

# THE CONTRIBUTION OF ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH TO REMEMBERING THE STRUGGLE, AND STRUGGLE HEROES AND HEROINES: THE STORY OF GAUTA LEFUO AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

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## ABSTRACT

The political situation from which teacher, revolutionary and politician Gauta Lefuo emerged will be considered. Lefuo exerted a significant influence on the political pedagogy of the youth and his colleagues in Botshabelo and surrounding areas such as Thaba Nchu, Verkeerdevlei and Bloemfontein. His role is examined with due regard for the critical part played by his contemporaries in both the educational and political context.

**Keywords:** Gauta Lefuo; Struggle; Oral History; Botshabelo; QwaQwa; Dikwankwetla, BOSO, BOYCO, White City

## INTRODUCTION

In this article, I consider the political situation from which teacher, revolutionary and politician Gauta Lefuo emerged. The emphasis, however, is not on destruction, but rather on the challenging of unjust laws. Lefuo exerted a significant influence on the political pedagogy of the youth and his colleagues in Botshabelo and surrounding areas such as Thaba Nchu, Verkeerdevlei and Bloemfontein. His role is examined with due regard for the critical part played by his contemporaries in both the educational and political context. Although I will avoid dwelling too much on the political problems in South Africa, attention will be paid to the struggle and struggle heroes and heroines within the context of education in Botshabelo from 1979 to 1994; BOYCO (the Botshabelo Youth

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Congress) and BOSO (the Botshabelo Student Organisation); the differences of opinion between the youth and the elders, of whom most came from the urban areas, farms and rural areas; the formation of the so-called League, which was intended to disrupt the political developments in Botshabelo and which was later quashed by political developments at school level; and the role of the educators who resided in Bloemfontein and worked in Botshabelo and had an enormous impact in terms of encouraging political activism, among them Messrs Gauta Lefuo, Molifi Tau, Kgauhelo Kanapi and Teboho Leoate, to name but a few.

The majority of Botshabelo residents come from Kromdraai, in Thaba Nchu, but others are from farms and other areas where they encountered political, social, and economic hardship. Life in Kromdraai was difficult for those who did not support the interests of Lucas Manayane Mangope or who spoke Setswana rather than Sesotho or isiXhosa. The solution was to vacate Kromdraai. Prior to this, a relationship had already been established with the Dikwankwetla Party, which was led by Dr TK Mopeli of the Qwaqwa homeland. The relationship between the Basotho people and Dr TK Mopeli in the late 1970s created a conducive atmosphere for the identification of different farms to the west of Thaba Nchu. Onverwacht was the final destination. Other farms surrounding Onverwacht were earmarked for development as well. "Other farms in the west of Botshabelo were earmarked for further development and job creation."<sup>1</sup>

The homeland and the central government had plans which did not materialise owing to the escalation of political unrest. The formation of the UDF (United Democratic Front), the incorporation of Botshabelo into Qwaqwa, underground political movements, and in 1990, the release of Nelson Mandela and other political prisoners galvanised the political fraternity into action.

Teachers and politicians took advantage of the availability of sources at schools. Gauta Lefuo and Kgauhelo Kanapi decided to bring a fresh approach to the teaching profession. A large percentage of the teachers in Botshabelo at the time resided in Bloemfontein, which is 56 km to the west of Botshabelo. It was a given that teaching and nursing accounted for most of the professional careers in Botshabelo, so the best strategy to counter any foreign ideology was to mobilise the teachers first. White City – Khauho Secondary School, as it was known, became the centre where BOPTU (the Botshabelo Progressive Teachers Union) was formed and established formally.<sup>2</sup> Members were recruited at schools throughout Botshabelo, with the process being managed by Kanapi and Lefuo. Most of the Botshabelo teachers were active members of OFSATA and NEUSA (the Non-racial Education Union of South Africa). More than 50 schools were visited and teachers were encouraged to join BOPTU as an active organisation that would fight for their rights. OFSATA was not seen as making a positive contribution, and new ideas were required. The formation of BOPTU led to greater

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1 Interview with Rev. L. S. Chaka, Dikwankwetla leader and Mayor of Botshabelo, Botshabelo, September 11, 2014.

2 Interview with Mr K. Kanapi, first Secretary of BOPTU, Botshabelo, October 4, 2016.

political engagement. Lefuo, the leader of BOPTU, rose to prominence. OFSATA and the Qwaqwa Administration were not weakened, but were profoundly shaken. “NEUSA became metamorphosis of OFSATA.”<sup>3</sup> BOPTU merged with NEUSA: it was much easier to form and join NEUSA because BOPTU had cleared the path. At a later stage SADTU was born. Gauta Lefuo as chairperson of BOPTU worked around the clock with Kanapi and encouraged other teachers from different schools in Botshabelo to join forces against incorporation into Qwaqwa and the DET. They had differences of opinion with other principals who were not interested in their new organisation because they realised that OFSATA would lose its support base in Botshabelo.

## METHOD

The struggle and struggle heroes and heroines remain fresh in the minds of many people, both the youth and the elders. This theme was studied by conducting oral history interviews with teachers, former teachers, inspectors, learners and ordinary people on the periphery, and by studying primary archival material relating to Qwaqwa. A voice tracker was used to collect audio interviews. A questionnaire was prepared to elicit information relating to education and political circumstances.

“Oral history relating to a time beyond the reach of living memory becomes oral tradition after it has been consolidated and repeated for a long period of time” (Thompson 2013): crucial here is a commitment to not repeating the errors of the past. The political re-naming of secondary and primary schools in Botshabelo was an element of the political education of learners. The names of schools were changed because students associated those names with oppression and in consequence felt marginalised. Another reason for renaming schools was to mislead the enemy: for instance, Kgauho Secondary School was known as Cuito Cuanavale. A further point of contention was that most of the schools had been named by Dikwankwetla Party members who stayed in Botshabelo, and this was resented by the youth and the learners, who did not identify with names such as Lerole PS, Leshome PS, Retsamaile PS, and Popano PS, and associated the use of those centres for learning with oppression. A number of names became well-known during the late 80s and early 90s, as opposition to the Dikwankwetla Party, which was gaining momentum amongst the elders, grew. Most of elders felt obliged to favour the Dikwankwetla Party because they believed that it deserved credit for the exodus from Kromdraai. On the other hand, the National Party was bringing more developments such as factories, schools, and roads development. The youth therefore focused their resistance in two directions: against both the Dikwankwetla Party and the National Party. More organised forums were established, but simultaneously more forums were formed to counteract the so-called revolutionary measures.

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3 Interview with Mr P. T. S. Modise, Ordinary Member of the Pan Africanist Congress, Bloemfontein, June 16, 2015.

Youth leaders in Botshabelo who were active at the time included Tsietsi Setona, Mahlomola Ralebese, Fikile Mbalula, Jabu Mbalula, the late Kaizer Sebothelo, Makama, and later Bonaventure, to name but a few. Schools remained central in resistance against oppressive measures. Important days of revolution which were not perceived as important by the Dikwankwetla and National Party administrations were considered significant by the youth and by Lefuo and his contemporaries. “Scholars of Botshabelo intended to celebrate the Soweto Day on the 01 July 1986 on the reopening of the schools and it led to the disruptions of classes and meetings.”<sup>4</sup> June 16 was regarded as an important day, but the government programme made certain that schools were closed on that day. However, this did not prevent the youth and Lefuo and others from standing firm and challenging the atrocities of unjust systems. All primary and secondary schools throughout Botshabelo participated.

The school boycotts of 1986 by BOYCO did not happen in isolation; indeed, the student organisations were closely involved. Meetings were held at Anglican churches. “At a meeting of the Botshabelo Youth Congress/Botshabelo Students Organisation (BOYCO/BOSO) held on 22 April 1986, it was announced that a mass meeting will take place on the 16 June in Botshabelo in order to show solidarity with the remembrance for this day.”<sup>5</sup> It was extremely difficult for the police and others to contain the unrest because clergymen were involved and defending the students. Two important clergymen who contributed immensely in Botshabelo were Rev. Mokwena and Father Coertzen: “The SACC [South African Council of Churches] was the church leaders’ mouthpiece for making political pronouncements on South Africa” (Vander Merwe and Oelofse 2013). These clergymen did not represent any political party, but they offered advice and allowed gatherings to take place at their churches. Rev. Mokwena’s church was situated in B Section, and Father Coertzen’s chapel was located in E section. It was called Lefikeng.

Ten years had elapsed since the shooting of Hector Petersen, and remembrance was therefore also used as a means of recruiting young people. It is interesting to note that in the archival material, the intelligence records pointed to the future activities of BOSO and BOYCO, thus revealing that there were informants who collaborated with the police. During 1986, all scholars were required to carry a pass as a symbol of identification. They were obliged to show this to the police on school days, as it was a means of distinguishing scholars from non-scholars. Teachers would wait at the school gates for scholars, who were expected to produce their identity documentation. 1986 remains a volatile year in the history of Botshabelo, but the state of emergency could not contain the political activism: meetings/workshops were called where scholars and learners were encouraged to leave their passes at home or throw them away.

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4 Free State Archives Repository [FSW Records], SD 9/4/6/1/4/G. Inligtingskategorie en versameling - Dorpe Profile: Botshabelo

5 Free State Archives Repository [FSW Records], SD 9/4/6/1/4/G. Inligtingskategorie en versameling - Dorpe Profile: Botshabelo

“The new year, 1986, which included the tenth anniversary of the Soweto riots [uprising], proved to be no less violent than 1985” (Stemmet 2015) The South African government enforced political gagging measures. Students were arrested and harassed. Lefuo and the clergymen used the opportunity to conceptualise a new approach and change. On the other hand, the Qwaqwa Administration was moving towards incorporation and canvassing and conducting elections in newly formed sections such as K, H and J. In other sections, such as L, M and N, construction was taking place.

BOSO and BOYCO, with the assistance of BOPTU, continued their activities with the intention of intensifying the political mandate of changing and uniting Botshabelo residents. Churches constituted a rallying point for most of the youth and all teachers. Some principals prohibited any gatherings on school premises because they did not want to be seen to be affiliated to political organisations, but others engaged with revolutionary ideas through BOPTU. BOSO and BOYCO in conjunction with BOPTU had a structure which was called the Botshabelo Crisis Committee. Scholars belonged to BOSO, the youth belonged to BOYCO, and teachers belonged to BOPTU. No one remained unrepresented. The elders belonged to the Dikwankwetla Party, which remained the main challenger of the youth and BOPTU.

## INCORPORATION OF BOTSHABELO INTO QWAQWA

The intensity of the revolutionary climate throughout the country, especially in the black areas, nurtured the movements in Botshabelo. The youth engaged in underground political activities managed by Kaizer Sebothelo and his comrades. The state of emergency from 1985 to 1988 was severe, but it did not curb the political development of the masses in Botshabelo. The 1986 state of emergency did not curb the unrest incidents, but it worsened the riots at school level. More schools became involved. Some teachers, such as Lefuo, Tau and Kanapi, openly rejected oppressive and unjust administrations, while others did so covertly.

The incidence of unrest was relatively low, but the underground organisation of the youth was widespread. In 1986 70 per cent of the 270 200 registered citizens were under the age of 30, and that on its own represented a security risk. The base for political movements to achieve their objectives was schools. All schools played a crucial role because some of the teachers did not support Qwaqwa and National Party administration.

Schools were used as bases from which to disseminate the revolutionary ideas of well-known teachers such as Gauta Lefuo and Kgauhelo Kanapi, with whose support student movements gained momentum. Schools became ungovernable. Dates such as 16 June played a crucial role because they provided a rallying point from which to criticise apartheid and unjust systems. The activists were very young, and energetic: “The likes of Butcher Matutle and his brother, Tsietsi Stona, Jabu and Fikile Mbalula and Mahlomola Ralebese.”<sup>6</sup> The rationale behind the communication plan lay in the

6 Interview with Mr G. L. Lefuo, an applicant resisting the incorporation of Botshabelo into Qwaqwa, Bloemfontein, September 29, 2016.

fact that, seen against the background of the possible incorporation of Botshabelo into Qwaqwa, it was very important to create a character-building action on behalf of the Qwaqwa government in Botshabelo (see Twala and Barnard 2006). This plan was launched with the support of the factories in Botshabelo. The government planning of the school calendar made sure that 16 June fell outside the school programme. “BOPTU brought their own programme and defy the DET programme lie June 16. Schools were regarded as normal day school.”<sup>7</sup>

Qwaqwa newspapers were used to promote Botshabelo as one of developing townships. The state used visual material such as videos and slide shows at government offices, exhibitions, clinics, Dutch Reformed churches, guidance sessions, and meetings of the Dikwankwetla Party to cast this in a positive light. Articles in national newspapers covered Botshabelo. “Dikwankwetla became much stronger and elderly people in Botshabelo shows their support.”<sup>8</sup> Newsletters were circulated containing information regarding development actions and issues such as social and sporting news. However, these media were not used at schools because they were rejected by radical teachers such as Messrs Kanapi, Lefuo, Loate, and Maine.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The oral history approach of collecting remnants of our history is critical to our nation, with secondary sources playing a complementary role. These stories tell us more and help to create a more equal platform for every citizen though continuous engagement. Some oral accounts recount joyous times, and these tend to be the accounts that receive a great deal of attention; however, people are selective, and fewer accounts of difficulties survive. The scarcity of oral history research is a great pity, as the number of first-hand sources and eye witnesses is dwindling as time passes, and most published sources present only a small part of our history.

Another obstacle to oral history research is the fact that some interviewees do not want to participate, or no longer remember events clearly. This leaves gaps which in some cases relate to crucial information.

Is oral history research the most important primary platform where raw ideas are chronologically gathered and interpreted logically? Ultimately it is important to look into our past and form an impression that will raise us above any challenges. Through this paper, I reached the conclusion that we need to be selective when discussing issues about which we seek closure. The objectivity of any subject needs to be considered and striven for. Oral historians have an enormous responsibility to provide an account of the past for the future without missing anything or misleading the audience. Gauta Lefuo could not have been the author of all his political achievements without the resistance of

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7 Interview with Mr K. Kanapi, first Secretary of BOPTU, Botshabelo, October 4, 2016.

8 Interview with Mr M. J. Fokazi, a Dikwankwetla Party member in Botshabelo, Botshabelo, September 11, 2014.

the Dikwankwetla Party, without the learners of the day, without the media, without the National Party government and people on the periphery. If progress is to be achieved, antagonists must become protagonists.

The political career of Gauta Lefuo from the 1980s to 1990s remains proof that personality matters and can make a difference in politics. Without his driving will and dogged commitment to the principles of freedom, especially his willingness to fight on when all seemed lost, the pursuit of freedom in the apartheid and homeland state would have floundered.

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