

**Sekibakiba Peter  
Lekgoathi**

Associate Professor and  
Head of Department,  
Department of History,  
University of the  
Witwatersrand. E-mail:  
Sekibakiba.lekgoathi@  
wits.ac.za

# RURAL YOUTH AND CHANGING PATTERNS OF POLITICAL MOBILISATION IN THE NORTHERN TRANSVAAL VILLAGE OF ZEBEDIELA, 1976-1990

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.18820/24150509/JCH43.v1.2>

ISSN 0258-2422 (Print)  
ISSN 2415-0509 (Online)

Journal for Contemporary  
History  
2018 43(1):21-42  
© UV/UFS



## **Abstract**

*Beginning with the massive uprising by the students of Soweto in Johannesburg on 16 June 1976, black schools in South Africa became theatres of war as the students engaged in running battles with the authorities against, inter alia, the poor quality of education provided to blacks in the country; the Afrikaans language medium; authoritarianism, and the apartheid system in general. Although there were whispers of rebellion in rural communities during the mid-1970s, and urban students studying in the countryside were prominent in these uprisings, it was only in the 1980s that rural youths reached a level of political consciousness comparable to that of their urban counterparts and began to play a leading role in local struggles against apartheid policies and the Bantustan system. In the 1970s, rural youths were increasingly drawn into the education system, but they had not yet developed a strong political consciousness, whereas by the 1980s young people throughout the country had developed, what Colin Bundy calls, “generational consciousness”. Ambient social and historical processes reshaped their consciousness and they became self-assertive and conscious of themselves as a distinct social category with a common identity. They realised that they had the capacity to effect far-reaching changes in society. This consciousness developed at the time when there were progressive erosion of African tradition and the legitimacy of chieftainship; thus rendering rural youths more receptive to urban youth culture and political ideologies propagated by the urban-based liberation movements. Using archival material and oral sources, mainly interviews with former students in the area, this article looks at changing patterns of youth mobilisation in the village of Zebediela in the northern Transvaal from 1976 to the early 1990s.<sup>1</sup>*

**Keywords:** Generational consciousness; rural youth; Black Consciousness Movement (BCM); United Democratic Front (UDF); chieftainship; apartheid; Bantustans; Lebowa.

**Sluutelwoorde:** Generasiebewustheid; plattelandse jeug; Swart Bewusynsbeweging (SBB); United Democratic Front (UDF); kapteinskap; apartheid; tuislande; Lebowa.

1 This article is based on research conducted for an MA project during the 1990s. Some information in the article have thus been adapted from the MA dissertation. See SP Lekgoathi, *Reconstructing the history of educational transformation in a rural Transvaal chieftdom: The radicalisation of teachers in Zebediela from the early 1950s to the early 1990s* (MA, University of the Witwatersrand, 1995).

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the four decades since the 1976 Soweto students' uprisings, a huge volume of literature has been produced that offers numerous interpretations of this student-led revolt. These explanations range from looking at the students' revolt as an outcome of the failure of state reforms;<sup>2</sup> analyses of the influence of the working class militancy against the backdrop of the victories of some liberation movements in southern Africa;<sup>3</sup> the role played by liberation movements (the African National Congress, Pan Africanist Congress, and others) in shaping students' organisational development and political resistance; the influence of Black Consciousness (BC) ideology;<sup>4</sup> contestations over ideological influences;<sup>5</sup> to issues of commemoration and memorialisation of the Soweto uprisings.<sup>6</sup> Some approaches identify student activism as the most pre-eminent factor in the uprisings.<sup>7</sup> Since the 1976 students' uprisings, the different explanations have also been shaped by various political trajectories in South African politics and by scholarship over the years. Some scholars have examined the impact of these uprisings on other townships on the Rand and beyond.<sup>8</sup> Very recently, two

- 
- 2 For a full discussion of this perspective, see, for example, J Kane-Berman, *Soweto: Black revolt, white reaction* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1987); A Brookes and J Brickhill, *Whirlwind before the storm* (London: International Defence and Aid Fund for Southern Africa, 1980). See also, The National Archives (hereafter TNA), Pretoria, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the riots at Soweto and elsewhere: Cillie Commission Report* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1980).
  - 3 B Hirson, *Year of fire, year of ash. The Soweto revolt: Roots of a revolution?* (London: Zed Books, 1979).
  - 4 AK Hlongwane, *The historical development of the commemoration of the June 16, 1976 Soweto students' uprisings: A study of the re-representation, commemoration and collective memory* (PhD, University of the Witwatersrand, 2015).
  - 5 H Mashabela, *A people on the boil: Reflections on Soweto* (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1987); SM Ndlovu, *The Soweto uprisings: Counter-memories of June 1976* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1998); "The Soweto uprising, Part 1: Soweto". In: South African Democracy Education Trust (hereafter SADET), *The road to democracy in South Africa*, Volume 2: 1970–1980 (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2006), pp. 317-350.
  - 6 S Ndlovu and AK Hlongwane, "The centrality of public and oral history in mapping the Soweto uprising routes". In: SADET, *The road to democracy in South Africa*, Volume 7: *Soweto uprisings: New perspectives, commemorations and memorialisation* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2017), pp. 79-125; AK Hlongwane, "June 16 1976 Soweto uprisings: A journey into the contested world of commemoration". In: SADET, *The road to democracy in South Africa*, Volume 7, pp. 165-194.
  - 7 H Pohlandt-McCormick, *"I saw a nightmare..." Doing violence to memory: The Soweto uprising, June 16, 1976* (PhD, University of Minnesota, 1999); E Brink et al., *Recollected 25 years later: Soweto June 16 – It all started with a dog* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2001).
  - 8 N Nieftagodien, "The Soweto uprising, Part 2: Alexandra and Kathorus". In: SADET, *The road to democracy in South Africa*, Volume 2, pp. 351-359; N Nieftagodien and T Moloi, "The Soweto uprising, Part 3: Thembisa". In: SADET, *The road to democracy in*

studies have been published on youth struggles, which shifted the boundaries of our understanding of the Soweto students' uprising and its effects in various parts of the country. These are Tshepo Moloi's book on political protest in a small Free State town since 1976;<sup>9</sup> and an edited volume by Anne Heffernan and Noor Nieftagodien, which includes contributions from different authors who explored various aspects of youth struggles from 1976 to the 1990s.<sup>10</sup>

With minor exceptions, a common denominator in all the studies of the 1976 student uprisings referred to above is that they tend to privilege urban perspectives. Even those scholars who have shifted away from the upheavals in the main metropolitan areas tended to focus on obscure townships as part of small towns and gave minimal attention to the unfolding of the crisis in the countryside and the conduits through which it spread to the rural villages. Moreover, no systematic analysis has been made of the factors that militated against widespread youth revolt in the countryside during the period.

Several factors account for this scholarly oversight. Firstly, most researchers have, until very recently, been preoccupied with political developments in the towns and they lacked meaningful contact with the countryside; issues affecting rural communities have been neglected. Secondly, the forms of struggles and resistance in the countryside have invariably been more muted and incomplete and not as dramatic and eye-catching as those unfolding in urban townships. In part, this is because the dominant political movement in the country at the time, the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM), concentrated too narrowly on developments in teacher training colleges, technical colleges and universities in the Bantustan areas and neglected the surrounding rural communities and their concerns. This article addresses this blind spot and pays particular attention to the rising discontent in educational institutions and secondary schools in parts of the northern Transvaal that felt the shockwaves of the Soweto students' uprising of June 1976; especially those with boarding facilities. The article commences by looking at the first responses to the upheaval at the University of the North at Turfloop, as well as at the Pax Institute (a boarding school near the city of Polokwane) and Setotlwane Teacher Training College. It then takes as a case study a single school, namely Matladi Secondary School in the village of Zebediela, situated in the Lebowa homeland.

---

*South Africa*, Volume 2, pp. 359-368; SP Lekgoathi, "The 1976 Soweto students' uprising and its aftermath in parts of the northern Transvaal". In: SADET, *The road to democracy in South Africa*, Volume 7, pp. 126-142; T Moloi, "'Angeke bemhlule umlungu. Umlungu unamandla (They won't defeat the whites. Whites are powerful)': Student protest in Mzinoni Township, Bethal, 1972-1977". In: SADET, *The road to democracy in South Africa*, Volume 7, pp. 143-164.

9 T Moloi, *A place of thorns: Black political protest in Kroonstad since 1976* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2015).

10 A Heffernan and N Nieftagodien (eds), *Students must rise: Youth struggle in South Africa before and beyond Soweto '76* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2016).

The article zooms in on the Zebediela area as a lens into the broader region, paying particular attention to structural changes in the area, notably those pertaining to secondary schooling in the period from the 1970s to the early 1990s. It is argued that the increase in the number of secondary schools over time, had a corrosive impact on certain traditional institutions, such as initiation (known as *koma* in Northern Sesotho/Sepedi) and chieftainship or *bogoši*. Changes in the attitude of the rural youth towards these cultural practices, caused by state restructuring of traditional leadership since the 1950s, and the gradual rise in the significance of modern schooling, weakened the authority of the elders over the youth. Although these changes were still quite muted at the time, there was some potential for rural youths to be politically mobilised. However, the BCM, which played such a pivotal role in politicising students in teacher training colleges and universities in the Bantustan areas in the 1970s, failed to see rural youths as a potential constituency and thus missed the opportunity to capitalise on the political rumblings in some rural secondary schools in the region. It was only in the 1980s that a large number of rural youths embraced the urban political culture and began to play a more prominent role in the political struggles in their communities under the auspices of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the African National Congress (ANC).

## **2. PROLIFERATION OF THE 1976 STUDENTS' REVOLT IN PARTS OF THE BANTUSTAN OF LEBOWA**

Although the scale and importance of the student uprisings in the northern Transvaal never matched the convulsive upheavals of Soweto, the shock waves did reach many communities in the countryside. The schools in the so-called Bantustan areas had their own dynamics, which were different from the urban ones for various reasons. Firstly, the Afrikaans medium decree of 1974, which made it compulsory for English and Afrikaans to be used on an equal footing as languages of instruction in all black schools (an issue that triggered the uprisings in Soweto and other townships on the Rand), never really became a contentious issue in the schools in the Bantustans. By 1974, most Bantustan administrations, including Lebowa, had used their limited autonomy in the sphere of education and opted for English and an African language as official languages. English was preferred as a language of education at secondary schools; a decision informed by the reality that English was gaining prominence as the language of commerce and industry. Thus, the schools in Lebowa were able to circumvent the contentious Afrikaans language policy, while its rigorous implementation on the Reef was a major source of discontent.

The second dynamic that differentiated schools in Bantustan areas from those in urban townships, was a complex mixture of urban and rural influences in schools; this prevented the formation of a common identity among students

until at least the mid-1980s. Because of the shortage of educational facilities for blacks in the cities, many parents sent their children to secondary and higher education institutions in the Bantustan areas. The presence of urban youths in rural boarding schools, teacher training colleges and universities in the countryside helped bridge the divide between town and rural village – and played a key role in forging a new youth culture. In the 1970s, it was largely these youths who brought news of the political developments in towns into the rural villages. When some of the more politically astute urban students were sent to schools in the countryside by their parents or guardians, they often articulated the need for rural schools to become politically mobilised; all of which was based on their understanding of the exciting popular culture of political resistance in the urban townships. However, rural youths attending secondary school were initially unenthusiastic in embracing the new popular culture, and tended to treat urban students with a great deal of suspicion.<sup>11</sup>

The students at the University of the North at Turfloop, near Polokwane, were among the first to know about the revolt in Soweto. Firstly, while in the early years there was a balance between rural and urban students at the university, by the late 1960s, the urban students outnumbered rural ones; a dynamic that was also reflected politically.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, Turfloop was the bedrock of the (BC) ideology. It was at this institution that the South African Students Organisation (SASO) was formally constituted under the leadership of Steve Bantu Biko in 1969, after black students became disenchanted with the “liberal” multiracial politics pursued by the predominantly white National Union of South African Students (NUSAS).<sup>13</sup> Politically active students at Turfloop had already demonstrated their political radicalism by joining SASO in the late 1960s, and by launching a class boycott after the expulsion of the Student Representative Council (SRC) leader, Onkgopotse Tiro from the university, following the delivery of a hard-hitting political speech at a graduation ceremony in 1972. Turfloop became radicalised and the students were constantly engaged in a series of class boycotts in the years leading up to 1976.<sup>14</sup>

11 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with H Mathekgana, Moletlane, Zebediela, 7 June 1994. Hereafter, all interviews, unless otherwise stated, are part of the project, “Student politics in the northern Transvaal during the 1970s and 1980s”. See also, SP Lekgoathi, Interview with MJ Madisha, Magatle Village, Zebediela, 22 May 1994.

12 For a discussion of Turfloop, a nerve centre of black student political activism, see A Heffernan, “The University of the North: A regional and national centre of activism”. In: Heffernan and Niefertagodien (eds), pp. 45-54.

13 For a discussion of the split of black students from NUSAS and the formation of a Black Consciousness aligned SASO, see J Hyslop, “School student movements and state education policy: 1972-1987”. In: W Cobbett and R Cohen, *Popular struggles in South Africa* (London: James Currey, 1988), pp. 183-209.

14 Heffernan, pp. 45-54.

Immediately after the news of the 1976 Soweto students' revolt became public knowledge at the university, students staged a large demonstration and once again embarked on a boycott of lectures as a sign of solidarity with the students of Soweto. The students at the university were as much opposed to Bantu Education, authoritarianism and the apartheid system as those in Soweto. The university administration, composed largely of Afrikaner bureaucrats with Afrikaner Broederbond connections, responded by closing down the institution three days after the Soweto uprising erupted, that is, on 18 June, only to reopen later. The police subsequently arrived and detained 176 students.<sup>15</sup>

The following year (1977), on Monday 13 June, the university students continued the class boycott that begun three days earlier.<sup>16</sup> It was intermittent thereafter and on 25 August, following a two-day boycott of lectures and food, students were instructed to leave the campus. In this particular case, students were protesting against the expulsion of a member of the SRC, as well as against the sub-standard quality of food dished up to them at the university.<sup>17</sup> Yet, the clear link of the boycott with the first anniversary of the June 16, 1976 students' uprising remained palpable. The university reopened on 12 September, but a day later the administration triggered a crisis by suspending the SRC, and the police arrested seven students. Following their expulsion and a confrontation with policemen wielding batons on 15 September, roughly 1 500 students departed from the campus. These students referred to the university as, "one of the strongest pillars of Bantu Education and the apartheid system".<sup>18</sup>

Another educational institution in Lebowa that reacted to the 1976 Soweto students' uprising was the Pax Institute. Significantly, it had a large number of students from urban areas. This boys-only boarding school was established by the Brothers of Charity (of the Roman Catholic Church) in 1930 in the Mašašane area, about 30 km from the city of Polokwane. Following an incident where the students broke the windows one evening in June 1976, the school was closed for about three months and, once it reopened, all students in the upper classes (high school level) were barred from returning. The decision not to readmit seniors became a thorny issue and caused serious conflict between students and school authorities in subsequent years.<sup>19</sup>

Setotlwane College of Education (formerly an Anglican missionary college), based in the township of Seshego near Polokwane, was also affected by this wave of political discontent sweeping through the country. Hector Mathekgana, a former student teacher at the college and principal at a high

---

15 Hirson, *passim*.

16 South African Institute of Race Relations (hereafter SAIRR), *A survey of race relations in South Africa 1977* (Johannesburg: SAIRR, 1978), p. 64.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 71.

18 *Rand Daily Mail*, 16 September 1977; cited in SAIRR, pp. 73-74.

19 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with L Mphahlele, Johannesburg, 6 December 1994.

school in the rural village of Zebediela at the time of being interviewed in 1994, recalled that a crisis was sparked in June 1976, just before the half-yearly examinations, when certain “faceless individuals” set several buildings on fire, including the library.<sup>20</sup> As a result, the examinations were suspended. Fearing police reprisals, most students fled from their dormitories. Police did arrive at the college, but they did so in order to investigate the extent of damage caused by the fire, rather than to make arrests. Ultimately, the students returned without any coercion from the police or the college authorities.<sup>21</sup>

As with many other educational institutions in Lebowa, the students at Setotlwane came from diverse regions, both rural and urban. A significant number came from the Rand townships.<sup>22</sup> Students from urban areas were markedly politicised, coming from an environment where the BC ideology had made a significant impression. Mathekgana observed that urban students were the ones who questioned the wisdom of continuing to attend classes when students in Soweto and other townships on the Rand were being killed. The politicised urban students went as far as to ask what the purpose would be of proceeding with their education if, ultimately, they would have no one to teach, because virtually all the students would have been killed by the time their studies were completed. Such concerns precipitated heated debates and sometimes culminated in squabbles as students took sides over the issues raised. One group advocated a militant approach of class boycotts, while the other was patently anti-boycott, choosing instead a path of careerism and distancing themselves from politics. These splits coincided very roughly with the background of the students. A significant number of urban students were sympathetic to the proposal for a symbolic class boycott in solidarity with the students of Soweto, while the majority of students from the countryside felt that boycotts would stall their academic progress and jeopardise their prospects of joining the Bantustan elite as teachers. For this reason, they aligned themselves with a more conservative stance.<sup>23</sup>

By virtue of their location in a “homeland”, the majority of the students were rural-based, and urban students found themselves in the minority. The socio-political background of these students determined how they would react to a call for a strike. Therefore, even though there were some ripples in the rural areas, most of the political activity in the 1970s that was inspired by the BCM was urban-centred, and urban students who came into rural-based boarding schools

20 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with H Mathekgana, Moletlane, Zebediela, 7 June 1994.

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.* The presence of urban-based students in rural colleges should be seen in the light of the apartheid state’s policy of separate development. It was as a result of this ideology that the establishment of black tertiary institutions in urban areas was prohibited. A development of this nature could only take place in the ethnically-defined homeland, where the aspirations of the Africans were supposedly fulfilled.

23 *Ibid.*

and colleges brought with them the popular culture of resistance associated with urban-based political organisations.<sup>24</sup>

Actions, such as the burning incident at Setotlwane College of Education (mentioned earlier) alienated and disturbed most of the students; even those from urban areas who had initially supported the idea of a class boycott. As such, the militants never really gained numerical superiority. Between June 1976 and late 1977, the College experienced low-key disruption of teaching and learning due to calls for class boycotts by some students. The two groups of students debated viciously on whether to strike, or not. However, there was never any physical coercion or confrontation and, in the end, those who called for class disruptions were increasingly marginalised when lectures resumed in earnest in subsequent years.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. MATLADI HIGH SCHOOL AND THE 1976 SOWETO STUDENTS' REVOLT

The unfolding crisis at Matladi Secondary School, the first and oldest secondary school in Zebediela, displays certain similarities with developments at Setotlwane College and other institutions in Lebowa. This school was established in the 1940s when the community of Zebediela decided to pool its financial resources; it was decided that the school should be situated at the *mošate* (the chief's capital) in Moletlane, about 45km from the town of Mokopane. Named Zebediela Central Secondary School, this institution was registered with the Transvaal Education Department on 3 March 1947;<sup>26</sup> it was renamed Zebediela Bantu Secondary School in the mid-1950s; and then Matladi Territorial Secondary School after Zebediela became part of the newly-established Lebowa territorial authority in the late 1960s.<sup>27</sup> The area of Zebediela itself is situated more than 300km north of Soweto on the Witwatersrand.

As with other educational institutions in the region with boarding facilities, the most pivotal role in the upheavals at Matladi in 1976 and 1977 was played by urban students – mostly boarders, particularly those from the townships around Pretoria, more than 200km to the south. Mostly in their mid-teens, these students were at the core of students' action at the school, and it was largely through them that news of the revolt in Soweto came to be known at Matladi and other burgeoning junior secondary schools in the area. They were the students who were the best informed about the situation, given their links to family and friends back home. After receiving telegraph messages and express letters from

24 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with L Mphahlele, Johannesburg, 6 December 1994.

25 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with H Mathekgana, Moletlane, Zebediela, 7 June 1994.

26 Principal, Log Book, Matladi High School (Zebediela), entry dated 11 December 1947.

27 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with RD Kekana, Mogoto Village, Zebediela, 10 April 1994; SP Lekgoathi, Interview with MJ Madisha, Magatle Village, Zebediela, 22 May 1994.

parents and guardians informing them about the convulsions in the townships on the Witwatersrand and Pretoria regions, some students went home to attend funerals. On their return to Matladi, having seen for themselves the situation in the urban areas, they had the urge to extend the uprising to the countryside.<sup>28</sup>

Besides urban students, another conduit of communication, which seems to have played some role in popularising the upheaval at the school, was the newspaper, *The Bantu World*. Although the influence of newspapers in the countryside during the 1970s should not be overestimated, given the limited readership, interested students managed to buy this paper from local trading stores. At Matladi Secondary School, these students combined their daily allowances and asked the school driver to buy the newspaper when he went to collect the mail from Koringpunt Post Office, or at a bigger trading store at the Zebediela Citrus Estates.<sup>29</sup>

The situation came to a head after the winter vacation of 1976 when, on returning to school, some urban students exhorted their rural counterparts to join them in a class boycott in solidarity with the children of Soweto. Most local students were not convinced of the wisdom behind a class boycott. In any case, there is no evidence whatsoever that the BCM, which was actively mobilising students at the University of the North and at colleges in the area, made any effort to mobilise high school students.

In September 1976, fighting erupted between the boarders and the day scholars. Most of the boarders were urban students, while the day scholars were mostly local children. The spark to this conflict was an assault by a male boarder, a bully, on a local student during the morning break – with the connivance of several other boarders. This led to a group of local students planning a counter-attack on the boarders to be carried out at night. The timing excluded students from outlying villages and, as a result, it was not well supported. Ultimately the plan failed.<sup>30</sup>

The following day, tempers flared at the school when a large contingent of day scholars from the local villages was up in arms against the boarders. The latter retreated to their dormitories, only to re-emerge with an assortment of weapons and stones. With a tinge of the theatrical, Alfred Matlaila, a day scholar at Matladi in 1976 and a teacher in 1994, remarked when interviewed, “When the day students were massing outside the school yard, the boarders attacked, holding pillows in the one hand, and softball [baseball] bats in the other hand, charging; some with big knives”.<sup>31</sup>

The day students dispersed in different directions, only to regroup later to throw stones at the boarders. The school was built in a rocky area, so there

---

28 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with A Matlaila, Groothoek Hospital, Zebediela, 10 June 1994.

29 *Ibid.*; SP Lekgoathi, Interview with MJ Madisha, Magatle Village, Zebediela, 22 May 1994.

30 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with MJ Madisha, Magatle Village, Zebediela, 22 May 1994.

31 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with A Matlaila, Groothoek Hospital, Zebediela, 10 June 1994.

was a bountiful supply of stones in the arsenal of the two camps. Fortunately, no one sustained serious injuries. However, damage to the school property was extensive enough to warrant a police investigation, which was carried out by a Sergeant Van Vuuren of the Zebediela Police Station on 23 September 1976.<sup>32</sup> No arrests were made, but the atmosphere remained tense, and enmity between the two groups persisted in the aftermath of the incident.

Despite the deep-rooted ill-feelings between boarders and day students, there were no major incidents at the school for more than 12 months. However, in October 1977 another class boycott was called by the students, "in protest against Bantu Education".<sup>33</sup> Surprisingly, both day scholars and boarders responded to the call, which perhaps suggests a steadily growing political consciousness among rural secondary school students in the aftermath of the Soweto students' uprising. The principal called the circuit inspector of schools in the Mokerong district (of which Zebediela formed part) to intervene. He responded by releasing the students to return to their respective homes in order to allow the explosive situation to subside.<sup>34</sup> Although the rural students participated in this protest, it seemed they did so half-heartedly. Relations between the two groups were severely damaged by the call for a class boycott the previous year and remained strained until the end of the 1970s.

How does one explain the tense situation at Matladi and other institutions in parts of Lebowa? Thus far, this article has discussed the apparent enmity between rural and urban students, which had serious implications for their responses to the 1976 crisis. However, relations between the students were far more complex than is suggested by the somewhat crude urban/rural dichotomy implied above. To illustrate this, the situation at Matladi High School will be examined closely.

For a start, not all boarders were from urban areas and not all day scholars were necessarily rural children – though most were. A perusal of the boarders' admission register at the school for the period from 1956 to 1979 revealed that the boarders were a mixed group of students from urban townships and rural villages.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the urban students were not a homogenous group sharing a particular consciousness, pitted against another united group of rural students with a common identity. There were also divisions among local students, which were difficult to identify without a deep analysis of the historical development of education in Zebediela since the 1950s. It is only through a close analysis of these divisions that a more nuanced understanding can be gained of the upheavals at Zebediela and other institutions in the region in 1976 and 1977.

---

32 Principal, Log Book, Matladi Secondary School (Zebediela), 1947-1979, Entry dated 29 September 1976.

33 *Ibid.*, Entry dated 20 October 1977.

34 *Ibid.*

35 Boarders' Admission Register, Matladi High School (Zebediela), 1956-1979.

Briefly, Western-type schooling in African communities in South Africa was introduced mainly by Christian missionaries in the period from the late nineteenth century. One of the main effects of mission education was the division in African communities between Christian converts and non-Christians. The former group was the first to embrace schooling while the non-Christians were not initially enthusiastic. However, as rural Africans lost their land due to government policies and the production of crops and livestock farming became less viable, the nature of the economy changed and rural communities desired to make the best of what was available for future generations. It was in this context that schooling became important for Christians and non-Christians alike.

In his analysis of the situation in Sekhukhuneland, neighbouring Zebediela, Peter Delius shows that, as the nature of the rural economy changed, schooling became increasingly important. To gain an education became a crucial objective in the lives of both Christian and non-Christian communities.<sup>36</sup> The situation was no different in Zebediela. The increase in the perceived value of schooling in the area had important implications for relations between “traditionalist” and Christian youths. Within the school structure, these youths found themselves under the same roof, undergoing the same experiences. As a result, the earlier pattern of open hostility gave way to some limited cooperation and fraternisation between them, reinforced by activities, such as team sport being played at schools. As more schools were established, formal schooling gradually replaced *koma* as a major form of socialisation outside of the household.

The value of initiation was curtailed by schooling, even among the non-Christian youngsters. It became subordinate to schooling in that it could only take place for about a month (the average period of the midyear school vacation), instead of two or three months which was a norm in the past. Furthermore, in the 1970s, *koma* was no longer the prerogative of the chief, but of enterprising individuals who claimed to have acquired certain skills in “traditional” medicine. Therefore, *koma* began to play a less significant role in reinforcing the authority of the kgoši, than in the past. The value of initiation was diminished most notably among non-Christian youths who were progressing to higher classes in school.<sup>37</sup>

Being the only secondary school in the area of Zebediela until the mid-1970s, Matladi provided some space for Christian and non-Christian youth to socialise, and for a more uniform youth culture to develop gradually. The school catered for the educational needs of the patchwork of villages constituting Zebediela. Despite the shortage of transport, students from outlying villages walked distances of up to 30km to and from school, five days a week. The more fortunate ones used bicycles. From its early years, the boarding facilities catered for both boys and girls. First preference seems to have been given to

---

36 P Delius, “Mapping histories of rural education: Where tradition and modernity clash”, *Mathasedi* 11(1), July 1992.

37 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with RD Kekana, Mogoto Village, Zebediela, 10 April 1994.

those coming from areas outside the boundaries of Zebediela, particularly from the Rand. However, not all boarders at the school came from the Witwatersrand. Some came from townships and rural villages in the northern Transvaal, for example from the areas around Polokwane, Mokopane, Bochum and Sekhukhuneland.<sup>38</sup>

Urban students added a third dimension to the interaction among students at the school. Their presence almost immediately generated clashes, which followed pre-existing lines of conflict. Naturally, perhaps because of their exposure to a “modern” lifestyle and entertainment activities, such as film, urban students were initially somewhat aloof from rural ones, considering their communities to be backward, because they still adhered to old customs which had no place in modern society, such as the practice of *koma*. In contrast, rural students, like their parents, regarded urbanites with some suspicion, and were particularly resentful of what they perceived to be corrupt habits, such as *tsotsi* tendencies among urban boys. The school structure by its very nature, however, fostered contact and friendships across these dividing lines. There were many areas in which the students found common ground for interaction and cooperation. The exposure of most urban students to Christianity made it possible for them to fraternise more with rural Christian students than with “traditionalists” or non-Christians. Irrespective of their backgrounds, students met under the same roof in the classroom context, and they were also taught by the same teachers. Perhaps most importantly, enthusiasm for sports in the school – more especially soccer, netball, softball and debating – provided additional common experiences for all students, whether urban or rural, initiated or uninitiated.<sup>39</sup>

The 1976 Soweto students’ uprising came at a time when the fostering of a sense of common identity among secondary school students, especially those in boarding schools, from these divergent backgrounds, was still in its infancy. The pattern of conflict between boarders and local students indicates that a potential bridge existed between them, but it broke down in the end. The news of the Soweto students’ uprising and pressure from the urban students for like-minded political awareness from their rural counterparts, led to a rupture of this evolving solidarity, and to the resurgence of earlier prejudices and mistrust.

#### **4. POLITICAL MOBILISATION AND RURAL YOUTHS IN PARTS OF LEBOWA, 1980S-1990**

By the 1980s, the ground was more fertile for the evolution of a common generational consciousness in the countryside, and for rural youths in secondary

38 Boarders’ Admission Register, Matladi High School (Zebediela), 1956-1979.

39 Lekgoathi, *Reconstructing educational transformation*, p. 172.

schools and tertiary institutions to become more intensely involved in political struggles in their communities. This decade marked a turning point in the history and the nature of political resistance in the Bantustans. The incessant wave of political revolt sweeping across the urban townships now spilled over into the Bantustans in the Transvaal (including Lebowa), turning them into a new frontline in the struggle against the apartheid system. Unlike the more muted rural upheavals of the 1970s that were mainly inspired by urban students, the convulsions of the 1980s were bigger and more violent, and for the first time rural youths took their destinies into their own hands and became major actors in the political theatre that unfolded in their communities. What made this possible?

A major factor shaping the politics of the Bantustan communities in general, and that of the youth in particular, was the desperate socio-economic context. By the 1960s, available land for African subsistence farming had been reduced drastically, as more people were forced off so-called “black spots” on white-owned farms and squeezed into the already overcrowded Bantustans. For some of those in the Bantustans who still had nominal access to arable land, the soil quality had deteriorated from being ploughed year after year, without being given a chance to recuperate. Thus, formal schooling came to play a more significant role as a survival strategy and as an important way of gaining access to employment, both in towns and in the Bantustan bureaucracies. It is within this context that more schools were erected in the Bantustan areas, and an increasing number of rural youths sought education during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>40</sup>

While the number of rural schools in the northern Transvaal was increasing, traditional initiation, or *koma*, was conversely declining in significance. Apart from serving socialisation purposes, *koma* had also reinforced the authority of the elders, most notably that of the chiefs or traditional leaders. As Western-type schooling rose in significance, *koma* gradually lost its value. Similarly, when the stranglehold of tradition on the rural youths loosened, so too did the authority of elders and chiefs over the younger generation.<sup>41</sup> Under these conditions, the rural youth became more receptive to the popular culture of resistance in the urban areas than their predecessors. Consequently, they managed to catch up with their urban counterparts and developed, what Bundy referred to as, “generational consciousness”.<sup>42</sup> As most youngsters were receiving social education in schools, rather than traditional institutions, they became less constrained by tradition and more self-assertive and conscious of themselves

40 SP Lekgoathi, “The United Democratic Front in Lebowa and KwaNdebele during the 1980s”. In: SADET, *The road to democracy in South Africa*, Volume 4, 1980–1990, Part 1 (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2010), p. 630.

41 Delius, p. 8.

42 C Bundy, “Street sociology and pavement politics: Aspects of youth and student resistance in Cape Town, 1985”, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 13(3), April 1987, pp. 303-330.

as historical actors. The common context of schooling increased contact and interaction between students, and earlier attitudes gave way to new ones. For the first time in the 1980s, they saw themselves as a distinct social category with a common identity capable of effecting far-reaching social change.<sup>43</sup>

The UDF, which was an umbrella body of many diverse organisations brought together by their common hatred of apartheid, came to play a key role in harnessing community grievances through its campaigns. Launched in 1983, the UDF embarked on a national campaign against apartheid. Its formation was triggered by the introduction of the Tri-Cameral Constitution by the National Party Government under President PW Botha, which extended the franchise to Coloureds and Indians, while excluding Africans from any meaningful political participation.<sup>44</sup> After its formation in 1985, the UDF in the northern Transvaal region made it its business to mobilise young people in the broader region, including the rural hinterland. Taking advantage of the growing youth consciousness, the UDF exploited local grievances in the homelands and through affiliates, such as the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) and the Azanian Students Organisation (AZASO), it urged student involvement in the affairs of their communities.

Residents of the homeland areas had long been aggrieved by a number of issues, including lack of access to arable land due to overcrowding, deplorable, or non-existent services, as well as the incorporation of chiefs into the state bureaucracy.<sup>45</sup> Those who sought to express their dissatisfaction with these conditions often faced severe harassment from the chiefs, the Bantustan police and the South African Defence Force (SADF). These conditions created a powder keg ready to be ignited by the nationwide political heat of the mid-1980s. By this time, the growing importance of Western schooling and the progressive decline in the significance of *koma* had weakened the control of chiefs severely, and traditional mores were far less evident among the rural youth. Many chiefs had already undermined their positions and reduced their legitimacy in the eyes

---

43 *Ibid.*

44 For a more comprehensive discussion of the UDF, see J Seekings, *The UDF: A history of the United Democratic Front in South Africa, 1983-1991* (Cape Town: David Philip; Oxford: James Currey, 2000); G Houston, *The national liberation struggle in South Africa: A case study of the United Democratic Front, 1983-1987* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999); I van Kessel, *"Beyond our wildest dreams": The United Democratic Front and the transformation of South Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000). See also, SP Lekgoathi, "The United Democratic Front, political resistance and local struggles in the Vaal and West Rand townships in the 1980s". In: SADET, *The road to democracy in South Africa*, Volume 4, pp. 555-610; SP Lekgoathi, "The United Democratic Front in Lebowa and KwaNdebele during the 1980s", In: SADET, *The road to democracy in South Africa*, Volume 4, pp. 613-667.

45 P Holden and S Mathabatha, "The politics of resistance: 1948-1990". In: P Delius (ed.), *Mpumalanga history and heritage* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007), p. 419.

of their people by complying with the prescripts of the Native Administration Act of 1927; the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951; and by accepting the patronage of the Apartheid Government and working as state functionaries. No longer were they accountable to their subjects; instead they answered to the Apartheid Government. They implemented so-called “betterment” schemes and pass laws that were unpopular with most rural villagers.<sup>46</sup>

As tools of control the chiefs were accorded ever more responsibility; they thus came to play a key role in the system of influx control that was so critical to the apartheid system. Whereas previously African men wishing to leave rural areas to seek employment in the cities had to go to the office of the white magistrate or commissioner to be issued passes, now, under apartheid, this role was devolved to the chiefs. This gave them considerable power over their subjects; power which they wasted no time in abusing. The people who disobeyed the chief’s orders, or failed to pay tribute, could be turned down when they applied for passes; thus making it almost impossible to find work in the cities.<sup>47</sup>

The period between the 1960s and the 1980s saw chiefs making excessive demands on the time and money of their subjects at a time of growing land shortage, due to the forced relocation of millions of people from white areas to the Bantustans. The chiefs were able to make such demands because of their new powers and the guarantee of support from an increasingly coercive state. Chiefs demanded all manners of payment from individuals in return for plots of land; women and children were required to carry out long hours of backbreaking work on the fields, or in the households of the chiefs; the more despotic chiefs even imposed a wide variety of levies, such as bride wealth payments and for buying cars and building houses. The people most directly affected and aggrieved by this unjustifiable abuse of power and corruption were women, migrants and young people. The abolition of pass laws in 1986 was a welcome reprieve for migrants who no longer had to go to the chief’s office – but for chiefs this represented a major blow to their important stream of income. To make up for lost revenue and their diminishing fortunes, most chiefs simply introduced new levies and even resorted to demanding gifts and bribes in return for any services rendered to their subjects.<sup>48</sup>

Among the new levies the chiefs imposed were fees for building “tribal” offices, clinics and schools. In many instances these funds were misused by chiefs and their councillors. Community members often discovered that,

---

46 Lekgoathi, “The UDF in Lebowa and KwaNdebele”, p. 631. For a comprehensive discussion of rural resistance to “betterment” in Sekhukhuneland and links with migrant organisations, see, for example, P Delius, *A lion amongst the cattle: Reconstruction and resistance in the Northern Transvaal* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1996), pp. 51-72, 76, 103.

47 Delius, pp. 139-167, 172-211; Van Kessel, pp. 80-81.

48 Delius, pp. 139-167.

despite paying taxes for years, the community coffers had been looted, but it was not easy for community members to bring the culprits to trial. Although it was stipulated under the Bantu Authorities system that proper tribal accounts should be kept, in most cases this was overlooked and tribal financial records were invariably in a bad state or non-existent. The apartheid state was prepared to put up with this situation in order to maintain the collaboration of the chiefs. By the 1970s, high levels of corruption and maladministration had become characteristic of the Bantustans. The outcome was widespread discontent.<sup>49</sup>

After its formation in the Northern Transvaal region in the mid-1980s, the UDF wanted chieftainship to be completely scrapped because of the role that chiefs had played under apartheid, but the attitude of many rural people towards the institution was ambiguous. Some differentiated between the office and the office holder and argued that even under apartheid not all chiefs were unsympathetic to their subjects' wishes. Nevertheless, by this time, a younger, better-educated and politically savvy generation of rural youths were not convinced that chieftainship could be transformed. These young people grew up listening to their parents grumbling about the incompetence, greed, corruption and oppression of the chiefs and were more inclined to agree with the UDF and some of its affiliates that chieftainship had lost its relevance and had no place in the democratic society they were building. In the context of nationwide youth-led revolt of the mid-1980s, in some areas, particularly in Sekhukhuneland and other parts of Lebowa, one of the main demands was for chiefs to be more accountable to their communities or else, to resign.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, apart from the influence of Western education, the role that the chiefs themselves were playing as agents of apartheid, combined with their incompetence, corruption and excessive demands, accounted for the growing disregard for the institution of chieftainship by the rural youths.

## **5. CHIEFTAINSHIP, THE RURAL YOUTH AND POLITICAL MOBILISATION IN ZEBEDIELA, 1980S-1990**

In the early 1980s, the youths of Zebediela were also targeted in a surge of nationwide political mobilisation, led by the UDF and the ANC and, unlike their counterparts of the 1970s, they embraced the new political militancy with enthusiasm. According to Khali Vader Maphoso, a student activist in the 1980s, "The comrades from the University of the North came here [to Zebediela] regularly and individuals like Peter Mokaba played an important role in the formation of the local youth political organisation ZEYCO [Zebediela Youth Congress]".<sup>51</sup> Another student activist from Matladi, Kleinbooi

---

49 *Ibid.*

50 *Ibid.*

51 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with KV Maphoso, Moletlane Village, Zebediela, 4 June 1994.

Matsetela, remembers, “a certain comrade from Pretoria [who] stayed in our village [Moletlane] for about a week and helped us to establish ZEYCO”.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Archie Klaas Poto (another local activist) recalls the growing political consciousness and the significance of nationalist political organisers from higher educational institutions on local youths. “The most dominant camp was that of the ANC because you would hear them talking of the UDF, of Ahmed Kathrada, of Mandela and the like, you see? Yes. What was to be established were the structures that mostly got the information from the ANC camp, or let me just say from the UDF camp [...] that was providing us with the material and some guys from the University of the North at Turfloop would come in the area to distribute such materials.”<sup>53</sup>

An affiliate of the South African Youth Congress (SAYCO), ZEYCO, influenced the UDF to address local grievances, such as chiefly extortions, lack of accountability, and Bantustan police repression. Most of the young interviewees emphasised the significance of black universities and colleges as breeding grounds of radical politics, or where activists cut their political teeth. Alfred Matlaila was such an activist; a young teacher from Moletlane who studied at the University of the North before switching to other institutions further south.

Not only did these young rural activists embrace the new political militancy, but they also denounced the Bantustan system and chieftainship. In the context of the struggles for the democratisation of every layer of society, Matsetela maintains that, “Basically what we were against was this chieftainship in itself. We didn’t want these *kgošis* because most of them, especially our *kgošis*, were not supporting the struggle. He was against us comrades of course. He was the one who was basically calling the police to come and harass us. So we were totally against this chieftainship. But in the end there was nothing we could do because he had the support of the police. Then he used to deny us [access to] the community hall where we could hold our meetings.”<sup>54</sup>

Youths embraced a nationalist vision of the ANC, of a unified and democratic country purged of apartheid and its institutions. They demanded an end to the Bantustan policy, which the unaccountable and undemocratic system of chieftainship had buttressed. It was young people, like Matlaila and others, who acted as conveyer belts of mass-based anti-apartheid nationalist politics from tertiary institutions to their rural homes. Matlaila goes on to say that, in about 1980, the political atmosphere in the Moletlane vicinity was very quiet,

52 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with K Matsetela, University of the North, Turfloop, 14 June 1994. By the time of the interviews in 1994, almost two months after the first democratic elections in the country, some of the informants, including Matsetela, were reluctant to divulge names of fellow activists, given the historical experience of brutal repression several years before.

53 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with AK Poto, Hillbrow, Johannesburg, 6 May 1995.

54 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with K Matsetela, University of the North, Turfloop, 14 June 1994.

“although there were individual people who knew a lot about these politics”.<sup>55</sup> Having acquired some experience of organising politically, these university-based comrades began to mobilise their communities around local issues, such as water levies and various other extortions by the chiefs – problems with which the rural villagers could identify.<sup>56</sup> Kenneth Kekana recalls, “ZEYCO was initiated as a structure of the ANC under the leadership of the same students who became the members of the first SRC at Matladi [...] and was active in the community. It mobilised around problems of insufficient water, electricity, as well as the maladministration by the *kgoš*. It was alleged that the relatives and friends of the *kgoš* used community funds for personal purposes.”<sup>57</sup>

The questioning of the moral authority of the *kgoš* was not only limited to ZEYCO, but also took place within the Zebediela Civic Association, which was established in about 1990. Alfred Matlaila, who served as the association’s secretary in the early 1990s, had this to say, “I remember when we went to the chief we demanded a lot of paperwork. In fact, I pushed the civic [organisation] to do that, to go and demand all the paperwork regarding the community’s moneys that were paid by the people for water (the water levy) from 1981 right until 1991 – the fee that was paid for the water supply, the one that was squandered by those people [chiefs] – the one that caused the uprising in 1985 here at Moletlane. Then we couldn’t get [access to] anything of course from the chief. Then I said: ‘But the chief may not have the final control of all the moneys. So let’s go to the commissioner’.”<sup>58</sup>

From around 1981 the Zebediela Mandebele Tribal Authority started extorting an annual tribal levy of about R10 per family, supposedly for the provision of water which many did not even receive. Proof of payment of this levy was required before any birth certificates, identity documents or work permits could be issued to any villager in need of them. This was compulsory; so most community members had to pay it whether they liked it, or not. The youths were aware of the underlying grievances, but their parents were terrified to articulate them publicly. The youths used this as a pretext to attack the Bantustan system.

To re-emphasise the point, the emergence of youth resistance in Zebediela should not be seen in isolation, but within the context of a broader campaign of countrywide mobilisation associated with the UDF.<sup>59</sup> By 1986, virtually all the villages in the area had youth structures, thanks to the efforts of the ANC-aligned

---

55 *Ibid.*

56 *Ibid.*

57 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with KM Kekana, University of the North, Turfloop, 2 June 1994.

58 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with A Matlaila, Groothoek Hospital, Zebediela, 10 June 1994.

59 At about the same time, similar developments were taking place in other Bantustans and over the entire country. For a discussion on the emergence of youth organisation in Sekhukhuneland, see, for example, P Delius, “*Dikgomo di ile* (The cattle have gone)”: The changing context of resistance in Sekhukhuneland”. Paper presented at the Wits History Workshop International Conference, *Structure and experience in the making of apartheid*, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 6-10 February 1990.

comrades, such as Peter Mokaba. Mokaba was one of the most energetic and fearless opponents of apartheid in the northern Transvaal. Born in 1958 in the New Look Location in Polokwane, Mokaba grew up in Mankweng, Turfloop. As a student at the local high school of Hwiti, he took part in the 1976 class boycotts, which had spread to the area from Soweto. After a period of nearly 17 months on the run, he was eventually arrested in November 1977, but later acquitted on charges of public violence. After matriculating in 1978, Mokaba was admitted to the University of the North, on condition that he distanced himself from politics – a promise he failed to keep. He became involved in the founding of the AZASO. Three years later (1982), he was detained under the Terrorism Act and tried for membership of a banned organisation (the ANC); possessing weapons of war; undergoing military training in Angola and Mozambique; and attempting to recruit members for the ANC. He was sentenced to six years' imprisonment on Robben Island. However, in September 1984 the Appeal Court set his conviction aside and he was released, only to be detained again almost immediately on the same charges. He was re-tried in Polokwane and was sentenced to three years' imprisonment, suspended for five years. In 1985 Mokaba became Publicity Secretary of the UDF and President of the newly-formed Mankweng Youth Congress, a UDF affiliate. He went on to serve as an education officer for the northern Transvaal Regional Youth Coordinating Committee. In the same year, however, he spent nine months in preventative detention, and was released on 21 March 1986 after a successful appeal.<sup>60</sup>

The young Zebediela activists who were interviewed, had vivid memories of Mokaba visiting them at Moletlane, helping them to organise themselves into a political structure, and providing political literature which assisted in their recruitment campaigns. From an initial membership of about five activists, ZEYCO grew phenomenally to include several thousand members from all the villages in Zebediela by 1986.<sup>61</sup>

The emphasis given to the influence of outsiders, like Mokaba and others, tends to ignore the degree of the involvement of local youths who had exposure to new political currents at educational institutions outside their rural villages. Most of them were studying at universities and colleges in other parts of Lebowa, as well as in the urban townships, which had been turned into centres of political education by the 1980s. These included the University of the North at Turfloop, and Technikon Northern Transvaal (TNT) in Soshanguve, Pretoria. A cohort of students from Zebediela was studying at TNT. During vacation periods and when their lectures were interrupted by class boycotts, which erupted at regular intervals, these students were forced to go back home until stability had been restored. They then brought the new radical political ideas, influences and

60 See, for example, *Weekly Mail*, 3 April 1986, 12 June 1991; *Sunday Times Magazine*, 10 July 1994; *The Star*, 17 February 1990.

61 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with K Matsetela, University of the North, Turfloop, 14 June 1994; SP Lekgoathi, Interview with KV Maphoso, Moletlane Village, Zebediela, 4 June 1994.

tactics they had learned at these institutions back to their rural villages during school vacations, or when they had completed their studies. After the boycott of examinations at the end of 1985, for example, the TNT administration insisted that the students repeat their semester courses in 1986; so many students were forced to stay at home until July 1986. One of these students was Archie Klaas Poto, who recalls, "Well at home I found that there was no structure that was well established. I am speaking specifically about community structures. The only exception, which was also the driving force for change, was the SRC that had been formed at Matladi High School. Of course Matladi persuaded or influenced other schools such as Chita Kekana, Rehologile and Seraditola. These four schools were the only ones in the area that were active at the time. And Matladi since it was the one place that started all these politics, then that's how the president of the SRC from Matladi was elected as the leader of the youth structure. The president we can say was the child of the soil brought up at Moletlane. And so he was given support and respect by the students at Matladi as well as by members of the community. Because most of the activists at that time – if I may call them that – were the students at Matladi. Having been mobilised from that school, they became the pioneers in trying to plant this spirit of activism within the community. Yes. So, that's where it all started."<sup>62</sup>

Thus, ZEYCO piloted the struggle in the area, initially by mobilising the local youths around local issues, such as the shortage of water in the villages, chiefly extortions and apparent corruption within the local tribal authority. These militant rural youths, however, were careful not to denounce chieftainship altogether, or to demand an end to it as their counterparts had done in areas such as Sekhukhuneland.<sup>63</sup> That was because taking such a radical position would have alienated the majority of the elderly people in their communities; people whose support they needed in the long term.

While the issue of the water levy was of cardinal importance in mobilising communities in Zebediela, there were other critical concerns that the youth organisation raised. One of these concerns was the increase in the crime rate. This was closely related to massive unemployment in the Bantustan and in the country as a whole. In a campaign to stem the tide of criminal activities in their communities, the youths formed alternative structures to enforce some semblance of order. The "militias", made up exclusively of youths, were established to search people they met in the streets at night for weapons, such as knives and axes.<sup>64</sup> If found, the weapons were confiscated, but rather than handing the culprits to the police, they were handed over to what were called the "kangaroo courts" set up to deal with them. Serious offences, such as rape, theft, assaults, including stabbing with knives, were tried at these alternative courts,

62 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with AK Poto, Hillbrow, Johannesburg, 6 May 1995.

63 Delius, "*Dikgomo di ile*", *passim*.

64 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with: K Matsetela, University of the North, Turfloop, 14 June 1994.

and those found guilty were often summarily sentenced to severe and humiliating punishment by the youths: the alleged offenders were undressed and flogged on their buttocks.<sup>65</sup> The emergence of kangaroo courts was a clear expression of resistance against the legal framework of the apartheid state; the apartheid and/or Bantustan system in its entirety; and the usurpation of the power of tribal authorities.<sup>66</sup> In all this, the UDF remained consistent in its campaign of political mobilisation. It supported and encouraged the formation of youth organisations and, in certain instances, provided detained activists with legal representation to defend them and to seek their release.<sup>67</sup>

After the unbanning of political organisations in February 1990, the whole of Zebediela witnessed a surge of political activism and youth organisations, such as ZEYCO, began to operate more openly, espousing the principles of the ANC.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Having delineated the complex nature of interaction among students in rural boarding schools and tertiary institutions, in closing, attention is directed to an analysis of the shifting patterns of political mobilisation in the countryside from 1976 to 1990. As indicated, the bulk of rural students of the mid-1970s did not support the class boycotts called mainly by urban students, due to enmity and mistrust between the two groups of students and the lack of a uniform youth culture among them. Until the end of the 1970s, the area of Zebediela was not yet politicised. Adults were quite conservative and still had a great deal of control over the younger generation. Furthermore, only a fraction of rural youth spent a considerable amount of time in secondary school. The social fabric of rural communities had not yet been torn apart, though it was showing signs of weakening. Through *koma* and *bogoši* – although the significance of these institutions was gradually being eroded – the authority of the elders and traditional norms still held sway.

The persistence of conservative-oriented parental authority made political mobilisation extremely difficult for urban-based organisations in the Bantustan areas. Without parental sanction, it was difficult for the rural youths to become politicised. This, together with the fact that only a relatively small percentage of rural youths was in secondary schools, meant that they had less weight as a social and political force in the 1970s. Furthermore, deep-seated suspicion of

---

65 *Ibid.*

66 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with AK Poto, Hillbrow, Johannesburg, 6 May 1995; SP Lekgoathi, Interview with KV Maphoso, Moletlane Village, Zebediela, 4 June 1994. Refer also to SP Lekgoathi, Interview with A Matlaila, Groothoek Hospital, Zebediela, 10 June 1994.

67 SP Lekgoathi, Interview with K Matsetela, University of the North, Turfloop, 14 June 1994; SP Lekgoathi, Interview with A Matlaila, Groothoek Hospital, Zebediela, 10 June 1994.

urban dwellers, as well as the lack of a common set of grievances between “insider” and “outsider” students, meant that consensus could not be reached on how best to shape the course of the country’s history. Finally, the Black Consciousness-inclined students’ organisations, such as SASO and SASM did not mobilise sufficiently in the countryside. Narrowly focused as they were on tertiary institutions in the Bantustans and on schools in urban townships, these organisations hardly made any attempt to link the struggles within the schools with broader community grievances. The complex interaction of these factors led to the ultimate failure of the 1970s students’ upheavals in the countryside.

By the 1980s, in contrast, rural youths moved for the first time to the forefront of political struggles within their communities, rather than being led by urbanites. These youngsters were both directly and indirectly influenced by the UDF and/or its affiliates, and sometimes embarked on campaigns autonomously from established political organisations. The new political culture, which was initially associated with urban township youths in the 1970s, began to make major inroads among rural youngsters, even in the most far-flung and almost inaccessible parts of the northern Transvaal. The context of schooling where many rural children spent a considerable part of their upbringing in a classroom, allowed for the evolution of generational consciousness, or a common youth culture that cut across the urban and rural divide. While these students questioned the inadequacies of the education system and demanded the scrapping of corporal punishment, which the poorly trained teachers used as a shield for their insecurities, the rural youths in particular connected school-based protests with grievances emanating from their communities, particularly the extortions of the chiefs, their lack of accountability and the general demand for an end to the Bantustan system.