

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AS A CULTURAL AND POLITICAL MOVEMENT (1967-2007)

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1 INTRODUCTION

The terms used to define the topic I have to address are significant. I gathered from the terminology that I am not required to speak about the organisational manifestations of Black Consciousness (BC), but rather of black consciousness as a cultural and political *movement*. Roger Scruton's *Dictionary of political thought* says the following about the term 'movement':

Movements should be distinguished from parties, institutions and associations, in that they come into existence without any need for formal organization or for a clearly defined common strategy and have a history and causality that are distinct from the history and causality of any institutions that are associated with them (Scruton 1996:361).

Scruton appears to be telling us what a movement is *not* rather than what it is. That approach is not altogether unhelpful, in any event not in the context of BC. As I understand them, adherents of BC have always clearly made that distinction themselves, albeit occasionally for polemical reasons. But among BC adherents the view has persisted for a long while now that the BC movement is wider than any concrete organisation that might for the time being present itself as the flagship of the philosophy or ideology.

Thus it was accepted that there could be an overtly political organisation in the BC mould and a number of organisations in other spheres of society also espousing black consciousness. It was accepted, too, that there could be any number of individuals who espouse black consciousness without ever affiliating themselves to any of its organisational manifestations. All these organisations together, as well as such unaffiliated individuals as one could find, were thought to make up the BC movement.

Needless to say, from time to time this view led to complications. Often they arose when opinions differed on what stand to take on some concrete issue from a BC vantage point. A question that sharply highlighted the difficulty in the 1980s was the visit to South Africa by US senator Edward Kennedy, which triggered in important ways a devastating rupture between organisationally affiliated and unaffiliated BC adherents.

Interesting as the problems and prospects raised by this approach to political and even cultural questions may be, they fall outside the scope of this article. It should merely be noted that the notion of 'movement' had another application in South Africa as well. When the term 'liberation movement' was used it generally referred to all those who were collectively involved in the struggle for liberation and was not confined to any particular organisation.

I have said that Scruton provides a helpful point of departure inasmuch as BC adherents appear to have consistently made the distinction he advocates between a movement and a party or institution. For the purpose of this paper, however, I am not sure that I always find it helpful. His suggestion that movements "come into existence without any need for formal organization or for a clearly defined common strategy and have a history and causality that are distinct from the history and causality of any institutions that are associated with them" does not, I think, fully apply to the development or evolution of BC in South Africa.

In this paper I try to demonstrate the very opposite. It seems that before there was a movement, there were concrete organisational manifestations of certain thought processes and that these organisations and individuals saw themselves as a movement. It seems, moreover, that insofar as a movement did emerge, it was, at least for a while, intimately intertwined with the organisations and, perhaps, the individuals that constituted it. Finally, the BC movement appears to have resolutely pursued, for some time at least, a clearly defined common strategy and had no history and/or causality different from those of the concrete organisational structures that gave rise to the movement.

This means that one cannot consistently speak about the Black Consciousness Movement as an entity or construct separate from black consciousness organisations in South Africa. Indeed, the two have been so closely interlinked in South Africa that the demise of BC organisational structures necessarily spelled the demise of the BC movement!

2 WHY WAS CULTURE IMPORTANT IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF BC?

Amilcar Cabral thought it a misnomer to equate the rise of liberation struggles in Africa with African cultural renaissance. He took the view that indigenous cultures never died out in the sense that they might need reawakening: quite the contrary, persecuted in the cities, they took refuge in the outlying areas from where they inspired the urban liberation struggles that were mistakenly thought to represent cultural reawakening. Indigenous cultures projected themselves from the periphery back to the metropolis and raised the spectre of what once was, thus buttressing the hope of what might be again. As Cabral put it in the Eduardo Mondlane Memorial Lecture (Syracuse University, 20 February 1970):

The value of culture as an element of resistance to foreign domination lies in the fact that culture is the vigorous manifestation on the ideological or idealist plane of the physical and historical reality of the society that is dominated or to be dominated. Culture is simultaneously the fruit of a people's history and a determinant of history by the positive or negative influence which it exerts on the evolution of relationships between man and his environment, among men or groups of men within a society, as well as among different societies ...

In a paper entitled "National liberation and culture" Cabral (1970b) explains it thus:

The study of the history of national liberation struggles shows that generally these struggles are preceded by an increase in expression of culture, consolidated progressively into a successful or unsuccessful attempt to affirm the cultural personality of the dominated people, as a means of negating the oppressor culture. Whatever may be the conditions of a people's political and social factors in practicing its domination, it is generally within the culture that we find the seed of opposition, which leads to the structuring and development of the liberation movement.

Viewed thus, the liberation struggles, whilst ostensibly orchestrated from metropolitan areas, drew their inspiration, at least initially, from the preservation of indigenous cultures in outlying areas and in some ways sought to make possible in the cities what was already happening in the rural areas, and more.

In outlining the place of culture in the liberation struggle as articulated by Steve Biko aspects of Cabral's argument will become evident – that is, it will become clear that in some important respects BC was, as Cabral might argue, inspired by, and sought to make possible, ways of life which had been persecuted to near extinction in

the cities but were to some extent preserved on the periphery. One could argue, indeed, that this view of the liberation struggle in South Africa was not peculiar to BC but had a much wider application. In his *No easy walk to freedom* Nelson Mandela tells us about some influences on his life which predisposed him to play the role he came to play in the liberation struggle. Arguably one of the most decisive was the discussions he had, in his younger days, with rural elders of his tribe, in which they conveyed to him what colonialism had destroyed and what had to be restored.

Before going into Biko's views it may help to consider Kumbirai Mkanganwi's paper entitled "As my father used to say". He writes:

What is culture? ... Here I can do no better than simply synthesise three definitions of long ago (before scholarship became too complicated ...). The three scholars are Edward Taylor (1871), Ralph Linton (1945) and Clyde Cluckholm (1949), who emphasised different aspects that have been aptly synthesised by Reece McGee (1975) as follows: "Culture is a learned, socially transmitted heritage of artefacts, knowledge, beliefs, values and normative expectations that provide members of a particular society with tools for coping."

This makes two things quite plain to me, namely,

- 1 Everybody has a culture no matter how simple it may be (the simpler the better).
- 2 To the extent that every human being participates in one culture or another, every human being is cultured, which means I am cultured.

This also obviously means that what "My Father Used to Say" means exactly the same thing as "My Culture" ... (Chiwome & Gambahaya 1998:9).

The quotation leads to three considerations, which in my view underpin the importance of culture for black consciousness. The first relates to the beliefs and values held by members of a community and the normative expectations to which they give rise. An exploration of Biko's writings suggests that he was convinced that the belief and value systems of black people were undermined and denigrated by white people. Those belief and value systems, however, survived whatever undermining and denigration they were subjected to and gave rise to normative expectations. In other words, if one held the beliefs and values that Biko articulated, one necessarily had certain expectations about how people should behave towards others, about how they should treat others. It was impossible to hold those beliefs and values and be at peace with oneself when others were treated as less than human.

The second consideration, implicit in the first, is captured in Mkanganwi's assertion that "every human being is cultured, which means I am cultured". The reluctance of white people to acknowledge the cultures of black people - indeed, their abuse of scholarship so as to define black people's lifestyles as uncultured - posed an existential problem that had to be focal in the liberation struggle. From Biko's writings he was clearly concerned that black people should be able to assert, along with Mkanganwi, that "every human being is cultured, which means I am cultured" as a precondition for freedom.

The third consideration is intimately related to the first two. It has to do with the imperative among whites to deny and denigrate black cultures. I have mentioned Cabral already and I do so again. In the Eduardo Mondlane Memorial Lecture (1970a) he said:

History teaches us that, in certain circumstances, it is very easy for the foreigner to impose his domination on a people. But it also teaches us that, whatever the material aspects of this domination, it can be maintained only by the permanent, organized repression of the cultural life of the people concerned. Implantation of foreign domination can be assured definitely only by physical liquidation of a significant part of the dominated population.

In fact, to take up arms to dominate a people is, above all, to take up arms to destroy or at least to neutralize, to paralyse, its cultural life. For, with a strong indigenous cultural life, foreign domination cannot be sure of its perpetuation. At any moment, depending on internal and external factors determining the evolution of the society in question, cultural resistance (indestructible) may take on new forms (political, economic, armed) in order to fully contest foreign domination.

From Biko's writings it is evident that he thought it essential for black people to come to terms with their identity if they were to prosecute the liberation struggle successfully, and that their culture was crucial to their self-knowledge. It suggests that Biko was concerned that black people must see the denial and denigration of their cultures as an integral part of their physical and political oppression.

3 BIKO ON CULTURE AND LIBERATION

I know of only one text that Biko wrote specifically on culture. It is a paper he read at the Inter-denominational Association of African Ministers (of Religion) (IDAMASA) conference in 1971, entitled "Some African cultural concepts". He did, however, comment on culture in a number of papers on other topics, so to learn his views on the subject one has to read his other writings as well. I will outline his views on culture as reflected in the IDAMASA paper, and then attempt to distil his views on culture as they appear in other papers or interviews.

In "Some African cultural concepts" Biko makes the following points:

- 1 Not only are Africans in South Africa supposed to be cultureless: they cannot even speak with authority on what they may consider to be their culture. "Other people have become authorities on all aspects of the African life" (Stubbs 2004:44).
- 2 From 1652 onwards there was a persistent effort to impose a dominant foreign culture on black people. Ideological apparatus was used to achieve this. Among these religion featured prominently. But if ideology proved adequate to obtain the required results, guns came in handy (Stubbs 2004:44-45).
- 3 The idea that all African culture in South Africa is pre-Jan van Riebeeck and that African culture is time-bound is unacceptable. So is the view that all African culture was obliterated at the time of conquest (Stubbs 2004:45).
- 4 African culture is anthropocentric. "Westerners have on many occasions been surprised at the capacity we have for talking to each other – not for the sake of arriving at a particular conclusion but merely to enjoy the communication for its own sake" (Stubbs 2004:45).
- 5 This anthropocentrism of African culture, as Biko saw it, also manifests itself in his view of human beings: "A visitor [to a Westerner's house] with the exception of friends, is always met with the question: 'what can I do for you?' This attitude to see people not as themselves but as agents for some particular function either to

one's disadvantage or advantage is foreign to us. We are not a suspicious race. We believe in the inherent goodness of man. We enjoy man for himself ... Hence in all we do we always place Man first and hence all our action is usually joint community oriented action rather than the individualism which is the hallmark of the capitalist approach ..." (Stubbs 2004:46).

- 6 The centrality of humans in African culture is further underpinned by the manner Africans relate to poverty: they consider it a foreign concept, possible only in circumstances where calamity has befallen the entire community. In the absence of such calamity it is culturally impossible that some may be poor, since they can always call upon others to help (Stubbs 2004:48).
- 7 In African culture conversation groups are a function of age and division of labour rather than personal friendship – Biko overstates the case somewhat, denying any notion of personal friendship as such. So boys who herd cattle will more naturally gravitate to conversing among themselves than with others doing different things in society and placed differently (Stubbs 2004:48).
- 8 A deep commitment to sharing defines our cultural vistas. "Thus one would find all boys whose job was to look after cattle periodically meeting at popular spots to engage in conversation about their cattle, girlfriends, parents, heroes, etc. All commonly shared their secrets, joys and woes. No one felt unnecessarily an intruder into someone else's business. The curiosity manifested was welcome. It came out of a desire to share" (Stubbs 2004:48).
- 9 Song occupies a special place in African culture and in some ways attests the value we place on communication. So whether we are happy or sorrowful, idle or working hard, song is never out of place: "Tourists always watch with amazement the synchrony of music and action as Africans working at a roadside use their picks and shovels with well-timed precision to the accompaniment of background song" (Stubbs 2004:47).

Biko concludes the paper by contrasting the approaches to life of urbanised – 'detrribalised' is the word he uses – blacks with those of tribal blacks. Detribalised blacks do what they can to mimic whites, but all they really achieve is what whites themselves contemptuously call a subculture. Notwithstanding their attempts to move away from African culture, it remains "difficult to kill the African heritage. There remains, in spite of the superficial cultural similarities between the detrribalised and the Westerner, a number of cultural characteristics that mark out the detrribalised as an African" (Stubbs 2004:50). The paper ends with Biko's famous words:

In rejecting Western values, therefore, we are rejecting those things that are not only foreign to us but that seek to destroy the most cherished of our beliefs – that the cornerstone of society is man himself – not just his welfare, not his material well-being but just man himself with all his ramifications. We reject the power-based society of the Westerner that seems to be ever concerned with perfecting technological know-how while losing out on their spiritual dimension. We believe in the long run the special contribution to the world by Africa will be in this field of human relationship. The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gift still has to come from Africa – giving the world a more humane face (Stubbs 2004:51).

Next I look at Biko's views on culture in other of his writings. Although he wrote many papers on different topics, he was inclined to repeat some ideas in various articles. We cannot tell why he did so, but I suspect it was for effect, since in my reading these were the more critical issues. One of the more important papers Biko ever wrote was "Black consciousness and the quest for a true humanity". Whilst the paper itself was not on culture, I think Biko's arguments about culture here are a lot more probing than in the paper specifically dedicated to the subject. He writes, among other things:

In all aspects of the black-white relationship, now and in the past, we see a constant tendency by whites to depict blacks as of an inferior status. Our culture, our history, and indeed all aspects of the black man's life have been battered nearly out of shape in the great collision between the indigenous values and the Anglo-Boer culture (Stubbs 2004:102).

He also writes:

It was the missionaries who confused the people with their new religion. They scared our people with stories of hell ... People had to discard their clothes and their customs in order to be accepted in this new religion ... This cold and cruel religion was strange to the indigenous people and caused frequent strife between the converted and the "pagans", for the former, having imbibed the false values of white society, were taught to ridicule and despise those who defended the truth of their indigenous religion. With the ultimate acceptance of the western religion down went our cultural values! (Stubbs 2004:103).

Further:

Thus we can immediately see the logic of placing the missionaries in the forefront of the colonial process. A man who succeeds in making a group of people to 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 all-powerful, all-knowing master. This is what Black Consciousness seeks to eradicate (Stubbs 2004:104-105).

And:

Our culture must be defined in concrete terms. We must relate the past to the present and demonstrate a historical evolution of the modern black man. There is a tendency to think of our culture as a static culture that was arrested in 1652 and has never developed since. The "return to the bush" concept suggests that we have nothing to boast of except lions, sex and drink. We accept that when colonisation sets in it devours the indigenous culture and leaves behind a bastard culture that may thrive at the pace allowed it by the dominant culture. But we also have to realise that the basic tenets of our culture have largely succeeded in withstanding the process of bastardisation and that even at this moment we can still demonstrate that we appreciate a man for himself ... We must seek to restore to the black man the great importance we used to give to human relations, the high regard for people and their property and for life in general; to reduce the triumph of technology over man and the

materialistic element that is slowly creeping into our society (Stubbs 2004:106).

There are other instances where Biko expressed himself on culture, but space does not permit me to dwell on them in detail. Consequently I merely put some of his views in a nutshell:

- Oneness of the community is at the heart of our culture.
- Lack of respect for elders is, in African tradition, an unforgivable and cardinal sin.
- One cannot escape the fact that the culture shared by the majority in any given society must ultimately determine the broad direction taken by the joint culture of that society.
- It is through the evolution of our genuine culture that our identity can be fully recovered.

4 APPRAISING BIKO'S VIEWS ON CULTURE

Some of Biko's critics tend to evade the issues he raises by focusing attention on what they see as sexism in his writings. Some of the passages I have quoted would lend themselves to such evasion. It is necessary, therefore, to deal briefly with this criticism so as to come to grips with the substance of his views, rather than refuse to do so on the pretext that they are not worthy of consideration because of his sexism.

Read today, the passages I have cited do indeed sound sexist. I admit that he could have formulated his views in more gender-sensitive terms. I do not share the view that this makes him sexist – he might have been, but that would need a different argument, not just his unfortunate phraseology.

Biko's language in my view bears the marks of his time. In the early 1970s, which is when most of his writings were penned, we – men and women – spoke the way he wrote. In evaluating sexism in his work, therefore, it is unfair to apply to his writings language criteria that were not yet common in those days. It is unfair to expect him to have spoken or written in parlance that was not part of his milieu. True, we can insist that he ought to have shown leadership in language usage in this area, but I am not sure that the fact that he did not entitles us to impute sexism to him. I hold this view notwithstanding what seems to me a compelling argument by postmodernist writers that language, and therefore the words we elect to use, are hardly ever innocent, but very often constitute a veiled legitimisation of positions we want to promote and de-legitimisation of those we wish to undermine.

If this submission proves untenable, it would still not follow that Biko's thinking was sexist. By and large, it appears to me quite clear that the views cited above concern human relations. He refers to 'man' and human relations quite often. I am not sure that a careful reading would lead us to think that he had in mind men as beings different from women – that a careful scrutiny would lead us to conclude that he would ask for one thing for men and another for women. He does, to be sure, speak about 'the black man', but that is very rare in the passages I have cited. I wish he had not.

That said, let us try and consider the content of his views. Biko makes pretty much the same points as other thinkers did. As I have already indicated in summarising his views, he overstates his case occasionally – like when he denies the existence, in African culture, of personal friendships. I think he also occasionally gets his terminology wrong – like when he argues that the view that African culture is time-bound must be rejected. He clearly meant to convey that African culture is not static, for he explicitly states subsequently that African culture is dynamic and was not frozen in time after Jan van Riebeeck allegedly 'discovered' us.

Biko understood, as Cabral did, that the denigration of indigenous cultures by the conqueror was not innocuous, but was integral to their subjugation of indigenous

peoples. The destruction of indigenous cultures was a means of undermining, on the ideological plane, all possible resistance to foreign domination. It was a means of ensuring that indigenous peoples had no framework within which to question what the conqueror was doing. Occasionally the colonial masters were fairly candid about this themselves. Listen to the instructive words of Sir George Grey in 1885:

If we leave the natives beyond our border ignorant barbarians, they will remain a race of troublesome marauders. We should try to make them a part of ourselves, with a common faith and common interests, useful servants, consumers of our goods, contributors to our revenue. Therefore, I propose that we make unremitting efforts to raise the natives in Christianity and civilization, by establishing among them missions connected with industrial schools.

The native races beyond our boundary, influenced by our missionaries, instructed in our schools, benefiting by our trade, would not make wars on our frontiers (Christie 1988:37).

Biko further pulled his argument together in a quite interesting manner. He starts his paper on African cultural concepts by portraying an African, in the eyes of the conqueror, as altogether cultureless. In other words, Africans were not supposed to know or even suspect that if they had a cultural dilemma, white people had anything to do with it. If there was any confusion about their cultural background, they were not supposed to know, or even suspect, that white people had obliterated any claim to culture they might have. No, white folk had found them in a cultureless state and merely tried, perhaps unsuccessfully, to raise them out of it.

Because Africans were cultureless and white folk cultured, if Africans aspired to culture, it stood to reason that those who were already cultured were best suited to guide them. It stood to reason that the teacher-pupil relationship that Biko spoke about was necessary, and had to be seen by Africans in exactly those terms. In humble submission to white folk Africans were condemned, in this relationship, to look up to them perpetually for validation. Tommy Lee's movie, *Shaolin chamber of death* (Chen 1976), offers some instructive insights.

Jackie Chan features as a mute boy who does not even have a name. His father, Su Lingh, was killed in front of his eyes when he was only a toddler. Unbeknown to everyone, the boy is not mute: he took a vow never to speak until he had avenged his father's murder. He grows up and goes to the Shaolin temple to prepare himself for the task ahead. He has a problem, though, because he does not now know the man who killed his father. At the temple he meets Fatchu,¹ who is kept chained in a cave. He takes pity on him and a strong bond of friendship develops between them. It turns out that Fatchu is a martial arts expert and, because of the relationship they have, he secretly gives the boy the training that the masters at the temple are too slow in providing.

After the boy has left the temple, Fatchu breaks free and continues his reign of terror. The climax of his campaign must be the destruction of the temple as revenge for his incarceration in the cave all those years to punish him for betraying Shaolin principles with his murderous deeds. To this end he develops a technique called the lion's roar. The temple has meanwhile enlisted the help of the mute boy to defend Shaolin traditions. The boy for his part has progressed beyond Fatchu's secret training by mastering the ultimate Shaolin technique that would enable him to resist the lion's roar.

Although he sees the necessity for it, the boy has mixed feelings about fighting Fatchu, who was, after all, his teacher. Not knowing the identity of the mute boy, Fatchu makes the fatal mistake of boasting that he killed Su Lingh because the latter

¹ I couldn't get assistance about the spelling of the name in English, but I am advised the name means 'bad person'.

refused to surrender his money to him. This immediately frees, for a while at least, the mute boy from any inhibitions he might have had about fighting his teacher. The knowledge that this day he will be able to fight and avenge his father's murder is liberating. Significantly, in my view, from this minute on, the mute boy has a name, an identity: he is Su Lingh's son and he says this himself! From this moment onwards he is freed from his self-imposed muteness and the duel, which must end in his or Fatchu's death, begins. At a critical stage in the fight he kneels before Fatchu and implores: "Teacher, once a teacher, always a teacher. I ask one thing of you, and it is that you come back to Shaolin. If you do, I will forget my vendetta against you." As he kneels with Fatchu hovering over him, the young boy is completely vulnerable, his head bowed in deference to his master.

Because the script dictated in advance that Su Lingh's son would live and Fatchu, the bad man, would die, all ends well. There is, however, no pre-ordained script according to which black people would ultimately win if they continued to bow to white people. They had, in Biko's words, to eradicate this instinctive tendency to seek to please their all-knowing, all-powerful master!

Because a significant number of South African black people have elected to have whites as their perpetual supervisors, history is punishing us in post-apartheid South Africa with a number of black broadcasters and receptionists who are doing their best, and are encouraged, to sound like whites in the modulation of their voices. They sound so irritating in their attempt to be what they are not that many discerning black people no longer even listen to radio or watch television. Or they endure it for the barest minimum time needed to get the information they want, and then switch off. And that is as it should be, for if we must choose between listening to black people who would like to be white or to real white people, it is infinitely better to have the real thing than the fake! History has also inflicted on us a number of highly qualified black people who try, if ever so poorly, to speak with an American accent and to act American in their demeanour. Although we like to think of them as intellectuals, Frantz Fanon (1963:254-255) bypasses them completely, when he writes:

So, comrades, let us not pay tribute to Europe [we may add the USA] by creating states, institutions and societies which draw their inspiration from her. Humanity is waiting for something other from us than such an imitation, which would be almost an obscene caricature. If we want to turn Africa into a new Europe ... then let us leave the destiny of our countries to Europeans. They will know how to do it better than the most gifted among us.

... If we wish to live up to our people's expectations, we must seek the response elsewhere than in Europe. Moreover, if we wish to reply to the expectations of the people of Europe, it is no good sending them back a reflection, even an ideal reflection, of their society and their thought with which from time to time they feel immeasurably sickened. For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man.

Biko understood, as did Cabral, that the conqueror's best efforts had failed to eradicate indigenous cultures. If they achieved any success at all, it was only to the extent of producing what Biko called culturally bastardised, detribalised Africans, for whom in any event the white structure had little or no respect. He made a strong plea for a return to those elements of indigenous culture that had concretely and organically evolved with African society in changing social conditions, which included but were perhaps not limited to mutual care and respect for age. His papers on African cultural concepts and on the quest for a true humanity both end with a passionate appeal that we should strive to give South Africa and the world a more

humane face. One could not espouse this view and then turn one's face away from the oppressive regime that held sway in South Africa.

5 FROM CULTURE TO POLITICS?

The structure of this paper might create the impression that there was a progression in the development of black consciousness from the cultural to the political spheres. The reverse would be more plausible, with the sole qualification that BC did not segment issues along political and cultural lines.

Biko's writings cited above were produced in the 1970s. The South African Students Organisation (SASO) had been formed at the close of the previous decade. When SASO was launched at the University of the North (Turfloop) in 1969, it stated in its *Policy manifesto*:

4(a) SASO upholds the concept of Black Consciousness and the drive towards Black awareness as the most logical and significant means of ridding ourselves of the shackles that bind us to perpetual servitude.

In section 4(b) SASO defined black consciousness as follows:

- (i) Black Consciousness is an attitude of mind, a way of life.
- (ii) The basic tenet of Black Consciousness is that the Black man must reject all value systems that seek to make him a foreigner in the country of his birth and reduce his basic human dignity.
- (iii) The Black man must build up his own value systems, see himself as self-defined and not defined by others.
- (iv) The concept of Black Consciousness implies the awareness by the Black people of the power they wield as a group, both economically and politically and hence group cohesion and solidarity are important facets of Black Consciousness.
- (v) Black Consciousness will always be enhanced by the totality of involvement of the oppressed people, hence the message of Black Consciousness has to be spread to reach all sections of the Black community.

4(c) SASO accepts the premise that before the Black people join the open society, they should first close their ranks, to form themselves into a solid group to oppose the definite racism that is meted out by the white society, to work out their direction clearly and bargain from a position of strength. SASO believes that a truly open society can only be achieved by Blacks.

5 SASO believes that the concept of integration cannot be realised in an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust. Integration does not mean an assimilation of Blacks into an already established set of norms drawn up and motivated by white society. Integration implies free participation by individuals in a given society and proportionate contribution to the joint culture of the society by all constituent groups. Following this definition, therefore, SASO believes that integration does not need to be enforced or worked for. Integration follows automatically when doors to prejudice are closed through the attainment of a just and free society.

6 SASO believes that all groups allegedly working for "integration" in South Africa – and here we note in particular the Progressive Party and other liberal institutions – are not working for the kind of integration that

would be acceptable to the Black man. Their attempts are directed merely at relaxing certain oppressive legislations and to allow Blacks into white-type society.

It is clear, then, that SASO saw from the beginning that it had a political role to play. A document produced in 1972, entitled "Historical background", argued that members of SASO were black before they were students and that they had a historical mission to search for 'the black man's' true identity and struggle for 'his liberation'. Themba Sono comments:

Lest it be misconstrued as a one-dimensional organisation, SASO was also highly instrumental in spreading Black Consciousness through cultural activities (poetry workshops, drama, music, painting and art exhibitions) ... SASO members were particularly active in drama, literacy, youth and arts festivities and activities ... Its strategy was thus the educational, cultural and political. It was the political strategy that dominated however (Sono 1993:73).

6 BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS ORGANISATIONS

SASO was the first organisational manifestation of black consciousness in South Africa. It was formed initially at Marianhill (Natal, as it was then) in 1968 but formally launched at Turfloop in 1969. Elsewhere I have discussed in some detail the frustrations of black students in and with the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) that led to the formation of SASO.²

Sam Nolutshungu (1982) thinks that a few chance factors conspired to make possible the SASO-NUSAS split when it occurred. One such factor was that Biko happened to represent the black section of the Natal Medical School (UNB) at NUSAS conferences in 1967 and 1968. (It was a mark of the stature of the man that he was chosen to represent UNB at the 1967 NUSAS conference: he had enrolled at that university only the year before!) This exposed him directly not only to what Sono later came to term "the poverty of liberalism" but also, to the increasing frustration of black students, to "the weakness of the militant liberal contingent". Biko became acutely aware of the division between black and white tertiary students as a result of his participation in these conferences. It is now a matter of record that he put this awareness to effective use shortly afterwards and in the years that followed.

The second factor, Nolutshungu writes, is that Biko came from a family that had connections with the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), although he himself never joined it. He was therefore sensitive or responsive "to the suspicion and disdain" with which Africanists "viewed NUSAS's black affiliates". In Biko, therefore, the prevarications on matters of principle that characterised NUSAS conferences found fertile soil.

The third factor Nolutshungu cites is Biko's temperament: that of an activist and an organiser. Nolutshungu sums it up as follows: "[Biko's] objection to NUSAS was fourfold: it was doing nothing, it repeated the same old liberal dogma, within NUSAS itself black and white formed separate and opposed camps and, for all these reasons he could not do in NUSAS what he felt required to be done" (Nolutshungu 1983:167).

Sono suggests that another factor to be taken into account when trying to understand why the SASO-NUSAS split took the form it did is the literature Biko read. He characterises Biko as "lazy [and] indolent ... he could sleep from dawn to dusk" (Sono 1993:95). But, he says, Biko was a voracious reader. If he picked up an interesting piece of literature not even his love of sleep would interrupt his interaction with the text until he had read the last word. Sono marvels at the way Biko read and

² The contribution(s) of Black Consciousness in the liberation struggle in SA.

finished *The autobiography of Malcolm X* (460 pages!) in one night. It is significant, to my mind, that this was the night before the SASO *Policy manifesto* was compiled (Sono 1993:95).

Having indicated that Biko read a lot of American Black Power literature, Sono proceeds to draw a fascinating comparison between statements made by black American activists in earlier years and positions that came to be adopted by SASO. Significant among these activists would be, inter alia, Eldridge Cleaver, Stockley Carmichael and Charles Hamilton (Sono 1993:40-42). I think it would be silly to deny that black consciousness in South Africa was, one way or another, influenced by the struggles of black people in the USA. In many respects the experiences of black Americans mirrored, and to some extent were a precursor to, our own. Consider this example cited by Sono (1993:48):

I recall vividly one evening in a room, while a few of us were chattering away, Biko was reading and he suddenly muttered something harsh when he was on page 10 of *The autobiography [of Malcolm X]*. "I remember waking up to the sound of my mother screaming again. When I scrambled out, I saw the police in the living room; they were trying to calm her down ... My mother was taken by the police to the hospital, and to a room where a sheet was over my father in a bed, and she wouldn't look, she was afraid to look. Probably it was wise that she didn't. My father's skull, on the one side, was crushed in ... Negroes in Lansing have always whispered that he was attacked, and then laid across some tracks for a streetcar to run over him. His body was cut almost in half ... I can remember a vague commotion, the house filled up with people crying, saying bitterly that the white Black Legion had finally gotten him."

One could not read things like that honestly and fail to see our own reflection in them. One could give many striking examples of black activists in South Africa meeting a fate not unlike that of Malcolm X's father, or even worse. Consider for one moment the manner of Mthuli ka Shezi's death in December 1972. After protesting against the maltreatment of black women by a white worker at the Germiston railway station, he was pushed in front of an oncoming train by a white railway policeman. It is also easy to imagine the blows that were rained by the police on the heads of Biko and Joseph Mduli – resulting in death, for which no one was held legally responsible in either case.

Why, the similarities can be extended to present-day South Africa. When Malcolm X's father's life was brought to such a brutal end the constitution of that country proclaimed the equality of all. It enshrined the equal right of all to life and the integrity of their bodies. That did not help Malcolm X's father. Neither was our constitution, for all its lofty pronouncements, sufficiently potent to prevent Nelson Chisane from being thrown alive into a lion enclosure where all that was left of him was a bone and shreds of his clothes.

It was therefore only natural that black consciousness would learn from the responses of others similarly placed. Indeed, we can state that we learned from a wider spectrum of black Americans than those listed by Sono. But by the same token we learned from many African leaders, one of whom Sono mentions – Julius Nyerere. We learned as much from Nyerere as we did from Kenneth Kaunda, Kwame Nkrumah and a few others, some of whom we admit learning from only tongue in cheek today.

SASO embarked on several community projects at various levels of society: leadership training, re-contextualising education, theatre, self-help, labour, Black Theology and others throughout the country. A few organisations were formed in order to carry out these projects. Focal in all of these was always an effort to raise political awareness. The question, 'political awareness to what end?', was left mostly unanswered – at least for a while. Nolutshungu suggests that some BC activists

thought that conscientisation was the *raison d'être* of BC and that once that was achieved, it was up to individual members to decide whether or not to join the armed forces of either the ANC or the PAC (Nolutshungu 1983:179).

My own view is that the question was a bit more complex than that. Nolutshungu indicates that BC's choice to operate overtly in the country was limiting in terms of things it might say publicly. He cites Bafana Buthelezi (Nolutshungu 1983:182):

In June 1975 a motion was proposed at a meeting of the Middelburg-Witbank branch urging recourse to armed struggle. The idea of formally adopting a resolution was opposed, and the proposal was not communicated to SASO, although it was felt that people who were keen to go for training should not be discouraged. The chairman felt that there was still a fair amount of conscientising work to be done and was, moreover, aware of the difficulties that were arising in SASO's own attempts to arrange the transition to armed struggle.

Nolutshungu conducted the interview with Buthelezi which contains this excerpt in Botswana on 31 August 1979. I can point out, in all humility, that I was the chairman referred to in the excerpt. The fact that I was not mentioned by name indicates the enormous considerations at issue.

Here is another instructive example mentioned by Nolutshungu. In 1974, against the backdrop of the Viva Frelimo rallies, Ruben Hare proposed that SASO be disbanded and that those who wanted to continue the struggle be allowed to go and fight. This came to form part of the charges against the SASO-BPC nine³ in the aftermath of those rallies. Muntu Myeza, one of the accused, stated at the trial that "Ruben Hare arose and in his peroration criticised SASO members and stated that he had moved the motion due to disappointment with them. He then withdrew the motion and wept" (Nolutshungu 1983:189).

It seems to me that there was excruciating tension between the mode of existence that SASO had taken on and the actions that many in that organisation thought were necessary. Hare knew, even as he proposed the motion, that it would not be passed, but he moved it all the same. Having done so, he withdrew it without anyone telling him to. Then he broke down and cried. Such was the angst of negotiating the delicate balance between knowing where you wished to go and avoiding unpalatable consequences for your comrades, who might or might not be in agreement with the path you thought needed to be trudged.

I think it is significant that Hare did not move that SASO should join the armed struggle, but rather that the organisation should be disbanded so that those who felt they must take up arms could do so as individuals. If SASO were disbanded, its mode of existence would no longer be there, and it would not be necessary to tame our words to obviate the risk of becoming a banned organisation. There would be no organisational bonds between those who took up arms and those who did not, so those who did not follow the course of armed struggle would not have to account to the state for those who did.

Further, as Nolutshungu points out, SASO was a broad-based student organisation to which tertiary students affiliated en masse through their student representative councils (SRCs). SASO was therefore not a political organisation, so it could hardly have had clear political programmes and strategies. Even after a decision was taken that an explicitly political organisation should be formed, it remained difficult to overcome this problem. This brings me to the next phase of the narrative.

³ Saths Cooper, Muntu Myeza, Strini Moodley, Nkwenkwe Nkoma, Pandelani Nefolovhodwe, Zithulele Cindi, Mosiuoa Lekota, Nchaupe Mokoape, Kaborone Sedibe.

In introducing Biko's paper, "Some African cultural concepts", Fr Stubbs says that the Black People's Convention (BPC) was formed in Johannesburg at the end of 1971, and that the conference where this paper was read paved the way for the formation of the BPC. With all due respect to the cleric, I must point out that the BPC was formed at Hammanskraal in December 1972.

Sono relives the arduous path that had to be traversed before the BPC could be formed. SASO worked hard to forge links with and amongst a number of organisations engaging with different aspects of social life. Sono mentions that there was some tension in the SASO leadership about both the political role that SASO was de facto playing and the felt need for a national political organisation to champion "the cause of Black Consciousness outside university auditoria". Strinivasa Moodley, Harry Nengwekhulu and he (Sono) were of the view that such an organisation needed to be formed. Biko and Barney Pitso, on the other hand, opposed the idea.

At a conference held in Bloemfontein in April 1971 the possibility of forming a national political organisation was explored. No agreement was reached and follow-up conferences in Pietermaritzburg (Edendale), Bloemfontein and Port Elizabeth likewise failed to reach consensus. A further conference was held at Orlando in December 1971 with the theme "Building a nation". At this conference it was agreed in principle that a national political organisation on the lines of the BPC could be formed (Sono 1993:81-82). It took another twelve months before the BPC was actually launched in December 1972.

Sono writes that the BPC did not prosper, partly because it was overshadowed by SASO and partly because of state harassment, evidenced by the arrest of Mosibudi Mangena and the banning of the organisation in the aftermath of the Viva Frelimo rallies (Sono 1993:83). His comments on what he calls "the recklessness and misplaced bravado" of some BPC leaders in deciding to go ahead with the rallies in the face of a government banning order must remain polemical, given that he makes them in the context of an explanation why the BPC did not survive long.

Firstly, I must point out that it cannot be stated *ex cathedra* that, but for disregarding the ban on the said rallies, the government would have left the BPC alone. The government had started showing impatience with BC already in 1973 when it banned the SASO-BPC eight.⁴ Then, there was no banned Viva Frelimo rally and therefore no disobedience to any ban. The government did not have to detail its reasons for banning people and it detailed none for banning the SASO eight. It remains possible, therefore, that the government could have banned the BPC for any reason.

Secondly, if Sono had published his book in the 1970s, the point he argues might be better appreciated. But he published his book in 1993 when history had unfolded in a manner that makes his argument quite embarrassing. In the 1980s, right up to 1990, open disobedience to government dictates was the order of the day. One might expect that, having observed that wave of civil disobedience and what it made politically possible, Sono might congratulate the BPC leadership for disobeying the government at a time when such disobedience was not in vogue and was possible only at mortal risk to oneself, rather than speak scathingly of it.

Thirdly, as we have seen, there was growing impatience within BC at the lack of physical engagement with the regime and a growing number of people were calling for armed struggle. The refusal by the BPC leadership to be cowed any further should, I contend, be seen in the light of the growing militancy within the BC movement at the time rather than as recklessness and misplaced bravado.

Fourthly, when the government banned the BPC it also banned other organisations and publications whose leadership had nothing to do with defying its ban of the Viva Frelimo rallies. Be that as it may, it is history now that SASO and the

⁴ Drake Koka, Strini Moodley, Saths Cooper, Nchaube Mokoape, Steve Biko, Bokwe Mafuna, Sabelo Ntwasa and Ranwedzi Nengwekhulu. Jerry Modisane was already banned before the above-named.

BPC were banned along with a number of other organisations in 1977. In 1978 the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) was founded.

When the BC movement emerged the Suppression of Communism Act (1950) was in force in South Africa. It is common knowledge that the act forbade the propagation or promotion of communism or any of its 'objects' – indeed, merely *being* a communist was forbidden. Similarly, it is common knowledge that in the enforcement of the act no distinction was made between *socialism* and *communism*. The consequence was that political organisations that wished to operate above board could not profess their commitment to socialism. Therefore it was impossible to put forward a socialist programme and ask the public to support it.

Before it was banned the BPC produced a document entitled "Towards a free Azania – Projection: future state" at its King William's Town congress in 1975. In that document the BPC committed itself to building "a strong, socialist, self-reliant economy". To the best of my knowledge that was the first time since the introduction of the Suppression of Communism Act that a non-exiled, overtly political organisation had recorded in its basic documents that it was committed to socialism.

In 1980 Letsatsi Mosala (AZAPO national organiser) publicly announced that AZAPO had taken BC beyond black awareness into the class struggle (Simkins 1980:13).

Between 1983 and 1984 AZAPO worked with other organisations in the National Forum to produce the Azanian People's Manifesto, which states the following:

Our struggle for national liberation is directed against the historically evolved system of racism and capitalism which holds the people of Azania in bondage for the benefit of the small minority of the population, i.e. the capitalists and their allies, the white workers and the reactionary sections of the middle classes. The struggle against apartheid, therefore, is no more than the point of departure for our liberatory efforts.

The Black working class, inspired by revolutionary consciousnesses, is the driving force of our struggle for national self-determination in a unitary Azania. They alone can end the system as it stands today because they alone have nothing to lose. They have a world to gain in a democratic, anti-racist and socialist Azania ... (National Forum Committee, July 1983:2).

At its inception, as we have seen, BC in South Africa was essentially a student affair. Its most important vehicle was SASO. There can be no doubt that SASO involved itself in national politics – how else could it be? Indeed, as we have seen, even after the BPC was formed, it was overshadowed by SASO and deferred to it in a number of ways. But SASO remained essentially a student organisation, and if BC was to have a wider social impact beyond the precincts of universities, it was necessary to create a vehicle commensurate with the task.

The BPC, we have said, was that initial vehicle. To the extent that it was overshadowed by SASO and deferred to SASO ideologically and, arguably, programmatically, the BPC did not take politics far beyond where SASO had brought it. Even when it argued for socialism in 1975 and the next year adopted the "Mafikeng Manifesto", also known as the "16-Point Programme", those positions were advocated largely by people who were linked in one way or another with SASO. The mere fact that the BPC, in "Towards a free Azania – Projection: future state", argued for *socialism*, and then for *black communalism* in the "Mafikeng Manifesto" the following year, without so much as trying to reconcile the two proposed socio-economic systems, bears testimony to the student marks left on the BPC.

Yet whatever criticism we have of that position, it remains true that BC was evolving, if in somewhat contradictory terms: first from student politics without any

clearly defined ideological orientation, to grappling with national politics with the attendant imperative to configure and articulate an alternative social order. Hence for all the imperfections the positions adopted by the BPC were an important and necessary step forward.

AZAPO built further on those imperfect foundations and argued more consistently for a socialist dispensation, even if, in its turn, it got bedevilled by the question of the correct relationship between the national struggle that was obviously in full swing, and the class struggle that was sometimes deliberately subordinated to the former. AZAPO's failure to resolve this question for itself in part accounts for the splits, expulsions and breakaways that came to haunt it in later years.

It was a long and arduous road BC activists had to walk from the moment SASO was founded in 1968 to the moment the first overtly political BC organisation was formed in 1972. Several hurdles had to be negotiated before it was possible to found the BPC. It was hoped that BC would have a wider and greater impact if it had a flagship organisation off campus that was overtly political. The dramatic irony is that such overt off-campus political organisations as came to be formed appear to have weakened BC's influence and impact on a societal scale.

Sono writes that this vindicates Biko's initial reservations about the formation of a BC political organisation:

It was nonetheless at the Orlando Donaldson Community Centre that this principle [of forming an overtly political organisation] was finally and formally conceded. For different reasons, M.T. Moerane, the ASSECA leader and *The World* editor, and Biko, opposed this idea. Biko was not yet certain about two issues conducive to the formation of an overt political organisation:

- (i) Political time-frame was not yet ripe;
- (ii) A more deeply rooted psychological sense of self-confidence was a *prima facie* precondition for this formation.

(In retrospect, Biko was right; and I must concede my complicity in this error. For once the BC ethic was translated into a political ideology of an overtly political organisation it had to lead to eternal contradiction of political party activism, as is obviously the case right now) (Sono 1993:81-82).

Today there are no fewer than three overtly political organisations, each claiming to be the true bearer of the message, philosophy and ideology of black consciousness. Outside these organisations BC pressure groups and individuals are toiling, without much to show for it, for the reunification of BC organisations. In the meantime popular support for BC appears to be dwindling in inverse proportion to the increase in the number of political organisations claiming to represent it.

7 ALMOST 40 YEARS LATER: A REFLECTION

It is almost 40 years since BC surfaced in South Africa, and 30 years since its founding father died at the hands of the security police. It is almost thirteen years since the apartheid system, which in part called BC into existence and on whose altar Biko's life had to be sacrificed at the tender age of 31, was dismantled. What difference has it all made?

I have presented the contributions made by the BC movement in the struggle for liberation in South Africa and the things it made possible in the essay referred to in footnote 2 of this essay. But how close has South Africa come to the vision BC had for the country thirteen years after liberation? How far have we got with eradicating racism? How close have we come to giving South Africa the humane face that Biko envisioned?

In some ways we have come a long way. Black people have the vote. The complexion of parliament and all subordinate legislatures has changed. So has the complexion of the executive arm of government as well as that of the judiciary. A number of previously lily-white residential areas have some colour. As Nthoana Tau-Mzamane is wont to quip, even the beggar community at the intersections of our streets has become “multiracial”! There can be no question about it: South Africa has undergone some profound changes.

In a good many other respects, however, as Neville Alexander would say, post-apartheid South Africa is just an ordinary country: as ordinary, almost, as it was before 1994. For Alexander this is so obvious that he opines that those who do not see it “have a vested interest in being blind” (Alexander 2002:60).

Perhaps Alexander, because of political awareness heightened by activism in the Marxist tradition, has to see things that way. How do other South Africans experience post-apartheid South Africa? How do other *black* South Africans experience the country post-1994? It is, perhaps, still too early to say, and we probably would need a scientific assessment before we are able to gauge their sense of the extent to which we have transformed. But there are a few pointers that keep surfacing, which I think we ignore at our peril. Let me mention some of them.

Wiseman Magasela, a senior researcher with the National Research Foundation, published an article in the *Mail & Guardian* (2004) entitled “The invisible professionals”. He expressed himself thus:

Highly educated blacks working in South Africa struggle against a system that aims to exclude and sideline them. There is the open struggle that is fought with bullets and bombs out on the plains ... The enemy is known and identifiable. South Africa had its own taste of this ... Then there is the covert struggle, the war that begins every time you enter the gates of the company or organisation you work for. The world of work. Another terrain of struggle. The war is not openly declared and the battle lines are blurred. The forces of change, driven by the principles of democracy, justice, equality, freedom and rights, have delivered you to the organisation among unwilling partners to the changes. Unable to employ the tactics of the good old days, they devise new strategies to deal with you. They refuse to see you, hear you or acknowledge your presence. You become, in their eyes, invisible – pastless, presenceless, futureless and mindless.

The strategies that are adopted against you echo what Ralph Ellison wrote in the prologue to *Invisible Man*: “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me ... when they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me.” If you are black in South Africa’s world of work, it is a daily struggle against a system that constantly alienates you ... If you are black, you are never good enough. Powerful but subtle and insidious currents incessantly work at undermining you, pinning you down “where you belong” ...

Bonga Bangani (2007), 22 years old and aspiring to learn much about the world of work, had the following to say in a letter addressed to his supervisor earlier this year, but which found its way across the length and breadth of South Africa:

... Before you get side-tracked, let me clarify a few things: the issue is not about the material things like laptops, etc. I can get these myself. The issue here is the significant discrepancy in the level of fairness and treatment between two young people, of similar age (I’m a year younger),

working for the same manager, same team, same organization ... but treated so differently. One is white, one (*sic*) is black ...

I'm afraid to try out new initiatives because of fear of failure – where white colleagues are allowed to fail – I get the feeling that my own failure will be taken as proof that I'm just a token appointment. Maybe I expected too much ... [his ellipsis] maybe not but one thing is clear: this is not how I wanted to start my career and definitely not the kind of environment I can flourish and grow in.

I wonder how many black professionals feel the same way? (*sic*). I guess we will never find out as they choose to leave silently. The only difference between them and I is that they choose to keep silent ... they choose to “job hop” or just drown themselves in their frustration and anger and pretend as if everything's fine as long as they still earn a salary every month.

Bangani felt the need to enter a disclaimer to the effect that he is not a racist: he is neither pro-black nor pro-white: he is “pro-humanity, pro-fairness and equal treatment”, in bold letters.

Nobantu Seleokane had practically all her schooling at the *Deutsche Schule* in Pretoria. She grew up mixing freely with white people. In fact, she never understood when I spoke to her about the racism of white people here and elsewhere: she believed, as do many others, that I am in dire need of debriefing so that I might be freed from the traumatic effects of growing up in a racist society and spending a fair amount of time opposing it. That was until she joined the world of work. Earlier this month she sent me the following SMS: “I know that there is no perfect workplace but I'm beginning to hate all the whites at that place. And if that makes me racist, then so be it.”

I think she still misses the point insofar as she thinks her reaction, rather than what evokes it, might be the problem; insofar as she thinks it is *her* feelings, rather than the conduct of the people who have turned her heart into a nest of such hatred, that need justification. But in time she will get there. In time she will understand, as does Magasela, that she is up against a system that leaves her little choice but to feel the way she does – that is to say, if we do not do something soon to create a truly liberated environment where no one has to feel that he/she is disadvantaged on racial grounds, and if we do not, as Alexander might put it, disinvest from our blindness to the truth that in many important respects South Africa still cries out for transformation!

Similarly, Bangani will get to understand that humanity, fairness, or equal treatment only become issues when they are denied. He will get to understand that in the real world these values are never denied to everyone, but only ever to certain people. And if one is going to take a liberatory or transformative stand on these values, one has to stand firm on the side of those who are denied humanity, fairness and equal treatment, whatever their colour and gender. One has, moreover, to stand firm against those who deny others these values. And one has to do so unapologetically!

Magasela, Bangani and Seleokane must be read as suggesting that there are still racial problems in South Africa. The workplace remains a terrain of racial struggle. It would truly have been a miracle if things were different. But the feeling that South Africa is still bedevilled by racism reverberates beyond the workplace and in part explains the formation earlier this year of the Native Club. Land ownership remains a niggling issue that must necessarily give rise to this feeling. In a recent article Lungisile Ntsebeza (2007) argued:

No one – not even President Thabo Mbeki – disputes that land reform in its current form is a dismal failure. In the past 13 years, only about 4% of white-claimed agricultural land has been transferred. The debate is really about the reasons for this failure.

There are two broad positions in this regard. There are those who argue that existing policies are coherent and that the problem lies with implementation. Others, including myself, agree that there are problems with implementation, but argue that the problem is much deeper than that.

The reality is that structural constraints in the current land reform programme make it impossible to embark on a radical land redistribution programme. The very constitution that guarantees formal equality before the law also entrenches material inequality, especially in the distribution of land ownership. The entrenchment of the property clause in the constitution is a major obstacle to the achievement of even the limited objectives of the land reform programme.

In South Africa it is impossible to satisfy equally both the need to protect property rights and to ensure a policy of equitable distribution of land. The compromise reached at the negotiation table in the 1990s clearly favoured the existing property holders, and it is this which is responsible for the dismal failure of land reform.

In my view we will need to be vigilant of racism for a good many years still before we can lower our guard. Part of the reason is that white people are not going to abandon racist views that have stood them in good stead for so many years quite so quickly.

The other, and in my view more serious, reason is this notion that South Africa is a miracle. By calling South Africa a miracle, we mystify not only the social actors who made the settlement possible (as well as their motives!), but the impulses that continue to drive social relations in South Africa too. The notion of a miracle invites us to suspend our critical faculties and to accept that forces are at work that are beyond our comprehension. It invites us to abdicate responsibility for ensuring that troubling social realities get corrected. So this notion that South Africa is a miracle, in my view, has to be treated with suspicion and resolutely guarded against if we intend get rid of racism reasonably quickly.

There is a hint in Magasela's letter that things might be a little better under black people. I am not always sure. I can identify with and relate to a lot of the things he points out – the rules of the game changing every time I try to participate; being ignored; being lied to; being sabotaged; being ganged up against and the fact being denied vehemently; interests-based networks being formed; being labelled for questioning; my spirit being dampened; and information being withheld from me. I have had experience of all these and more at the hands of fellow black people who are in charge of institutions. I have, to be sure, experienced them at the hands of white folk as well, but that was to be expected. The fact that today we are experiencing them from black folk underscores Ayi Kwei Armah's point: *the beautiful ones are not yet born!*

Therefore we cannot, we should not lower our guard too soon, in the expectation that black people – because, and only because they are black – are necessarily better, are necessarily pro-freedom. There are far too many examples of black people betraying the values that informed liberation struggles throughout Africa for us to pin our hopes of anything substantially transformative on their colour alone.

Alexander (2002:61) also dwells on the fact that racism is still visible in South Africa. He writes, for instance:

Even eight years after the founding democratic elections, we still hear of new South African directors-general of government departments and

even, on occasion, of cabinet ministers who are isolated in their own offices, human islands in a hostile sea of yesterday's clerks and lackeys. In many cases, this isolation is made worse and more painful by the crudities of a racism that is always visible under the veneer of civility.

He goes farther, however, and questions whether the economy of South Africa has been transformed in any serious sense. He concludes that it has not (Alexander 2002:61):

[The] capitalist class can be said to have placed their property under new management and what we are seeing is the sometimes painful process of the new managers trying to come to terms with the fact that they are managers certainly but not by any means the owners, of capital. Inevitably, a few individuals in this political class have rapidly themselves become "men of substance" through the Johannesburg Securities Exchange. Men such as Cyril Ramaphosa, Tokyo Sexwale, Dikgang Moseneke, Saki Macozoma, Marcel Golding and many others who were paragons of radicalism in their day, have become pillars of conservative economics at the same time as they have personally accumulated considerable wealth.

It can be argued with integrity that the phenomenon of these 'men of substance' that Alexander refers to already bears testimony to the changes that have taken place in South Africa: they would arguably never have made it in apartheid South Africa, using the modalities that have brought them where they are. That much should, I think, be conceded. Part of the problem, however, is that most of them shamelessly feature in every initiative. Hardly a business venture is announced, from the simplest to the most complex operation, without them going for it like bloodthirsty hounds. The result is that the black economic empowerment scene is dominated by a few individuals who are mostly well connected politically. I am not sure that this takes us in the direction of giving South Africa a more humane face.

In the end it appears to me that, whilst South Africa has made a fair amount of progress since 1994, many important areas of our social life still scream for transformation. There is an upsurge of ethnic consciousness that sometimes sends fear through my heart that 1994 may have opened the floodgates of ethnicity in a manner comparable to the way 1989 opened the floodgates of xenophobia in East Germany. There are people I knew during the dark years of struggle that I never imagined could be as comfortable as they appear now when pushing an ethnic argument. And then there is the senseless way we butcher one another. I think of all these, and I am reminded of a letter by Jawaharlal Nehru (1934), dated 5 January 1931 and entitled "The lesson of history":

I think I wrote to you once that a study of history should teach us how the world has slowly but surely progressed, how the first simple animals gave place to more complicated and advanced animals, how last of all the master animal – Man, and how by force of his intellect he triumphed over the others. Man's growth from barbarism to civilization is supposed to be the theme of history ...

Perhaps this is what Biko hoped for, too, when he held that black people might yet give South Africa a more humane face. Yet one has to concede that we are as far from it as we were when Nehru wrote that letter 76 years ago. But perhaps we must keep on hoping: Nehru says the progress is slow but sure.

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