



# AFRICA-FRIDAY REFLECTIONS

## "AFROCENTRIC THOUGHT"



### PICKING UP FROM BIKO.

BY ZAKHELE MTHEMBU

This week we commemorate the death of the legendary Stephen Bantu Biko. Biko week as it is affectionately known among BC organizations like AZAPO and the modern day Black First Land First as well as individual proponents alike.

Biko was a great mind, although studying medicine at oNgoye, his penchant for what is called the Social Sciences was simply unmatched.

Rather than a feel-good remembering of Biko, which there is nothing wrong with in earnest for his memory does indeed bring a lot of people joy.

This piece will advance a synthesis of Black Consciousness that builds and critiques the synthesis advanced Biko during his time, making a case for a purely independent base of consciousness, which informs identity, that base being isintu sabantu abanobuntu/ Setho sa batho abanale botho.

Biko was a brilliant mind, he is no exception though, abantu are gifted with brilliant minds. Brilliant not because he developed novel analysis around the issues of the African and her oppression

during colonialism and apartheid at the time but rather because he had the ability of translating the sometimes 'too abstract' ideals of existentialism and African Nationalism, to some extent, and place them firmly in the day to day world of the ordinary black South African at the time.

Black consciousness as advanced by Biko was a response by a people who had been at war for centuries, with the basis of their oppression being their pigment.

Biko sought to proverbially use the tools of the oppressor to bring down his house with, although Black did denote pigment and there are multiple reference of this in Biko's writing, Black as a concept represented the other oppressed 'groups' in South Africa at the time, the Indians and so called coloureds.

This conceptualization of blackness is controversial, accentuated by Biko's words saying black consciousness is not about pigmentation but rather an attitude of the mind.

**"...IDENTITY  
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This has been appropriated by the very same white liberals who has segregated meetings in NUSAS for their own agendas.

My main critique towards Biko's BC is its paradigm in conceiving of identity. It must be noted that 'blackness' was not the primary marker of the identity of umuntu prior to his contact with the terrorist settlers.

Beyond looking for an identity of Africans as in the case of a historical investigation, identity stems from within, firstly from the primordial all-encompassing nature of Ubu-Ntu and as the actions of umuntu tend to define him, this consonance of actions and the force of Ubu-Ntu is called Isintu, it is the spirito-cultural centre if so were, that serves as the foundation upon which reality is constructed and action undertaken in the world by umuntu.

Political Blackness on the other hand is the inverse of this in-out relationship as concerning identity since blackness is a creation of whiteness, the two exist in sort of a symbiotic relationship, a dialectical one, whereby you do not have one without the other. So, the error of Biko in using political blackness as an identity was constructing an identity and promoting it, that was not defined by its subjects through their own agency but rather immediately puts them in this game of comparison with the other that is whiteness.

Thus, Blackness politically, the Black Consciousness of Biko insofar as identity was concerned, was a reaction to the white "consciousness" of the ruling elite. By reaction it is meant that what makes 'blackness' itself, its 'identity', is it being an antithesis to 'whiteness', for without whiteness, there is no blackness as a response to.

This ontological paradigm, since identity serves as the ontological/epistemological basis of consciousness, becomes reproduced in the actions and psyche of the subject, the constant game of comparison whereby the standard is not oneself as they actualize in consonance with ubu-ntu through isintu but rather the proverbial other, their conforming to the standard of the other or their non-conformity, in whatever context, political blackness hardly ever centres its subjects, it rather perpetuates the dichotomous, dialectical logic, that it was birthed from.

Fanon as a Hegelian to an extent understood this quite lucidly and his writing is replete with instances of how this act of comparison, this defining blackness as not whiteness, is prevalent among colonized peoples of course and even among the compradors who assume power after independence. The most insidious acceptance of this paradigm is that it denies the subject of the philosophy any type of agency, as a matter of structure, it ties the being of umuntu not in his pursuit to be in alignment with Ubu-ntu through Isintu but rather to whether how far away from 'whiteness' they can move or are.

Instead of centering umuntu and his spirito-cultural foregrounding, the BC if Biko, since it was using a worldview not deduced from the cosmology of abantu but rather reacting to the conditions of the time, centred the victimhood of black people, by counterfactual implication also centring the 'power' that comes with being a 'perpetrator' for lack of a better word.

Biko's ideas ought to be critiqued just like everyone's else, not by any other standard but by the standard of our very own worldview. Just like all of us, he was not perfect, he cannot be faulted though, for not acting, for wallowing in self pity.

If BPC projects are anything to go by, the BCM understood the power of the agency of the indigenous African. Biko spoke of the need to act, to change not only your mind, but every other thing that is not in consonance with your spirit, that spirit for him was Blackness and for us, in the same breath just a different synthesis, the spirit is Ubu-Ntu.

In commemorating Biko, 40 years after his death at the hands of the state whose actions only managed to endear him forever, the project he started, at the very least intellectually, ought to be continued and improved upon.

Rather than his Black Consciousness and its fixation, by nature, with whiteness, let us cultivate a consciousness that centres Ubu-Ntu, as the roots of umuntu, informing his identity and general operation in the world. Rather than Blackness and its dialectical partner of whiteness as the centre, let us centre Isintu, as the culmination of the actions of our living dead to bring themselves in consonance with the primordial force that is Ubu-Ntu.

Rather than a consciousness that is concerned with one's proximity or, lack thereof to 'whiteness', let us foster a consciousness that stems from within, a consciousness that has as its source the be-ing of Abantu as manifest through Isintu.

In remembering the great Biko, we must centre the people whom he literally gave his life for, spiritually, ontologically, right down to action, our main concern should be abantu and making their lives and conditions not synonymous with regression as is currently the state of things. The base upon which reality is engaged with, must be Umuntu himself, with all the implications thereof.

Rather than a reactionary consciousness deduced from a position of victim-hood thus eliminating agency from the subject, making them, a mere molecule battered by the god that is 'history'.

I am for a consciousness that centres umuntu, not as an appendage of the proverbial other in everything, but rather as the source of action. A consciousness that has, as an assumption because its too absurd to consider otherwise, freedom, the liberty of umuntu. A consciousness that fosters an identity that is in line with the be-ing of umuntu, a consciousness and subsequent identity not subject to external control but rather is a product of self-actualization, what I believe to have been the project of most theoreticians of African descent.

Most importantly with agency, comes responsibility, which brings change and growth. Umuntu has the freedom to either have ubuntu or not, the responsibility is his, for she is an acting being, in a world characterized by motion.

The practical implications of what is laid out here are as varied as there are abantu that populate this great land. There is no best way to be umuntu beyond having ubuntu, this is the standard of Africans. A standard that assumes liberty among those who aspire to it to either lie up to or fall short of it. In a world where the standards are of the Hellenes, the best way to centre oneself is context specific, but the benchmark that you will use to judge your actions must be from within, it must be in consonance with Ntu.

In continuing the wonderful work of Biko, this series of articles, hopes to spark an understanding of the African being as an initiator, a creator, rather than a reactor, a victim of the actions of others whilst he downplays her own.

In remembering Biko, we hope that one day the standards that most adherents of his philosophy use to judge white people with, a symptom of the dialectic nature I speak of is this fixation with whiteness by the way.

We hope those high standards that are usually applied to whites, will be standards that we attempt to apply to oneself and the corollary of one's community, then city, nation and continent.

It all starts with the individual. As we know, the individual is in a constant entanglement with the collective for abantu. As Biko would say; "we are on our own".

There is no change unless we change ourselves for the state of events we find ourselves in currently is also contingent on us, our agency. Umthakathi usendlini bantu abahle!

We hope to foster an 'Ubuntu Consciousness' as a continuation of Biko's project of Black Consciousness. To centre umuntu and imbue him with the agency of the Gods; the agency to create, live and prosper, the agency of be-ing.

40 years later after the death of this giant of a man, we are still the ones we have been waiting for!

The Eloquent Peasant.  
Umuntu wabantu.