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Dr. Thomas G. Karis
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Dear Thomas

I can see why you have made such a successful researcher and author. You never give up. You really do run after whoever has promised to do a task for you until he/she has actually done it. Congratulations!

For my part I must really apologise for the delay in fulfilling my promise. In retrospect, I find that the delay was, to some extent, a blessing in disguise. In my comments on the Black Renaissance Convention I have had the benefit of looking at it also in the light of subsequent developments particularly the CDF at which you were fortunately present.

Enclosed please find my critique of the Black Renaissance Convention. Feel absolutely free to edit it as long as the meaning is not substantially changed. I look forward to the finished product.

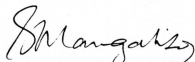
Please give my special regards to Gail. I must confess it was very nice meeting both of you again in New York city en route to Nicaragua and Cuba. If I must say so I was most impressed by the people in those two countries. Their experiments with the socialist model have not always been successful as they themselves would admit. But the one thing one must say is that they certainly have been worth the attempt. Had they been allowed to carry out their experiment without the constant fear of being militarily squashed by their bigger neighbour, I am sure that they would probably be offering to the world quite an interesting new vision of how to organise society.

Please do not forget also to give my very special greetings to your wife whose support I am sure you find most valuable.

Wishing you every success in the very good work that you continue to promote.

I remain

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Smangaliso'.

SMANGALISO MKHATSWA (Fr.)

General Secretary

THE BLACK RENAISSANCE CONVENTION REVISITED

INTRODUCTION

Sixteen years ago an important political event took place in South Africa. It was the black renaissance convention and was held in December 1974 at Hammanskraal, near Pretoria. The idea of such a conference had been in gestation for many months. Extensive consultation was mooted before the main organisers finally decided to proceed with the project. Subsequent developments demonstrated that non-Church organisations (e.g. SASO and B.P.C) should have been invited to serve on the organising committee. Although luminaries such as the late Steve Biko, Beyers Naude, Ben Khoapa and Barney Pitso, to mention but a few, were fully consulted, members of the Black consciousness movement were not fully represented on the Steering Committee. As it happened, the organising committee comprised Church leaders or employees of Church organisations. The major players were linked to the SACC, SACBC and the N.G. Kerk in Afrika. Three of the most likely explanations for this were that these Church organisations had or could find resources, the organisers were meeting frequently and the organisers were themselves active members of the Black consciousness movement at the time and therefore did not suspect the possibility of a conflict between themselves and other members of the black consciousness movement. The organisers should have been more sensitive to the fact that the Black People's Convention had only just been founded, that the prominent leaders of the Black consciousness movement were banned or politically disabled. To allay fears and minimise friction a bigger role should have been given to the B.C. leadership.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF THE CONFERENCE.

Conventional wisdom shows that events of political significance are normally better appreciated in hindsight. It is common cause that the aim of the Black Renaissance Convention was to do a critical analysis and assessment of the struggle for democracy, justice and unity in an apartheid South Africa. In essence this is what it was all about. In retrospect one must point out the timeliness of this exercise. Internationally, particularly in the Third World, the struggle against imperialism and colonialism had reached its height. In Vietnam the revolutionaries were winning the war against the United States. Nearer home the Portuguese and racist white Rhodesians were conceding defeat inflicted upon their regimes by the freedom fighters. In Latin America and elsewhere the mood was for the liberation of the oppressed people. On the Church Front, there was involvement in the struggle against injustice.

Influenced to some extent by the Black consciousness movement in the U.S.A. and partly encouraged by a heightened social awareness and contradictions within the apartheid system, black people in South Africa were in a militant mood. In 1974 the youth and students were already preparing for the social explosion which was to erupt in 1976 and continued for some years afterwards. This development coupled with an upsurge in the unionisation of workers from 1973 onwards as well as the establishment of numerous other organisations, laid the foundation for the United Democratic Front, the popularisation of the ANC and formation of the Mass Democratic Movement.

THE QUEST FOR UNITY

Another interesting observation is the way history moves in waves as well as in circles. By way of illustration. When the African National Congress was launched in 1912, it did not exclude the groups or persons who were "working within the system". A conscious attempt was made to invite all the oppressed people. Again when people were consulted in preparation for the Freedom Charter, a concerted effort was made to win over even the servants of apartheid. After the banning of the ANC and PAC until the birth of the B.C. movement the general attitude of the people towards bantustan leaders was one of suspicion and rejection.

This was always not so, though. Take the case of Gatsha Buthelezi, for example. When he assumed the leadership of Kwa-Zulu he was generally accepted. Only subsequent developments led to his ostracism. The total rejection of all bantustans and their chiefs at the Black Renaissance Convention must be seen in that context. What is particularly interesting is that the Conference for a Democratic Future held in 1989 had no problem in extending an open invitation to all groups in South Africa provided they endorsed certain principles. It is common cause that this openness reflected the policies of the M.D.M. and the ANC.

Although members of the Black Consciousness Movement and the Pan Africanist movement participated in the preparation for the C.D.F. sharp ideological differences surfaced during the conference. It was difficult to understand this attitude, as all the major political forces and sectors had been consulted throughout. However, in the light of present political developments and trends in South Africa, one can rightly conclude that the Black Renaissance Convention was ahead of its time. In attempting to force a principled unity (not necessarily an organisation) among the oppressed in 1974 we were quite correct but a little too hasty.

Significantly, though, the C.D.F. resolutions were essentially similar to those of the Black Renaissance Convention.

CONCLUSION

The analysis and sentiments expressed in the Introduction to the Black Renaissance (published in 1975, Johannesburg) remain as valid today as they were in 1975. The only difference might be one of emphasis. Whilst it was right to stress black unity, the emphasis on blackness tended to underplay or even conceal some of the social factors which should have received greater prominence in our analysis of the 1974 events. A casual reading of the Black Renaissance Convention documents sometimes give the wrong impression that the Convention was just a cultural event. Fortunately, the Black Renaissance Convention resolutions removed any such confusion.

For all its shortcomings, the Black Renaissance Convention remains one of the most significant events in the history of our struggle against apartheid.