

Biko: A Symbol Beyond His Lifetime

By Nkosinathi Biko

We are a people immersed in a culture of symbolism. One such symbol is that which marks the grave of the departed. In modern day form this is a tombstone. While designed to mark the end of life, many African communities believe that the end of one form of life is, in fact, the beginning of another. For this reason solace is often derived from the conviction that having been beckoned to the world of ancestors, one's dearly departed joins those departed before them, and from their ancestral world, continues to cast an eye over their erstwhile earthly home.

Forty years ago the Biko family erected a tombstone to mark the grave of one of their sons, Bantu Stephen Biko. He is buried in what has since become known as the Biko Garden of Remembrance, which is located on the edge of Ginsberg township. On 18 August 1977 he had left his home a healthy thirty-year-old man. By 12 September 1977 he was dead, a victim of police brutality. The memories of what happened to him in detention were refreshed by the recent inquest into the murder of Ahmed Timol, who like Biko and many others, were victims of torture and death in detention. For many, Biko's murder seemed to signify the end of an era. Indeed, many have defined 12 September 1977 as a sunset moment in South African history.

Recently, I walked past the graves that have since filled the cemetery, on the way to his. I noticed for the first time something that is otherwise glaringly obvious, that most of the tombstone messages were of a personal nature such as, rest in peace, missed by, survived by. On his tomb stone the message is simply: *Bantu Stephen Biko Honorary President Black People's Convention. Born 18 - 12 - 1946. Died 12 - 9 - 1977. One Azania One Nation.* It is so because his death was a loss to the nation and thousands came to join his family to share in its pain, thus the message of unity, which had been the rallying cry of the Black Consciousness Movement. Biko himself had argued that, "Death can itself be a politicising thing."

Since the funeral on 25 September 1977, I have been a regular at his grave, to carry out various duties otherwise to pay my homage, often in the company of a visitor or three who also wish to do the same. As is customary in our tradition, a close relative of the deceased has the responsibility to conjure the spirit of the family ancestry and to announce the presence of visitors at a graveside. In isiXhosa this act is referred to as *ukubika* and the message *umbiko*, a word that is at the root of my family identity. It is then and only then that the visitor may place a pebble on the grave as a gesture of salutation. The visitor may also proceed to convey such message, as they deem appropriate, either audibly or in quiet contemplation, in augmentation of *umbiko*. Lastly, following a visit to the grave the visitors are expected to present at the home of the deceased for a hand washing ceremony.

Over the years I have come to learn that legacies that live in peoples hearts are most resilient. Unlike Jimmy Kruger who was left "cold" by the death of Steve Biko, for many Biko is, as one elder described him, a "warm feeling." Thus

important as commemorative days are, it is what happens in between them that is of more significance. In the case of Steve Biko thousands of visitors make this annual visit and participate in the traditional homage, albeit that theirs might be totally dissimilar. These visitors originate from all over the country as well as from an increasing number of international cities and institutions. Refreshingly, it is young people who, for the most part, visit on school tours or through other organised youth formations that frequent the Biko Trail, which includes his home, No. 698 Leightonville, now known as the Biko Monument. This was our grandparent's house to which he was banned and banished for the last five years of his life. His house therefore was a room within this home, which was shared by the broader family. It is the location of many fond childhood memories including the tugging smell of my grandmother's freshly baked bread, which still comes alive at every visit, long after her death in November 1995.

Following the birth of my brother Samora, in August 1975, my parents, then with a growing family, were on the lookout for a house and had in fact secured tenancy at No. 700 Leightonville from the local rent office, shortly before my father's death. At the time, full-title tenure was not available to Blacks. This was to be our new home and my father was to seek an amendment to his banning order to allow him to move house, but death struck sooner than occupation. In fact transfer to our new family home coincided with his to his ancestral home.

The Biko Trail also passes his former office, No.15 Leopold Street, the regional offices of the Black Community Programmes. Steve Biko was the Regional Executive Director thereof. The office ran a number of self-reliance initiatives including Njwaxa, which made leather products, Zimele Trust Fund, which supported families of former political prisoners, as well as bursary schemes and other initiatives. These offices were a hive of political and development activity that brought hope to many. This is one of the more unique aspects of the legacy of Black Consciousness – its ability to take ideas into the practical realm. It is a critical but rare skill one wishes had had enough time to take root, the absence of which explains the yawning gap between the poetry of our current day policies and the efficacy of projects that flow from these policies.

The Biko Trail further incorporates Zanempilo Clinic, which was a project of the Black Community Programmes. It was designed to demonstrate to the then apartheid government how little it took to provide quality basic healthcare services, even in the most rural of settings. I have a scar on my forehead to remember Zanempilo by, following a bicycle accident at our neighbour's house, which was one of my many emergency visits there, occasioned by boys being boys. The other is on my right foot following a game of Russian roulette that ended up with a garden fork plunged right through my foot by my friend, Sikhumbuzo Msumza, who was our neighbour's son. He had thought that I would remove my foot on that occasion. We both were very wrong. I remember being stitched together at Zanempilo. On a recent visit to King William's Town I ran into one Zanempilo Madikana, who was amongst the first babies to be delivered at Zanempilo clinic, on 22 September 1977, three days before Biko's funeral. He consequently earned its name for keeps – the place that brings wellness. He is

forty plus now and the clinic continues to operate to this day albeit under the Eastern Cape Department of Public Health.

The Biko Trail also comprises a visit to the Steve Biko Centre. This is a relatively new addition, which was opened in December 2012. Here visitors are taken on a tour of the museum as well as treated to live stage performances by the in-house theatre group, Abelusi (the Shepherds). Alternatively, and depending on where we are on the national calendar, film screenings are used, with a focus on educational titles that teach our youth about struggle icons and historic moments from our long tradition of resistance. Even the restaurant Aluta, is a canvas that celebrates inspiring world leaders in the tradition of Biko.

The public library and archives and the adjoining children's library house the largest collection of material by and about the Black Consciousness Movement and provides a useful resource to an increasing number of masters and doctorate students who are researching the subject. Otherwise, one story at a time, it lays a foundation for the little people who come in daily for assistance with homework and for reading classes, which are conducted by the library interns, much to the delight of my mother Ntsiki Biko. In five years the library has collected over forty thousand titles through the generosity of many people around the world and continues to pursue more donated titles. The Steve Biko Centre itself is a proud legacy of the people of South Africa as it was made possible through public funding after it was declared a National Legacy Project, alongside other projects under the Department of Arts and Culture. The Department of Tourism and the National Lottery Commission have also supported it. At the core of its proposition is the challenge to young people to re-imagine themselves through the mantra - memory, discovery, action.

When the late Chinua Achebe delivered the Biko Memorial Lecture he made an interesting observation. He urged that we should not forget Steve Biko, "Not because it is important to him. He is all right where he is. We must do it because it is important to us." It is for this reason that evoking the spirit of the founders of our democracy is a developmental imperative, not a luxury. Every day I spend at the Centre I witness its mantra come alive, defying the perception that South African youth are either a lost or disengaged generation. The quality of reflections that take place on these visits is enthralling, be they imibiko, dialogues, poetry sessions, theatre, book launches and readings, lectures and many other activities.

Being one they relate to as "their" political symbol it is natural that the reflections by the youth on Biko will tend towards socio-political content. Rhodes must Fall and Fees Must Fall both referenced him extensively as a source of inspiration. He too may have been pleased especially when the discourse went beyond what must fall to what, in fact, must rise. The youth are frank but accurate about the concerning political trajectory the country is on and the interconnection between the leadership deficit and the continued entrapment of thousands in poverty and diminishing life chances. It would be as valuable a session for the scribes of the State of the Nation address as it would be to those who are strategizing to capture the imagination of the public in the build up to

the next cycle of elections. Interestingly, the more international visitors have found echoes of the Black Lives Matter message. They have found a vocabulary against the rise of conservatism in America, Britain, France and other European countries that seem to have followed the wanton step to the right.

A few moons ago I happened upon yet another group visiting the grave. I did the usual wondering, in fact, what Biko would have had to say were he to respond. I imagine that he would have something to say about his forty years call - One Azania One Nation - particularly given the corrosive inter and intra party politics which have relegated the national imperatives to a status lower than that of crass personal priorities. How else can one possibly convince Biko, Sobukwe and Tambo and the thousands who sacrificed, that the findings of the Statistician-General that more than fifty percent of the South African population now lives below the poverty line, is what they struggled for.

Second, I imagine him argue that the ritual of washing hands has two meanings. First, it serves the literal purpose of cleansing. In the case of a visit to a grave it symbolically cleanses ones contact with death. Perhaps national cleansing is exactly what we need to ward off the death of the nation. However, hand washing also bears a second and perhaps paradoxical meaning of the Biblical Pontius Pilatus order – washing our hands of our responsibility to keep this nation alive. In this regard, we cannot choose not to choose. Thus the ancestral Biko would remind the thousands of young people that visit his grave that the journey through a purposeful existence requires us to “avail ourselves to history for history to work through us.” May his spirit live through the hearts and the informed actions of our youth.

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