



Phakamile Mabija.

### SAHO Biography

Name: Phakamile Mabija

Date of Birth: unknown

Date of Death: July 7, 1977

In summary: Phakamile Mabija was a teacher at Zingisa, a youth worker for the Anglican Diocese of Kimberley, and anti-apartheid activist in Kimberley before being unjustly detained by police under the Riotous Assemblies Act, and ultimately killed in detention in 1977.

Phakamile Mabija was a teacher at Zingisa and a youth worker for the Anglican Diocese of Kimberley. He was involved in anti-apartheid protests in Kimberley in 1977 before being unjustly detained by police under the [Riotous Assemblies Act](#) and ultimately killed in detention. He not only represents the anti-apartheid movement as a whole, but also all Africans who were murdered in detention yet wrongly recorded as suicidal in many historical documents. The inaccuracy in these recordings leaves friends and families without closure, and it dehumanizes these activists and negates so much of what they contributed to the eventual relief from the apartheid. Although the inhumanity of their treatment can never be taken back, and the pain that was caused to the country of South Africa will never be forgotten, by recognizing the true stories of these anti-apartheid heroes we can begin to bring justice and reconciliation to a group of people who still face the aftermath of oppression today.

Phakamile Mabija was a teacher, enthusiast for education, loving brother, son, and friend, and a brave man who stood up and rejected apartheid in the face of persecution. Mabija was also incredibly well-respected in the community. He has been described as a “forceful yet gentle and

non-violent man,” and he was passionate about creating change in the political system of South Africa.<sup>1</sup> His inclination was not towards violence, but towards peace, and his intentions were focused on justice for the oppressed. He was not only a teacher at Zingisa, but he was a member of the Anglican Church’s NOMAD team, which is “a team of young people doing diocesan youth work.”<sup>2</sup> He was also a National Youth Leadership Training Program delegate, and he was a youth worker for the Anglican Diocese of Kimberley. His commitment to his community, family, and young South Africans was commendable and was very well respected by his peers. Discussing her brother, Phakamile Mabija’s sister, Sylvia, stated that he was:

*“a very good child and he hated everything that was wrong. He was a person who was involved with the scouts and church activities and he was involved in everything...he was a person who was a visionary who channeled all his energies to accomplish the best of things. He wanted success...”*<sup>3</sup>

Shirley Mabija was not sure if he was politically involved with any organisations:

*“I don’t know about politics, I really don’t know I’ll be telling lies. I don’t know if he was in politics I don’t whether was it a PAC or an ANC I don’t know I thing. I only know him as an ordinary child- a good child- who listened to his parents- an even though he was young I used to listen to what he was telling me-I took him as an adult although I was older than him.”*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reiner Holst. "Death of Phakamile Mabija." *Reality* 9, no. 4. (September 1977): 19.

<sup>2</sup> Reiner Holst. "Death of Phakamile Mabija." *Reality* 9, no. 4. (September 1977): 19.

<sup>3</sup> Testimony by Sylvia Mabija, Shirley Mabija, and Henrietta Manzana. Truth and Reconciliation Commission [www.Justice.gov.za](http://www.Justice.gov.za).

<sup>4</sup> Testimony by Sylvia Mabija, Shirley Mabija, and Henrietta Manzana, Truth and Reconciliation Commission. [www.Justice.gov.za](http://www.Justice.gov.za)

Shirley also speaks to how she and others knew him: “as a teacher he was an elder at the Catholic Church. He was a Scouts Commissioner. He was everything and he was a good boy. He was helping the orphan children within the family...he used to buy uniform and open up accounts for them and buy for everybody-he had a good heart.”<sup>5</sup> Considering this allows us to see him not as the state did, as a reckless rule-breaker, but as a human being who had good intentions in his protest against the oppressive government that he and his family were facing.

Life under apartheid for all people of colour was incredibly difficult and filled with oppression. Police officers constantly looked for any excuse to “enact law” upon Africans, even if it was for the most insignificant thing. For example, [pass laws](#) made it unnecessarily difficult for people of color to travel in and out of cities and to find work. Apartheid required that Black people typically lived incredibly far from places where job opportunities were available, and usually these jobs were only found in white communities. If Black people wanted to be able to go and take advantage of these jobs legally, they had to make sure to carry a pass with them confirming their employment at all times, so that if they were stopped by an officer in the city he could not legally arrest them.<sup>6</sup> This was inconvenient, unfair, and used by authorities to keep track of Black citizens; it served to make South Africans angry and that much more willing to fight for their freedom. Ultimately, these type of prejudicial laws were what sparked protests and backlash against the government and lead to the eventual downfall of apartheid rule.

On June 16, 1976, which was one year before Mabija’s detention and eventual death, the “[Soweto Uprising](#)”<sup>7</sup> occurred. A group of students were peacefully protesting in Soweto, when police reacted with violence to students publicly resist the apartheid government. South Africans

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<sup>5</sup> "TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION." Testimony by Sylvia Mabija, Shirley Mabija, and Henrietta Manzana. Justice.gov.

<sup>6</sup> "Pass laws in South Africa 1800-1994." South African History Online. November 17, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> "The June 16 Soweto Youth Uprising." South African History Online. June 13, 2017.

shot at the unarmed, peaceful crowd and caused one of the deadliest, most violent acts of terror in South African history. The death toll was reported as 168 Black deaths and 2 White deaths, when in reality it was likely that the number was upwards of 1000 African deaths, plus hundreds more who were injured in the attack.<sup>8</sup> None of the officers were prosecuted in any way. It was moments of incredibly obvious evil and oppression like this, combined with humiliating, unnecessary acts of oppression, such as the passbooks, that ignited a passion for freedom and justice within people like Phakamile Mabija.

The Soweto Uprising of 1976 was the final straw for Phakamile Mabija who was incredibly involved in advocating for the youths in his community. His passion for education and fostering a fruitful environment for his students drove him to fight back against the injustice that was seen not only in Soweto, but all over South Africa. On 27 June, 1977, Mabija participated in a bus boycott in Galeshewe, Kimberley that involved throwing stones at public transportation in the Vergenoeg Township. This ultimately led to his arrest and detention by the police.<sup>9</sup> Civil disobedience was one of the tactics that was used to peacefully and publicly reject apartheid laws. Violence was hardly ever the goal for any South African, but eventually peacefully breaking the law became a common tactic that was used to take a stand. On this particular occasion, the South African Police arrested Mabija for participating under the Riotous Assemblies Act of 1956. The Riotous Assemblies Act prohibited “any outside gathering that the minister of justice saw as a threat to public peace.”<sup>10</sup> This is an incredibly broad description that allowed the minister of justice to use his own subjective discretion when deciding what was or was not allowed in regards to public protesting and public gathering. Many Africans were

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<sup>8</sup> Davis, Jennifer. "SOWETO 1976 - The Struggle Against Apartheid.": 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> Steve Lunderstedt. "7 July, Today in Kimberley's History - Phakamile Mabija." Kimberley City Info. September 10, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> "The Riotous Assemblies Act Commences." South African History Online. March 13, 2015.

detained under this law after it was “presumably passed in response to the Congress of the People, which was held at Kliptown near Johannesburg in June 1955.”<sup>11</sup> The Riotous Assemblies Act did not just have the power to arrest public displays of apartheid defiance, but it also “allowed the government to ban any newspaper or any other “documentary information” that would cause hostility between Black and White people, but also punished actions that could bring the two racial groups together.”<sup>12</sup> This meant that it made it legal for government officials to get rid of any written published work, whether that be a magazine or newspaper, that could create racial tension. This demonstrates the manipulation of the white, elite, government officials and their desire to not only keep races separated, but to keep races unequal as well.

After his arrest, Phakamile Mabija was killed on July 7, 1977—the day before his court hearing was scheduled to take place.<sup>13</sup> He was murdered by the South African Police, essentially being labelled as a threat to public peace. His death was reported as a suicide, but evidence suggests otherwise. A fact that points to this conclusion is that family members reported that after his detention, Mabija, accompanied by police, was brought home very briefly to grab some belongings, and he had clearly been brutally beaten. Describing the last time she saw Phakamile, Shirley Mabija stated:

*“two policemen...came inside the house with Phaki... Phaki came and having the looks of being beaten up and he didn't have his spectacles on, and he didn't have his belt on his*

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<sup>11</sup> O'Malley, Pdraig. "The O'Malley Archives." 1956. Riotous Assemblies [Amendment?] Act No 17 - The O'Malley Archives.

<sup>12</sup> "The Riotous Assemblies Act Commences." South African History Online. March 13, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Steve Lunderstedt. "7 July, Today in Kimberley's History - Phakamile Mabija." Kimberley City Info. September 10, 2015.

*pants as well...after that they left with him and that was the last time I saw Phaki  
alive.”<sup>14</sup>*

Clearly this shows that the South African police had been beating Phakamile while he was being held before his trial, which makes it much more logical that the South African police also caused his death. It was not uncommon for anti-apartheid deaths to be labelled as suicides because police often framed the South African anti-apartheid activists as impulsive, violent, and uneducated in order to make their deaths appear insignificant on a global scale. To friends and family who knew the real people behind these “suicides” their deaths were a symbol of serious oppression and dishonesty in the South African government. As reports of these acts of suicide became more common, other countries began taking notice and recognizing the inhumanity of the white, ruling elites in South Africa. Mabija was one of many men who died, unjustly, in detention under the South African Police.

Mabija was a prominent figure in his community, so the news of his death sparked a deeper passion in South Africans to expose apartheid and gain justice for the deaths of those who were killed in detention. In an article entitled “Death of Phakamile Mabija,” written by Reiner Holst in 1977, we see the author subtly reject the idea that Mabija committed suicide and use his platform to denounce the actions of the South African Police. The article begins by stating what was reported by the government, which was that Mabija’s death occurred, by suicide, when he jumped out of the sixth story window at the Transvaal Road Police Station. Although the article never completely denies the idea that his death was suicide, likely to avoid persecution, it hints that this is inaccurate. The last paragraph even states:

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<sup>14</sup> Testimony by Sylvia Mabija, Shirley Mabija, and Henrietta Manzana. Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. [www.Justice.gov.za](http://www.Justice.gov.za)

*“We would be grateful if you could give this statement and the background thereto maximum publicity in your newspaper. If Christians and the public in general may, through this, become more fully aware of the evil of detention and if this awareness will lead to some meaningful action against this evil, then perhaps Phakamile’s death has not been totally pointless.”<sup>15</sup>*

Finding information on the lives of men who died in detention is incredibly difficult due to the strong censorship of the South African government, so this article is incredibly critical in understanding the leadership and respect that Mabija had gained in his community. The reader is able to look into the pain that his death caused people and their desire for the justice that he never was able to acquire for himself. James Matthews wrote a poem regarding these “suicides” that took place in detention that conveys the common understanding about deaths in detention among the Black public: “a slip on a stair/a flight through the air/these are the ways/they say we take/now, they found you a hanging/a hanging in your cell/another one who went that way/that’s what they say/but we know better...”<sup>16</sup> This poem eloquently calls out the way that the White officials said Africans committed suicide in detention.

After the end of apartheid, the Mabija family testified at the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#), hoping to learn more about his unjust death. The acts of protest against apartheid that Phakamile Mabija, among others, contributed to the eventual change in government in South Africa. Although his death was tragic, untimely, and unjust, he will go down in history as someone who fought to make a difference in his own country. In fact, his sister stated that “*He would say ‘I want a plan to succeed and when it succeeds it should benefit all.’ He always wanted his dreams to come true and be successful. Everything about him was so amazing*

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<sup>15</sup> Reiner Holst. "Death of Phakamile Mabija." *Reality* 9, no. 4. (September 1977): 19.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Irish Paul, and James Matthews. "Death in Detention in South Africa." *The Africa Fund*, 1977.

*because he was such a great person. And about the fact that he killed himself- that is not true- there is no such a thing like that.*"<sup>17</sup> Although Mabija and his family may never receive justice for the cruel treatment that they faced under the apartheid government, recognizing the courageous acts that Mabija took and making the true cause of his death known can at least create global awareness and sympathy.

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<sup>17</sup> "TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION." Testimony by Sylvia Mabija, Shirley and Henrietta Manzana. Justice.gov.

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