

Now that the mass newsmedia have commented on the Convention; now that some hitherto unknown facts as well as vital information have come to light, we owe it to the people that an unbiased account of the Conference should be made available, particularly to those of our brothers and sisters who could not witness this historic event for themselves. Millions of our people got second-hand reports, either from the White-man's Press or from the delegates who attended the Convention. The weakness of such accounts need no mention. In general, the White-man's Press highlighted and dramatised the negative aspects of the Black Renaissance Convention. In the interests of truth, though, one must admit, with deep praise, that the "STAR" and "PRETORIA NEWS" were the most positive and objective of the English medium newspapers. In its leader the STAR wrote (December 1974):

"BLACK VOICES MUST BE HEARD:

The Day of the Covenant weekend is traditionally one of White rhetoric, but this time there were some coincidental new voices which also deserve the closest attention.

They came from the Black Renaissance Convention, organised by Black theologians and broadly devoted to themes of "Black Consciousness".

At the close of their discussions the 300-odd delegates condemned separate development and racial discrimination; called for an equal distribution of South Africa's wealth and a nonracial society with one man, one vote.

Predictable stuff? Perhaps - but it is important to note whence it comes. By and large these were neither angry young students (they tried to disrupt the meeting) nor Bantustan leaders (one of whom was prevented from speaking).

They were, if you like, a middle stratum of Black urban intellectuals. And yet they came out with a set of demands which might sound, in the eyes of most Whites, impossibly extreme.

These are the demands born of frustration and the sheer inadequacy of existing political institutions for Blacks. If the current fine phrases about equal citizenship mean anything at all, White South Africa must take note of this rising mood among moderate Blacks - and start doing something, now, towards meeting it".

The PRETORIA NEWS leader (17 December 1974)

"TIME TO TALK AT HOME:

Day of the Covenant messages and speeches, from that of the State President downwards, reflected White South Africa's growing acceptance of the need to solve Southern Africa's racial problems by co-operation, not confrontation. Nothing could underline the wisdom of this more than the revealing glimpses of the mood of Black South Africa today that were provided by the Black Renaissance Convention at the weekend.

In the end the militancy of the South African Students' Organisation and the Black People's Convention was held in check, but it was strong enough, at a Conference organised by the Churches, to eject a Lebowa Minister, Mr. Ramusi, himself an opponent of separate development, and to ensure the passage of a resolution rejecting separate development and its institutions.

Between White and Black South Africa there is clearly a gap to be bridged by consultation round the conference table comparable with that between White and Black Rhodesia. The difference is that in Rhodesia, both sides, having experienced the ghastliness of confrontation, are prepared to give consultation another try. South Africa still has time to avoid a clash, but dare not ignore the danger signals

Ironically our contribution to the latest endeavour to achieve a peaceful settlement of the Rhodesian dispute has shortened the time we have at our disposal for putting our own house in order. We have helped persuade Rhodesia to release political detainees and negotiate with banned organisations. Should we not practise what we have preached? Should not the Government, preparing in any case to talk to homeland leaders about urban Black problems, examine the need of going further? Should it not accept the irresistible logic of the argument that it will have to talk to people such as Sobukwe and Mandela, expatriate Black nationalists and Black organisations that are at present banned?

For separate development to be given a real chance of showing it can work such a step seems unavoidable."

Every Black man knows that the Whites have vested interest in the status quo and in the apparently irreparable disunity among the Black people. So, it was only to be expected that a hostile Press would stress the "divisions" that appeared at the Convention. For example, according to the White-man's Press, the outcome of the Black Renaissance Convention resulted from the SASO-BPC's bull-doing tactics. In South Africa, everybody knows that anything supported and promoted by the "SASO-BPC axis" is tantamount to "immaturity", "hot-headedness", "suicide-mania", "anti-Whitism", "irresponsible radicalism", "violence or bloodshed"..... In other words, there has obviously been a futile yet sustained attempt at driving a wedge between the SASO/BPC axis and the rest of the Black community. The reasoning goes as follows: Since SASO/BPC is constituted by a bunch of school drop-outs, hysterical girls, immature self-styled militants, surely no self-respecting or sane citizen of Azania can take seriously whatever emanates from such an unfortunate crowd! We do not wish to repeat some distressing "evidence" about the alleged hypocritical double dealings, etc. which SASO/BPC have been accused of. We shall return to some of these points later, because we cannot tolerate, let alone encourage, this destructive character assassination against our children, brothers and sisters. At the same time, we shall obviously not condone vandalistic and iconoclastic behaviour by some members of these organisations.

We said that another source of information about the Black Renaissance Convention has been those delegates who were physically present. Not a few among them were exposed to such a meeting for the first time. The puerile behaviour of the so-called SASO/BPC clique did annoy and bewilder some of the delegates, most of whom were connected with the Church and thus unaccustomed to stormy and heated debates. Fortunately, many of the delegates were able to discern the real significance of the Convention, in spite of the disgusting ill-mannered behaviour of one or two delegates, whose saboteur rôle was only brought to light afterwards.

The natural question Black people are asking is: "Was the Black Renaissance Convention a success? If the primary objective of the Conference is properly understood, then we shall have no hesitation in replying in the affirmative. In fact, the positive success of the Convention went far beyond our own expectations.

Thanks to all the active participation of the delegates. Whatever the outcome was, should be taken as the untrammelled voice of a wide-section of the Black community. Due to communications problems it was inevitable that there should be a preponderance of "intellectuals" as well as an adequate representation of the proletariate. There was an obvious absence of the peasants, who for various reasons could not attend. It is regrettable that so far none of the existing socio-political or students' organisations have ever involved peasants in their conferences. ANC and PAC were the only movements which made any organised inroads into the peasants' world. This is something for every so-called Black organisation to think about with a view to rectifying the anomaly.

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 Euthelezi, 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.

A group represented out of all proportion was the clergy and church representatives.

3. The Honourable Collins Ramusi and the other "protagonists of apartheid" were not physically evicted from the Conference, as suggested by the offending white newsmedia. As a matter of fact, these gentlemen sat through that session until it ended. The Honourable Collins Ramusi even participated in the whole debate and resolution.
4. It is reported that "many of the SASO/BPC members were sitting and smoking at the swimming pool of the seminary, whilst some hysterical girls were left to do the howling and heckling inside the hall....." We, the organising committee, regret these scandalous insinuations.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF SASO AND BPC

Why single out these organisations? Our reason for doing so is to rectify some deliberately negative misinterpretations about the "vandalistic tendencies" of SASO and BPC. To be honest, the most constructive contributions came from the 300-odd delegates, irrespective of their group affiliation. For example, many people are unaware that the "Declaration" and "Resolutions" were primarily based on the reports of the eight discussion-groups. The SASO/BPC (group 9) failed to report back. But in all fairness, it must be admitted that they participated very energetically in the actual debates which eventually led to the adoption of the "Declaration" and "Resolutions". Practically all the Resolutions and the Declaration were adopted by an overwhelming majority or unanimously. Even the "expulsion" of homelander was the decision of a majority vote. It is, therefore, absolutely irresponsible to suggest as "Ecu-News" and the white press do, that the SASO/BPC axis bulldozed the Conference into voting for things it did not know. We must not delude ourselves. What the SASO/BPC axis clamour for is precisely what Black people want, except that due to political naïveté, some organizations alienate Black people rather than win more allies.

The Convention was certainly not composed of illiterates! There were many university graduates among them. In any case, the so-called SASO/BPC clique formed hardly 9% of a total of 300 delegates. We reluctantly refer to that group as SASO/BPC axis merely for purposes of identification, following the example of the newspapers. The largely student group refused to be singled out as a SASO/BPC clique. Those concerned were unfortunately largely to blame for their being labelled a "clique". The manner in which they huddled together in one corner; the obvious way they darted in and out to caucus together, their repeated reference to SASO and BPC, especially on the first two days, left people with no option but to identify them as a distinct pressure group. Strategically, their performance was a disaster. They alienated the more mature delegates too early in the Conference. The unfortunate result was that they antagonized many would-be supporters. They arrogantly created the false impression that they are the "sole custodians" of the term "Black". Many hypocritically pretended to condemn any "White money", as though they themselves are financially supported from the Black Community. Some created the impression that they were experts in the clandestine operations of the C.I.A. and that they were the only self-appointed spokesmen of the Black Community. Most delegates were incensed by the indiscretion and deplorable lack of political sophistication displayed by the SASO/BPC axis. Generally speaking, they betrayed a heart-breaking degree of political infantilism. What has just been said are some of the observations by most delegates who witnessed the performance of the group in question. These are but minor annoyances which in no way detract from the laudable contribution of SASO/BPC.

As a group of Black people, we excluded all other non-Black persons, so as we might come together and talk as brothers and sisters.

We wanted to re-examine our situation as openly and candidly as possible. We did not wish to pretend we had already achieved the much-sought-after Black solidarity, but to intensify the machinery for its realization. We were reminded of the first Bandung Conference of 1954. For the first time, in the history of the colonized Black nations, men from Asia, Latin America, the West Indies and Africa came together. Brother Malcolm X points out that these Black people met together notwithstanding their religious, ideological, ethnic, political and philosophical differences. Their common experience of colonial and imperialist oppression was a uniting factor. They shut the doors and thrashed out their problems as a Black family. If we want to solve our number one problem, the Convention had to allow absolute free speech, without condoning girlish rudeness. We had to listen to one another's points of view without prejudice. The Convention provided a public platform for people to say the things which need to be aired. It is indeed regrettable that when SASO and BPC hold their conferences, only their own registered members attend. The people do need and will always require a non-ideological or neutral platform where they can freely voice their grievances and share views with other Blacks in so far as they are Blacks. Distinct political movements like BPC will always be necessary. Black politics do need leftist elements whose revolutionary fervour leave no room for compromise. However, political compromise may be a sign of political astuteness in given circumstances, not weakness.

To attempt a positive appraisal of SASO/BPC is not an easy undertaking. We feel that the growing ostracism of these organisations is a retrograde step in the liberation struggle of our community. They have been called all kinds of horrible names, some of which they deserve, thanks to their rare expertise in unnecessarily alienating allies rather than winning respect, acceptance and credibility. You don't gain support by labelling influential black people as "non-whites", "political renegades" etc. etc. As a block, SASO/BPC axis was the most hard working; daytime, night-time and meal times. This is an indication that they took the Convention very seriously. They made it clear they were not attending a vacation or a "gumba-gumba session". Clouding the real issue by lampooning these organizations won't quench the thirst of the Blacks for their manhood and freedom.

In politics, as in other forms of human relationships, your strength as a leader lies with the people. In Black society, young age can be a liability. As a young man you need to convince the grown-ups that you really deserve their respect and that you are mature in your judgement and actions. Most of our people will agree that thanks to SASO efforts, Black Consciousness has come to stay in South Africa. Because of the nature of its membership and composition, SASO only reached the educated and sophisticated segment of the population. Had SASO's original leadership remained intact, its contribution to the Black people would be tremendous today. One must understand, therefore, that in the absence of the stalwart sons of SASO and BPC at the Convention, it is not surprising that the members of SASO/BPC found themselves "political orphans". This observation should not minimise or ignore the extraordinary work, dedication and courage of those brothers who are presently keeping the SASO/BPC machinery in a state of smooth operation. Leading during crisis situations is never easy for anybody. One or two persons seized the leadership vacuum and dictated terms to the two groups. In spite of these handicaps, SASO/BPC axis deserve our praise and admiration for the splendid work and dogged determination they brought to the Convention. Black people must refuse to allow the subtle attempt by our enemies to drive a wedge between SASO/BPC and the rest of the Black people. These organizations may be well advised to conduct a little search into their constituencies. Some characters are not doing the movements any good.

If SASO/BPC make a mess of things, they remain our sons, daughters, brothers and sisters notwithstanding. They are part of the Black Community. We must resist the insidious temptation of the white press and its agents to categorise us into radicals, moderates and conservatives. As someone once observed, "Black people in South Africa love to indulge in intellectual and verbal masturbation..... one thing sure, they are hopeless organisers and still worse, they never implement what they plan". Nobody in their sound sense would advocate "solidarity at all costs". God forbid.

The SASO/BPC axis injected a lot of vitality into the discussions. Without their vigorous participation, the Convention would have been poorer. It is, therefore, regrettable that some people should gloat over the tragic blunders committed not by SASO/BPC, but by some individuals who claimed to be members of these organizations. As parents we have a parental duty towards them, because most of them lack political experience, education and leadership training. In a situation which stifles free political organization and expression, our young people must be given credit for their contribution, however meagre, in terms of political realism.

WHAT NEXT?

The Black Renaissance Convention indicated very loud and clear that:

- a) There is urgent need for more Conventions of this nature. Their exact nature and scope will be determined by an organizing committee.
- b) Grass-root organizers as well as the existing Black organizations should be revitalized and reinforced. They should immediately implement some of the Resolutions taken at the Convention.
- c) Programmes of action should be put into operation. e.g. projects of a cultural, political, social and academic nature. Of the existing political organizations, none of them has a properly worked out programme, except vague tough-sounding slogans.

SOME SERIOUS MATTERS OF COMMON CONCERN WHICH BLACK PEOPLE WERE WARNED TO GUARD AGAINST.

- A) U.S. neo-imperialism, spread through the C.I.A. operations around the globe. cf. "TAR BABY" of Dr. H. Kissinger.
- B) Local White liberals who might want to back up movements that dilute the revolutionary fervour of the freedom-lovers.
- C) Elité and the bourgeoisie who have usurped for themselves the right of leading the "masses".
- D) "Out-of-touchism" with the masses of Black people. e.g. SASO, exclusive in-groups, BPC, Academic groups etc.
- E) Sole dependence on foreign financial support in the Black struggle.
- F) Doctrinaire, blacker-than-thouism which merely delay the day of the people's solidarity.

- G) The danger of allowing ourselves to be compartmentalised into leftists and rightists. To be honest, there is hardly any leftist group worth the name among the Blacks. If there is any evidence of it at all, it is only in its embryonic form. An amorphous bunch of youthful bellicose "howlers", who yell slogans and words devoid of any coldly-analysed ideological content are not leftists. A leftist's qualification is not only a good pair of lungs, but a fine analytic mind and a total ideo-political commitment.

Finally, the Black Renaissance Convention revealed contradictions, some painful facts which should galvanize us into more concerted action rather than polarize us or discourage our people. We refer here particularly to the political leadership vacuum which was left by the demise of the ANC and the PAC. None of the existing ethnically-based organizations have bridged the gap. Instead, they have absolutely thrown the Black people into political confusion. BPC the only non-tribal political organization needs to treble its efforts before it can even begin to give a semblance of being a people's mass movement. So far, it looks as though the choice lies between Bantustanian politics and BPC. SASO is supposed to be a students' organisation, even though it is far from being a-political. We find ourselves in a terrible dilemma. Only a very small number of Blacks will join BPC, because they are either terrified of its "radicalism" or because its organizational viability leaves much to be desired. In general, your urban population wants to have nothing to do with tribal dummy political movements. There are undoubtedly millions of Black people whose political frustrations have no organized outlet. Political apathy in the Black community makes one shudder, especially when you think of the inevitable change. Is posterity going to accuse us of "sleeping through the Revolution".

Since the politics of separatism were so utterly and unconditionally rejected at the Convention, the implications of that rejection are self-evident. Although the Prime Minister, J.B. Vorster, has repeatedly recognized the right of every South African to "legitimate political activity", most Blacks believe they dare not organize politically. The ubiquitous State Security Agents sooner or later will serve you a crippling banning order. People made it clear that they have enough church, cultural, social and other innocuous associations. But politically, they are very, very starved and the politics of the Homelands are odious as well as fraudulent. Surely, when "detente" does eventually come to Azania proper, the Black people cannot be expected to be represented by the "protagonists of Apartheid" because these men were disowned by the people (Black) in no uncertain terms.

Must the Blacks wait for the release of the Mandelas, Sobukwe and Sisulus? If so, how long must the voiceless millions wait before some form of realistic political activity is allowed? These are but a few insights which were gleaned at the never-to-be-forgotten Black Renaissance Convention.

Such was the Conference of the Black people which was undoubtedly one of the most significant developments in 1974. We cannot conclude the report without re-emphasizing the oft-repeated call to ACTION. Among the grown-ups, paradoxically, one found much impatience with the long-winded speeches of the younger delegates, most of whom proved to be excellent armchair revolutionaries. There was unanimity among all the delegates that Black people demanded more "praxis" than "theoria". We have noted with some dismay, therefore, the bitter attacks on SASO and BPC in the newspapers. Bantustanian leaders like Gathema Buthelezzi accused SASO/BPC of using violence in evicting Collins Ramusi. We do not yet quite understand his strange logic and why he has chosen to indulge in such distortions of language.

In our considered opinion, the Homeland Chiefs over-reacted to the "expulsion" of the "protagonists of apartheid". Their anger is humanly understandable, although Collins Ramusi over-reacted when he smeared SASO/BPC "Reckless little people" and proceeded to compare them to Black Panthers. That label can be seized upon by the enemy to destroy SASO/BPC. As Black people, we cannot encourage such tendencies. Let us spend more time promoting the unifying factors rather than dissipate our energies bickering over petty differences. Lampooning young, blundering students is to deliberately create a cloud of smokescreen to avoid the fundamental issues. The Black Renaissance Convention clearly manifested how united Black people are. All what is required is a little more systematized and consistent organization. Our differences look more serious than they really are.

The Convention ended on an optimistic note with the delegates complaining that such a crucial event should have taken the whole week instead of three days! The mood of the departing delegates was one of "THE STRUGGLE GOES ON...ONWARDS CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS!....." The campaign for Black solidarity may suffer some temporary setbacks, but in the long run, nobody will stand in its way. The struggle will and must succeed, because the Black people are morally justified in fighting for their humanity. The enemies of Black unity, even those who masquerade as "uncompromising militants", will be discovered by the people and be exposed for what they really are. Black people must eliminate fratricidal quarrels. They should rather seek to find a common rallying point. Denigrating one another can only militate against the solidarity that we all crave for.

Among other forms of follow-up, this committee would like to see some very serious work being done in highlighting the crux of the Convention. Just to enumerate a few proposals:

- a) A scientific political analysis of the implications of the Convention, especially the Declaration.
- b) Co-ordination of the endeavours of the different Black organizations.
- c) A historical survey of all political Black organizations, dating back to the nineteenth century.
- d) The political vacuum among Black people in South Africa.
- e) A study of "Political alternatives".
- f) North American and European designs on South Africa.
- g) Work situation of the Proletariate in industrialized South Africa.
- h) Suitable means of communication e.g. a newspaper, journal, quarterly or solidarity rallies etc.

At the Convention, the Black people stated categorically what they wanted. As we all know, there is nothing easier or self-gratifying than to spit hell and thunder, fire and brimstone and to sound impressively scholarly. But what is more difficult, because more effective, is to study, think, plan, toil, research and communicate. Few belligerent speeches and more organized and co-ordinated action are the demands of the hour. Inspan our young people into some constructive work for the people, rather than unwittingly assist the enemy in destroying their praiseworthy, though sometimes puerile, endeavours. Together we stand, divided we shall sink deeper into the quagmire of oppression and slavery.

Appendix: Black Renaissance Convention Report

OBJECTIVES:

1. To confirm our solidarity with Black organisations and to plan for further programmes initiated by them to formulate the destiny of the Black people in South Africa.
2. People should have an overall representative body to express the Black thought.
3. The Convention is not a new organisation.
4. A statement should be released to express our stand towards the political situation.
5. To bridge existing disunity among Africans.
6. Liberation at all levels.
7. Send a delegation to the Government to speak on Black rights.
8. Formulation of common strategy for all Black organisations.
9. Maintain contact with one another.
10. To work for the emancipation of all people and for the release of political prisoners.
11. Not to reject other racial groups.
12. To be selfless and compromise with our differences.
13. To respect one another's views.
14. To look into the encouragement of tribal divisions in the homelands and find ways to combat this practice.
15. To look into foreign investments.
16. To spell out our view of Azania - liberated South Africa.
17. Express concern about the unchanging attitude of South African Whites towards Blacks.
18. To know the social forces working in South Africa.
19. To articulate the aspirations of Blacks people.
20. To define the type of society we wish to create.
21. Get rid of homeland Governments and political differences.
22. The conscientious conscientisation of all Blacks.
23. To create a national organisation for Blacks.
24. To review the failures of Black movements in the past and to explore new strategy for Black liberation.
25. To exclude any Government appointed organisations from any future Black planning.

26. Common involvement at grass-roots level.
27. To inform the world on the Representative Stand of Blacks on basic issues in this country - especially the Government.
28. To make a statement on Conscientious Objection to Military Service.
29. To make a statement on the Expropriation of the Federal Theological Seminary in Alice.

/vvs
16th January, 1975