



*The Office Of The Principal and Vice - Chancellor*

## **REFLECTIONS ON 30 YEARS SINCE THE DEATH OF STEVE BIKO: A LEGACY REVISITED<sup>1</sup>**

N Barney Pityana, GCOB  
Principal and Vice Chancellor: University of South Africa

Stephen Bantu Biko was an ordinary young man of his time. Nothing could have distinguished him, his family circumstances and environment from any other young man growing up in a small township in a small Eastern Cape town. Not even his death, in some respects was extraordinary. After all, it was not unusual for political activists to die in detention. He was in fact the 42<sup>nd</sup> person to die while detained by the South African Security Police, the Special Branch. Almost all who died were young. Steve's comrades in the Black Consciousness Movement were also beginning to die either in detention as well, or in suspicious circumstances. Mapetla Mohapi, a young social worker and community activist, who died in detention, comes to mind, as does Mthuli ka Shezi, assassinated by being pushed in front of an oncoming train at Germiston Station. Onkgopotse Abraham Tiro died in exile, as a result of a parcel bomb. The manner of his death was not extraordinary either, shocking as it was. He would not have been surprised.

Steve Biko was an ordinary young man who lived in ordinary times but who made something extraordinary out of his life, not out of his own will, but by the machinations of an evil system. He touched the lives of young men and women of his generation and he was part of an abiding movement capable of changing the social and political face of our country. In other ways he gave birth to a society that could shape its own future.

I am one of those then young people of Biko's generation who was touched in extraordinary ways by his life and presence. For me it began when we shared a desk in class IVa at

---

<sup>1</sup> The 2007 Steve Biko Lecture to mark 30 years of the death of Black Consciousness leader Stephen Bantu Biko, delivered in the Senate Hall, Unisa, Wednesday 12 September 2007. This lecture was first given at the Winter School of the Grahamstown Arts Festival, Eastern Cape, 3 July 2007.

Lovedale in 1963; it continued when as university students we found ourselves at an ASF Conference at Michaelhouse, Natal, and later during a very long evening of conversations following a NUSAS Conference at Rhodes University Grahamstown. It grew through an extraordinary three years when he invited me to live with him in Durban and I ended up sharing his room illegally at the Allan Taylor Residence of the University of Natal Medical School (UNB). Together with our two families we then shared a house in Umlazi, Durban. We travelled together distances across the length and breadth of this country, sharing long conversations, good times and bad, and a host of dear friends and comrades.

The last time I had any contact with him, though, was when, on 15 August 1977 we had a long telephone conversation on his domestic situation, in contravention of the banning orders to which we had been subjected. Later that afternoon the security police came and took me into detention at Baakens Street Police Station. On the Sunday, Major Fisher called in to tell me, with alacrity, that they had also detained Steve. I heard no more. I never saw the police again. But a few days after Steve died, circumstances in my cell changed. The coloured policeman who was on duty at the police station disappeared. A young white police constable appeared. He was truly shocked to see me in prison. "Meneer prokureur", he said, "wat soek jy hierso? Hulle het mos my gesê daar is a baie gevaarlike terroris hierso." Upon seeing me he could not believe it. Unbeknown to me, he had been suddenly transferred from his duties as a court orderly in the Magistrate's Court in Port Elizabeth, the New Law Courts, where I used to appear as an articulated clerk with a right of appearance. He was a kind young man. He allowed me to have a shower, exercise out of the cell and, a privilege, let me read his morning newspaper - although by this time he was not keen to let me read. I managed to read a report on a statement by Jimmy Kruger on the death of Steve Biko, the infamous "Biko's death leaves me cold." Then I knew what my young policeman friend wanted to hide. That, it seemed, like it was the end.

But many South Africans of my generation could tell similar stories. My comrades in the Movement could tell their own stories. They could speak of a sense of loss and devastation, of anger, of the unleashing of resistance and the rededication that came with the murder of Steve. They could tell of the personal pain they felt at the loss of a dear friend, comrade and leader. They could also share a sense of fear, and for some of us guilt, that he died and we continued to live. For some there may have been some despair and hopelessness, that with Steve's death all was lost, and the exodus towards exile and the armed struggle turned into a flood. I remained in detention until August 1978- section 6 of the Terrorism Act, and another spell in preventive detention.

I have said that Steve's life was ordinary and that in the circumstances of his day, not even his death could be said to have been extraordinary. But what was germane to Steve's story is that he touched the lives of many people of his generation, black and white. Among them,

was the then editor of the East London Daily Dispatch, Donald Woods and at another end, Fr Aelred Stubbs, CR. They were dear friends and they had the power of influence. They could not prevent his death but they could tell the world who he was. They wrote their stories about how Steve Biko changed their lives. The world listened, and Steve became no longer the ordinary friend and comrade. He became a representative figure of the new generation of political activist and would-be revolutionaries that we fancied ourselves to be. But this is not a biography, not about Steve or about Barney Pitso. This address is a personal reflection on the 30 years that have passed since Steve was murdered. From a perspective of today's South Africa, I wish to make an analytical statement about the meaning and relevance of the life and times of Steve Biko, and its impact on contemporary South Africa.

## II

Recently I received by e-mail a copy of my paper *Black Consciousness and Black Theology* from Dr Ben Khumalo, a South African theologian now based in Germany. I gathered from the e-mail that Dr Khumalo had found it fit to distribute the paper to a number of people across the globe, in commemoration of Steve Biko. The paper was published in a book of essays on *BLACK THEOLOGY* edited by Prof Mokgethi Motlhabi now on the staff of our College of Human Sciences. Reading this paper again at the behest of Dr Khumalo I was reminded how ideas flowed and developed during the Black Consciousness era. I wish to introduce this substantive part of this paper with a brief reflection on the Black Consciousness method. Steve Biko has come to be known as the "Father of Black Consciousness". While that is true, it needs however, to be put in context.

It is important to point out that Black Consciousness drew much from the method and pedagogy of the Latin American grassroots development movement. The Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire and his seminal work *A Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was an early influence. Social analysis leading to reflection and action were critical tools of engagement. I am reminded that the way black consciousness evolved was through many, and long hours of interaction and debate among friends at the Alan Taylor Residence. Steve Biko was a central participant; he listened and challenged ideas as they emerged, concretised them, and brought them back for further development. This was a small group of men and women who were medical students, but joined regularly by some of us from other universities, especially at weekends. In such an environment it is hard to say who the originator of the ideas could be. All ultimately owned and identified with the expression of the collective idea. What I do know though, is that it was Steve who translated that common idea into essays that went into his columns as Frank Talk: *I Write What I Like*, and as memoranda to the SRCs and SASO Local Branches. It was Steve ultimately who concretised and articulated the ideas. He captured the common mind.

In order to undertake such an experiment it is important to assert that this group of black consciousness activists were avid readers. I was introduced through their circle to the works of Paulo Freire, Amilcar Cabral, Franz Fanon, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr, and indeed, African literary giants like Chinua Achebe, James N'gugi (as he was then known). There was in that group a culture of reading and of intellectual engagement. Debate was always rigorous, and maybe even opinionated. So there was never any question of uninformed debate or ideas that could not be justified.

With such critical insights therefore, it was possible to subject the social and political reality of South Africa at the time to critical scrutiny. The starting point and the perspective was on the oppressed, the marginalised; those who sought after and yearned for freedom. It was observed that at the time liberatory politics were in danger of suffocating from the vice-grip of two social forces. While black consciousness was conscious of and acknowledged the proud history and traditions of liberation struggles, they had to contend with the fact that visible and vocal activism had gone underground, with many in exile and more still in jails. The dominant condition was one of pathological fear because the security system was repressive and ruthless.

First, was the relentless attack from the system with its onslaught of Bantustanism. It was observed that in an environment where the authentic voice of the people was not heard many Bantustan quislings had appropriated the rhetoric of freedom. They presented the Bantustans as a step towards freedom and as a legitimate response to the cry of the people. What was alarming was not only that this nonsense was becoming accepted as some joined the system - ostensibly in order to subvert it, but also that the media of that day especially, was acquiescent and touted these Bantustan leaders as representative of the people. It was necessary to address that.

Second there was the "liberal" onslaught. Various bodies and institutions led by whites who were opposed to the policies of the apartheid regime, were assumed to be speaking for the black people. It was important to denounce any idea that they could be speaking for us. For one thing there was an effective accommodation of the prevailing white dominant ethos and hegemony, which needed to be exposed and set apart from the liberatory ethos we sought to affirm. The trouble with this was that there seemed to be the setting in of the idea that black people need not do anything by themselves, but that white people and institutions could be the defenders of black interests. There was a real concern that black people were abdicating responsibility for their own liberation and entrusting it to those who had no interest in the liberation of black people.

Social and political analysis was a necessary starting point to reflection and action. Much of Steve's writing therefore, addressed these three themes: fear, Bantustans and liberals. It was

important to do so in order to create a conceptual space that would free black people for creativity, and to take responsibility for their own liberation.

Steve Biko's discourse on fear was in fact addressed to the black community. It was an internal conversation. It began with an analysis of the history of white people's dealings with black people, which was always based on instilling as much fear as possible in order to dominate, suppress and conquer. Fear had even more devastating consequences. It was demeaning of the dignity of black people and negated their humanity. Fear, therefore, had to be resisted because to do so was an assertion of one's humanity. Resistance therefore was the most humanising response to oppression.

The white liberal establishment, including white opposition parties in the apartheid parliament, the media, and institutions like the SAIRR, as well as NUSAS could not be entrusted with the task of liberation. They too were part of the movement that imprisoned the mind of the black people and created false hopes about what they might accomplish while at the same time participating in and enjoying the fruits of an evil system. Their vision of South Africa was based on exploitative values, and the integration they espoused would entrench inequalities. There was also a connivance between all these forces: the apartheid regime and their Bantustan collaborators, and the liberal establishment, all had one thing in common: they applied and derived comfort and sustenance from a system of racial oppression, then they dared to believe that self-respecting black people would wish to be co-opted to their grand design, and finally to have their response to the condition of oppression programmed. That had to be rejected.

This analysis then set the scene for a presentation of black consciousness as a response to the social and political condition that was seen as a dead-end. The idea was to transform politics out of the danger of acquiescence, and position the voice of liberation as abiding – a voice that could not be silenced. That required courage, but also clear thought and ideas. Black consciousness therefore, as an ideology, was meant to lift black people out of despair and instil in them hope about a future that was in their own hands. Millard Arnold was right in observing that "Biko's lasting legacy was that he had an uncomplicated vision; an intrinsic appreciation of the essence of the struggle confronting black people" (2007: xii).

There is a sense in which there is nothing original about black consciousness. There is in its articulation an amalgam of ideas from the black power and civil rights movements in the United States; there is a thread that runs from the early nationalist movements in Africa, the Ethiopian Movement to the early ANC; there is much that draws on the influence of negritude of Senghor and others, and the Pan African Movement. The essence of it though, is that it was not to become merely a set of ideas but "a way of life" as the SASO Manifesto so eloquently put it. It was a call first and foremost to the black society to take responsibility for

their liberation, to free the human spirit and claim back their nature as free humanity. Secondly, it was giving notice to all who undermined the humanity of black people that the condition of subjugation was not one which God had ever decreed, and that black people were ready to claim their freedom and their inherent humanity and that they would do so on their own terms.

I now wish to highlight three instruments that were intrinsic to this liberation ethic. One, a new and critical understanding of culture. Culture needed to be liberated from what Biko referred to as the “arrested” image of culture that lacked vibrancy and dynamism. His idea, however, was that culture was a necessary ingredient towards humanising black people, towards claiming back their instruments of humanity. Of course, it was recognised that the same culture had been used as an instrument of subjugation, set in a tight box as backward and uncivilised. Inasmuch as the history of all subjugated peoples was a history of conquest, black people needed to be authors of their own histories, to make history while they lived it. Culture was an important determinant of consciousness, but African culture had to be subjected to critique which would include the discovery of authentic culture, draw from the elements of African culture of communalism and solidarity, and engender an understanding of human nature, of creativity and the arts, of wisdom and insight. All this suggests that there is nothing about African culture to be ashamed of, but that culture could be an instrument of liberation. There are echoes of Amilcar Cabral, of Franz Fanon in Biko’s discourse on culture. In a profile on Cabral the point is made that

Culture has to take its place at the heart of the struggle for liberation. It is not enough to talk about raising consciousness, what is important is the type of future we envisage, the kind of social relations we plan to set up and how we prepare for the future of humanity.

Fanon, for his part states it bluntly, “it is this that counts, everything else is mystification. It is around the people’s struggles that culture takes on substance, not around songs, poems or folklore.” I raise this point here because there has been criticism of black consciousness and Steve Biko as if there ever was an idea that black consciousness had no liberatory action or revolutionary force.

The second area of focus was religion. Although Biko himself was not consciously “religious” - especially he played no part in institutional religion and the church - he was deeply conscious of the role religion could play in social upliftment, in asserting a common humanity as well as human solidarity. He was equally conscious that the church through the missionary movement had brought mixed fortunes to Africa, a liberating gospel and an ideology and practice of acquiescence. He therefore took his place among the radicals and the non-conformists who held that the gospel had to be liberated from the clutches of the politics of the missionary establishment. African traditional religions were therefore a significant pointer of a people’s quest for authentic self expression, and the church had an abiding value to large

numbers of black people who continued to find meaning and value in the church. His approach therefore was not to denounce the church or embrace atheism but to liberate religion and theology as well. That is how it came about that black consciousness found common cause with the UCM, and established the Black Theology Project, and worked very closely in advocacy work with the black churches and with theological colleges.

The third area was social development. Black consciousness as a strategy for liberation built its philosophy on the idea that the black oppressed shared common values and common aspirations. The ethic of black solidarity was critical for black consciousness. It was therefore important that students as the intelligentsia of their society, must remain connected to their social and cultural roots. SASO pioneered the programme for engagement of students in the development of communities. By so doing they not only participated in community upliftment, but they also took time to understand the communities, listen to the people, hear their stories and their struggles for life, and work with them towards solutions. The community development projects began with literacy training using the Paulo Freirean psycho-social method of pedagogy. Students later ran clinics and were soon building schools and community centres. From the work of their hands, and the application of their knowledge and learning from the elders, students were not only able to fill up gaps in their knowledge and history but they were conscientised as well. His rallying cry to members of SASO was straightforward:

We have a responsibility not only to ourselves but also to the society from which we spring. No one else will take up the challenge until we, of our own accord, accept the inevitable fact that ultimately the leadership of the non-white people in this country lies with us.

Of course, this idea was never original to Steve. It has been the means by which a liberatory ethic could afford to build its system on the basis of contending social forces. The idea was that through their common interest such forces could be fused, and the tendency towards elitism by the intellectual and bourgeois class neutralised by committing them to integrating their life and praxis to the communities they served. That was what Amilcar Cabral practiced in Guinea Bissau and Paulo Freire advanced in Brazil. Charles Peterson (2001:26) represents Cabral's thought in this way:

The elite reunion with mass popular struggle and culture disproves the lie of colonial invincibility and superiority by showing how colonial subjects can move beyond foreign domination. For the elite class, the class most immersed in colonial ideology and culture, moving beyond the shadow of colonial influence demonstrates the possibility of a new nation rising out of the ashes of a dominated past. With an eye on the future the re-born elite, by becoming one with the mass population, suggests and

actively works towards a new democratic nation that attempts to deliver on the party's national liberatory promises.<sup>2</sup>

The reference to "non-white" was made in 1969. The formulations of blackness, non-white and solidarity had not become set. In later times he would never have referred to blacks as non-white, but only to those who betray the destiny of black people and their liberation.

### III

Black consciousness never attempted in any systematic sense to formulate a manifesto for a new South Africa: in part because black consciousness, certainly during the time of Steve Biko, never envisaged itself as an alternative liberation force, but also in part because it was justly preoccupied with the middle passage, the strategies necessary to bring about the revolution of the mind that leads to action. I can assert that in its early formulations black consciousness had no desire to substitute the traditional liberation organisations, neither did it see itself as formulating an alternative ideology. Its primary thrust was that in the circumstances of its time, the disunity of the black people was a luxury that we could not afford. That explains why someone like me could be a loyal cadre of the movement even though I had a strong pedigree in the ANC Youth League. Indeed, at the time of BC I was regularly in touch with the underground at various levels. I made sure that what BC was about was well communicated and understood. It was therefore not about engaging loyalties from different movements, but about seeking ways of transcending such divisions by articulating a meta-narrative of liberation that was unifying rather than particularising.

And yet Steve Biko never hesitated in advancing his own vision of a new South Africa. That vision was never detailed. It was not a Freedom Charter, it was not a ten-point programme. These were ideas Steve formulated in response mainly, to interviews he was subjected to largely by outsiders curious about a future South Africa. It therefore emerges that he espoused a vision of a common humanity and the affirmation of a society founded on justice, without any privileges or considerations for minorities. He recognised that South Africa ruled by majority would be black and nationalist in orientation and political practice. He had no language of socialism and as such never critiqued to any substantive extent the socialist ideology, save to say that he harboured intellectual suspicions about socialist ideologies and practice.

Steve Biko's essay *Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity* is by common consensus considered to be the best statement he could have made of a vision for a new society. This comes not just from discursive reasoning but draws from a critique of society as it was organised. He then elaborates a vision of the people of South Africa ultimately sitting

---

<sup>2</sup> West African Review (2001): *returning to the African Core: Cabral and the Erasure of the Colonized Elite*.

down together around a tabula rasa to formulate a truly new society based on the common value we all share together as common humanity. Somehow through this essay we begin to get an insight into Steve Biko as a visionary and as someone with a truly humane heart. "We have set out", he says, "on a quest for true humanity, and somewhere on the distant horizon, we can see the glittering prize."

#### IV

I must now come round to reflecting on what all this might mean for a new South Africa. What strikes me first and foremost is how much society needs both intellectuals and heroes. It is correct that this society should honour its heroes and heroines and celebrate its intellectuals. Heroes are never those who set themselves up as such, or who go about their business in the expectation of being hero-worshipped. Likewise intellectuals are not those who draw attention to themselves, but to ideas, their currency and to the critique of society. For both their currency is truth: to stand by the truth, to articulate reality as truthfully as they understand it without calculation of personal benefit. Perhaps what we need even more in our current climate is a good dose of idealism. We need that capacity to think ahead and above the din of the madding crowd. Idealism comes from the knowledge that current circumstances need never be the final word and that we can visualise a better future. Without idealism, however, we can hardly find solutions to contemporary challenges, and shape our future. I believe that Steve Biko did all three things for our country. He was enormously prescient in his utterances, and he clearly envisioned the kind of future South Africa is struggling to establish today. What is most refreshing about Steve's writings, looked at today, is their bluntness and matter-of-factness. He does not seem to calculate a particular way of courting acceptance. Reading Steve today one is amazed at how much of a truly "free" spirit he was. If one considers that he was writing at a time of repression, his courage shines through. No wonder the young people of his generation were rapt, in awe, and cultivated their own sense of imagination. Steve Biko in that sense has lessons for the young leaders of our day.

I believe that today, this should call us to a renewed connectedness to the values that sustained and entrenched the liberation struggles against all odds; in particular, to the abiding humanity, *Ubuntu*, that drove all aspects of the struggle. Today, it would mean I believe, that we would address poverty with vigour, and that we would place human development at the centre of our national development strategy. We would by now, the second decade of our liberation, be advancing more strongly on all the development indices like housing, health care, primary education and basic literacy - much like what the Heads of State committed themselves to at the Millennium Summit in 2000: the Millennium Development Goals. In truth crime and corruption devalue whatever values we stood for during the liberation struggle. They are founded on selfishness, jealousy and cold, inhuman violence. Crime and corruption inveigh against our common humanity and dignity. We are a society devoid of any regard for

human life and cynical in our regard for the rights of others. I believe that the same can be said about racism and ethnicity. A society which by common consent was founded on racism cannot but be riddled with the cancer of racism. Determined steps must continue to be taken to analyse all forms of racism, undertake corrective measures, set systems in place to entrench equality and punish all traces of racist conduct and behaviour. Social cohesion remains a major deficit of our society today. We are as divided as ever along the lines of race, gender and poverty/wealth divides. Social cohesion must remain an overriding goal of our society at all levels.

Finally, Steve Biko continues to point us towards a vision of leadership that is as visionary and sacrificial as it is transformational. His relationship with colleagues and comrades was truly collegial. A larger than life figure he was always at one with those from whom he sourced ideas and his thinking. Steve was always able to discern the strengths and weaknesses of his teams and often guided colleagues according to their gifts. Because of his affirming nature Biko virtually lived with many of us like brothers and sisters. He was deeply concerned about our well-being and shared with those in need. We cannot tell what kind of leader Steve might have turned out to be in the new South Africa. What is undeniable is that he nurtured a band of comrades, confident and articulate, who lived in dangerous times without fear. Steve Biko is a true model of his generation.

Pretoria, 12 September 2007.