

# BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE QUEST FOR TRUE HUMANITY

by Steve Biko

It is perhaps fitting to start off by examining the real reasons which make it necessary for us to think collectively about a problem we never created. In doing so, I do not wish to appear to be unnecessarily concerning myself with the White people in this country, but I sincerely believe that in order to get to the right answer, we must ask the right questions; we have to find out what went wrong where and when; we have to find out whether our position is a deliberate creation by God or an artificial fabrication of the truth by power-hungry people whose motive is authority, security, wealth and comfort. In other words the "Black Consciousness" approach would be irrelevant in a colourless and non-exploitative egalitarian society. It is relevant here because we believe that the anomalous situation we find ourselves in is deliberately man-made for the reasons mentioned.

There is no doubt that the colour question in South African politics was originally introduced for economic motives. The leaders of the White community had to create some kind of barrier between Blacks and Whites such that the Whites could enjoy privilege at the expense of Blacks and still feel free to give a moral explanation for the obvious exploitation that pricked even the hardest of White consciences. However, tradition has it that whenever a group of people has tasted the lovely fruits of wealth, security and prestige they begin to find it more comfortable to believe in the obvious lie and to accept it as in fact quite normal that they alone are entitled to privilege. In order to believe this seriously, they need to convince themselves of all the arguments that support the lie. It is, therefore, not surprising that in South Africa, after generations of exploitation. White people on the whole have come to believe in the inferiority of the Black man, so much so that while originally the race problem was an offshoot of the economic greed exhibited by White people, it has now become a serious problem on its own. White people now despise Black people, not because they need to reinforce their attitude and therefore justify their position of privilege but simply because they actually believe that Black is inferior and bad. This is the basis upon which Whites are working in this country. This is what shows South Africa to be a racist society.

## INSTITUTIONALISED

The racism we meet is not only on an individual basis; it is also institutionalised to make it look like the South African way of life. Although of late there is a feeble attempt to gloss over the overt racist elements in the system, it is still true that the system derives its nourishment from the existence of anti-Black attitudes in the society. To make the lie live even longer, Blacks have to be denied any chance of accidentally proving their equality to the White man.

It is for this reason that there is job reservation, lack of training in skilled work, and a tight orbit around professional possibilities for Blacks. Stupidly enough, the system turns back to say that Blacks are inferior because they have no economists, no engineers, etc. even in spite of the fact that they make it impossible for Blacks to acquire these skills.

To give some kind of authenticity to their lie and to show the righteousness of their claim, Whites have further worked out detailed schemes to 'solve' the racial situation in this country. Thus, a pseudo-parliament has been created for 'Coloureds' and several 'independent Bantu states' are in the process of being set up. So independent and 'lucky' are they that they do not have to spend a cent on their defence because they have nothing to fear from White South Africa who will always come to their assistance in times of need. One can of course see the arrogance of Whites and their contempt for Blacks even in their well-considered modern schemes for subjugation.

## SWART GEVAAR

The overall success of the White power structure has been managing to bind the Whites together in defence of the status quo. By skilfully playing on that imaginary bogey — "swart gevaar" — they have managed to convince even the die-hard liberals that there is something to fear in the event of the Black man assuming his rightful place at the helm of the South African ship. Thus after years of silence we are able to hear the familiar voice of Dr. Alan Paton shouting from as far away as London — "perhaps apartheid is worth a try". 'At whose expense, Dr. Paton?', asks an intelligent Black journalist. Hence Whites in general reinforce each other even though they allow some moderate disagreements on the subjugation schemes.

## DO NOT QUESTION

There is no doubt that they do not question the validity of White values. They see nothing anomalous in the fact that they alone are arguing about the future of 17 million Blacks — in a land which is the natural backyard of the Black people. All proposals for change emanating from the Black world are viewed with great indignation. Even the so-called Opposition has the cheek to tell the Coloured people that they are asking for too much. A journalist from a "liberal" newspaper like the "Sunday Times" describes a Black student — who is only speaking the truth — as a militant, impatient young man.

It is not enough for Whites to be on the offensive. So immersed are they in prejudice that they do not believe

that Blacks can formulate their thoughts without White guidance and trusteeship. Thus, even those Whites who see a lot wrong with the system make it their business to control the response of the Blacks to the provocation. No one is suggesting that it is not the business of Whites of liberal opinion to oppose what is wrong. However, to us it appears as too much of a coincidence that liberals — few as they are — should not only be determining the modus operandi of those Blacks who oppose the system but also leading it, in spite of their involvement in the system.

To us it looks as if, in fact, their role spells out the totality of the White power structure — the fact that though Whites are our problem it is still other Whites who want to tell us how to deal with that problem. They do so by creating all sorts of red herrings across our path. They tell us that the situation is a class struggle rather than a race one. Let them go to van Tonder in the Free State and tell him this. We believe we know what the problem is and will stick by our findings.

### FALSE COALITION

I want to go a little bit deep in this discussion because I feel it is about time we killed this false political coalition between Blacks and Whites as long as it is set up on a wrong analysis of our situation. I want to kill it for another reason also — that it forms at present the greatest stumbling block to our unity. It dangles before freedom-hungry Blacks promises of a great future for which no one seems to be particularly working in these groups.



Shaka

The basic problem in South Africa has been analysed by liberal Whites to be apartheid. They argue that in order to oppose it we have to form non-racial groups. Between these two extremes, they claim, there lies the land of milk and honey for which we are working. The **thesis**, the **antithesis** and the **synthesis** have been mentioned by some great philosophers as the cardinal points around which any social revolution revolves. For the liberals, the **thesis** is apartheid, the **antithesis** is non-racialism and the **synthesis** very feebly defined.

They want to tell the Blacks that the integration they see is the solution to the ideal society. Black Consciousness defines the situation differently. The **thesis** is in fact a strong White racism and therefore, ipso facto, the **antithesis** to this must be a strong solidarity amongst the Blacks on whom this racism seeks to prey. Out of these two situations we can therefore hope to reach some kind of balance — a true humanity where power politics will have no place. This analysis spells out the difference between the old and new approaches more than any more words can show. The failure of the liberals is in fact that their **antithesis** is already a watered-down version of the truth whose close proximity to the **thesis** will nullify the purported balance.

This is the failure of the SPROCAS commissions to make any real headway, for they are already looking for an 'alternative' that shall be acceptable to the White man. Everybody in the commissions knows what is right but all are looking for the most decent way of dodging the responsibility of saying what is right.

### DELIBERATE ACT

It is much more important for us Blacks to see this difference than it is for Whites. We must learn to accept that no group, however benevolent, can ever hand power to the vanquished on a plate. We must accept that 'the limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress'. As long as we go to Whitey begging cap in hand for our own emancipation, we are giving him further sanction to continue with his racist and oppressive system. We must realise that our situation is not a mistake on the part of Whites but a deliberate act and that no amount of moral lectures will persuade the White man to "correct" the situation. The system concedes nothing without demand for it, formulates its very method of operation on the basis that the ignorant will learn to know, the child will grow into an adult and therefore demands will begin to be made. It gears itself to resist demands in whatever way it sees fit. When you refuse to make these demands and choose to come to a round table to beg for your deliverance, you are in fact calling for the contempt of those who have power over you.

This is why we must reject the beggar tactics that are being forced down our throat by those who wish to appease our cruel masters. This is where the SASO message and cry becomes very relevant — **BLACK MAN, YOU ARE ON YOUR OWN!** "

The concept of integration, whose virtues are often extolled in White liberal circles, is full of unquestioned assumptions that embrace Whites' values. It is a concept long defined by Whites and never examined by Blacks. It is based on the assumption that all is well with the system save for some degree of mismanagement at the top by irrational conservatives. Even the people who argue for

integration often forget to veil it in its supposedly beautiful cloth. They tell each other that, were it not for job reservation, there would be a beautiful market to exploit.

## PEOPLE

They forget that they are talking about people. They see Blacks as extensions of brooms and additional levers to some complicated industrial machine. This is White man's integration — an integration based on exploitative values in a society in which the Whites have already cut out their position somewhere at the top of the pyramid. It is an integration in which Black will compete with Black, using each other as stepping stones up a steep ladder leading them to white values. It is an integration in which the Black man will have to prove himself in terms of these values before meriting acceptance and ultimate assimilation.

It is an integration in which the poor will grow poorer and the rich richer in a country where the poor has always been Black. No one wants to be reminded that it is the indigenous people who are poor and exploited in the land of their birth. These are concepts which the Black consciousness approach wishes to eradicate from the Black man's mind before our society is driven to chaos by irresponsible people from Coca-cola and hamburger cultural backgrounds.

What is Black Consciousness? In essence this is an attitude of mind and a way of life. It is the most positive call to emanate from the Black world for a long time. Its unadulterated quintessence is the realisation by the Black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their oppression — 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. It is based on a self-examination which has ultimately led them to believe that by seeking to run away from themselves and to emulate the White man they are insulting the intelligence of whoever created them Black.

## GROUP PRIDE

The philosophy of Black consciousness, therefore expresses group pride and the determination by Blacks to rise and attain the envisaged self. Freedom is the ability to define one's self, possibilities and limitations held back, not by the power of other people over you, but by your relationship to God and to natural surroundings. On his own therefore the Black man wishes to explore his surroundings and to test his possibilities, in other words to make real his freedom by whatever means he deems fit. At the heart of this kind of thinking is the realisation by Blacks that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.

If one is free at heart, no human-made chains can bind one to servitude; but if one's mind is so effectively manipulated and controlled by the oppressor as to make the oppressed believe that he is a liability to the White man, then there will be nothing the oppressed can do to scare his powerful masters.

Hence thinking along lines of Black consciousness makes the Black man see himself as a being, entire in himself. It makes him less dependant and more free to express his manhood. At the end of it all, he cannot tolerate attempts by anybody to dwarf the significance of his manhood.

In order that Black consciousness can be used to advantage as a philosophy to apply to people in a position like ours, a number of points have to be observed. As people existing in a continuous struggle for truth, we have to examine and question old concepts, values and systems. Having found the right answers we shall then work for consciousness amongst all people to make it possible for us to proceed towards these answers. In the process towards the answers we have to evolve our own schemes, forms and strategies to suit the need and situation, all the time keeping in mind our fundamental beliefs and values.

## BATTERED

In all aspects of Black-White relationship both in the past and at present we see a constant tendency by Whites to depict an inferior status to what is Black. Our culture, our history and in fact 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.

The first people to come and relate to Blacks in a human way in this country were the missionaries. These people were brought to the vanguard of the colonisation movement to "civilise and educate" the savages and to introduce to them the Christian message. The religion they brought was a highly suspicious religion quite foreign to the Black indigenous people. African religion, in its essence, was not radically different from Christianity. We believed in one God. We had our own community of saints through whom we related to our God. We did not find it compatible with our way of life to worship God in isolation from the various aspects of our lives. Hence worship was not a specialised function that found expression once a week in a secluded building.

Instead, it featured in our wars, in our beer-drinking, in our customs in general. Whenever Africans drank, they would first relate to God by giving a portion of their beer away in a token of thanks. When anything went wrong at home they would offer sacrifices to appease God and to atone for their sins. There was no hell in our religion. We believed in the inherent goodness of man — hence we took it for granted that all people on death joined the community of saints and therefore merited our respect.

## MISSIONARIES

It was the missionaries who confused the people with their new religion. They scared our people with stories of hell. They painted their God as a demanding God who wanted worship "or else . . ." People had to discard their clothes and their customs in order to be accepted in this new religion. Knowing how religious the African people were, the missionaries stepped up their terrorist campaign on the emotions of the people with their detailed accounts of eternal burning, the gnashing of teeth and grinding of bone. By some strange and twisted logic, they argued that theirs was a scientific religion and ours a superstition — all this in spite of the biological discrepancy which is at the base of their 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 from White society, were taught to ridicule and despise those who defended the truism of their indigenous religion. With the ultimate acceptance of the Western religion down went our cultural values!

While not wishing to question the basic truth at the heart of the Christian message, I wish to state that there is a very strong case for a re-examination of Christianity. Christianity has proved to be a very adaptable religion which does not seek to supplement existing orders but – like any universal truth – to find application within a particular situation. More than anybody else the missionaries knew that not all they did was essential to the spread of the message.

But the basic intention went much further than merely spreading the word. Their arrogance and their monopoly on truth, beauty and moral judgment taught them to despise native customs and traditions and to seek to infuse into these societies their own new values. This then sets out the case for Black theology. While not wishing to discuss Black Theology at length, let it suffice to say it seeks to relate God and Christ once more to the Black man and to his daily problems.

It wants to describe Christ as a fighting God and not a passive God who allows a lie to exist unchallenged. It grapples with existential problems and does not claim to be a theology of absolutes. It seeks to bring back God to the Black man and to the truth and reality of his situation. This is an important aspect of Black consciousness, for quite a large proportion of Black people in this country are Christians still swimming in the mire of confusion – the aftermath of the missionary approach. It is the duty therefore of all Black priests and ministers of religion to take upon themselves the task of saving Christianity, by adopting the Black Theology approach and thereby uniting once more the Black man to his God.

## EDUCATION

Then too a long look should be taken at the educational system given to Blacks. The same tension situation was found as early ago as the arrival of the missionaries. Children were taught, under the pretext of hygiene, good manners, etiquette and other such vague concepts, to despise their mode of upbringing at home and to question values and customs prevalent in their society. The result was the expected one – children and parents saw life differently and the former lost respect for the latter.

Now in the African society it is a cardinal sin for a child to lose respect for his parent. Yet how can one prevent the loss of respect between child and parent when the child is taught by his know-all White tutors to disregard his family teachings? How can one resist losing respect for his tradition when in school his whole cultural background is summed up in one word – barbarism?

Thus we can immediately see the logic of bringing in the missionaries to the forefront of the colonisation process. Whenever one succeeds in making a group of people accept a foreign concept in which he is an expert, he creates out of them perpetual students whose progress in that particular field can only be evaluated by him and on whom the student shall constantly rely 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 all of us are at pains to please this powerful, know-all master. This is what Black Consciousness seeks to eradicate.



*Hintsa*

## DISTORTS THE PAST

As one Black writer says, colonialism is never satisfied with having the native in its grip but, by some strange logic, it turns to his past and disfigures and distorts it. Hence, the history of the Black man in this country is the most disappointing history to read about. It is merely presented as a long lamentation of repeated defeats. The Xhosas were thieves who went to war for stolen property. The Boers never provoked the Xhosas but merely went on "punitive expeditions" to teach the thieves a lesson.

Heroes like Makana who were essentially revolutionaries are painted as superstitious trouble-makers who told the people lies about bullets turning into water. Great nation builders like Shaka are cruel tyrants who frequently attacked smaller tribes for no reason except for some sadistic purposes. Not only is there no objectivity in the history taught us but frequently there is an appalling misrepresentation of facts that is sickening even to the uninformed student.

Thus a lot of attention has to be paid to our history if we as Blacks want to aid each other in our coming into consciousness. We have to rewrite our history and produce in it the heroes that formed the core of our resistance to the White invaders. More has to be revealed and stress has to be laid on the successful nation-building attempts by people like Shaka, Moshoeshoe, Hintsa. These are areas calling for intense research work to provide some desperately-needed missing link. It would be too naive of us to expect our conquerors to write unbiased histories about us anyway. We have to destroy the myth that our history starts in 1652.

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 for people 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 seems to suggest that we have nothing to boast about except loins, sex and drink. We

are aware that when colonisation sets in, it devours the indigenous culture and leaves behind it a bastardised culture that may thrive at the pace and rate allowed it by the dominant culture. But nevertheless we also have to realise that the basic tenets of our culture have succeeded to a great extent in withstanding the process of bastardisation and that even at this moment we can still demonstrate that we enjoy Man for himself. Ours is a true Man-centred society whose sacred tradition is that of sharing.

## HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

We must reject, as we have been doing, the individualistic cold approach to life that is the corner stone of the Anglo-Boer culture. We must seek to restore to the Black man in general the great stress we used to lay on human relationships, the high regard for people, their property and for life in general; to dwarf the triumph of technology over man and to reduce the materialistic element that is slowly creeping into our society.

These are essential features of our Black culture to which we must cling. The term Black culture above all implies the freedom by us to innovate without recourse to White values. This innovation is part of the natural development of any culture. A culture is essentially the society's composite answer to the varied problems of life. We are experiencing new problems by the day and whatever we do adds to the richness of our cultural heritage as long as it has Man as its centre. The adoption of Black Theatre and drama is one such important innovation which we need to encourage and to develop. Our love for music and rhythm must be made to assume some relevance even in this present day.

## COLONISED

Being part of an exploitative society in which very often we are direct objects of exploitation, we need to evolve strategy to our economic situation. We are aware of the fact that the Blacks are still colonised even within the borders of South Africa. Their cheap labour has helped to make South Africa what it is today. Our money from the townships takes a one-way street to White shops and White banks and all we do in our lives is to pay to the White man.

Capitalist exploitation tendencies coupled with the overt arrogance of White racism have conspired against us. Thus now in South Africa it is very expensive to be poor. It is the poor people who stay furthest from town and therefore have to spend more money on transport to come and work for White people; it is the poor people who use uneconomic and inconvenient fuel like paraffin and coal because of refusal of the White man to instal electricity in Black areas; it is the poor people who are governed by many ill-defined restrictive laws and therefore have to spend money on fines for "technical" offences; it is the poor people who have no hospitals and are therefore exposed to the exorbitant charges from private doctors; it is the poor people who use untarred roads and therefore experience the greatest wear and tear on commodities like shoes; it is the poor people who have to pay for their children's books while Whites get them free. Of course it is the Black people who are poor.

Needless to say therefore we need to take another look at how best to use our economic power, little as it seems. We must seriously examine the possibilities of establishing business co-operatives whose interests shall be ploughed

back into community development programmes. We should examine more closely such lines as the "buy Black" campaign once suggested in Johannesburg and to establish our own banks for the benefit of the community. Organisational development amongst Blacks has only been low because we allowed it. Now that we are aware we are on our own, it is more than a duty for us to fulfill these needs.

## INVOLVEMENT

The last step in Black Consciousness is to broaden the base of our operation. One of the basic tenets of Black Consciousness is totality of involvement. By this we mean that all Blacks must sit as one big unit and no fragmentation and distraction from the main stream of events must be allowed. Hence we must resist the attempts by the protagonists of "separate development" to fragment our approach. We are oppressed not as individuals, not as Zulus, Xhosas, Vendas or Indians. We are oppressed because we are Black. We must use that very concept to unite ourselves and to respond as a cohesive group. We must cling to each other with a tenacity that must shock the perpetrators of evil.

Our preparedness to take upon ourselves the cudgels of the struggle will see us through. We must completely remove from our vocabulary the concept of fear. Truth must triumph ultimately over evil. The White man has always nourished his greed on this basic fear that manifests itself in the Black community. Special branch agents will not turn the lie into truth and one must ignore them. In a real bid for change we have to take off our coats, be prepared to lose our comfort and security, our jobs, and our positions of prestige, our families; for just as it is true that "leadership and security are basically incompatible", it may well be true that a struggle without casualties is not worth its salt. We must ultimately accept that prophetic cry by Black students "Black man, you are on your own!"

Some will charge that we are racist but let us not take heed, for these people are using exactly the values we reject. We do not have the power to subjugate anyone. We are merely responding to provocation in the most realistic way. Racism not only implies exclusion of one race by another — it always presupposes that the exclusion is for the purposes of subjugation. Blacks have had enough experience as objects of racism not to wish to reverse the tables. While it may be relevant now to talk about Black in relation to White, we must not make this our pre-occupation for it can be a negative exercise. As we proceed more towards the achievement of our goals let us talk more about ourselves and our struggle and less about Whites.

We have set out on a quest for true humanity and somewhere in the distant horizon we can see the glittering prize. Let us march forth with courage and determination, drawing strength from our common plight and our brotherhood. In time we shall be in a position to bestow upon South Africa the greatest gift possible — a more human face.

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