

SAHO Biography

Name: Tshifhiwa Muofhe

Date of Birth: 1954

Date of Death: 12 November 1981

In summary: Tshifhiwa Muofhe was a community leader and Lutheran priest in Venda. Police arrested him in 1981 in connection to a bombing at Sibasa Police Station. He died while in detention.

The Death of Tshifhiwa Muofhe

After years of struggle and no success from a non-violent approach to the oppressive government, the African National Congress (ANC) launched an armed wing by the name of Umkhonto we Sizwe, or MK.¹ The apartheid state suspected MK of several bombings against political authorities in the apartheid Bantustans, which spread fear and panic in the Venda Bantustan and increased the unjust tactics used by the government. In a hearing for an ANC submission to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1997, it stated that there were at least 40 ANC guerilla attacks in inner-city areas between January and October of 1981, which was the year Tshifhiwa Muofhe was arrested and killed.² In October of 1981, an MK operation bombed a Sibasa Police Station in Venda and killed several police officers.³ Authorities concluded that the attack was orchestrated inside the Bantustan and not directly by MK operatives themselves. This led to the suspicion and arrest of four church and community leaders that all had strong

¹ “uMkhonto weSizwe (MK) in Exile” from South African History Online.

² ANC. “Further Submissions and Responses by the African National Congress to Questions Raised by the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation,” May 12, 1997, appx. 4.

³ Allister Sparks, “Tshifiwa Muofhe, a Lutheran Church elder suspected of complicity in the Sibasa Police Station bomb blast, dies in police custody” from *South African History Online*.

followings in Venda, especially Tshifhiwa Muofhe.⁴ While the Lutheran priests consistently denied the allegations of being MK contacts, all were detained and tortured in prison.⁵ On November 12, 1981, Tshifhiwa Muofhe died two days after being detained and authorities attempted to hide his cause of death however; years of research and witness accounts gathered by the TRC support that he was killed by the torture he received in police custody.

Tshifhiwa Muofhe spent the majority of his life as a political activist and Lutheran preacher during the time of the apartheid, which began in 1948 and lasted for several decades. In the Bantustan of Venda, he was an icon for struggle and hero of resistance. Tshifhiwa Muofhe was born in Musina in 1954 and his love for books led him to register as a student at the University of the North; however, he was forced to drop out due to financial difficulties.⁶ His mother described him as a loving and peaceful person, who frequently helped strengthen her faith in God.⁷

⁴ See note 3 above.

⁵ See note 3 above.

⁶ “Gallant freedom fighter Tshifhiwa Muofhe posthumously honoured with a Doctorate Degree at UNIVEN,” *Department of Communications and Marketing* (speech, at University of Venda graduation, Thohoyandou, Limpopo, May 12, 2016).

⁷ SAPA, “TRC hears of Venda Police Station bombing,” October 4, 1996.

The police bombing at Sibasa Station occurred in October of 1981 and Tshifhiwa Muofhe, along with Tshenuwani Simon Farisani and Ndanganeni Phaswana, were arrested on November 10, 1981 and held responsible for the attack.⁸ The attack was significant because it killed several police officers and because it was one of the numerous violent events that occurred as the anti-apartheid movement sought to undermine the apartheid system of Bantu Authorities. Venda was the last stage of Bantu Authorities, a faux independent Bantustan. On November 12, just two days after being detained, Tshifhiwa Muofhe was found dead in his prison cell.⁹ While authorities denied the allegations of

⁸ Allister Sparks, "Police Killed Pastor, Says Tribal Court," *The Washington Post*, July 21, 1982.

⁹ See note 8 above.

assault and torture, the families held that this was the Christian pastor's cause of death. Other pastors witnessed and testified to this cause. A few weeks after the death of Tshifhiwa Muofhe, the detained Simon Farisani was sent to a hospital badly bruised, but still in chains.¹⁰ News of this caused controversy and the U.S. National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation strongly protested with the general secretary, Paul A. Wee.¹¹ This led to Amnesty International launching an investigation into the death of Tshifhiwa Muofhe and the treatment that the men received in prison.¹²

Editorial: FIGHT APARTHEID MURDER

This month's editorial consists of a statement issued by Comrade Alfred Nzo, ANC Secretary General, after the murder of Dr Neil Aggett in Security Police detention.

The apartheid regime is escalating its brutal repressive measures against the democratic forces in the country confronting its decaying despotic rule. A few days ago a leading trade union worker, Dr Aggett died in detention under circumstances similar to those of trade unionists and political activists such as Lawrence Nzanga, Steve Biko and many others who were murdered in police detention cells.

As part and parcel of these fascist repressive measures are the brutalities that are being perpetrated by the Venda bantustan puppets who are vainly hoping to curb the growing resistance of the masses in opposition to the hated separate development policies of the apartheid regime.

In the Venda bantustan, following an attack on the Sibasa police station by a unit of our people's army, Umkhonto we Sizwe, the bantustan administration resorted to indiscriminate arrests of innocent people subjecting them to brutal torture. Recently, the Venda bantustan regime, on instructions from Pretoria, has decided to prefer murder charges against three Ministers of the Lutheran Church, Rev. A.M. Mahamba, Rev. P.M. Mphosiwa and Rev. N. Farisani and the fourth to be accused under the same charge is R. Tshikororo. The murder charges arise from the attack on the Sibasa police station. Reverend Farisani is at the moment fighting for his life suffering from serious injuries he sustained during

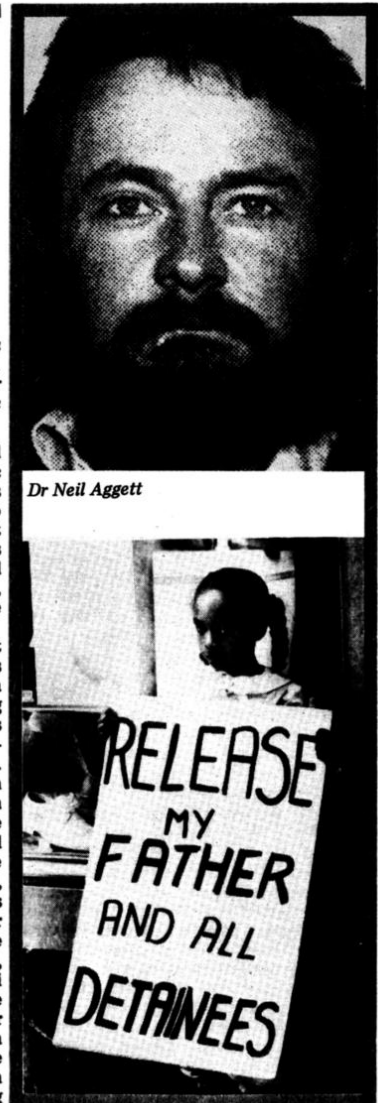


Figure 1: Article inside ANC Telegram on Sibasa Bombing that Tshifhiwa Muofhe was arrested for.

¹⁰ Allister Sparks, "The Torture of Dean Farisani," *Reality Vol 14 No 6*, November 1982.

¹¹ See note 8.

¹² See note 8.

At the time of Tshifhiwa Muofhe's death, an inquest blamed the police and found that his two interrogators had assaulted him to death during an investigation. This allegation was the first time that an inquest court had accused security police of killing a political detainee.¹³ The captain and sergeant claimed that Muofhe had accompanied them in a trip up the mountain when he tried to escape. However, this was proven false when the truck that was allegedly used was confirmed out of service at the time.¹⁴ Three doctors confirmed the beating from a medical examination of his body that showed severe bruising on his head and genitals, along with internal bleeding caused by extensive blunt force.¹⁵ At a hearing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission for the Venda Police Station bombing, Ndanganeni Phaswana revealed the truth about the torture he received alongside Tshifhiwa Muofhe and the events that unfolded prior to his death.¹⁶

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which began in 1995, worked to uncover the human rights violations and police brutality that occurred under the apartheid.¹⁷ The police and military personnel conducted the violence by abusing their power, which included

interrogation and torture whilst in detention after the attack on the Sibasa police station.

These insane acts of brutality, have further inflamed the anger of the vast majority of the South African population against the apartheid regime. On Thursday, 11th February, thousands of workers in almost all the principal industrial areas of South Africa stopped work for a brief period in answer to a protest call by a united trade union movement of the oppressed and super-exploited workers following the murder of Dr Aggett. This mighty demonstration of solidarity was joined also by the youth, the Christian community and other democratic sections of the South African population. The masses of the people, acting in revolutionary unity, are calling a halt to the trail of fascist barbarism which has already accounted for the brutal assassination of revolutionaries such as Griffiths Mxenge, including Joe Gqabi and many other South African revolutionary fighters murdered by the agents of the apartheid regime on the territories of independent African states.

Figure 1: ANC reaction of Sibasa arrests

¹³ South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, vol. 1–6. Cape Town: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1999–2003.

¹⁴ See note 8.

¹⁵ See note 8.

¹⁶ SAPA, “TRC hears of Venda Police Station bombing,” October 4, 1996.

¹⁷ Alex Steiner, “Policing Apartheid: A History of Control and Resistance in South Africa.” *Washington State University*. (2015).

death of political activists. The treatment of activists was heavily influenced by political motives, with police believing the state was at war and justifying any method it took to win, even with prisoners behind bars. In the hearing of the Venda Police Station bombing, Matamela Dladlamba, the mother of Muofhe, testified that she was not informed of her son's death right away and was only given some information after repeated attempts.¹⁸ A key piece of evidence however, was in the testimony of Lutheran minister Reverend Ndanganeni Phaswana, who was in jail with Tshifhiwa Muofhe. He said the police tried to force a confession statement of the bombing from Phaswana and did so with tortuous techniques such as: electric shocks, punches, clubbing by police. He suffered a burst eardrum after an officer struck him with an open hand.¹⁹ One of his most important statements was when he revealed that the police officers threatened to drown him in a bucket and admitted that this was the way they killed Tshifhiwa Muofhe. Another Lutheran minister who was detained shortly after the bombing, Reverend Mbulaheni Phosiwa, testified that he was subjected to electric shock and that his private parts were injured from police treatment, which eventually sent him to the hospital. In addition to these TRC testimonies, the detailed account of Dean Simon Farisani's time in detention reveals strong evidence for police brutality as the cause of Tshifhiwa Muofhe's death.

The Lutheran Dean of Venda, Simon Farisani, was tortured by the same interrogators that killed Tshifhiwa Muofhe. Farisani survived to share his account. The Dean explained how "...he was made to do exercises until he collapsed. He was beaten until his eyes bled and his eardrums burst. He was suffocated under a wet canvas hood and subjected to electric shocks to the head, spine and genitals until he lost consciousness."²⁰ Three weeks after his initial torture, Farisani

¹⁸ See note 16 above.

¹⁹ See note 16 above.

²⁰ Allister Sparks, "The Torture of Dean Farisani," *Reality Vol 14 No 6*, November 1982.

experienced a delayed shock to his nervous system, which caused heart failure and he nearly died. This is significant in considering Muofhe's cause of death because both men were subject to torturous tactics, however, Muofhe's body may have responded differently. Farisani explained the sweltering heat that they suffered through in the prison cells, though the conditions of the prison were not his main fear. He feared the two interrogators that allegedly killed Muofhe because of their ability to torture. The treatment began when Farisani refused to write a letter confessing that he and the other pastors organized the police station attack. "They went beserk," said Farisani. "They punched, kicked and hit me with everything they could lay their hands on, even the chairs."²¹ He explained how the officers smashed his head, causing him to bleed from his nose, mouth, ears, eyes, and eventually his eardrum burst. This is significant because it coincides with the treatment that the other pastors testified. The next morning at 6 a.m., Farisani's torture sequence continued in the Sibasa security police office, where he was told that no one survives unless they tell the police what they want to hear. Farisani then endured the electric shock treatment. A wet canvas hood was placed over his head with electric terminals glued to his ears and back of his skull. As the shock turned on, it targeted his brain and spine, which caused his entire body to convulse until he lost consciousness. Once he woke up, he was asked to confess again and when he refused, the interrogators placed more electric terminals on his inner thighs and genitals. After 13 hours of continuous torture, Farisani finally agreed to say whatever the officers wanted to hear, however; he prayed that God would forgive him.²²

After the death of Tshifhiwa Muofhe in 1981, prison conditions and police brutality for the oppressed continued, despite efforts to fight for justice. In an investigation conducted by Human Rights Watch, they studied over 20 prisons between 1992 and 1993. They collected court

²¹ See note 19 above.

²² See note 20 above.

cases dealing with prisoner's rights, interviews with prison officials, former prisoners, and several other people involved in prison rights and condition issues. The report found that, as of December 31, 1992, the South African prison population held 4,258 white prisoners versus a total of 104, 440 non-white prisoners.²³ Excluding the physical abuse that was happening in private, the report found obvious differences in the living conditions between races. The living conditions were drastically better for whites such as, single cells, beds, food surplus, and little physical harm. Whites were also rewarded with good behavior and assigned less amounts of labor than non-whites. The report also states that, "The irony of the South African classification system is that it awards the best conditions to individuals who committed the most serious crimes, affording the harshest to those sentenced for the shortest terms," which is significant because it directly addresses the racial discrimination that killed Tshifhiwa Muofhe, a Christian leader and activist that was arrested for a crime he was falsely accused of.²⁴ A common practice among activists trapped inside the prisons was to go on hunger-strikes as a form of non-violent protests. This was practiced by the pastors that were arrested with Tshifhiwa Muofhe, however, it is also reported in the investigation by Human Rights Watch. "We received disturbing testimonies about the treatment afforded to participants in some of these fasts," the report states.²⁵ One of the prisoners testified that they were stripped of their clothing for an entire night during the cold weather conditions. The next morning, they were taken to a prison hospital and forced into the morgue, where the temperature was also freezing. While the police version of Muofhe's death was proven false, other examples of falsification is supported in the Human

²³ Joanna Weschler and Bronwen Manby, "Prison Conditions in South Africa." *Human Rights Watch* (1994): 1-5.

²⁴ See note 22.

²⁵ Joanna Weschler and Bronwen Manby. "Prison Conditions in South Africa." *Human Rights Watch* (1994): 1-5.

Rights Watch report. By 1991, when the anticipated releases of political prisoners had not yet been granted, protests broke out behind bars. It is reported that prisoners in Barberton set their cells on fire “to get attention”, however; by the time the fire was subdued, six inmates were dead with the official cause of death by fire.²⁶ The interviews conducted with prisoners from Barberton have a different, detailed, and graphic account of what actually happened to the lay prisoners. They claimed they were brutally murdered by the prison staff and top officers, specifically by trapping them with their boots placed on the prisoners’ stomachs, beating them continuously, and then dragging them on the floor.²⁷ The human rights violations that happened between 1948 and 1994 escalated greatly and strengthened South Africa’s need for change.

In an attempt to unveil the methods of police brutality and human rights violations, the 1995 Truth and Reconciliation Commission began to document the experiences of those who suffered under apartheid. The TRC held hearings with victims and concluded that there were countless motives used by police and military personnel in order to practice these acts of violence. On October 29, 1998, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission presented a report to President Nelson Mandela of the gross violations of human rights.²⁸ The report contains primary sources from individuals who suffered from the system, court case hearings on transcripts post mortem reports, and research on the relation of deaths to several prisons. The TRC report found an overwhelmingly majority of black males, aged 13-36, that were killed by conflict and had the highest rate for experiencing torture.²⁹ The 748-page report conducted by the Truth and

²⁶ See note 24 above.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁸ South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission. *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, vol. 1–6. Cape Town: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 1999–2003.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

Reconciliation Commission was successful in achieving its goal; exposing the human rights violations and the assault that Muofhe received in prison.

While none of the police officers involved in Tshifhiwa Muofhe's death were punished for their actions and his cause of death is officially unknown, Tshifhiwa Muofhe continues to be recognized for his efforts to struggle against the dominance of racial discrimination. In 2012, a plaque was unveiled in honor of Tshifhiwa Muofhe outside of the prison cell where he died that stated, "In honour of Tshifhiwa Muofhe who bravely fought and laid down his life in the struggle against oppression so that all South Africans may be free and be equal before the law."³⁰ His legacy lives on because of the struggle he endured. In 2016, Tshifhiwa Muofhe's daughter accepted a Doctorate Degree on behalf of her late father in Laws Honoris Causa by the School of Law at the University of Venda. Also in his honor, the Department of Justice and Correctional Services renamed the "Matashe Correctional Services" to "Tshifhiwa Muofhe Correctional Centre."³¹ He lived a life of service and risked his life traveling extensively knowing that he was under the eye of the apartheid and Bantustan governments. However, this did not stop him from his determination to spread the word of Christianity and help those who were suffering under the system alongside him. Tshifhiwa Muofhe died with honor.

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³⁰ Benson Ntlemo, "Tribute to Muofhe: Hero of Resistance," *Sowetan Live*, November 12, 2012.

³¹ "Gallant Freedom Fighter Tshifhiwa Muofhe posthumously honoured with a Doctorate Degree at UNIVEN," *Department of Communications and Marketing* (speech, at University of Venda graduation, Thohoyandou, Limpopo, May 12, 2016).

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