SRCs of Black universities in order to set up a new organisation. “The conference, which was attended by thirty members from various SRCs from Black universities, was held at Marianhill, Natal. The conference

⁵ Badat, S. *op. cit.*, page 59.

saw the birth of SASO. The following year in July 1969 SASO had its inaugural conference [in which] Steve Biko was elected its first President and students from the University of Natal played a pivotal role in the formation of this student structure.”⁶

This decision was impregnated with what later became known as the Black Consciousness ideology, being Biko the leader who “ultimately concretised and articulated the ideas. [capturing] the common mind.”⁷ One of his first propositions regarding Black Consciousness, was clearly manifested in one of Biko’s first articles in the SASO newsletter under his pseudonym ‘Frank Talk’, in his famous column *I write what I like*. In a piece titled “Black souls in White skins?”, he made his statement against the possibility of any white-dominated organisation being able to achieve substantial progress in defense of the Blacks interests. In fact, in this article he made his argument in justifying the existence of a student organisation exclusively for Blacks as the only one that could genuinely represent the interest of the oppressed because “the role of the white liberal in the black man’s history in South Africa is a curious one. Very few black organisations were not under white direction. True to their image, the white liberals always knew what was good for the blacks and told them so. The wonder of it all is that the black people have believed in them for so long. It was only at the end of the 50s that the blacks started demanding to be their own guardians.”⁸

For Biko and the rest of the black students behind the creation of SASO it was time for a new step forward in the struggle for liberation.

• ORGANISATION

Between 1969 and early 1972, SASO concentrated on the engrossing of its membership, as well as on establishing an organizational infrastructure that could look up to the black students needs. This was definitely something essential for the continuity of SASO as a student representative body and it was well achieved: “by early 1972 [...] SASO claimed a national membership of 4000 and predicted that membership would reach 7000 by the end of 1972.”⁹

⁶ South African Students’ Organisation. *Origins and Formation*, in: <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/governance-projects/organisations/SASO/saso-history.htm>

⁷ Pityana, Barney. *Reflections on 30 years since the death of Steve Biko: a legacy revisited*, Forum for Religious Dialogue Symposium of the Research Institute for Theology and Religion held at the University of South Africa, Pretoria, 23-24 August 2008; in URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/10500/4338>. Page 3.

⁸ SASO Newsletter, August 1970, page 15.

⁹ Badat, S. *op.cit.*, page 108.

SASO was basically conformed by the affiliated Student Representative Councils (SRC) of the different universities which were, in the end, the ones that operated in the base level, spreading the BC ideas. Then, the co-ordination and coherence of these different SRCs was achieved through higher national and regional structures, being at the top the General Students Council (GSC), which was the maximum decision-making body, that met annually in a conference held in campus.

“The GSC consisted of the elected national executive of SASO and delegates representing the various affiliated SRCs, branches and locals. The national executive itself was a five-person committee elected by the GSC. It consisted of the president, vice-president, general secretary, “permanent organizer” and publications director, and was responsible for the day-to-day affairs of SASO. The general secretary and permanent organizer (responsible for liaison between the executive, the various affiliated SRCs, branches and “locals”, and for research and co-ordinating certain projects) were full-time employees whose appointments were a three-year basis, to be ratified annually by the GSC.”¹⁰

SASO IN ACTION: BUILDING A BLACK IDENTITY, STRENGTHENING STUDENTS SOLIDARITY

The particular context of birth of SASO can be understood as one of the reasons why SASO leaders' first task aimed basically at giving shape to the Black Consciousness ideology.

The majority of the scholars agreed that in its first years this organisation was mostly an ‘introspective and intellectual movement of educated elite’.¹¹ But from this point onwards some dissenting interpretations can be found.

While in some studies the emphasis is put on the lack of sufficient cohesion and coherence between theory and praxis, others actually stress the importance these formative years had in the consolidation and spread of an ideological basis which would further be able to grow into a political movement that would involve the vast majority of the black community by the mid-1970s.

¹⁰ Badat, S. *op.cit.*, page 109.

¹¹ David Hirschmann; *The Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa*; in: *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Mar., 1990), pp. 1-22. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/160899> Accessed: 07/03/2011 08:41. Page 7

As an example of the first position, Saleem Badat says that “it is evident that prior to 1972 there was no serious and detailed consideration of key education issues such as goals, structure, organisation and financing of education, curriculum and pedagogy. The criticism of education was in purely political terms and the conception of the university that was posited was thoroughly idealist. [...] apart from asserting that “Black Education” was linked to liberation, provided no details of the form and content of such an education. Moreover, there was no indication as to how black values, identity and culture were to be promoted through education.”¹² It could be said that what the August 1971 SASO Newsletter stated as regards education goals is in agreement with this observation, as in this issue it is stated the traditional Freirean line of understanding education as a means of liberation which definitely sounds mostly rhetoric: “True education today should be that which seeks to make man the master of his environment, enabling him to use technological advance and not be harassed by it; to understand and come to terms with his own history, and his part in creating that history, to understand the place of his country, economically and politically, in the world, and his career in terms of that place.”¹³ Therefore, Badat’s view tends to be quite severe in respect to SASO’s achievements and proposals for transformation and liberation displayed in the first years.

However, in this same newsletter, the “Conference issue” which reported the July 1971 SASO’s 2nd GSC discussions and decisions, appeared a special section on the topics treated by the Commission on Black Education. It was this commission which led to the drawing up of the charter on the *Declaration of Students’ Rights*. What is more, the article on the commission offered a quite detailed summary of the different proposals that were discussed and agreed as regards the issues concerning higher education, from students power and government of the universities, to curricula contents and problems with primary and high school education.¹⁴

¹² Badat, S. *Op.cit.*, page 98.

¹³ SASO Newsletter, August 1971, page 12

¹⁴ Under the section *Student power and government* it is reminded the (neglected) role the SRC were supposed to have: “...what is the role of governing student bodies such as an SRC? Are they merely there to act as a glorified prefect system? It is a generally accepted fact that the SRC should also be represented in the university governing bodies such as the Councils and the Senates and the University Disciplinary Committee in order to bring the students’ point of view across.” As regards the curricula, the critics on the contents studied, present a demand for an African-centered view: “The curricula set for the Blacks until now [...] is still very much Western and very little has been done in promoting Black pride and consciousness. There is at the moment a crying need for re-discovery of Black history and culture in order to put it in the proper perspective. The role played by the Black man in the South African history has been underplayed and distorted. [...] Behavioural Sciences as presently taught are primarily concerned with European and United States societies. Thus it is not amazing that Black students qualifying in social Science and it difficult to implement effectively in the Black Society that they have gained at University.” Some paragraphs later in the article, there is the observation on the problems that primary and high school education faced, including

Another scholar is Kogila Moodley who affirms that “In its earlier phases, Black Consciousness was characterised by spontaneity and an easy evolution, without any rigidly worked out plan of aims and directions.”¹⁵ Though as critical as Badat in respect to the limits of SASO’s first steps in the building of the BCM, Moodley still values positively this period, as a moment that –due to its ‘easy-going’ developing- allow the members of this newly resistance force to develop a specific and singular identity, focusing first and foremost in the psychological realization of black individuals. Thus, the orientation politics in these years *had to be* imprecise in certain ways in order to address a varied range of issues that included the problems faced by a degraded and devaluated educational, religious and cultural black identity.¹⁶

Still, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, there exists a line of agreement between Moodley and Barat. Both intellectuals see one of the main weaknesses of the South African Students’ Organisation in the impossibility its leaders had in transcending the petty bourgeois ideology of the black oppressed into that of the *working class* black oppressed. Badat, for example states that one of SASO’s problem was its foundational piece, its Charter, which constituted a contradictory starting point for the building of an anti-apartheid movement. SASO proposed a struggle in the material level that could guarantee social mobility within the social structure, but at the same time, at the ideological level it aimed at treating the black community as a whole, regardless the specific needs and aspirations of the groups within it.¹⁷ Therefore, according to this author, the limits of SASO’s tactics in the early 1970s to consolidate solid grass-root anti-apartheid bodies would have been, in fact, what could be considered the very basic assumption proposed by Black Consciousness ideology: that unity was to be the result among all black victims of oppression, and not, as could have been expected, the result of class struggle. In the same line, Moodley affirms that “it did not take long to discover that the intellectual bias of Black Consciousness impeded a major transformation as

overcrowded classrooms, shortage of qualified teachers, students dropping out due to financial problems. “The task thus remains with the Black people, students included, not only to look into various methods of improving educational conditions at all levels, but to contribute as well whatever is in their means.” *SASO Newsletter*, August 1971, page 13

¹⁵ Moodley, Kogila; *The Continued Impact of Black Consciousness in South Africa*; The Journal of Modern African Studies, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Jun., 1991), pp. 237-251. <<URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/161022>; Accessed: 19/07/2011 13:11. Page 245.

¹⁶ In an interview Gail Gerhart had in 1972 with several SASO leaders Jerry Modisane said: “How long will SASO last? This isn’t a big concern. We look at the situation, analyse it and decide what needs to be done. If something requires a year, 15 years, 1000 years, we budget that length of time, operating on the basis that we’ll be around. If they ban us we don’t care –we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.” Also, Magaziner says that “early 1970s Black Consciousness measured change in an intangible way, for which it is quite difficult to account. It was about self-awareness and the rejection of inferiority complexes; it was measured in individual selves accepting that their blackness was an existential reality and that consciousness demanded that they move towards the future.” (p.239)

¹⁷ Badat, S. *op.cit.*, page 99.

long as it did not reach workers effectively. This goal implied not only a modification of language, but also a fundamental shift of concerns: building diminished self-images seemed peripheral, at best, to people who were heavily burdened with the daily drudgery of earning a labour-intensive living.”¹⁸

Opposite to these views, the works of Sipho Buthelezi¹⁹ and Daniel Magaziner²⁰ provide a rather more optimistic interpretation of the period 1969-1972. Here it can be seen the emphasis on how the persistence of leaders as Biko in the strengthening of the ideological transformation/liberation of the Black man was essential and in fact was what led SASO to an early move towards encouraging mobilization at grassroot levels through the community development programmes.²¹

“Social and political analysis was a necessary starting point to reflection and action. It was important to do so in order to create a conceptual space that would free black people for creativity, and to take responsibility for their own liberation.”²² From here, the members of SASO would define the strategies to spread their ideas to the rest of the black community. In the end, this idea was not even unknown in other resistance experiences. Much of SASO’s line was based on Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, realizing the need for a change in the state of mind, a vindication of ‘blackness’. Thus, the scheme of work that began in the sphere of mostly purely intellectual debate, consolidating the BCM among university students with the proliferation of spaces for debate and exchange of ideas, that slightly spread beyond campus to impregnate other groups to give the oppressed the chance to listen to their own voice.

Two main instruments allowed SASO to consolidate Black Consciousness ideology among students: the ‘formation schools’ and the SASO Newsletters. An enriched debate and exchange of ideas, central to the purposes of a movement convinced of the need for a psychological change of identity, was to take place through both these instruments.²³

¹⁸ Moodley, K. *op.cit.*, page 246.

¹⁹ Buthelezi, Sipho. *The Black consciousness movement in South Africa in the late 1960s*, Wits Historical Papers, 1987, Pages 23-33; in URL: http://www.disa.uzn.ac.za/index.php?option=com_displaydc&recordID=art19871200.032.009.762.

²⁰ Daniel Magaziner’s works: *“Black Man, You Are On Your Own!”: Making Race Consciousness in South African Thought, 1968-1972*; and *The Law and the Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968-1977*.

²¹ Buthelezi, S. *ibidem.*, Page 28

²² Pityana, B. *op.cit.*, pages 4-5.

²³ Also, it should not be disregarded what Badat comments about the conferences of the GSC: “The GSCs appear to have been lively occasions, and organized so as to deal not only with policy and organizational matters but to also provide space for exploring particular themes and cultural pursuits. Much time at GSCs was given over to small working commissions [...] possibly to enable issues to be explored in depth and to facilitate participation. [...] There

- **THE “FORMATION SCHOOLS”**

If students were to be involved in their own liberation process, getting rid of the Whites tutelary action, then it was required that they had the means to do it. Students needed to soak up the black literature on liberation and struggle, the one that could not be learnt at university. As a result, national and regional “formation schools” were held in order to train SASO’s cadres, providing a space for debate and political formation. And so, several leadership seminars were organized in the early 1970s to offer black students the chance to learn about the history of the liberation movement in South Africa, to be introduced in the American Black Power ideas, or to analyse the implications of Black theology.

As commented by Badat, “these sessions normally lasted four days and involved in-depth discussions on many topics. Participation at the seminars and formation schools was limited to the core cadres from centres and branches; these were locally selected in consultation with the SASO national executive.”²⁴

- **SASO NEWSLETTER**

The other substantial instrument required for the spread of Black Consciousness ideas across the universities campuses was the development of a Black Press. Considering that the “formation schools” were actually restricted to a limited group of students –mainly the most committed ones-, the panorama left was on the issue of how to reach the rest of the students.

Counting with their own media resources represented a vital instrument for the diffusion of BC ideology and for the co-ordination of actions among students from different universities. It was not casual what each issue of the SASO Newsletter informed in the last page:

The SASO Newsletter sets out to achieve the following aims:

- *to establish proper contact amongst the various Black campuses and between Black students and the community at large.*
- *to stimulate discussion amongst Blacks on current matters of topical interest.*
- *to make known Black opinion on matters affecting Blacks in South Africa.*

were poetry readings, drama, music and art exhibitions by emerging BC artists and the GSCs, as well as other SASO forums, provided artists with a platform for cultural expression and a means of becoming known nationally.” Badat, S., *op.cit.*, page 110.

²⁴ Badat, S. *op.cit.*, page 113-114.

- *to make known the stand taken by students in matters affecting their lives on and off the campus.*
- *to examine relevant philosophical approaches to South Africa's problems.*
- *to contribute in the formulation of a viable and strong feeling of self reliance and consciousness amongst the Black people of South Africa.*²⁵

The SASO newsletter worked as the looking glass through which the *Black Alice* would be able to transgress the frames of the white-dominant structure, and free her mind. And it was certainly able to achieve those aims mentioned above. By 1972, circulation of the SASO Newsletter reached 4000 copies.

In the end, SASO newsletters worked as the main black press that allowed the diffusion of BC ideas beyond campus. As said in the *Black Review* 1972, “the SASO Newsletter, started in 1970, has been consolidated and now commands a respectable position as an opinion-maker.”²⁶ But ideas needed to be put into action, and in this regard, black students realized the urgency of stretching bonds with the local communities through programmes that could allow collaboration activities that would integrate blacks in one same path of struggle.

SPREADING BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS BEYOND CAMPUS

If SASO can be identified as the leading avant-garde of the liberation movement of the 1970s, it is clear that the consolidation of the BCM had to abandon the isolation of university life. The way proposed to do so was by the active intervention of the black students in the local communities, developing projects of interaction that would contribute to the reinforcement of the bonds of the black community and its consciousness of belonging to one single group: the oppressed.

• THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

One of SASO’s instruments in the struggle for Black liberation was to be done in the area of social development. SASO pioneered the programme for engagement of students in the development of communities. The first ones, identifying one of the greatest problems of blacks, attempt to improve literacy across the community. But this was not all, students also ran clinics and even helped building schools and community

²⁵ Except for the first issue of the SASO Newsletter (August 1970), the rest issues here accessed all presented this legend in the last page.

²⁶ *Black Review* 1972, op.cit., page 44.

centres. This way, the approach to the community re-enforced the idea of shared values and expected to achieve a close relation between university students –usually isolated in their intellectual debate- and the local communities.

In one of the proposals presented by SASO for the community development projects, it could be read:

“Broken down, the objectives of the program are:

- 1. to build up a community awareness and liaison between students and the people;*
- 2. to instil (sic) in the black community a sense of self-reliance and also to help themselves;*
- 3. to create an awareness and consciousness of the social, economic and political forces that frustrate their development;*
- 4. to teach them skills and techniques that will help them develop as a community and also bring about change.”²⁷*

However, as already mentioned previously in this work, the effectiveness of the community projects were not always as expected. In fact, even the members of SASO that were involved in the planning of them could foresee the problems and limitations these had as an strategy for building up strong bonds between black university intellectuals and the rest of the black community. As mentioned in the SASO *Community Development Project Proposals* (Sept.1971), “it must be admitted that the major drawback in a program of this nature is the very fact that it is run by students. There cannot be any real continuity and follow-up because this is an extra-mural engagement on their part and can only be done during vacations. The program may not reach the people it is desired to serve because of work commitments, etc. [...] Another real barrier that has to be broken down is how students can be made acceptable as fellow-sufferers and avenues for dialogue and co-operation opened.”²⁸

This last remark highlights something that scholars had pointed out about SASO –and BCM- leaders’ social background: their belonging to the black petty bourgeoisie. Evidently, one of the problems students faced when meeting the black local community was the fact that rural and urban workers were usually thought by them as homogenous, disregarding the specific needs of the different groups within the community.²⁹ As Moodley observed, this approach of the university students to the grass-root levels

²⁷South African Students’ Organisation, *Community Development Project Proposals*, September 1971, Durban; in: http://www.disa.ukzn.ac.za/index.php?option=com_displaydc&recordID=mem19710900.032.009.747; page 1.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, page 3.

²⁹ Siphso Buthelezi, Saleem Badat, Kogila Moodley among others support this view, emphasizing that some of the difficulties SASO found in reaching the extended black community could have been a result of this class situation.

required a refrain of the ideas that could better appeal to the particular situation of the black man oppressed not only as black but as a *working class* man.

Nevertheless, there was something that was in absolute coherence with the basic ideology of Black Consciousness, expressed in the SASO *Policy Manifesto*,³⁰ positively addressed in the planning of the community projects: “There will be no co-operation with white and/or multi-racial organisations. Our refusal to co-operate with white and/or multi-racial organisations stems from our belief that only Blacks are able to stamp out a myriad of injustices –illiteracy included that are gnawing the flesh and soul of the Black man in South Africa.”³¹ This position is a reflection of SASO’s ideological influences such as Paulo Freire’s approach to developing political awareness among oppressed groups. It is evident that the purpose of these projects was not to be an end “in themselves but rather as a means to win the trust and confidence of people and provide a platform for their education and mobilization.”³²

And despite the fact that “overall, the track record of SASO’s community development initiatives was poor”³³, the ideological impact they had in the community where far more reaching than the ones on the material level that can be measured through how many schools were built or dams were put up. “To date SASO has come to be accepted as one of the most revelant organisations in this search for the black man's real identity and of his liberation. The involvement of students with the community by way of community development projects remains a testimony of the oneness of the two, both in plight and in efforts.”³⁴

THE 1972 STUDENT PROTESTS: A TURNING POINT

For the South African Students’ Organisation, the year 1972 represented a moment where some of the lines adopted were later to be deepened, and some others were to be rejected. That year of the first coordinated demonstrations across the black universities campuses was also the year when for the first time a president of SASO was expelled by the General Students’ Council (GSC)³⁵, bringing to light the ideological

³⁰ See Appendix 2, page 17 of this document.

³¹ SASO, *Community...*, *op.cit.*; page 5 of Literacy Project, page 12 of the pdf document accessed.

³² Badat, S. *op.cit.*, page 124.

³³ *Ibidem.*, page 124.

³⁴ Khoapa, B. (ed). *Black Review 1972*; Black Community Programmes, Durban, 1973; in: http://www.disa.ukzn.ac.za/index.php?option=com_displaydc&recordID=Br1972.0376.4354.000.000.1972

³⁵ Temba Sono was disaffected from SASO after his speech in the 3rd SASO Conference that took place in July of 1972. According to the *Black Review 1972*, in his speech he said “that SASO had to learn to be flexible in its

fractures that began to appear once the struggle got tougher. That year was even the year when SASO adopted the black fist (the one reminding the American Black Power and its influence in developing the BCM) as its symbol. The year 1972 can definitely be considered as the (first) turning point in the history of SASO and the BCM, when its leaders –despite its differences- agreed on taking a step forward, taking the struggle against the apartheid government to the next level.

May and June 1972 were months of unrest in the black universities. Protests and students boycotts spread all over South Africa, making visible the work that –unregistered before the eyes of the apartheid institutions- SASO had built. What triggered the protest was an incident that took place in the graduation ceremony at the University of the North on April that year. Mr Onkgopotse Ramothibi Tiro delivered a talk on behalf of the 1972 graduands. He was former SRC President at the University and, at that time, studying for the University Education Diploma. His speech was an open call for resistance: “We black graduates, by virtue of our age and academic standing, are being called upon to greater responsibilities in the liberation of our people.” What followed a couple of days after Tiro’s address was his expulsion from campus.

Student reaction to these events was quick: the same day of the expulsion the SRC President of the University of the North called for a mass meeting of the student body that resolved to boycott the lectures Tiro attended, claiming for his return.

As a consequence of the sit-ins, within the following days, the University authorities decided to close down the campus, forcing the students to leave. All of them, according to what was stipulated, would have to re-apply to go back the following semester. This meant many of the students identified in the protest would not be able to return to college.³⁶

However, this incident was not to be isolated, and soon other university campuses began to express the solidarity with the situation of the students of the University of the North. At the Western Cape and the Natal Medical School boycotts of lectures were held, and by mid-May at a meeting of the SASO National Executive held during the SASO National Formation School in Alice, what became known as the *Alice*

approach; that they had to avoid stagnating in the 'Servitude of ideology'; that they should be elastic and learn 'to talk even to our enemies'. He then called for open-mindedness towards Bantustan leaders, white liberals and even towards security police.

³⁶ *Black Review* 1972, op.cit., page 175.

declaration was issued in support of African students expelled for boycotting classes early in May at several Universities. Once the declaration was announced publicly, the word spread quickly and students decided not to return to school, boycotting the lectures, demanding now not only the return of the formerly expelled students but presenting their demands “dealing with basic student issues like definition of education, control measures over students, student participation in University Government, etc.”³⁷ The end of the protests was accompanied by a series of interventions of parents looking forward to end the boycott, and resolute university authorities that did not re-admit a number of SRC and SASO members.

But despite the unfortunate results in terms of specific student demands, the main outcome of the 1972 protests was definitely far-reaching. The 3rd SASO Conference was nurtured by intense debates on the policies to be followed by the organisation, which led to the declaration of the *Black Students’ Manifesto*³⁸ in which full conscious responsibility was assumed by the black studentship in the struggle for black liberation.

As explained by Saleem Badat³⁹, the importance of the 1972 protests relies on the fact that they evidenced the extent to which Black Consciousness had reached, showing that strong bonds of black solidarity had been formed across black campuses. It also remarks their importance as from this point onwards, SASO committed to a further discussion in detail of the role of education in South African politics and the actions (strategy) to be followed afterwards. The protests even led SASO to develop the “free university” scheme, “a correspondence and tutorship system where students will feel free to make additions to the curricula, calculated to develop a proper social conscience and a commitment to the larger goals of the black people in South Africa.”⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

The period here analysed, between 1969 and 1972 represented one of critical transition between the almost silenced activism of the 1960s and the fervor and the excitement of the late 1970s struggles. In this period, the work done by the South African Students’ Organisation was -regardless its difficulties- essential to the building

³⁷ *Ibidem.*, page 178.

³⁸ See Appendix 4, page 19 of this document.

³⁹ Badat, S. *op.cit.*, pages 119 to 121.

⁴⁰ *Black Review 1972*, *op.cit.*, page 180.

of the BCM that clearly consolidated its action programme after the 1972 university boycotts and the 3rd GSC.

If something cannot be put into question is the intellectual-petty-bourgeois SASO's origins. But this demonstrated actually not to be a problem itself in the long struggle for black liberation from Afrikaner rule. Paying attention to the different sources here analysed, it could be affirmed that, in fact, the previous circumstances of the 1960s worked as a warning for this new generation of liberation leaders. Therefore, the fact that "[between 1968 and 1972] future Black Consciousness leaders spent these years engaged in quieter—and in a sense, more fundamental—pursuits, thinking, exploring, critiquing and developing their own perspective on the issues that mattered to them [was fundamental for them to] developed the ideas that constituted Black Consciousness and which they carried into the struggle against the State after 1972."⁴¹

"In July 1972, the Education Commission tabled the "Black Student Manifesto" (BSM), for adoption by SASO's third GSC [General Students Council]. Through the BSM, SASO members proclaimed that "we are an integral part of the oppressed community before we are students."⁴² The adoption of this position deepened the line stated in SASO's "Declaration of Student Rights", adopted in July 1971, where it was stated a close relation between black studentship and general black community and their demands for equality.⁴³

Interesting enough is to highlight the reflections made in the recent years by Barney Pityana, one of the protagonists of this organisation, on the origins and steps taken by Black Consciousness:

*"Black consciousness never attempted in any systematic sense to formulate a manifesto for a new South Africa: in part because black consciousness, certainly during the time of Steve Biko, never envisaged itself as an alternative liberation force, but also in part because it was justly preoccupied with the middle passage, the strategies necessary to bring about the revolution of the mind that leads to action."*⁴⁴

⁴¹ Magaziner, *op.cit.*, page 223

⁴² Badat, S. *op.cit.*, page 96.

⁴³ See Appendix 1, page 17 of this document.

⁴⁴ Pityana, p8

Appendix 1

Declaration of Students' Rights (July/August 1971)

We, the Black students of South Africa believing:

- (i) That it is the right of every person to have free access to education;
- (ii) That this right to be inalienable;
- (iii) That no single group has the right of monopoly to the exclusion of others;
- (iv) That all persons have an undisputable claim to what has been contributed universally by mankind in terms of knowledge;
- (v) That it is the obligation of the State to recognize these rights;
- (vi) That free academic pursuit is the right of every student;
- (vii) That academic fields are not restrictive in themselves;
- (viii) That Institutions of learnings and all therein serve in the pursuit and unprejudiced acquisition of knowledge;

THEREFORE DECLARE:

- (i) That it is the right of every Black student to attend the University of his choice;
- (ii) That the Black students' choice of university be not prescribed by any ethnic factors.
- (iii) That it is the right of every Black student to choose his field of academic pursuit;
- (iv) That the right of dissent of the Black students with the instructor is fundamental.
- (v) That it is the duty of the Black Universities to recognize this right to dissent;
- (vi) That this recognition by Black institutions of learning will help eliminate the Black man's induced sense of inferiority;
- (vii) That this recognition will lead to cordial relations between student and staff;
- (ix) That Black students owe each other allegiance in view of their common oppression.
- (x) That Black students have right of communication with other Black students,
- (xi) That it is not the prerogative or right of any State to prescribe this communication of Blacks with Blacks.

Appendix 2

SOUTH AFRICAN STUDENTS' ORGANISATION
TARA ROAD, WENTWORTH, DURBAN.

Telegrams
Telephone

P.O, BOX 23,
AUSTERVILLE.
NATAL.

SASO POLICY MANIFESTO (1971)

1. SASO is a Black Student Organization working for the liberation of the Black man first from psychological oppression by themselves through inferiority complex and secondly from physical oppression accruing out of living in a White racist society.
2. We define Black People as those who are by law or tradition, politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realization of their aspirations.
3. SASO believes:
 - a) South Africa is a country in which both Black and White live and shall continue to live together,

- b) That the Whiteman must be made aware that one is either part of the solution or part of the problem,
- c) That, in this context, because of the privileges accorded to them by legislation and because of their continual maintenance of an oppressive regime, Whites have defined themselves as part of the problem,
- d) That, therefore, we believe that in all matters relating to the struggle towards realizing our aspirations, Whites must be excluded,
- e) That this attitude must not be interpreted by Blacks to imply "anti-Whitism" but merely a more positive way of attaining a normal situation in South Africa,
- f) That in pursuit of this direction, therefore, personal contact with Whites, though it should not be legislated against, must be discouraged, especially where it tends to militate against the beliefs we hold dear.

4) (a) SASO upholds the concept of Black Consciousness and the drive towards black awareness as the most logical and significant means of ridding ourselves of the shackles that bind us to perpetual servitude.

(b) SASO defines Black Consciousness as follows:

- (i) BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS is an attitude of mind, a way of life
- (ii) The basic tenet of Black Consciousness is that the Blackman must reject all value systems that seek to make him a foreigner in the country of his birth and reduce his basic human dignity.
- (iii) The Blackman must build up his own value systems, see himself as self-defined and not as defined by others.
- (iv) The concept of Black Consciousness implies the awareness by the Black people of the power they wield as a group, both economically and politically and hence group cohesion and solidarity are important facets of Black Consciousness.
- (v) BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS will always be enhanced by the totality of involvement of the oppressed people, hence the message of Black' Consciousness has to be spread to reach all sections of the Black community.

(c) SASO accepts the premise that before the Black people should join the open society, they should first close their ranks, to form themselves into a solid group to oppose the definite racism that is meted out by the White society, to work out their direction clearly and bargain from a position of strength. SASO believes that a truly open society can only be achieved by Blacks.

5. SASO believes that the concept of integration can never be realized in an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust. Integration does not mean an assimilation of Blacks into an already established set of norms drawn up and motivated by white society. Integration implies free participation by individuals in a given society and proportionate contribution to the joint culture of the society by all constituent groups. Following this definition, therefore, SASO believes that integration does not need to be enforced or worked for. Integration follows automatically when the doors to prejudice are closed through the attainment of a just and free society.

6. SASO believes that all groups allegedly working for "Integration" in South Africa...and here we note in particular the Progressive Party and other Liberal institutions...are not working for the kind of integration that would be acceptable to the Black man. Their attempts are directed merely at relaxing certain oppressive legislations and to allow Blacks into a white type society.

7. SASO, while upholding these beliefs, nevertheless wishes to state that Black Consciousness should not be associated with any particular political party or slogan.

Appendix 3

ALICE DECLARATION: BOYCOTT OF BLACK UNIVERSITIES (May 1972)

That this Formation School noting:

- 1. the series of expulsions from various black Universities/Institutions;
- 2. the oppressive atmosphere in the black institutions of higher learning as demonstrated by the expulsion of the Turfloop student body;
- 3. that the 'wait and see' attitude, if adopted by other black institutions, will be a betrayal to the black man's struggle in this country;
- 4. that the black community is anxiously and eagerly waiting to learn and hear of the stand taken by black students on other campuses who invariably are subjected to the same atrocities and injustices suffered by the Turfloop students; and believing:

- (a) that this cannot be viewed as an isolated incident;
- (b) that black students have long suffered under oppression;
- (c) that this can be escalated into a major confrontation with the authorities.

THEREFORE RESOLVES

that all black students force the institutions/universities to close down by boycotting lectures;
that the date when a simultaneous boycott of all classes be effected be on 1 June when it is expected that all Turfloop students will be returning to University.

Appendix 4

BLACK STUDENTS' MANIFESTO (1972)⁴⁵

We, the Black Students of South Africa, believing that the Black Man can no longer allow definitions that have been imposed upon him by an arrogant White world concerning his Being and his destiny and that the Black Student has a moral obligation to articulate the needs and aspirations of the Black Community hereby declare that:

- A. We Black Students are:
 - 1. An integral part of the Black oppressed Community before we are Students coming out of and studying under the oppressive restrictions of a racist education,
 - 2. committed to a more disciplined involvement in the intellectual and physical work and to the consistent search of the Black Truth,
 - 3. committed to work towards the building of our people and to the winning of the struggle for liberation and guided by the central purpose of service to the Black Community on every technical and social level.
- B. We therefore, reject the whole sphere of racist education and commit ourselves to:
 - 1. The intellectual and physical development of our community and to the realization of liberation for Black peoples of South Africa.
 - 2. the definition that education in South Africa is unashamedly political and we therefore, believe that Black education is tied to the liberation of the Black people of the world.
- C. We hereby commit ourselves to:
 - 1. the assertion, manifestation and development of a sense of awareness politically, socially and economically among the Black Community.
 - 2. the belief that Black Students should maintain a spirit of fraternity amongst themselves, free from the prejudice of whit fallacies by virtue of their common oppression.
 - 3. attempting to break away from the traditional order of subordination to whites in education and to refuse to be educated for them,
 - 4. encourage and promote Black Literature relevant to our struggle,
 - 5. ensure that our education will further the preservation and promotion of what is measured in our culture and our historical experience.

⁴⁵ As published in *SASO Newsletter*, September 1972.

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