The rise of the Black Conciousness Movement:
An enduring influence on the South African liberation struggle

By **Simphiwe Sesanti**

The author is a senior lecturer in Stellenbosch University's department of journalism

As South Africa celebrates 20 years of democracy, this article serves to highlight the history of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) and the factors that contributed to its growth. As the twentieth anniversary is celebrated, as is often the case, some will fall into the temptation of promoting the history of their own party whilst denigrating that of others. This is an attempt to pre-empt such an unproductive act and to tell, to the best of one's ability, the history of the BCM without embellishment – which would be another form of distortion. It is impossible, in such a few words, to write comprehensively of the role of the movement in the struggle to liberate South Africa.

This is the movement, led by a 22-year-old student named Bantu Steve Biko, that would inspire 13-year-olds, armed only with stones, to confront a heavily armed South African police force, which led to an exodus of young people to swell the ranks of the Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA) and Umkhonto WeSizwe (MK), the military wings of the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) and African National Congress (ANC) respectively. This is the only liberation movement that has trusted a woman to be its president: Winnie Kgware, elected as the first president of the Black People's Convention (BPC) in 1972.

ROOTS OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

The 1960s witnessed a strong wave of black consciousness or black nationalism in the USA, forcefully articulated by black revolutionaries such as Malcolm X, Angela Davis and Stokely Carmichael, to mention only a few. Whenever the philosophy of black consciousness (BC) is discussed in the South African context, it is attributed to the struggles of blacks in the USA. While such an analysis is partly right, it does not give a full picture if it removes the local African influence from the equation.

Biko leaves us in no doubt about this. In a 1972 interview with Gail Gerhart (2008), he notes that "the influence from Africa was very important" to the evolution of black consciousness in South Africa. He singles out Frantz Fanon, the Martinique-born psychiatrist and prolific author of *The Wretched of the Earth,* among many others, who was renowned for his participation in the anti-colonial struggle in Algeria. Biko also acknowledges the influence of Leopold Senghor, one of the leading figures of the negritude movement, and the first president of independent Senegal. He does not leave out Senegal's Cheikh Anta Diop, revered in Afrocentric scholarship circles and widely acclaimed for his book, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality.* Biko does not fail to recognise the African diasporic contribution either, openly acknowledging Carmichael, who later changed his name to Kwame Ture.

This should not give the false impression that there was no local South African influence. In his essay, "White racism and black consciousness", Biko quotes Aimé Césaire as he traces South African BC to "a group of angry young black men who were beginning to 'grasp the notion of (their) peculiar uniqueness' and who were eager to define who they were and what." (Biko, 1987: 67) These were the elements, Biko continues

> *"who were disgruntled with the direction imposed on the African National Congress by the "old guard" within its leadership. These young men were questioning a number of things, among which was the "go slow" attitude adopted by the leadership, and the ease with which the leadership accepted coalitions with organisations other than those run by blacks. The "People's Charter" adopted in Kliptown in 1955 was evidence of this. In a sense one can say that these were the first real signs that the blacks in South Africa were beginning to realise the need to go it alone, and to evolve a philosophy based on, and directed by, blacks. In other words, black consciousness was slowly manifesting itself."*

An examination of the history of the South African struggle would reveal that the young men Biko refers to, who registered their disgruntlement with coalitions and had a strong objection to the 1955 Freedom Charter, were the young African nationalists in the ANC who later broke away to form the PAC, under the leadership of Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe. Just as the African nationalists broke away from the ANC, due to resentment

of perceived white domination, black consciousness students broke away from the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) and formed the South African Students Organisation (SASO), because of their perception of the elevation of white students' aspirations and the relegation of black students' frustrations. Of course, white students were the majority in NUSAS while Africans were the majority in Congress Alliance led by the ANC, but the nationalists of the 1950s and the BC adherents of the 1960s shared a common aversion to perceived white domination of the liberation struggle.

SELF-RELIANCE AND SOLIDARITY

Biko observed that the rise of black consciousness was largely "attributable to the sudden death of political articulation of ideas within black ranks, which came about as a result of the banning of all the political ideas" (in Gerhart, 2008: 21) when anti-apartheid political parties were banned in 1960. Its consequence was that "effectively all black resistance was killed, and the stage was left open to whites of liberal opinion to make representation for blacks, in a way that had not happened in the past, unaccompanied by black opinion" (ibid.).

In the aftermath of the banning of the liberation movement, organisations like NUSAS and the Progressive Party took centre stage. In Biko's eyes these

"were in fact white organisations, white-dominated in terms of members, but open in terms of membership. The best blacks could do was just to be there, and to allow whites to speak on their behalf. And all blacks were doing all this time was just to clap and say "amen"." (in Gerhart, 2008: 22)

This was unacceptable to Biko and those who shared his view. Black people could not be spectators in a game where they should be players.

In "The definition of black consciousness", Biko speaks of "the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers, around the same cause of their operation – the blackness of their skin – and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude" (Biko, 1987: 49). Some – both within and outside of the BCM – have argued, and continue to argue, that black consciousness treated the issue of skin colour as irrelevant. This definition proves otherwise. How could the issue of skin colour be ignored when it was used as a criterion to politically oppress, socially degrade and economically exploit black people?

However, it is equally true that the BCM did not reduce "blackness" to skin colour or pigmentation. It was regarded as a "reflection of a mental attitude" (Biko, 1987: 48). Referring to oneself as "black" was a commitment to fight against all forces that sought to stamp a black person as a subservient person. Remember that this was a period when black people were identified as "non-whites", "kaffirs" and "Bantus". Racist whites had arrogated to themselves the right to name, rename and misname black people. Black consciousness sought to put a stop to that.

The philosophy and the movement focused on black solidarity and self-reliance. This meant that white people were excluded from participation in the BCM, a position that invited charges of racism from some white liberals. However, the rejection of white participation was not merely ideological. The SASO breakaway was informed by concrete experiences with white comrades in NUSAS who verbally expressed solidarity with black people but contradicted this with their actions. At a NUSAS conference in 1967, it emerged that black students would stay in one residence and blacks in another. The black students' response was that the conference should close. But it did not, and went ahead. Biko realised "at that stage that this was a dead organisation; it wouldn't listen to us, and that no useful and forthright opinion can be expressed from the aegis of this organisation" (Gerhart, 2008: 22).

The following year, again at a NUSAS conference, another argument broke out about how to respond to the apartheid law that stipulated that blacks could be in a white area for no longer than 72 hours. Black students wanted to defy the law, but their white comrades appealed for compliance. Biko observes that

"what made whites hysterical about what we were saying was that we said: all right, when the vans come to collect us, whites should all lie in front of the vans so that they don't move. The whites could not support this. They saw it as an extremely irresponsible, radical line that didn't take into account the interests of the students on the restricted campuses." (ibid.)

An intense two-hour debate ensued, with neither side willing to concede. Since black students were outnumbered, Biko realised that putting the issue to the vote would not yield a positive result. From these experiences, he learned that whites were not willing to listen to blacks – they wanted make the decisions, and blacks should be followers. It was time to call it a day and form an exclusively black students' organisation. That is what informed the birth of black consciousness and the formation of SASO in 1968.

In "White racism and black consciousness", Biko argues that, while it would be a "cruel assumption to believe that all whites are not sincere … one has to come to the painful conclusion that the liberal is in fact appeasing his own conscience" (Biko, 1987: 65). He impatiently continues: "Why then do they persist in talking to the blacks? Since they are aware that the problem in this country is white racism, why do they not address themselves to the white world? Why do they insist to talk to blacks?"

CLASS AND RACE

From another angle, white leftists argued that the BCM had misdiagnosed the ills of apartheid South Africa: the problem was not colour but class. Biko was suspicious of this use of class analysis:

"A number of whites in this country adopt the class analysis, primarily because they want to detach us from anything relating to race. In case it has a rebound effect on them because they are white. This is the problem. So a lot of them adopt the class analysis as a defence mechanism and are persuaded by it because they find it more comfortable." (in Gerhart, 2008: 34)

From a black consciousness perspective, the problem in South Africa was "not only capitalism… it is also the whole gamut of white value systems which has been adopted as standard by South Africa, both whites and blacks so far" (ibid.).

Biko was sensitive to the reality that, with the advent of colonialism, Africans could no longer run their own affairs. Instead, they were "tolerated simply because our cheap labour is needed" (Biko, 1987: 46). Clearly, he was aware of the economic exploitation blacks were subjected to. Continuing his observation of the cultural assimilation, Biko notes that Africans were thus

"judged terms of standards we were not responsible for. Whenever colonisation sets in with its dominant culture, it devours the native culture and leaves behind a bastardised culture. This is what has happened to the African culture. It is called a sub-culture purely because the African people in the urban complexes are mimicking the white man rather unashamedly." (ibid.)

He was very clear about the position African culture should occupy in a free Azania (the BCM's preferred name for South Africa): "a country in Africa, in which the majority of the people are African, must inevitably exhibit African values and be truly African in style" (Biko, 1987: 24). That is because "one cannot escape the fact that the culture shared by the majority group in any given society must ultimately determine the broad direction taken by the joint culture of that society" (ibid.). Black people lived in the shadows of white people: theirs was not just physical oppression, but a mental enslavement that reduced them spiritually. The battle site of values would need attention even in post-revolutionary society.

Biko wanted to address the black condition holistically, and he conceived of black consciousness as the best way to restore self-esteem in black people and to recognise that they did not need white tutelage to become free. The challenges experienced by blacks, he argued, would not be "solved completely when you alter the economic pattern, to a socialist pattern" (Gerhart, 2008: 34).

AFRICAN COMMUNALISM

Not focusing on capitalism was not the same thing as ignoring its existence and its effects. In order to understand the BCM's stance towards capitalism, as articulated by Biko, one needs to read his essay, "Some African cultural concepts". Here he observes that "[a]ttitudes of Africans to property show just how unindividualistic the African is", noting that "most things

were jointly owned by the group" and that "there was no such thing as individual land ownership. The land belonged to the people and was merely under the local chief on behalf of the people" (Biko, 1987: 43). He states that "individualism… is the hallmark of the capitalist approach" (ibid: 42).

As if not to leave us in any doubt, his essay "Black consciousness and the quest for a true humanity" recognises that "the colour question in South African politics was originally introduced for economic reasons" (Biko, 1987: 87–8) and that capitalism is exploitative. His answer to the evils of capitalism was African communalism. But according to Mangcu (2012: 249), the Marxist-oriented branch of the BCM in the Western Cape "rejected anything short of a socialist/communist vision of the country… [and were] strongly opposed to the concept of black communalism proposed in the position paper as the basis for future economic policy".

In 1977, the Black Consciousness Movement suffered two severe blows. Biko was killed in September and the BC-aligned organisations were banned the following month. In 1978, the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) was formed and declared itself a socialist organisation. The organisation emphasised that black people were oppressed both on the basis of race and on the basis of class. Trade unions emerged that were inspired by black consciousness and addressed black people as workers.

In 1983, under the banner of the National Forum, AZAPO and organisations opposed to racist South Africa adopted the Azanian Manifesto. This document clearly identifies the BCM's stance at this juncture. Neville Alexander, in "An illuminating moment: Background to the Azanian Manifesto", notes that the "politics of the BCM as a movement was complex and constantly changing. At first sight, it was informed by an Africanist ideology that was closer to the views of a Robert Sobukwe than those of a Nelson Mandela" (Alexander, 2008: 159).

The Azanian Manifesto states that the

"black working class inspired by revolutionary consciousness is the driving force of our struggle. 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, antiracist and socialist Azania." (in Alexander, 2008: 168) ⚑

REFERENCES

Alexander, N. 2008. "An illuminating moment: Background to the Azanian Manifesto". In Mngxitama et al (eds)

Biko, S. 1987. *I Write What I Like*. Oxford: Heinemann.

Gerhart, GM. 2008. Interview with Biko. In Mngxitama et al (eds)

Mangcu, X. 2012. *Biko: A Biography*. Cape Town: Tafelberg.

Mngxitama, A, A Alexander and NC Gibson (eds). 2008. *Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan