

Tsietsi Mashinini

the Tsietsi legend



Bailey's African History Archive

Historical Sources – an Exercise in Perspectives



In this lesson plan, learners are asked to think about how the different people in their lives would describe them. They are asked to reflect if they think that their caregiver or teacher would say the same things about them as their best friend. They will apply their insights on differing perspectives to historical sources such as newspapers and letters.

Tsietsi Mashinini (1957 - 1990)

Tsietsi Mashinini led the 1976 Soweto student uprising. Charismatic and theatrical, he was a prefect and head of the debating team at Morris Isaacson High School in Soweto where his love of literature prompted a classmate to call him "Shakespeare's friend in Africa".

On June 16th 1976, after prayers at the 8 am assembly at Morris Isaacson High School, students unfurled their banners and posters. To the cry of "Amandla!", Mashinini then led them out the gates. They hadn't gone far when police confronted them with guns and teargas. An estimated 600 people died and over 2000 were injured. After that day, Mashinini never slept at home again. The 19-year-old went into hiding, spending his days evading the security police and helping to bury the dead. Two months later, he left the country for a life in exile and the physical and psychological hardships that followed, took their toll.



Tsietsi Mashinini giving Black Power salute DRUM, 28 April 1979



Tsietsi Mashinini's wife, Welma A Campbell, a former beauty queen DRUM, 28 April 1979

The story of a celebrity couple? Not Quite! Tsietsi went into exile in August of 1976 and died a month before he was due to return home in 1990 of mysterious causes.

Tsietsi in his Own Words

The White man has got to learn that whichever way he goes, the direction is downhill – until he decides to turn away from his evil ways. The students do not want what is happening and what they do not want they will get rid of.

Students today want to be recognised as human beings because we know that if we don't do what we think is right for us now, our children will suffer the same way we are suffering.

We do not want to always demonstrate against the White man. We want to sit down and learn, and we want to learn the correct things – not the Bantu education that is being fed to us.

Whatever is right for the white child, is right for us.

The things that are being given to our people because of the colour of our skin, is unacceptable to us. And if this Government does not do something about it, our people will do something about it.

Tsietsi Mashinini in an interview with Mr Percy Qoboza, The World Newspaper, 10 August 1976



Tsietsi Mashinini Memorial opposite Morris Isaacson High School, Mputhi Street, Central Western Jabavu, Soweto Sunday Times

What style score would you give Tsietsi? (Remember it's the 1970s!)

How would you have felt if you were a National Party Minister seeing this photograph in the newspaper in 1976?

Now read the different ideas that the people in his life had about Tsietsi:

- A. His comrade from the 1970s
- B. His mother interviewed in the 1970s
- C. One of the teachers who taught him in the 1970s

A. Sowetan, Thursday 9th 1990

Tsietsi Mashinini, who led the 1976 student campaign, will be buried in Soweto this weekend. Khotso Seathlolo, his right-hand man and successor as leader of the Soweto Students Representative Council, wrote this tribute:

'Debate and argue – Oh, in those days students enjoyed the process. And it is precisely this that brought you, Donald, Sydney and myself together. Do you remember when our school, Naledi High, was holding a debate against yours, Morris Isaacson in 1975? Mshana, you guys had powerful speakers...

By God, did I say what you did at Orlando West on June 16? To me when you took the platform and told us to disperse for later planning and reorganisation – that was the best, shortest, simplest, purposeful and easy to understand speech. It gave all of us a proper direction.'

B. Tsietsi's Mother in DRUM, 28 April 1979

She explained that she is not interested in politics and that her son is responsible for whatever he has done or does. She is unhappy that her whole pattern of life has been changed and disrupted. 'I never had anything to do with the student movement. I never even knew if Tsietsi was involved. He was just like the boy next door,' she said.

C. Teacher's Statement from Truth and Reconciliation Commission

'One day the police came to the gate and as I saw them approach the gate. I locked the gate, and there was a serious confrontation between them and the students which was short of shooting. And what scared me the most was that as I was having an altercation with the police, telling them that they will not enter the gate, I saw Tsietsi pass between me and the police wearing a balaclava and an overall and he was singing very casually, pushing a wheelbarrow like one of the people who were busy building the laboratory in the school. And he announced that it was teatime and he had to go and have tea in the township. He went through a hole in the fence and off he went!'

TRC Hearings on Human Rights Violations: Soweto. Testimony of Mr Fanyana Mazibuko, 22 July 1996. Transcript of hearings available from: <http://www.Doj.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/Soweto/mazibuko.htm>

Learner Activities

- What do you think Tsietsi's friends said about him in 1976?
- Was his mother disappointed in him for the role he played in the 1976 Soweto Uprising? Support your answer.
- What do you think the teacher might have written on Tsietsi's report at the end of the third term in 1976?
- What do you think he was like?

Other Ideas

Here is a Song about Tsietsi:

*Tsietise le Vorster
Ba ngola teste
Vorster ke setlaela
Tsietsi o phasile*

Translation: Vorster was the prime minister at the time of the 1976 Uprising – he failed the test, whereas Tsietsi passed it.

Ask the learners to try and find more songs about Tsietsi or other historical figures that were popular amongst the school kids in the 1976 era and thereafter.



Virginia Mashinini, Tsietsi's mother
DRUM, 28 April 1979

Assessment Criteria

- Learners can identify different points of views about Tsietsi
- Learners can reflect on how different people may view them

Curriculum Link - Grades 10 & 11

LO 1: AS 4
LO 2: AS 2
Grade 11 Content link – nature of resistance to apartheid theme and public representation of 1976 history in South Africa.

