

**Biko Lives: Building the Bridges among the Wretched of the Earth
The 12th Steve Bantu Biko Annual Memorial Lecture**

**Jeanine Ntahirageza, PhD
Center for Genocide and Human Rights Research in Africa and the Diaspora
Northeastern Illinois University**

Thank you so much for the warm welcome and thank you for the very kind introduction. Honorable Prof Sibongile Muthwa, Vice-Chancellor of the Nelson Mandela University, Prof Saths Cooper, the Former AZAPO President and President of the Pan African Psychology Union, Prof Barney Pityana, the founder of Black Consciousness Movement and Biko Contemporary, Mr. Nelvis Qekema, AZAPO President, Mr. Mzwanele Nyhontso, PAC President, Mr. Simphiwe Hashe, AZAPO National Chairperson, Ms. Kekeletso Khena, AZAPO Deputy President, Mr. Chris Swepu, AZAPO Secretary General, Mr. Victor Serekalala, PAC Deputy President, Mr. Apa Pooe, PAC Secretary General, Mr. Allan Zinn, Director of the Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy here at Nelson Mandela University, AZAPO Standing Committee, and members of the Biko family, Professors and Staff, Distinguished guests, ladies and gentleman, I would like to express my deep gratitude for being with you today to deliver the 12th Steve Bantu Biko Memorial Lecture. It is indeed an honor and privilege to join the illustrious list of those who preceded me in delivering the Steven Bantu Biko lecture. I was asked to address the topic, "Biko Lives: Building the Bridges among the Wretched of the Earth".

WHO AM I?

A simple question yet a complicated one. Am I even allowed to answer it the way I should? Whose terms am I using when I describe myself? What is the meaning of my name(s)? I hope we can all answer this question the way that's true to ourselves, not to someone else. What does my name represent?

In Kirundi and Kinyarwanda, we say 'izina n'iryo muntu' which means a person's name impacts who she or he becomes. Well, 'Bantu' in these languages means people. His life is a message to all of us, especially the oppressed. In Xhosa, one of South Africa's 11 official languages and one of Steve Biko's native languages, "Bantu" means "**the people's person.**" Those who knew Biko said it was a name that described him well, says Nkosinathi Biko, CEO of the Steve Biko Foundation and the eldest of Biko's four children. Having been able to closely engage in his work and meet his contemporaries and family members, I can say 'izina n'iryo muntu'. Telling the story of Steve Bantu

Biko is telling the story of Black Consciousness which is telling the story of agency and resiliency in oppression context. This is how Steve Bantu Biko continues to live among us.

Let me first share with you a quote from the 1987 Frank Talk Editorial second volume: “Biko Lives!!! Two words slashed across a ghetto wall. A phrase that haunts the nights of South Africa’s rulers. Reactionaries and opportunists of every stripe hope and pray that it will disappear under a rain of blood and the white-wash of reform. But it remains, bold and powerful; not a tired and worn-out slogan but a battle cry of a generation whose hopes and aspirations are for revolution, and **end to all exploitation and oppression.** (Frank Talk, Editorial Vol. 2, 1987)”

Well, how do we end all exploitation and oppression? We build bridges. As Zambians say, if you want to run fast, run alone; if you want to run far you run with others. Joining forces, inspiring each other provides strength, courage and resilience to keep at it. When 99% of the black people live in poverty in the world and more than 20,000,000 Africans have been killed in less than 150 years, producing more than 100 million survivors and numerous refugees in the world, we cannot wait any longer to build bridges and fight together. The more than 20,000,000 lives lost to genocide and mass atrocities are from six countries only: Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Namibia, Rwanda, Sudan, and Uganda. Numbers such as these are difficult to gather, particularly when perpetrators are still in power. Additionally, these devastations leave behind deep wounds such as trauma, including generational trauma, that, if not intentionally healed cripple individuals and entire communities. In addition to these wounds, continuous oppression undermines productivity and progress. Joining forces requires knowledge of self and knowledge of those who suffer the same plight.

In order to build strong bridges, one has to be self-aware and also aware of the other wretched of the earth. Self-awareness promotes healing. If one inherits a garden full of weeds, no matter how healthy the seeds are, they cannot grow in such a garden. They will get choked up and die. One has to be aware of the seeds, remove them, and then proceed to fertilization. In other words, one has to be aware of the individual and collective trauma that has crippled generations for centuries.

When we share our stories, we build the kind of empathy that engenders the willingness to fight together with a common goal. Former US President Barack Obama describes empathy in ways that fit this context when he says, about his meeting with Pope Francis:

"I think the theme that stitched our conversation together was a belief that in politics and in life the quality of empathy, the ability to stand in somebody else's shoes and to care for someone even if they don't look like you or talk like you or share your philosophy... that's critical."

Steve Biko was endowed with all qualities of greatness. One of them that contributed to the success of the Black Consciousness Movement was empathy. "He managed conflict through solving problems and building relationships. He also had the ability (to) lead others, and became involved in those activities." (<https://sites.google.com/site/coldwarhistory2/analysis-on-steve-biko-and-his-leadership-qualities>). To continue his legacy, we have to build bridges which requires selfless and empathetic actions. It is listening to other people's stories, somehow getting into the contents of other people's minds. Other people's stories give us a window into their hearts and souls. Stories tell us what's going on in other people's lives, including their histories. This way we get to inhabit their world. Unless we pay attention to what's going on in other people's lives, we can't be fully human. We end up selfish and, in many cases, run into the danger of othering those who don't think like we do or look like we do. Othering means "I/me at the center"; other-centeredness means that the other person's happiness is my happiness; his/her success is my success. In one teacher training session, I asked a group of participants to provide examples of how they put empathy in actions. I was surprised to find out that a couple of them said they don't have empathy. It is critical that empathy is developed early. In Kirundi, we say, *igiti kigororwa kikiri gito*, which means a tree is straightened while it's still young. Unless we train the young through experiential learning, how to practice ubuntu, we end up with narcissistic individuals who want to cling to power at all cost even if this may require the killing of innocent people, with no ability to transcend their own experiences, with inability to empathize with other individuals.

Building bridges requires going outside our own experiences. We learn to do that with stories. Listening to others helps us develop empathy. We will succeed in the struggle if we stop working in silos to the *point of* competing. We need to engage others even if they have different opinions about certain things and treat them with respect and dignity even when they don't look interested in what we have to say at the beginning. They will eventually turn around. That's what would Steven Bantu Biko want us to do and that's what he modelled. *Compassion is not just feeling with someone, but seeking to change the situation. Frequently people think compassion and love are merely sentimental. No! They are very demanding. If you are going to be compassionate, be prepared for action!* —[Desmond Tutu](#)

Desmond Tutu's quote challenges us to not just feel with someone but to seek to change the situation. We are all called to play a leading role in modelling **actionable empathy**. Founded in ubuntu principles, this modeling promotes collective healing and reconciliation by 1) recognition of past traumatic experiences, 2) building and creating spaces for public and collective memorialization, 3) cultivating trust and favoring community engagement, 4) developing activities that promote kindness and unity, 5) enhancing an environment conducive to thought sharing and listening, and 6) participating in truth telling projects and reparation endeavors. With intentionality, various institutions can lead their people out of enforced silence into regained trust, truth, justice, healing and reconciliation.

Let me start then with my own story, which is, in essence, the story of Burundi. I didn't know I was black until I was 30, as a new graduate student in the United States. I was being denied something I had the right to and when I asked why, my friend who belongs to a privileged class, informed me that it was because I was black. Of course, I knew the plight of black people through books, but being black did not become relevant to my life until that day. Then I wondered how many oppressed people are out there and don't even realize it, or at least don't face the root cause of their oppression. I knew I was among the wretched of the earth, being a Hutu in Burundi at that time. Who are the Wretched of the Earth? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines 'wretched as deeply afflicted, dejected, or distressed in body or mind; contemptible, INFERIOR; the oppressed are not responsible for being wretched. This realization should bring those in these conditions to fight together, to unite in order to achieve true mental and systemic liberation. All those who suffer longing for justice, freedom, and peace ought to fight in unison. For this to happen, we have to know each other. What's in the curriculum? Paulo Freire defines critical consciousness as the ability to intervene in reality in order to change it. Questioning everything, becoming aware of the condition one is in and being able to do something about it is key. Steve Bantu Biko's consciousness was not passive; it was active; his achievements in his short 30 years of life continue to inspire generations.

Colonization not only took material goods, but also infiltrated the minds through formal education among other ways. The language we adopt to name African concepts is telling. For example, taro roots, in Kirundi and Kinyarwanda, *amateke*, are named based on the quality, the better ones carry the white name and the not so good looking are named the Burundian ones. This may look like a

silly example, but it's indicative of how badly colonized the African knowledge system is. We cannot liberate our minds, what Steve Bantu Biko asks of us, until we remove weeds from the garden.

Formal education, especially through boarding schools, tore the ubuntu humanity fabric. White people physically left but their culture remained, the demeaning language remained, and most importantly, they left with deeply wounded Africans. They left them divided and the Ubuntu fabric was torn. It continued to be torn as the new leaders continued to implement the divide and rule policy. The population got doubly wounded, first from colonization and then from ethnic strife that led to genocide in some countries such as Burundi and Rwanda.

In the 70s, while Steve Bantu Biko and his contemporaries were fighting for freedom in South Africa leading to the creation of the Black Consciousness Movement, subhuman characteristics were being imprinted on the Hutu minds in Burundi by a Tutsi regime in 1972. Segregation was being implemented in various systems, education, judiciary, army, and many more areas in the country. I didn't know I was Hutu until I was a 13-year-old when it was revealed to me, by a classmate, that I was Hutu and that my father was killed because he was Hutu and that my mother was Tutsi. From that time on, I was told I didn't have the right to the air we breathe because my nose was too large. My Tutsi peers feared it would take up all the world air. More than 300,000 Hutu, 10% of the population of the time, had been killed and hundreds of thousands had become refugees in neighboring countries. It still bugs my mind that the first genocide in post-independence Africa was so successfully denied and silenced. Fifty years later, more than 4,000 mass graves have been found in Burundi. Guess who is having to manage this state of affairs, the 1972 orphans. Today they are allowed to talk. The collection of testimonies says it all. Men and women, in their 60s, 70s, and 80s, who break down crying while sharing, who for the first time in 50 years, are able to publicly mourn their loved ones and share their stories. Quite powerful.

We can only build strong bridges if we aim to:

- Heal together through relationships and meaningful connections
- Realize, recognize, respond and resist re-traumatization
- Promote critical conscientization and
- **Memorialize** what happened to the oppressed for healing's sake.

“Memorialization efforts seek to preserve public memory of victims, usually through a yearly day of commemoration or through museums and monuments (*African Union Panel of the Wise 2013:26*).

The problem is that this type of memorialization is not culturally relevant in many African societies.

An old lady in the townships, in rural areas or in poor neighborhoods is not going to travel to see a monument to publicly memorialize her loved ones lost to oppressor atrocities. Oftentimes, the oppressed tend to inherit memorialization of the oppressors' events with no room for memorialization of what happened to them such as the lost lives. In such situations survivors cannot fully heal. Consciousness achieves its fullness when the oppressed actively engage in remembering what happened to them in order to heal. They are called to the pain that was caused on us. Black pride promoted by Steve Bantu Biko; a great example of memorialization. The challenge is to find ways to harness memory to learn lessons from the past in an effort to avoid repeating it. "Without a proper engagement with the past and the institutionalization of remembrance, societies are condemned to repeat, re-enact, and relive the horror. Forgetting is not a good strategy for societies transiting to a minimally decent condition" (Bhargava 2000:54).

In 2019, I traveled to Burundi and during the same summer, I traveled to Cambodia for a conference organized by the International Association of Genocide Scholars. What I saw in Phnom Pehn, the capital city, was a huge shock. Cambodia had publicly memorialized their 1975 genocide, from the killing fields to the genocide museum, with precise narration, while in Burundi, one could barely talk about the 1972 massacre. I still wonder whether the silence that surrounded the genocide for decades isn't the reason Burundi has experienced recurring atrocities over the years.

Africans are called to mend ubuntu, the unifier that Bantu Africa inherited. It has been torn due to a number of historical events such as colonization, particularly through formal education, political power and money. Colonizers united to divide the continent. Africans need to unite to mend it. This division allowed colonizers and those they privileged to gain and maintain power divisively. This strategy expanded to the conquered so that, even in countries where the white man left, oppression remained and, in some cases, it got so bad that it led to genocide. They got together to divide those they colonized, building bridges will require uniting. The oppressed cannot afford passiveness or being spectators to the struggle any longer. Surely, Steve Bantu Biko modelled differently.

Promoting interconnectedness builds bridges that lead to stronger and long-lasting unity. I witnessed what building bridges looks like when I participated in Steve Bantu Biko's 45th annual memorial activities. President Nelvis Qekema of Azanian People's Organization and President Mzwanele Nyhontso of Pan Africanist Congress of Azania brought together their organizations to celebrate this special event. The outcome was a rich sharing of thoughts and ideas and lots of singing and dancing,

the African way. Allowing social movements to connect with those, on the surface, may appear to have little in common with them. In Kirundi and Kinyarwanda, we say *umuntu ni uwundi*, which means ‘the personhood of a person is made whole by [the existence of] another person.’ In other words, alone we are inevitably incomplete, broken even. We make each other whole. Ubuntu is part of the African heritage. Is it perfect? no. But we have to keep working on it.

It is almost universally acknowledged that in order to get the right answers, one has to ask the right questions. What’s in the curriculum? Who designed the content? Whose story are the children reading/listening to? How much value is given to indigenous knowledge? Why teach the colonizer language to express foreign culture instead of using it to promote African epistemologies and increase global connectedness? My friend and colleague, a Canadian American professor at the University of Burundi, Jodi Mikalachki, has intentionally opted to use literature produced by Burundi authors in her classes instead of Eurocentric texts as traditionally done, even by African instructors. Who are the teachers, anyway? How were they trained/how was I trained? After my very day of teaching graduate students, one of them was visibly disappointed that I didn’t teach the African way and he expressed it politely but in such vivid terms that I had to revisit what teaching the African way meant. Sadly, I couldn’t use an approach I didn’t have. As Biko said, I had been mentally eradicated from my own culture. We cannot lead differently from the so-called models. The servant leaders, the true role models had been killed by oppressors. They killed Steve Bantu Biko, Louis Rwagasore, Patrice Lumumba, and the list goes on. We are called to question, revisit and rethink the oppressor pedagogy and wholistically implement ubuntu as a methodology. As Walter Isaacson says, “Blind respect for authority is the greatest enemy of truth.” and “Every society must be intentional about educating its leaders.” Patrick Awuah, Jr. As long as the perpetrators are in power, this history of oppression is ignored by many and is rarely ever mentioned in high school textbooks. If this part of history is not exposed and dealt with systematically, healing is delayed and generational trauma perpetuates.

A lot has been written about ubuntu and many institutions and organizations have been created about this concept. In a nutshell, this African way of life favors communalism (community or collectivism) above individualism. It is a code of trust so that **suffering of one is conceived as the suffering of all**. It strives for harmony and security offered by the group, and self-sacrifice **by individuals for the larger group**. After all, as we say in Kirundi, *Umutwe umwe ntiwigira inama*, ‘one head cannot advise itself’.

To conclude, the ubuntu virtues that apply in personal relationships are the same that work between large scale groups such as movements, organizations, institutions and nations. For relationships to grow stronger some key qualities need to be put in practice: patience, trust, generosity, modesty, humility and self-sacrifice. Above all, self-awareness and awareness of others who have gone through similar oppression will make it possible to build strong bridges.

Let me end with a quote from a poem that can be found in a book entitled “Building Bridges - Ubuntu and Servant Leadership” (p.18) by The Erasmus Project.

*‘There is no greater power than a community discovering what it cares about.
Ask ‘What’s possible?’ not “what’s wrong” keep asking.
Notice what you care about.
Assume that many others share your dreams
Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.
Talk to people you never talk to.’*

Thank you!