

## Apartheid and Child Abuse

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In a report by the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights it is stated that + 2,000 children under the age of 16 were detained in South Africa in a period of + 4 months. It states that torture and assault of children in detention was routine (Cited in the Star 21/4/86). My own work with children in South Africa's black urban townships confirms that great numbers of children in South Africa are being subjected to violence which finds its origin in the apartheid system. In this sense apartheid could be seen to have institutionalised child abuse.

Not all the abuse and violence to which children are subjected is directly inflicted by the South African Defence Force or the police. Assaults in detention and violent action by troops in the townships represent only two types of abuse growing out of the apartheid system.

Apartheid fosters hostility and conflict in the townships and the number of children exposed to violence is increasing daily. There are long lists of names of detainees which range in the thousands, people who have died in what is euphemistically termed the unrest, and the names of

the more than 300 people who have been necklaced (Weekly Mail, September 26th 1986; City Press August 24th, 1986).

Given these overwhelming numbers it is hard at times to retain one's humanity and recognise that each of these names has a face, a family, and a history. It is for this reason that I have chosen the case study method as I wish to stress that there are faces in the revolution. The following is the story of one of the many thousands whose individual narratives will combine to document events which will remain a blot on South African history throughout time. The adolescent whose story will be presented will be called Sipho, an adolescent from the township of Leandra.

In order to understand Sipho one has to understand the history of Leandra. Leandra is a township near Secunda in the Eastern Transvaal. It is a township which until the end of 1984 had been united in its opposition to a government threat of forced removal (Haysom, 1986). In 1985 this unity began to break down. The central cleavage in the community was between the "insiders" with legal rights of abode in the township and the "outsiders" who had no such rights (Seekings 1986).



This division created a situation which facilitated black on black "violence. Not all the "insiders" reacted with hostility to the "outsiders". Some managed to retain a sense of perspective and one of these was a community leader called Chief Mayisa, a man who campaigned for lowered rents, improved housing and lower taxes for all. In so doing he antagonised a number of "insiders" and in January 1986 he was stabbed, hacked and burned to death by a group of right wing vigilantes (Seekings 1986). On the day of his funeral an individual suspected of being a member of this vigilante group was killed in revenge for Mayisa's death. Following this the vigilantes organised a campaign against Mayisa's sympathisers. Sipho was one of these sympathisers, as were a number of the other children and adolescents aged 12 - 22 who were forced to flee the township. As it later transpired Sipho had actually been in Mayisa's house on the night he was murdered. He had fled from the house which had been petrol bombed and had taken some of the younger children who were in the house with him. These children then sought refuge with a sympathetic organisation which arranged for a church community centre to harbour them.

The children had been at the community centre for approximately two weeks when it was invaded by the police. They arrived in helicopters with search beams and in cars with armed men. Some of the children attempted to flee and two were shot and wounded. A few escaped but not Sipho.

Sipho was arrested and in an affidavit declares that he was taken to a number of different jails and beaten and deprived of food. After some days Sipho, along with a number of the other children, was released

following an urgent application to the Supreme Court. The children were returned to the community centre. It was at this point that the children were first seen by counsellors.

Sipho himself did not request a consultation. He knew that everyone was being seen in order to prepare a defence in regard to the police raid. Legal and medical experts had been called in along with the counsellors. Sipho at this time had a high ranking in the group and was acknowledged as a leader. The counsellor's approach to him therefore was initially not as a psychologist but as a colleague who was interested in his personal story but was also interested in enlisting his help in identifying members of the group who may have been especially traumatised and in need of help. Sipho seemed to enjoy this role and related to the counsellor relatively freely as her credentials had been established in the context of the broader legal team. The importance of this became evident later when new members of the psychological team were not immediately accepted by the children but were regarded with suspicion.

There was pressure from the children on the counsellors to declare a political position. This raised a dilemma for the professionals. While all the professionals were definitely anti-apartheid, not all subscribed to the same ideology as the children.

Fortunately the issue of the counsellor's political position did not emerge as a problem in this specific instance. However, what did emerge was a complete lack of understanding of the role of the psychologist. The notion of a "talking cure" was completely foreign to Sipho and to most other group members. Sipho and many of the other group members were



showing signs of post-traumatic stress in the form of nightmares, sleeplessness, agitation and depression but the Western notion of psychological help was a foreign one. A number of the children in the group felt that they had been bewitched by the vigilantes and that the only way around the problem was to call in a witchdoctor who was stronger than that of the vigilantes. The resident team at the centre called in black community leaders who performed a number of ritual exorcisms and this brought some relief. But for many of the children, including Sipho, the symptoms of stress remained. Sipho complained of headaches, insomnia and general anxiety and symptoms congruent with a diagnosis of post traumatic stress syndrome.

Given that in the space of approximately 6 weeks Sipho had been exposed to 7 incidents of trauma most of which was severe enough to be termed catastrophic within the definition advanced in D.S.M. III, this was not at all surprising.

These incidents were as follows:-

- a) being present at Mayisa's murder (this was further complicated by the fact that Mayisa was clearly a father figure to Sipho).
- b) having his own life threatened by being in a house that was petrol-bombed.
- c) being exiled from his community.
- d) being in a centre which was invaded by armed police.

- e) being arrested.
- f) being beaten (stated in an affidavit).
- g) being returned to a centre now regarded with suspicion and anxiety.

In line with the literature on the post-traumatic stress syndrome, interviews with Sipho were directed toward helping him relive the traumatic events of the last weeks. In the initial phases these interviews took place in the context of general legal proceedings and were not formally designated therapy sessions. Nevertheless in the course of these interviews what emerged strongly was that of all the events the death of Mayisa was the most traumatic event for Sipho. Interestingly the police invasion and his arrest while objectively traumatic events, were seen by him as an acknowledgement of his status as a freedom fighter and in this sense were responded to positively. The death of Mayisa however was something Sipho needed to talk about over and over. His impotence in the face of what had happened left him with deep feelings of shame and guilt. There was mourning and grief over the loss of an important figure. There were strong fantasies of revenge. This desire for revenge was not uncomplicated. The individuals who had killed Mayisa were black and Sipho saw the encouragement of black against black violence as part of government strategy. Thus he was torn between a personal desire for revenge and an awareness of the political futility of this.

This conflict between personal desires and political strategy was a recurring theme for Sipho. This ongoing conflict between the personal



and the political emerged as one of the most important factors contributing to his anxiety and subsequent depression. It was a conflict which expressed itself on a number of levels as is clear in the following events.

Sipho, like all the other children and adolescents, was ambivalent about staying at the community centre. The centre had not proved itself to be a safe refuge given the police invasion. Further, after the court released the children into the safe keeping of the centre, there was growing suspicion that the centre itself may even have been cooperating with the police. This fuelled an already present desire on the part of the children to return home. They were all homesick and anxious about their families, yet the news from Leandra indicated that it would be unwise to return. In an attempt to cope with the children's home sickness and their anxiety about their families the staff at the centre attempted to arrange visits for the children with their families at neutral venues. An arrangement was made for Sipho to meet his mother at a railway station; which he did. This meeting had an unexpected and unfortunate outcome. Until he met his mother Sipho had complained of headaches, insomnia and general anxiety but he was relatively contained. After this meeting he plunged into a deep depression which was to have dire consequences both for himself and the entire group.

Prior to his home visit there had been a passion in his grief over Mayisa and a directedness in his anger with the system and with the vigilantes. He was hopeful about the outcome of the struggle and he had visions of a future beyond this. He enjoyed a high status in the group and was an acknowledged leader. On his return from this visit he became

increasingly lethargic, apathetic and listless.

It took some days before Sipho confided what had transpired. The crux of what had happened was that his mother had stimulated a grave conflict between his personal and political interests. Sipho, unlike many children who have grown up under apartheid was not separated from his mother. He did not know his biological father but he had a very close relationship with his mother. His mother is the sole breadwinner and she has struggled very hard to support her family on her wages earned as a car washer. Sipho is the second eldest of six children. Sipho said that when he met his mother he was struck by how frail she looked. She begged him to join her as a breadwinner. She felt that Sipho's activities which involved participating in alternative education for township children was bringing danger to the family. She had been visited both by the police and by vigilantes in Sipho's absence. She told him that the family's financial position had deteriorated even further and that they desperately needed him. Moved by the moment and how frail she seemed Sipho gave his mother his word that he would give up the struggle and seek work.

Sipho's anguish when he described this was enormous. There was a bitterness which had not been there before. He said that had he remained in the formal schooling system he would now be in Standard 9. He had dropped out after the wide spread school boycotts in 1978. Now he had virtually no education and he felt all his effort had been for nothing. He felt totally alienated from the group who would instantly brand him as a "sell-out" if he were to tell them what had happened. Living with the knowledge of his promise to his mother created in him an



unbearable conflict which sapped his energy and confidence. While he never confided his difficulties to the group, it was soon after this that group cohesion broke down, and Sipho's leadership position was usurped .

Sipho's displacement as leader of the group seemed to be related not only to his own depression and consequent lack of charisma but also what was happening in the group itself. When the group originally arrived at the community centre everyone's understanding was that the sojourn was to be brief i.e. a matter of days. However, the police invasion and increased conflict in the townships made the return of the children impossible.

Given this, the dynamic in the group began to change. The group which had kept itself primed for a return to conflict now began to relax. The aggression in the group which when marshalled against the common enemy had united it now contributed to the group's disintegration.

In the meantime the police continued to harass the centre and individuals identified by the group as plain clothes police, were frequently seen in the perimeter of the property. Further the centre was twice invaded by white vigilantes who came onto the property and fired off shots into the air. This generally unsettled the group and also tipped the balance of fear so that the township was now seen as a safer option than the centre.

A decision was made by the total group including Sipho to attempt to return home. Consultation by the centre's staff with community leaders

seemed to indicate that there was a possibility that it was now safe to return. Transportation was arranged and the children were 'bussed' back to the township. However, the leaders had misread the situation and the children were met by the vigilantes as they entered the township. One child was stabbed through the hand and some of the others were badly beaten. The children fled once again and returned to the centre feeling demoralised and defeated.

Following this the legal team redoubled its efforts to enforce court interdicts which had already been sought to restrain the vigilantes. Slowly these began to be effective. In the meantime the balance of power in the township was also changed due to the fact that some members of the group captured a member of the vigilantes outside court in town. This individual agreed to give evidence against the vigilantes in court and a number of vigilantes then fled Leandra.

A second attempt was then made to return the children. This time the group was not returned en masse but in splinter groups. The endeavour was both more and less successful. It was more successful in that the majority of the children were reintegrated back into the community. It was less successful in that three of the leaders were more severely attacked and all had to be admitted to hospitals, with stab wounds. Sipho was not one of these. He was targeted for attack but escaped. He has not been able to rejoin his family. He has remained in hiding and on the run, and has not been seen since. It is not known if he has resolved his conflict nor is it known if he is hungry, clothed or sheltered.

But it is known that he is one of thousands in a state which has not only



failed totally to protect its young, but has for decades enshrined in legislation, rules destructive of family and community life. There are general principles which may be drawn from this case study and the many hundreds like it, but this is the subject matter of another paper. This paper ends not with the general but with the specific, not with the nameless, faceless masses but with one face, the story of one single human being - one of the many psychologically wounded in South Africa's current crisis.

#### REFERENCES

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