# Article

# Legitimacy and generational conflict in the UDF: the struggles behind the struggle[1]

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Processes of political and social change are usually examined either at the level of national politics, or at regional or local level. Less attention is generally paid to the interaction between micro and macro level, to the often bewildering variety of local interpretations of the discourse of national politics. Yet this is a relevant perspective, both in historical studies and in analyses of contemporary transformation processes.

How do ordinary people make sense of politics? This article explores how the anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s was understood in three locally-based social movements, that campaigned under the banner of the United Democratic Front. It suggests that a similar approach, when applied to the socio-political transformation process in South Africa in the 1990s, would yield valuable insights into the multiple meanings of present processes of change.

The United Democratic Front has all but faded from the collective memory, but it has played a vital role in South Africa's transition towards a non-racial democracy. The UDF was a dynamic and innovative mass movement, which owed its success to its unique organisational formula, accommodating a broad range of people and interests. At the national level, the UDF ran a high profile campaign against apartheid, driven by a combination of old ANC traditions and new strategies of communication and organisation. At the local level, the affiliates of the UDF used effective mobilising techniques, focusing on bread and butter issues which concerned ordinary township residents.

In terms of national politics, the UDF focused on protest against apartheid and on popularising the programme and leadership of the banned African National Congress, simultaneously developing an increasingly

radical agenda for social change. But how was the political programme of the UDF understood in the social and moral universe of divergent local communities? Seen from the vantage point of local case studies, several sub themes emerge behind the overall theme of the anti-apartheid struggle, notably the importance of religion and local belief systems, and the reversal of generational roles which expressed itself in the contestation of patterns of authority within African society itself.

The UDF originated in 1983 as an ad hoc front to co-ordinate the campaigns against the new constitution, which extended the franchise to Coloured and Indian South Africans, while continuing to exclude Africans. From its modest origins, it soon grew way beyond the expectations of its founding fathers who sometimes looked in amazement at the range of organisations and activities under the UDF umbrella. In regions with a strong ANC tradition, such as the Northern Transvaal, the UDF was widely seen as the internal wing of the banned ANC. In regions where the ANC lacked local roots, such as the Western Cape, the UDF acquired its own distinct identity.

Since its dissolution in 1991, UDF organisations have largely merged with the African National Congress. Not only in terms of its membership, but also in the collective memory of the South African public, the UDF has largely been subsumed in ANC history. Yet the UDF had some distinct characteristics.

A new feature in South African liberation politics was the organisational formula of the Front. The flexible arrangement of a Front with largely autonomous affiliates, which could organise along regional or sectional lines, made the UDF eminently adaptable to different environments. Its over 600 affiliates included student organisations, township-based civic associations, church groups, trade unions, women's organisations, advice offices, and a range of other organisations. UDF affiliates addressed issues of immediate concern to its constituents: rent increases in the townships, corporal punishment in school, shortage of washing lines, suspension of a bus service, unsafe conditions in the workplace, high electricity rates, unsafe streets, lack of sporting facilities. Some of these member organisations predated the launch of the UDF, others sprang up after the Front and its affiliates had demonstrated that there was new space for organised protest. Since these organisations were linked to a nation-wide political movement – the UDF – South Africans could feel part of the national liberation struggle by participating in local school or rent protests.

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With its front formula, the UDF could accommodate black rural youth, white middle class liberals, Moslem organisations, trade unionists, clergy and township students. The ANC had historically been a more homogeneous and centralised organisation, relying on individual membership of Africans only. On the one hand, the UDF acquired legitimacy through its use of ANC stalwarts and symbols. On the other hand, the organisational and ideological formula was flexible enough to attract a new following which was not rooted in ANC traditions.

A second characteristic of the UDF was its emphasis on the importance of participatory organisational methods. Participation, not pluralism, became the defining feature of the UDF's concept of democracy. The wide range of issues addressed meant a lowering of the threshold for collective action. People who were not highly politicised were unlikely to campaign for the unbanning of the ANC, but they could be persuaded to join a campaign against rent increases.

Several books have been published on the UDF as a national political mass movement, notably by Tom Lodge and Bill Nasson (1991), Anthony Marx (1990), Steven Mufson (1990), Martin Murray (1987) and most recently by Jeremy Seekings (2000), author of the most comprehensive book on the UDF. Various affiliates have featured in numerous articles, which explore the local dynamics of rent struggles, school boycotts or popular justice. However, a missing link in most of the literature is the interaction between national level and local level, between national movements and local struggles.

The flexible organisational formula, allowing for local adaptations, left ample room for the UDF's following to fight a range of other battles under the overall banner of the anti-apartheid struggle. I have selected three very different case studies to explore the dynamics of 'the struggles within The Struggle'. These local manifestations of protest and revolt, and their ideological legitimation, will be examined in the settings of a rural youth movement (Sekhukhuneland) a civic association in an African township (Kagiso), and a community newspaper (*Grassroots*) in Cape Town. In all three cases, generational confrontation within local communities emerges as a feature of resistance in the 1980s, although with varying intensity and different outcomes.

## Historiography: race, class and evil

The UDF was by far the biggest, but by no means the only force in resistance politics. Towards the end of the 1980s, hard hit by successive states of emergency, the UDF came to be overshadowed by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). The trade unions and the Front joined forces in an even broader movement, the Mass Democratic Movement.

The relationship between anti-capitalist labour struggles and nationalist anti-apartheid resistance has been a consistent theme in South African historiography. This race-class paradigm also dominates the historiography of resistance politics in the 1980s. While the concepts of race and class are obviously relevant, the analysis of South African society in terms of race or class only results in a rather one-dimensional portrayal of the main protagonists. They tend to be reduced to either greedy capitalists versus downtrodden proletarians or white supremacists versus black freedom fighters.

From the 1970s, the liberal school in historiography which had interpreted the South African case as primarily a racial conflict, came to be overtaken by a revisionist school which adopted class analysis as its point of departure. During the 1980s, this revisionist school lost some of its orthodoxy by a renewed recognition of the relevance of concepts of race and ethnicity, thus restoring at least two dimensions to the protagonists. But in order to do justice to the full complexity of the human experience in South Africa's protracted liberation struggle, more dimensions are needed. Next to race, ethnicity and class, other relevant dimensions include gender, generation and the urban-rural divide. Using material from the three case studies, I will focus on the generational struggles within The Struggle. How did activist youth legitimate the reversal of generational roles?

As in other parts of Southern Africa, the liberation struggle in South Africa was legitimised in terms of nationalist and socialist ideologies. The liberation agenda prioritised fundamental changes in the political and the social order, but was not limited to socio-political goals only. Actors in the 1980s were motivated by a mixture of African nationalism, the ideal of a non-racial society and the vision of an egalitarian order, which often amounted to a socialist 'People's Republic'. But many – probably most – were not acting within a purely secular framework. They were also fighting a spiritual battle against the forces of darkness, cleansing society of evil in the search for a harmonious moral order.

This spiritual dimension is not absent at the national level. Allan Boesak condemned the 1983 Constitution as politically untenable and 'morally wrong', Moslem leaders declared participation in the government's new

dispensation *haraam* and leading protagonists of liberation theology asserted in the Kairos document that 'God sides with the Oppressed' (*South Africa* 1987). But it is at local level that the use of religion and local belief systems as spiritual resources comes to the fore much more starkly. In order to build a new society, the forces of evil had to be driven out. Not only were white authorities, capitalist bosses, black town councillors, bantustan leaders and policemen excluded from the UDF's definition of 'The People'. Those who controlled the forces of evil magic, witches and sorcerers, were equally excluded.

## The struggles behind The Struggle
### Sekhukhuneland
In rural Sekhukhuneland, then part of the Lebowa bantustan, the UDF was largely limited to youth movements (see also Delius 1996). The 'engine of the struggle' was the University of the North at Turfloop, near Pietersburg, where Pedi students strategised about the formation of organisation in their home villages. During holidays, students went home to their villages to form youth groups. Afterwards they would meet again at the university to exchange experiences. Some of the leading activists in Sekhukhuneland were students from Turfloop, or maintained close contacts with university students. The campus of the University of North was an important source of organisational know-how, as well as Marxist-Leninist classics.

Rural youth movements operated largely in isolation. In theory, the Marxist classics prescribed the forging of student-worker alliances. In practice, the workers of Sekhukhuneland, who as migrant workers had been instrumental to the revolts of the 1950s, now were relegated to the backdrop. Migrant workers were generally seen by activist youth as 'parents', not as workers with whom an alliance could be sought.

The idiom of the youth movement was clearly influenced by Marxist orthodoxy. In the neighbouring district of Nebo, the UDF-affiliated youth organisation NEYO adopted red as the colour for its banner 'to affirm the organisation's recognition of the working class leadership. A hammer and a hoe on the flag represent the workers and the peasantry – the Neyo constituency'.[2] In reality, the constituency of UDF-affiliates in rural Lebowa consisted largely of students from secondary and tertiary institutions.

In a sense, youth organisation functioned as tribal age groups: one did not join by choice, one was considered a member by virtue of age. Everybody who was considered to belong to the 'youth' was also considered to be a member of the youth congress. 'Workers' and 'peasants', in theoretical terms the essence of the struggle, were in real life perceived in their role as parents, as belonging to the older, conservative generation who stood in the way of a new order.

A few feeble attempts at community-oriented activities fell flat. In the urban townships, rent and bus protests provided effective mobilising issues across the generational divide. But in the rural villages, people owned their houses. Transport was indeed a costly item on the budget of migrant families, but not a daily concern. In Sekhukhuneland, youth movements targetted first of all 'the dictatorship of the chief'. Most chiefs reacted antagonistically to the youth movement, which was rightly perceived as a rival power base. 'Our ultimate aim is to allow the people to govern themselves', stated youth leader Peter Mokaba. 'We have already established people's courts in some areas and are in the process of forming our own militia which will carry out the orders of the courts.'[3]

These people's courts, either in the form of mass meetings or as a disciplinary committee of the youth organisation, handled criminal cases such as theft, rape or robbery, political offences such as 'speaking ill of the organisation', and domestic matters, such as domestic violence or cases of divorce. Divorce was considered a social evil, which should be rooted out. People's courts ordered couples to stay together. The proclaimed aim of these youth-run courts, where verdicts were enforced with sjamboks, was to re-establish harmony and to effect reconciliation within the community. But seen from the perspective of adults, these people's courts usurped the functions of tribal courts and adjudication by elders, thus challenging the authority of parents and chiefs alike.

Forced recruitment into the youth movement was another major source of generational conflict, particularly when boys went from house to house to recruit girls for a campaign which became known as 'building soldiers':

> Since the Boers were killing many people, there was a need to make more soldiers. The girls should abandon the preventions. So the youth carried out attacks on clinics, because at the clinics, contraceptives were given to the girls. And girls were forced out of their houses, to join the comrades. And then the girls would only come home the next morning. Most girls got pregnant in 1986.... The youth were saying: we need to make more babies to become soldiers, because the Boers were killing us. It caused much strain between youth and parents. The youth would go around the village singing and marching and collect

the youth for a meeting. Girls were also forced to come. The parents could not complain or refuse to let their daughter go, because otherwise their house might be burned. At that time, the youth did not have clear direction; they antagonised the parents.... But these mistakes were also made because the youth had no one to turn to. There were few people around who could provide direction. The youth thought that the parents failed to solve any problem.[4]

Since the parents 'failed to solve any problem', youth leadership took it upon themselves to overcome communal conflicts caused by 'factionalism and tribalism'. In some cases with a degree of success, as in the twin villages of Apel and GaNkoane, which were locked in a long-standing feud about land rights. Here youth leadership managed to overcome communal conflict by forming one youth organisation for the two villages, to demonstrate the importance of unity. However, when youth from Apel-GaNkoane set out to solve a 'faction fight' in the neighbouring village of Strydkraal, they sparked off a chain of events with dramatic consequences. The procession of chanting youth was met by the chief's men, who opened fire and killed one of the demonstrators. The funeral of Solomon Maditsi was a massive event, a milestone in the process of youth mobilisation. Shortly afterwards, a young activist was struck by lightning: lightning is commonly associated with witchcraft. Now the youth took it upon themselves to establish who was responsible for this new attack on their ranks. A mass meeting decided to send a delegation to a ngaka to identify the culprits. Three villagers, whose guilt was subsequently established during the consultation in the ngaka's hut, were burned to death. After a lull of a couple of days, more suspects of witchcraft were hunted down. In the first half of April 1986, 32 people were burned to death. The second spate of killings happened as a spontaneous outburst in a highly charged atmosphere. Youth no longer bothered about traditional procedures. They decided not to waste any more time and money on consulting dingaka, reasoning that these people were just making profits and that, anyway, 'we all know who are the witches here'.

Youth had usurped the powers of village hierarchies, revolting against chiefs, dingaka and school teachers alike. By early 1986, 'there was deep conflict with the parents. They saw us as terrorists. We could not sleep in our homes (...) People were blaming us for wanting to be Jesus Christ, wanting to die for the masses.'[5]

The 'rule of the comrades' had instilled great fear in villagers who were at a loss to comprehend the collapse of the old order. The youth movement saw itself as implementing the ANC's call to make the country ungovernable. But the ideals of serving the community with a millenarian perspective of a better order blended with a reign of terror, which profoundly upset the relationship between parents and children. In the rural parts of the Northern Transvaal, the UDF did not manage to broaden out beyond its following of militant youth.

The witch killings led to the demise of the youth movement in Sekhukhuneland. Police and army moved in with full force, detaining hundreds of youth and forcing the leadership into hiding with friends in town. The most 'politically advanced' youth activists, initially bewildered and demoralised by this unexpected turn of events, searched for new interpretations to make sense of their predicament. They found a tool of empowerment in Marxism-Leninism, which could also serve as a legitimising ideology for their self-proclaimed vanguard role.

Three volumes on dialectical materialism, authored by an orthodox British Marxist in the 1950s, became the bible of the 'politically advanced' activist (Cornforth 1987). In these times of upheaval and confusion, Lenin provided welcome certainties: 'The Marxian doctrine is omnipotent, because it is true. It is complete and harmonious, and provides men with an integral world conception, which is irreconcilable with any form of superstition, reaction or defence of bourgeois oppression' (Lenin, *The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism*, quoted in Cornforth I 1987:14). Thus far, teachers and parents alike had endeavoured to impress on them their impotence and ignorance. Now, from this marginalised position in South African society, they were suddenly thrust into the forefront of history and entrusted with a vanguard role in the impending revolution:

Materialism teaches us to have confidence in ourselves, in the working class – in people. It teaches us that there are no mysteries beyond our understanding, that we need not accept that which is as being the will of God, that we should contemptuously reject the 'authoritative' teachings of those who set up to be our masters, and that we can ourselves understand nature and society, so as to be able to change it. (Cornforth I 1987:28)

Marxism-Leninism was welcomed as a tool of empowerment to achieve people's power, or – in Cornforth's words – communist society, in which the whole social process will be brought under the conscious, planned direction of the victorious working class (Cornforth I 1987:53). Here was the promised land, with a new, harmonious social order. Marxism-Leninism did not supplant other beliefs, but was rather added on to the existing

ideological armoury. In recognition of the fact that the witch hunts had sown division, activists realised that the enemy had to be externalised in order to unite communities for a common goal. Hence the new message which youth activists spread through the BaPedi villages: 'Apartheid is the biggest witch'.

After the unbanning of the ANC, youth did not regain their vanguard role. Youth movements, such as the Sekhukhuneland Youth Organisation, were disbanded, with youth political activity now being channelled into the ANC Youth League. In spite of their fierce loyalties to the ANC, young activists experienced this as a loss of autonomy, their organisation now made subservient to the 'mother body'. The 'old men' were taking control again, telling the youth to go back to school. Within a year, the ANC branch in Apel-GaNkoane was firmly under the control of teachers and a few businessmen. Chiefs regained much of their previous power, in many cases effectively undermining attempts to set up civic associations in the villages.

### The Kagiso Residents' Organisation
In the urban context of Kagiso, the African township of Krugersdorp on the West Rand, the youth movement did not operate in isolation. A small core of youth activists had initiated a protest campaign against a rent increase in 1981, embarking on house-to-house visits. Following the example of Soweto and Port Elizabeth, they wanted to consolidate community mobilisation by establishing a residents' organisation. Realising that ordinary township residents were unlikely to join a youth-led organisation, they went in search of more mature, experienced leadership, which they recruited mainly from trade union leadership and from various churches in Kagiso. The pastor of the Apostolic Faith Mission, Frank Chikane, actively supported and encouraged the young men, although his church would not allow him to get directly involved in political organisations himself. Another source of inspiration and leadership was Sister Mary Bernard Ncube, with some of her fellow sisters in a small Roman Catholic convent.

Leading youth activists in Kagiso were older and more mature than their counterparts in Sekhukhuneland. Establishing the civic association was the work of the 1976 Soweto generation, who had gone through a deeply politicising experience which had taught them the importance of effective organisation and linkages with adults. Moreover, the most pressing civic issues in Kagiso – as in many other townships – were rents, electricity and transport, all eminently suitable to interest a broad range of not very politically motivated residents. Young activists had gained previous organisational experience in Chikane's Interdenominational Youth Christian Club, the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) and in the Young Christian Workers (YCW). YCW activists, combining a militant Christianity with Marxism and social action, were particularly prominent in both civic and trade union organisation in Kagiso. This socio-religious inspiration is well captured in the diary of Lawrence Ntlokoa, a leading young activist who had become an avid reader during his years of banning orders. He made a close study of the scriptures: 'My realisation and discoveries was that Salvation history is totally on the side, objectively and subjectively, of the poor, the oppressed (...). Faith then, brings with it new dimensions of the liberation struggle.'[6] YCW had taught young activists the strategy of building confidence in collective action by tackling concrete local issues. They shared this result-oriented approach with the trade union leadership.

Through its affiliation to the UDF in late 1983, the Kagiso Residents' Organisation (KRO) became linked to national politics, although affiliation made no immediate difference. In due course, however, KRO became part of the Charterist hegemonic project, in the process alienating non-Charterist residents with Africanist leanings who in 1984 decided to form their own civic organisation. The Africanists claimed that KRO was dominated by youngsters who still lived under parental care, but this was clearly a caricature. KRO obviously owed its fairly wide support bases at least in part to the prominent role played by respected older residents.

In fact, youth organisation in Kagiso had a slow start. The banning of the Congress of South African Student (COSAS) in August 1985 ultimately gave the impetus to the formation of the Kagiso Youth Congress (KAYCO), which met regularly in the Catholic Church near Sister Bernard's convent. Surprisingly, KAYCO leaders saw their main responsibilities not as addressing specific youth issues, but in maintaining public safety. The high death rate in Kagiso, as a consequence of crime, stabbings and excessive drinking, was singled out as the most pressing concern. The anti-crime campaign, launched in December 1985, commanded wide popular support in Kagiso, particularly among women, who praised the youth for making Kagiso a safer place to live. Young men went from shebeen to shebeen asking customers to surrender their knives. A huge pile of knives was subsequently stored in the convent.

Initially, generational tension developed over the role of the Disciplinary Committee (DC), which heard cases of people found with knives and confiscated their weapons. Members of the DC were young activists in

their twenties. At the same time, elderly men formed an organisation with the same goal of controlling the tsotsi element and, significantly, named it the 'Fathers' Congress'. Invoking African tradition and the practice of township makgothla, they attempted to regain control over a terrain that they traditionally considered their own preserve: administering justice. The problem became more acute when the DC widened its scope to include domestic problems and mediation between neighbours. 'People said that they could not present domestic problems to these youngsters. You cannot discuss problems like barren wives of husbands who cannot provide sexual satisfaction because the husband is always drunk, with a group of youngsters. This type of thing could turn against KRO. So we purposefully took a decision to get parents involved in the DC'.[7] In the newly constituted DC, the role of youth was limited to summoning people to the meetings. Most members of the new DC were elderly men. Although domestic issues obviously involved women, the DC had no female members. But from the police recordings of tapped telephone conversations between leading civic activists, it is obvious that Sister Bernard was very influential in the sphere of popular justice.[8] The jurisdiction of the DC in marital and domestic issues seems to have been widely accepted.

Generational conflict however did flare up around the role of youth as monitors of the consumer boycott, which was called in Kagiso in December 1985. 'Youth as young as 14 year old stop taxis and private cars coming from town. They destroy groceries found in the vehicles and in some cases assault those who refuse to hand over their goods. Where in the world have you seen youths as young as 12 years making decisions?', complained a resident.[9] A week after the consumer boycott started, a meeting was called by the women's organisation and the youth congress, where some rules of observing the boycott were agreed upon. School boycotts were called in support of the consumer boycott. At the end of January 1986, KAYCO had called a meeting to discuss the back-to-school call by the National Education Crisis Committee. In spite of police teargassing the hall, sjambokking students and shooting bird shot – killing 14 year old Maki Legwati – students decided to heed the call to go back to school.

This police brutality against school children had a profoundly politicising effect on ordinary township residents. People who had previously been wary of militant youth disrupting township life, now became united against the common enemy. Getting rid of the murderous presence of the security forces became priority number one, across the generational divide.

However, school boycotts did erupt intermittently. A long bus boycott, which was launched early in 1986, provided another mobilising campaign. The consumer boycott carried most divisive potential, as groups of youth attacked and burned delivery vans and went around ordering some shopkeepers to close their shops, for various offences, such as charging high prices or not observing commemoration days. Most of the violence was blamed on a group of 30 to 40 tsotsis aged between 16 and 30, who operated outside the fold of KAYCO under the name 'the United Front'. Rivalry between the United and KAYCO at times resulted in violent confrontations. The United Front and KAYCO had different approaches to the struggle, explained two KAYCO activists in a later interview: 'Some wanted to politicise the youth. Others wanted to burn cars. So the United boys made a mistake, They thought they could burn cars because the cars belonged to the bourgeoisie. Many youths were very angry because of the daily killings. And they were responding to Tambo's call to make the country ungovernable'.[10] The civic leadership could not exercise any control over this 'lumpen element', school drop outs who lacked the qualifications, the skills and the patience to participate in long meetings and strategising sessions. The United boys chose the battlefield where they felt most at home: the street.

But the civic leadership had a very positive relationship with KAYCO, praising the various forms of community service performed by the student youth, such as the anti-crime campaign, clean-up campaigns in the township, embellishing the environment with People's Parks and helping with the organisation of funerals. The Afrikaans Sunday paper *Rapport* was duly impressed, as is evident from a story on the People's Parks, which was headlined 'Kinder-Skrikbewind'. The reporter asserted that children as young as 12 or 13 had unleashed a reign of terror, manning street blockades, checking on taxis, prescribing businessmen how to run their business and cleaning the streets. The 'ominous quiet and order' was interpreted as evidence of a Maoist revolutionary terror.[11]

Although numerous residents gave positive assessments of the role of (student) youth, one should at the other hand not underestimate the insecurity and bewilderment felt by ordinary residents who were subjected to 'revolutionary discipline'. Resentment against arrogant and unruly youth transpires clearly from many phone conversations between residents and Sister Bernard.

In the story of township revolt in Kagiso, generational frictions come to

fore on numerous occasions, with the consumer boycott and the initial stage of popular justice as the most obvious flash points. But on the whole, youth activity – with the exception of the tsotsi element– was well integrated into overall civic campaigns.

## Grassroots

The third case study, the community paper *Grassroots* in the Cape Peninsula, is an example of a broad based initiative which after a phase of successful community participation became a tool in the hands of well-educated students and ex-students, revolting not only against apartheid and capitalism, but also against the hierarchies among the Coloured population of the Western Cape. Ostensibly, *Grassroots* was a community paper, but in the mid-1980s it was turned into an expression of militant youth culture.

The idea to launch a community paper in the Cape Town area was first mooted in May 1976, but the first issue only appeared in 1980. The paper was meant to serve as organising tool in promoting community organisation and to build alliances between Africans, Coloureds and Indians, who had been kept isolated from each other by apartheid legislation. At least some of the leading media activists were strongly inspired by Leninist prescriptions on the use of media to establish an ideological hegemony. This intellectual vanguard saw its role as 'detonators', going out to mobilise the masses and making sure that the workers acquired a proper understanding of their class interests. *Grassroots*, as well as most other alternative papers, preferred to look beyond the anti-apartheid struggle, taking the premise that racial conflict was merely a convenient camouflage for the real issue: the class struggle.

*Grassroots* has been instrumental in building a network of activists in the Western Cape, thus laying the foundations for the UDF in this region. Nearly everybody who became involved in the UDF had at one time or another been working in *Grassroots*. While the newspaper project was important in forging a 'community of activists', the media workers tended to get intoxicated by an activist subculture which was rather remote from the concerns of ordinary people.

> When we became activists, with our workshops in Marxism-Leninism
> and Gramsci, we lost touch with ordinary people. We were also rather
> patronising. We thought that debates were not relevant for ordinary
> people. They would only get confused. Debates were for activists. (...)
> We became a subculture. We all looked like Che Guevara's (...) We
> were into reggae, not disco. We called each other comrade, we

embraced African comrades. And we took for granted that non-racialism, socialism etc. were accepted by 'the people'.[12]

Some UDF leaders with a working class background, such as Western Cape vice-president Joe Marks (1983-85), were openly scornful of the *Grassroots* activists who turned the paper into an instrument of a political elite, pretending to 'lead the masses'.

By the mid-1980s, the socialist agenda was articulated quite openly:

> Rejecting the structures of the Apartheid State is no longer enough. It
> is now also necessary to replace the Apartheid structures (...) with
> democratic bodies which are well organised and have strong support
> from the people(...) The task of the People's Press is to challenge the
> power of the ruling class media, to minimise its influence and eventually
> take over state media and commercial newspapers, and use their
> institutions to serve the interests of the people.[13]

In their puritanical endeavours to 'build people's power', the media workers spurned topics such as sports, crime, religion and entertainment, although these would have made the paper more digestible for its intended readership. The result was a heavily politicised paper which was unlikely to attract a working class audience. In the search for people's culture, break-dancing and graffiti were portrayed as 'a form of culture originated by the people themselves, understood by them and appreciated by them'.[14] This equation of activist youth culture with 'people's culture' sounds oddly out of tune with *Grassroots*' main constituency: the Coloured working class on the Cape Flats.

Following the ideological prescriptions, people's power ought to imply workers' power. In real life, student activists and radical academics were the most ardent advocates of people's power. Towards the end of the decade, *Grassroots* activists frankly acknowledged that they had lost touch with their main constituency when they became intoxicated by their belief in the impending coming of people's power and by their blind adoration of communist model states. In style and contents, *Grassroots* had become so much the product of a particular youth culture that it strayed much beyond its original mission of building community organisations, promoting non-racialism and stimulating joint action with trade unions.

As demonstrated by these case studies, local agendas did not necessarily coincide with the national objectives espoused by the UDF. Making babies and burning witches did not figure on the national liberation agenda of UDF or ANC, although the perpetrators believed to be acting according to the prescriptions of the liberation movement. In Kagiso, where the civic

association and the youth organisation maintained close contact, there is less evidence of young activists pursuing their own agenda. In the case of *Grassroots*, however, we find another example of activist youth taking over and making the newspaper instrumental to their own cause, the search for a socialist utopia.[15]

## Legitimising the reversal of generational roles

Finding ample evidence of the vanguard role of youth in 1980s did not come as a surprise. In media coverage of the urban revolts in particular, militant youth was highly visible. The unexpected outcome of research on the local level was the extent to which youth had been pursuing their own agenda under the umbrella of the UDF. Youth activity was characterised by a surprising degree of autonomy.

At national level, various legitimising ideologies were adopted in the course of the struggle. Nationalism and socialism were vital ingredients in the numerous statements and publications of the UDF, while Christianity also served as an obvious source of inspiration. Less obvious at national level, but clearly visible in the case studies, is the use of Marxism as a secular religion, and interpretations of the struggle derived from local belief systems. In this respect, the South African liberation struggle is surely not unique.

In his book on the Zimbabwean liberation war, David Lan poses the question of what to make of a guerrilla war whose leaders professed a socialist ideology and a commitment to leading Zimbabwe into the modern world, whereas fighters themselves described their experiences in the field in religious terms (Lan 1985). Like other liberation movements in Southern Africa, ZANU espoused a familiar mix of nationalism and socialism, often equating socialism with African communalism. But in Lan's interpretation of the nationalist struggle in Zimbabwe, ZANU employed a far more effective method to make sense of the struggle in terms of local belief systems. In order to obtain legitimacy with the local peasant population, ZANU guerrillas successfully turned to African religion. Through the spirit mediums in the villages, the ancestors gave their blessing to the armed struggle, and thereby also to the generational reversal of roles. Under wartime conditions, the elders had to accept that much of their authority was usurped by the young guerrilla fighters and their local assistants. Thus, while modernising ideologies such as nationalism and socialism feature as dominant theme on the macro level, religion emerges as a powerful force on the local, or micro level.

After the pioneering work by Ranger on the first Chimurenga, the Shona rising at the end of the 19th century, religion has emerged as a central theme in the historiography of the Zimbabwean wars of liberation (Ranger 1967). By contrast, in the academic literature on the liberation struggle in South Africa, religion is largely ignored.[15] This subject remains confined to the domain of theologians and is hardly explored by historians and social scientists, who were the captives of the race-class paradigm. Secular analysts are all too easily inclined to relegate religion to the sphere of false consciousness, ignoring the basic fact that a secular worldview is a minority view characteristic for elites in twentieth century western societies.

Another possible explanation for this blind spot is the fact that many case studies of popular revolt were undertaken as a function of the national liberation struggle, often seeking to draw 'lessons of struggle' (eg Marx 1990). The absence of the spiritual dimension in the historiography of South African resistance may in part be due to a failure to understand local struggles in their own terms. South Africans engaged not only in a struggle against white domination and capitalist exploitation. They took on the forces of evil, exorcising evil from their communities with a range of cleansing rituals, ranging from clean-up operations and boycotts to the burning of impimpis (traitors) and witches. This was by no means out of tune with mainstream South African society. After a discussion on the Reconstruction and Development Programme, archbishop Desmond Tutu called for a series of church services to 'smoke out the demons' from South African society. While engaging in spiritual cleansing, the churches would also call on communities to clear the streets of litter.[16]

Religion indeed is part and parcel of the ideological baggage of the liberation movement at a national level, but it is at the local level where the pervasive presence of religious beliefs is most visible, both as a resource in the struggle for legitimacy and as a paradigm which helped to make sense of events. At grassroots level, the UDF's followers expressed their worldview often simultaneously in both a socialist and religious idiom, as with the Young Christian Workers in Kagiso or Sekhukhune youth. The very same youth who opened a village meeting in Apel with a 'Viva Proletarian Internationalism' had played a prominent part in the witch hunts. In contrast to Kagiso, Christianity was not a source of inspiration for Sekhukhune youth. They drew on local belief systems, involving beliefs in witchcraft, and on orthodox Marxism.

In terms of youth usurping roles usually reserved for elders, there is a

parallel with the Zimbabwe experience, where young guerrilla fighters, fearful of betrayal, also mounted anti-sorcery campaigns and took it upon themselves to identify and kill the suspects. The vital difference lies in the legitimation of this reversal of generational roles. Unlike in Sekhukhuneland, in Zimbabwe tradition was mobilised as a source of legitimacy for the young fighters. Through spirit mediums, the ancestors gave their blessing to the liberation struggle. Thus a revolutionary struggle could be accommodated in peasant society. Although the war thoroughly upset the pattern of social relations, this experience could be digested in terms of local value systems. The Zimbabwean guerrillas fought for the return of the ancestral lands.

Why was this road not open to the comrades in Sekhukhuneland? Why could the tradition of resistance against Boers and British in the nineteenth century and the revolt in the 1950s against the imposition of bantustans not be tapped to legitimate a new cycle of revolt? It seems that, for the older people in Sekhukhuneland, the memories of revolt and harsh repression in the 1950s functioned as a deterrent rather than an inspiration. Moreover, youth and spiritual authorities did not occupy the same positions as in Zimbabwe. Pedi youth wielded sjamboks, not guns: their means of coercion were less persuasive than those of ZANU fighters. On the other hand, spirit mediums in Zimbabwe had preserved a considerable degree of autonomy, while the dingaka in Sekhukhuneland were compromised by their dependence on the chief.

In the first phase of youth mobilisation, youth activists had turned to the dingaka with a request for medicines to make them invulnerable for bullets and with the demand to identify the culprits of witchcraft. But in the BaPedi villages, dingaka were highly dependent on the discredited chiefs, at whose request they performed certain rituals and from whom they needed to obtain certain permits. Therefore, the spiritual resources of the dingaka were closed off to the youth. It was only when they had established that the dingaka could or would not deliver that they turned to another powerful medicine: Leninism. Cornforth's much-thumbed trilogy held the promise of a new potent spiritual force which could guarantee invincibility (if not invulnerability): 'The Marxian doctrine is omnipotent because it is true'.

Marxism-Leninism was put to use as a secular religion, with the promise of an omnipotent doctrine – just like Christianity. Generational consciousness became a much stronger motivation than any sense of continuity with past resistance. Leninism provided easy legitimation for the vanguard role assumed by 'politically advanced' youth: since they were now engrossed in developing a materialist understanding of society, they would become 'masters of the future' and guide 'the masses' towards a new harmonious social order.

Leninism similarly provided ideological legitimation for the vanguard role assumed by the young intellectuals who had seized control over *Grassroots* community paper, ostensibly to lift the everyday struggles of the Coloured working class to levels of higher ideological sophistication. In the process, by drawing on an ideology which was alien to the world view of 'the masses' on the Cape Flats, they alienated themselves from their constituency. Here is another parallel with Sekhukhuneland.

Similarly, leading activists in Kagiso were simultaneously involved in the struggle against apartheid oppression and towards a classless society. They were also involved in a quest for a new moral community. In the words of Frank Chikane, the people of Kagiso were taking part in the 'struggles between the forces of righteousness (light) and unrighteousness (darkness)' (Chikane 1989:103-4) Both Chikane and Sister Bernard believed that apartheid and capitalism belonged to the forces of unrighteousness, while a classless society was seen as fulfilling the ideals of the Kingdom of God.

The anti-crime campaign, the clean-ups, the social isolation of the police and the town councillors all fit in with the endeavour to cleanse the township of evil forces. In Kagiso as in Sekhukhune, evil forces and spiritual power were agents to be reckoned with. But in Kagiso, youth was not nearly as isolated as in Sekhukhune. While the civic leadership worried about excesses on the part of the comtsotsis and youth displayed impatience with the caution of adults, much common ground remained. In Kagiso, Christian religion was a shared resource across the generational divide.

As demonstrated by these case studies, local interpretations of The Struggle can deviate from the dominant ideology at the national level. The subject of 'struggles within a revolution' is a common theme in much of the literature on revolution. These struggles can unfold along lines of class, ethnicity, race, ideology, region, gender and generation. In the historiography of the South African liberation struggle, these dimensions tend to be neglected because of the prevailing race-class paradigm. There is a need for a more inclusive concept, to accommodate multiple dimensions of the human experience.

This article has focused on the generational dimension of the internal

anti-apartheid struggle in the 1980s. Generation is also a central theme in studies of the wars of liberation in Zimbabwe and Namibia (eg Lan, Ranger, Kriger, Leys and Saul). In South Africa, the generational reversal of roles was largely undone after 1990, when the 'old men' returned from prison and from exile to take charge. The UDF was emptied into the ANC as activists jockeyed for positions and patronage. Much of the distinct political culture of the UDF evaporated, while the ANC also underwent a profound ideological transformation. The egalitarianism, the participatory ethos and the spirit of collective action came to be overshadowed by the principles of liberal democracy, combined with an upsurge of American-style consumerism. Egalitarian principles have largely been replaced by the new ideal of getting rich quickly.

How is this ideological transformation at national level interpreted at the level of local communities? How are the RDP, GEAR, the rainbow nation and the African Renaissance understood in Sekhukhuneland, Kagiso and the Cape Flats? How do ordinary people make sense of a changing environment, in which rapid social advancement of individuals and integration into the global economy go hand in hand with lasting poverty and a spiralling crime rate?

A research agenda analysing the various phases of the transformation of South African society should not be limited to developments at national level. How is the process of change understood in the moral universe of local communities? Social change is characterised by the rapid rise of segments of the black middle class, while the losers are left pondering the cause of their misfortune. Religion, including persistent beliefs in witchcraft, continues to be a strong element in the ideological armoury of many South Africans. Anti-witchcraft movements have not abated. On the contrary, in the Northern Province, the provincial government was so preoccupied by the pervasive phenomenon of witch killings that it instituted an official commission of inquiry. These beliefs are by no means limited to rural backwaters. Commercial free sheets in traditionally white neighbourhoods, as well as in African areas, carry a surprising array of stories on Satanism.

Witchcraft comes to fore as a major issue in an article by Adam Ashforth (1998) on the impact of the democratic transition on the people of Soweto. As residents try to figure out why the promise of 'a better life for all' has been overtaken by the reality of 'the good life for some', they attempt to identify the causes of persisting poverty, unemployment and disease. Ashforth notes a widespread – and ever increasing – belief that witchcraft

provides the explanation for these misfortunes. The evil actions of witches bring harm to the community. Protecting communities against violence, crime and other forms of harm is a prime responsibility of the state. Therefore, this situation prompts the logical question 'what is the government doing about witches?'

Ashforth even suggests that, in the long term, 'the legitimacy of the democratic regime in South Africa will be solely challenged by the response of political authorities to issues concerning witchcraft in places such as Soweto' (Ashforth 1998:506). This sounds like overstating the case. Explorations of the moral universe of local communities should not be limited to matters of witchcraft only. Most South Africans tap a variety of spiritual and ideological sources. The discourse of national politics tends to obscure the ways in which ordinary South Africans try to make sense of their changing world. As the examples from the UDF episode have demonstrated, studies of the interaction between national agendas and local dynamics add valuable insights to interpretations of the multiple meanings of processes of political and socio-economic change.

## Notes

1. This article is largely based on my book on the UDF: Ineke van Kessel, *'Beyond our Wildest Dreams': the United Democratic Front and the Transformation of South Africa.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000. The book is an adaptation of my doctoral thesis, which was completed in 1995. Fieldwork for the thesis was done in South Africa in 1990-1991.
2. *New Nation* April 23, 1987.
3. *Sunday Times* May 11, 1986
4. Seyo activist, interview August 1990.
5. Seyo activist, interview August 1990.
6. From a letter by Lawrence Ntlokoa, 2 Augu. 1980, exh. 111.3, Krugersdorp Residents Organisation and four others vs the Minister of Law and Order, catalogue AK 2145, Historical Papers, University of the Witwatersrand.
7. Interview with Serge Mokonyane, November 14, 1991.
8. Police recordings of phone conversations, 142.
9. *The Star* December 13, 1985.
10. Interview with Mpho Malele and Zandisele Musi, November 10, 1991.
11. *Rapport*, March 2, 1986.
12. Interview with Rehana Rossouw, October 11, 1991.
13. *Grassroots* AGM 1986.
14. *Grassroots*, March 1985.

15. With some exceptions, notably Chidester, 1991.

16. *Sowetan*, November 17, 1994.

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