

Chapter 5

Afrikaans

"We Are Fed the Crumbs of Ignorance with Afrikaans as a Poisonous Spoon"—Historical Context and Precipitating Factors

Through the rejection of Afrikaans we are prepared to break the spine of the whole immoral White Apartheid Empire.

—Khotso S. Seathlolo, student leader, 1976

Perspectives on the Role of Afrikaans

Students organized the demonstration that began the uprising in Soweto in protest against the enforcement of the government's new Afrikaans-language policy and its indifference to township residents' protests and petitions against it. The uprising seemed to succeed on the narrow issue of the Afrikaans-language policy: On July 6, 1976, just three weeks after the beginning of the uprising, M. C. Botha, the minister of Bantu Administration and Development and of Bantu Education, announced that school principals would be free to choose the medium of instruction in their schools and that the *50-50 ruling* would no longer apply.¹ The first battle of the student movement had been won, but protests and violence continued for more than a year.

Questions about the role of Afrikaans in the uprising are fundamental to this contradiction and lead to a furious debate about whether Afrikaans had only been an opportune trigger or actually reflected deeper dissatisfaction. In this chapter I analyze the central issue of the relevance that the imposition of the Afrikaans policy had to the timing of the uprising. It is my argument that all accounts underestimated the threat that Afrikaans represented through its potential to reach directly into the lives and minds of black South Africans. Participants' voices and memories reveal that it was Afrikaans' particularly invasive powers and its association with assimilation into the alien, oppressive Afrikaner culture that made it the central issue of the uprising and distinguished it from any of the other issues or hardships imposed by the structures and policies of apartheid. Focusing specifically on Afrikaans, I analyze in this chapter how the different discourses presented in this book clashed, coalesced, and interacted over that particular issue.

Although the issue of the imposition of the Afrikaans-language policy was addressed in all of these discourses, it was done in a way and in a language that made it peripheral as a reason, unimportant, a fluke. Some of this may have been the consequence of a perspective bias common to all accounts, a bias that was the result of each author's position outside the groups that constituted the youth

movements. In the literature on Soweto (see: "Analysis of the Literature" below) this was probably aggravated by the anti-Black Consciousness stance of such authors as Hirson, whose political affiliations lay closer to the ANC and the South African Communist Party, and of Brooks and Brickhill, who repeatedly refer to "the wider liberation movement" as if there were only one.² But the events in Soweto were not the ANC. They had caught the ANC as unawares as anyone else, and as a consequence the organization, as much as its spokesmen, or those who wrote from its ideological position, jumped on a bandwagon to which they were obviously sympathetic and that served their cause but that was not of their own construction, both attempting to analyze and mobilize after the fact.³

The dismissal of the youths as active historical agents was most clear of course in the Cillié Report (see "Cillié" below) but it existed also in Kane-Berman's and Hirson's work. They wrote about the lack of organization, foresight, planning, breadth, institutions, revolutionary ideal, and ideology. The profound dismissal of student consciousness created in all of these discourses a similar phenomenon, regardless of or despite their otherwise diametrically opposed political viewpoints and sympathies, resulting, in the end, in a dismissal of the participants as active (if imperfect) subjects and agents of their own history. I am not sure any of the antiapartheid writers ever thought of themselves as perpetuating in their analysis the same notions as that of the state and its authors, but in dismissing the importance of Afrikaans they were, on an analytical level, as culpable as the government was on a policy level.

The possibility cannot be discounted that the dissimilar significance given to the issue of Afrikaans in different discourses was related to the position of their authors vis-à-vis the state. Cillié, for example, as a direct agent for the state and invested with the mandate to find the causes of the uprising, as well as being, by virtue of this position, analytically or conceptually sympathetic to the issue (at least in terms of validating or invalidating its importance as a cause of the riots), devoted a substantial chapter of his report to this issue and took it seriously, both as a topic of investigation and in terms of determining its role. For the more radical Hirson, any issue so closely identified with the state and its ideology would have been anathema, and this may account to some extent for his distance and reluctance to consider the issue seriously for analysis. In the end, even the Cillié Report, despite locating the Afrikaans issue centrally both in its analysis and its argument, dismissed it (as it did most of its detailed descriptions and evidence) in favor of theories of intimidation and outside agitation as the main reasons for the uprising. 5

Against such representations, however, I would hold that, by suddenly choosing to implement the Afrikaans policy in Soweto schools *at that particular time*, the South African state had effectively handed to the students on a silver platter a

reason for revolt. I would argue, once again, for a shift in perspective and claim that Afrikaans was not simply a precipitating factor but that it was central to the uprising and central also to any adequate explanation of the eruption of resistance at that historical moment.

Afrikaans had vast symbolic power.⁴ Kane-Berman spoke of "a violent protest against powerlessness,"⁵ the direct "consequence" of the government's "clumsy and imperious" handling of the issue and its failure to respond to demands by both parents and students to revoke the decree that had led, over many months, to the build-up of explosive frustration:

Those who have the power to name often have, by the very act of naming, the power to structure reality, and this power increases dramatically with the degree to which that authority is considered legitimate.⁶

Similarly, those who assumed the power to impose their language assumed by this act also the power to structure reality. It was an assertion of power whose structures and ideology sought to disempower and create perpetual minors of Africans. Steve Biko had recognized this interdependence of ideology and material reality as early as 1973 and had therefore repeatedly challenged it through *Black Consciousness*:

A man who succeeds in making a group of people accept a foreign concept in which he is expert makes them perpetual students whose progress in the particular field can only be evaluated by him; the student must constantly turn to him for guidance and promotion. In being forced to accept the Anglo-Boer culture, the blacks have allowed themselves to be at the mercy of the white man and to have him as their eternal supervisor. Only he can tell us how good our performance is and instinctively each of us is at pains to please this powerful, all-knowing master. This is what Black Consciousness seeks to eradicate.⁷

If, as Goke-Pariola has pointed out, "this power increases dramatically with the degree to which that authority is considered legitimate,"⁸ then the students, who no longer considered the authority of the apartheid state legitimate, questioned that power and challenged it. Power grows if the authority to impose the language is considered legitimate. Therefore, students protesting the imposition of Afrikaans were not only contesting the state's authority to impose the language but were also setting limits to the very power that the state had claimed—in their eyes, illegitimately—to do so.

Afrikaans was too easily dismissed in the literature as simply a "precipitating factor," and the analyses moved on to larger, more important issues, thus diminishing the youth effort. One must ask in whose interest it was to portray it as such? The shooting clearly transformed what happened but, rather than saying

that the protest might have remained "confined to the Afrikaans issue"⁹ without it, which diminishes the power of the Afrikaans issue, a slight shift of perspective might have provided a different picture and allowed us, through analysis of the Afrikaans issue, to get at the consciousness of the participants. Was not Afrikaans a powerful symbol, exactly the issue required as a rallying point? What was capable of bringing so many young people on to the street, if not Afrikaans in their schools, the one political issue that most directly affected them? Afrikaans was capable of *mobilizing* the population to resist, and the African youth and children especially, and *then* of bringing out another group in support: their parents, who would have experienced it in other settings but would have recognized its import. It was a student who pointed out that "everybody was involved and they'd been longing to do this. They didn't know who would start it—so the students set the pace for them."¹⁰

In other words, there would have been no uprising of any size, duration, or scope at that time without the children, without the Afrikaans issue, and without the police reaction. Afrikaans provided the constituency for protest (school students), it provided the rallying point, it provided the ideology (or rather, the counterideology), it provided the place (schools), and it provided the targets (schools, teachers, police, and the administration that was about to enforce the policy change.) In as much as it had always been the language of confrontation, it was about to become also the language of exclusion. Steve Biko had long argued that language had a peculiar power to create hierarchies of knowledge and exclusion, making it an especially menacing instrument in the hands of a state that sought to control the minds of its subordinates. With Black Consciousness's focus on African identity and a new Africanist history that would "describe in it the heroes that formed the core of resistance to the white invaders," the selection of social studies, which included history in particular, to be taught in Afrikaans was especially sinister.¹¹

I am not complaining against the language, I am merely explaining how language can help in the development of an inferiority complex... unfortunately in the learning process this is really what happens, you do not grasp enough and therefore you cannot be articulate enough, and when you play side by side with people who are more articulate than you, you tend to think that it is because they are more intelligent than you ... unfortunately again, Afrikaans has got certain connotations historically that do provoke a rejection from the black man, and these are political connotations. I am not arguing for or against it, but they are there.¹²

Now Afrikaans had provided the issue around which to organize, as even this undated ANC document acknowledged:

The language issue provided a point of unity for the community and offered a clear theme around which an anti-Bantu Education campaign

could be built. The reaction against this particular government decree however, reflected a general mood of resistance to an undemocratic and discriminatory education system.¹³

Students spoke explicitly in Biko's terms. Just before the first anniversary of June 16, 1976, the new leader of the Soweto Students Representative Council (SSRC), Trofomo Sono, who had replaced Daniel Sechaba Montsisi after his arrest, wrote in response to those who "slam Black Consciousness" and say it is "dangerously negative."¹⁵

Negative it is, yes, to an oppressive and ungodly government. Black Power is the key to the black man's awareness. It is the energy that propels the black man to seek what is his by right—a birthright he was denied for over four centuries.¹⁴

Despite the continued threat of the police and the loss of one leader after the other, Sono once again rallied the student movement around the issues of Bantu education:

Oppression is evil, and you need not to have brains and ears to know that you are oppressed. Eyes are enough, and you can know more than you should have learnt and heard. Oppression today is on the surface and exposed through Bantu Education. This is our main enemy. Once we kill it we are through with oppression and discrimination. We will be through with racial segregation, we will be through with Bantustans and all conflict of white and black domination. And there is only one way to get this cleared, and that is by boycotting Bantu Education indefinitely.¹⁵

Although language has largely symbolic and ephemeral qualities, it also has a material effect as it is translated into institutions and practices. The imposition of Afrikaans in black schools was therefore as much part of state violence as police actions were, for it sought to exclude the vast majority of the population from politics, economics, society, and culture. On a broader level, I would argue, this shift in perspective fills a gap in the various analyses and corrects a point of view that is outside and critical of youth and that seems to have been common to the various discourses. It also allows, for the first time, the consideration of the participants as active if not always "perfect" (wise, consistent, revolutionary enough, etc.) subjects of their own history.

The imposition of the Afrikaans policy made it possible both to imagine resistance and to make it concrete. It allowed the transformation of the somewhat elusive, unorganized, and unstructured philosophy of internal liberation, Black Consciousness, into a focus of resistance and into concrete action. Afrikaans became the symbol of the state's illegitimacy. The state had allowed itself to go one step too far, attempting to translate Afrikanerization, until then an ineffective ideology, into an effective policy. This step placed the ideology of the apartheid state squarely into the everyday lives of black South Africans, into their

classrooms, and thereby made the designs of the state imminently apparent and real.

The Afrikaans issue was multidimensional. Through the schools it was linked to Bantu-education policies. In the mouths of black and white police officers and officials of the Bantu Administration, it was linked to the structures of control. Police and prison guards most commonly spoke Afrikaans, as did officials in government offices. It was the language of the National Party.¹⁶ Through its inherent parochialism it threatened to break the link between African students and the international world of commerce and learning:

From a strictly educational point of view a switch to Afrikaans would have been disastrous. Nearly all African teachers had received their own training in English and could not possibly have conducted a course of instruction in Afrikaans. English was moreover the main language of industry and commerce, an international language, and the medium through which contact could be maintained with the rest of Africa.¹⁷

Hirson described how the "massive" increase in the number of students entering Form 1 after the consolidation of Standards 5 and 6 (7th and 8th grade) meant that the language policy would also have affected that many more students. In addition, the Afrikaans issue bridged secondary and primary schools, thus allowing for more solidarity across age groups. Hirson criticized the action committee of the SSRC / South African Students Movement for claiming to speak for all youth. Because of its focus on Afrikaans and Bantu education, he argued, it effectively excluded the "push-outs," the non-school-going youth.¹⁸ But the fact that Afrikaans not only was the language of the oppressor but was experienced across all African classes in their daily confrontations with authority gave it additional unifying force. **20**

Credo Mutwa, a self-proclaimed "conservative and tradition-minded" person, spoke at length about the nature of Afrikaans and what it represented. Even he argued that "for the education authorities to compel our children to take certain lessons in Afrikaans, was the height of folly:"

We all knew from bitter experience, as did thousands of our people that many Afrikaans-speaking White people throughout South Africa, persistently make a terrible mistake that has made the Afrikaans language hated by many of our people, especially the youth, over the years. When they speak to Bantu people, they insist on speaking in Afrikaans, becoming furious and even violent if the Bantu being spoken to dares to speak back to them in English. Thus the Bantu becomes compelled to speak a language he does not fully understand. He has to grope for words, to stutter and to stammer, completely at a psychological disadvantage. We knew there were White police officers, superintendents, pass office officials and others who daily insist on being spoken to in Afrikaans by any Bantu coming before them, regardless of the fact that the Bantu is able to speak this language or

not; that there are even policemen who, rather than take a statement from a Bantu in English, chooses rather that the Bantu should give the statement to a Bantu interpreter in a Bantu language who will then interpret the statement to the White officer in Afrikaans, a strange thing which happens daily in Soweto police stations.

[...]

In fact, some weeks before the riots, two policemen came to my home to take a statement from my wife about some pictures which a White man stole from me and one of the officers, who was White, asked if my wife could speak Afrikaans and she, who comes from Natal, said she could only talk English and the White policeman then told her to give the statement in Zulu to the Black officer who then interpreted in Afrikaans for the White officer, which was a dangerous thing to do, because when one makes a statement to a policeman in Soweto, one must remember every word that one said, and how can anyone be sure that the statement he gave would be put down as he said it if it is translated into a language he does not understand. And how can anyone be lawfully expected to sign a statement written in a language he cannot read, let alone speak.¹⁹

The government's new policy on Afrikaans presented an opportunity, an issue among many issues, on which opposition could be focused. The evidence presented by the students themselves, to which this chapter will return, shows that it was thus a conscious decision on the part of the students to make Afrikaans the central cause around which to organize protests. In the words of Murphy Morobe, student leader in 1976 :

It wasn't a conscious decision to *use* [emphasized] it as a flashpoint. It was a key issue, which in fact was so *deep* [emphasized] in our communities that, given the extent of our own political and social consciousness, there was no way as responsible student leaders, that we could have let it go by. We had to do something about it.²⁰

Black Consciousness had succeeded in raising the students' awareness, it had forced them to see the concrete everyday evidence of their oppression. The lived meaning of apartheid became real to them through the experience of Afrikaans and the way their lives were governed at school. Black Consciousness made the students aware of the profound psychological and quotidian impact of government policy, which was made real in their everyday lives and translated—for them—through the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in their classrooms.

Despite all of the evidence, all the other groups this book has so far considered in reconstructing the different perspectives of the uprising had their own agendas in analyzing the causes of the uprising. The government's capitulation and withdrawal of the attempted language policy was the outcome of a hurried and contentious official debate, which immediately followed the outbreak of violence in Soweto, about the primary causes of the uprising (See: The State on the next

page). Debates on this subject ensued, involving other circles such as the Urban Bantu Council (UBC), other official voices (The Opposition), and the media (The Press), each marked by the political and ideological context of its production. In this chapter I describe how the debates, at least initially, were focused so as to marginalize the issue of Afrikaans, how they were marked, each for its own reason, by an increasing tendency to dismiss the importance of the Afrikaans issue, and how they foreshadowed the later debates in the Cillié Report and the historical literature on Soweto (Cillié). The later debates reflected a more complex interaction of politics and ideology in the construction of the meaning and causes of the uprising, and in these debates the broader historical, social, geographical, and political context tended to take into more careful consideration.

The tendency to diminish the centrality of Afrikaans was replicated in the literature on Soweto. To the official "secondary discourses" of the state and the ANC, as well as to the "primary" voices of the student participants themselves, this chapter therefore adds another layer of voices: those "tertiary discourses" of what Ranajit Guha has called the "History-of-the-Freedom-Struggle genre,"²¹ produced by the authors of the radical or liberal antiapartheid historiography. Farthest removed in time and in experience from the events of the uprising, these writers were most often not officials.²² Their political sympathies, ranging from liberal to far left, lay unequivocally with those struggling against apartheid. Their texts were characterized by efforts to break away from the language—of riot, communist agitation, conspiracy, anarchy, and intimidation—so closely associated with the state's point of view, to embrace the participant point of view. In the end, these secondary and tertiary discourses, "so very different from and contrary to each other in ideological orientation,"²³ did, however, have much in common. 25

By looking at the policy change whereby Afrikaans was enforced as a medium of instruction in African schools and considering it not simply as the trigger of the uprising but as a central issue in a time of mounting political self-awareness and purpose, I show in this chapter that analyses and arguments advanced after the uprising suffered deficiencies of perspective, deficiencies that permitted them all, regardless of political sympathies, to commit a common offense: They betrayed a fundamental disregard for and underestimation of the students as historical agents and subjects of their own history.

Notes:

Note 1: South African Institute for Race Relations [hereafter SAIRR], *A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa: 1976*, ed. Muriel Horrell, Tony Hodgson, Suzanne Blijnaut, and Sean Moroney (Johannesburg: South African Institute for Race Relations, 1977), 61.

Note 2: Alan Brooks and Jeremy Brickhill, *Whirlwind before the Storm: The Origins and Development of the Uprising in Soweto and the Rest of South Africa from June to December 1976* (London: International Defence and Aid Fund for

Southern Africa, 1980), 2, 80, and 95.

Note 3: This was particularly evident in the debate between Archie Mafeje, Ruth First, Baruch Hirson, and L. Mqotsi in the academic forum of the *Review of African Political Economy* 11 (1978): 17-108, and 14 (1979): 97-106, and commented on by Hirson.

Note 4: See also Colin Eglin's reaction before Parliament on 17 June 1976, quoted above.

Note 5: John Kane-Berman, *Soweto: Black Revolt, White Reaction* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1978), 47.

Note 6: Abiodun Goke-Pariola, *The Role of Language in the Struggle for Power and Legitimacy in Africa* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993), 157.

Note 7: Steve Biko, "Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity" (1973), in *I Write What I Like* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 94-95.

Note 8: Goke-Pariola, *Role of Language*, 157.

Note 9: Kane-Berman, *Black Revolt, White Reaction*, 48.

Note 10: Matric student (anonymous), interview by Mike Stent in press release, cited by Southern African News Agency (SANA), 10 September 1976.

Note 11: Steve Biko, "White Racism and Black Consciousness," 1971, in *I Write What I Like*, 70.

Note 12: Steve Biko, "What Is Black Consciousness?" evidence given May 1976 in the SASP/BPC (Black Peoples Convention) trial and reprinted in *I Write What I Like*, 107-8. In fact Biko argued that Afrikaans was easier for people to speak because it-like the African languages-was very idiomatic, a language "that has developed here ... [I]n many instances in its idiom, it relates much better to African languages."

Note 13: ANC document in the possession of Francis Meli, cited in *A History of the ANC: South Africa Belongs to Us* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 185-86.

Note 14: "SSRC Reply Slanderous Pamphlet," handwritten notes by Trofomo Sono, SSRC, June 1977. Evidence seized at the arrest of Masabatha Loate, civil-court case SAB WLD 6857/77, *West Rand Bantu Administration v. Santam* (WRAB v. *Santam*), vol. 413. See also Trofomo Sono, notebook, handwritten speech, undated: "And you must know we cannot do anything, until we have known what Black Consciousness is..." Evidence, SAB WLD 6857/77, *WRAB v. Santam*, vol. 411.

Note 15: Trofomo Sono, notebook, handwritten speech, undated. Evidence, SAB WLD 6857/77, *WRAB v. Santam*, vol. 411.

Note 16: See also Baruch Hirson, "Language in Control and Resistance in South Africa," *African Affairs* 80, no. 319 (April 1981): 222; and Brooks and Brickhill, *Whirlwind Before the Storm*, 44 and 47. Brooks and Brickhill titled that section of their book "The Language of the Conqueror" and wrote: "As Nationalist power has grown, the government has been increasingly active in its efforts to impose Afrikaans on the rest of the population. Afrikaans has now become the main language of government, public administration and the armed forces, and, through the more recent rise of the Afrikaner business community, is also being extensively used in commerce and industry."

Note 17: ANC document in the possession of Francis Meli, cited in *South Africa Belongs to Us*, 185-86.

Note 18: Baruch Hirson, *Year of Fire, Year of Ash: The Soweto Revolt, Roots of a Revolution?* (London: Zed Press, 1979), 195.

Note 19: Credo Mutwa, testimony, 22 September 1976, SAB K345, vol. 139, file 2/3, part 1, Commission Testimony vol. 11. Vusa'mazulu Credo Mutwa, by profession a witchdoctor and writer, is author of *Indaba My Children* (Johannesburg: Blue Crane Books, 1964) and *frica Is My Witness*, ed. Adrian S. Brink (Johannesburg: Blue Crane Books, 1966). He volunteered to give evidence before the Commission.

Note 20: Murphy Morobe, interview by John Robbie, Radio 702 Talk Radio, 16 June 1993.

Note 21: Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 33.

Note 22: As far as I know, there are not yet any accounts by former officials no longer under any professional duty or compulsion to represent the point of view of the old apartheid government, although du Randt might be a possible candidate. Advocate Percy Yutar has refused to comment and provide his inside view (communication with Helena Pohlandt-McCormick, May 1995).

Note 23: Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," 28.