

# **Activating the agency of the people to free the land, mind and spirit**

## **The 13<sup>th</sup> Steve Bantu Biko Annual Memorial Lecture**

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The director of the programme of today that commemorates the profound lessons of struggle through a thinker, a struggle icon, a being human philosopher and realist who was brutally murdered forty six years ago, the Biko family who bore to us Steve Bantu Biko, the Ginsberg community, who made it possible to share Bantu Biko not only with South Africa but the African community and the world, the Vice Chancellor and my sister Professor Sbongile Muthwa for continuing the commitment to remind us through the annual Steve Biko memorial lectures about the profound foundations upon which our freedom is constructed, the university community gathered here today, compatriots, ladies and gentlemen. I feel the privilege and the presence of mind of having been in the same space forty-six years ago of one who when he learnt that Steve Biko took his last breath of life on this day in 1977, dropped everything where he was in Lesotho and rushed back to South Africa where he shared his pain and great hope. In the company of more than 20 000 mourners Bishop Desmond Tutu presided over the funeral of Steve Biko. Bishop Desmond Tutu was based at the National University of Lesotho where I was a second-year student majoring in statistics and economics. Little did I know that today, I will carry the burden of memory of that monumental day which changed our trajectory of struggle and raised immense hope. But regrettably forty-six years on, this moment of insatiable hope in despair

has metamorphosed into unbearable disappointment of morbid interregnum today. The dying is refusing to die and the to be born is doing very little to be ejected or extracted from its mother's womb. Worst still, society is anxious about what the birth might deliver – Is it a still born or a moron. The question is therefore are we going to implode as a nation? The answer is certainly we are going to if we continue to fiddle whilst Rome is burning. Through the theme “Activating the agency of the people to free the land, mind, and the spirit,” we seek to capture our moment of despair that forty-six years ago mobilized the more than 20000 mourners who followed the ox-wagon that carried the remains of Steve Bantu Biko to his resting place. The address to the multitudes by Bishop Desmond Mpilo Tutu, and specifically his elevation of Bantu Biko to a Jesus like character irked the apartheid regime. So offended was the regime that they returned the favour by elevating the man of the cloth to the enemy of the apartheid state.

Professor Bheki Mngomezulu, director of the Centre for the Advancement of Non-Racialism and Democracy (CANRAD) – through which this project-memory is anchored, I must confess I have been challenged by the topic. I wondered therefore what reflections those who decided on me had had, to so conclude that I am worthy of taking on this task. I was terrified by the prospect of being Jonas who was thrown overboard into the sea by fellow sea farers as he attempted to run away from being a messenger of the good lord. I pondered the thought and alas, I recalled that Moses was advised to lean on his brethren, in particular Aaron. I soon realized that there are many an Aaron around me who could ease my delivery of this the 13<sup>th</sup> Steve Biko Memorial Lecture arranged by CANRAD and AZAPO. Amongst them are Dr Saths Cooper, Journalist Oupa Ngwenya, Advocate Mojanku Gumbi and the late PC Jones. They embraced me as part of the

70s Movement despite my reservations that I am not a 70's by any stretch of the imagination. I was born and bred in Lesotho and played no part in the struggle for South African liberation, except helping Mandisi Titi to ferry materials to his family in East London and or driving him to a meeting in Maseru where the late Ntate Mafafa Mfafa, a former fellow student, who had just arrived from Tanzania and delivered a ton of tongue lashing to the comrades. Less deserving so I was, because in fleeing from Leabua Jonathan's soldiers in Lesotho in September 1982 I cut my intended destination to Botswana by a hundred and fifty kilometers and ended in Mmabatho, Bophuthatswana. Steve Biko in his interview with Bernard Zylstra in July 1977 had a lot to say about the homeland apartheid architecture. So, my pedigree into the 70s movement leaves a lot to be desired. But we are here now. My initiation into this 70s Movement was to discuss the economy and present on the fundamentals of the scenarios we at Indlulamithi had just completed in 2018. The three Aarons were there to listen and interrogate our thoughts. Today opens that unfinished business that the late PC Jones attentively listened to. Steve Biko was arrested with PC Jones on that fateful day of the 18 of August 1977. My heart wells with proud anxiety and trepidation in that I have been accorded this rare privilege and responsibility to address on the theme "Activating the agency of the people to free the land, mind, and the spirit." Land is the sum total of life and encompasses not only land as a geometric feature of earth but as a giver of life. Land cannot be seen outside ownership of life stock and beasts of burden with which we plough, plant and engage the seasons of our times in productive work. Land is where we are tied to for meaning. It is where the umbilical cord is interred after birth and where the final remains are deposited when our last breath is taken from us. The idea is captured as a complex paradox. In the Setswana idiom land is tied to cattle. The idiom says Oa na naeo oa thloka boroko, oae tlhoka oa

thloka boroko. It translates to “If you own cattle be certain that you will lose sleep, but equally when you do not own cattle you will lose sleep over not owning them. It is this responsibility that life demands from us to fulfil our life mission. It is an endeavour that by all counts Steve Biko fulfilled with excellence in the very short three decades of his life. He remains a towering figure in our heads and hearts. He brought the chemistry of theory, practice, empathy and revolutionary spirit with such political dexterity that advancing the cause and course of struggle became second nature despite all the life threatening dangers it all entailed.

Bernard Zylstra interviewed Steve Biko three months before he was murdered in cold blood by apartheid police. The nuggets of the interview provide important pointers towards understanding what we face as the biggest precipice of our time – There were eleven issues he had to address. These were 1. Black consciousness, 2. Black consciousness and Christianity, 3. Black People's Convention, 4. The homelands, 5. Communism, 6. South Africa and the US, 7. Black Communalism, 8. Role of foreign individuals, 9. The future of America, 10. Dr Beyers Naude and 11. The Human bond.

Biko cut through the subject with an incredible clarity of mind. Delivering on the scale of complexity and pathways to addressing these massive challenges became his oyster. Let me take you briefly through this journey. On the birth of black consciousness, he ably advanced the idea of cultural and political revival as an important first step for oppressed people to liberate themselves. He emphasises the cultural depth of black consciousness in that it forces black people to ask themselves "who am I? Who are we? This is especially so in the context of the demise of invincibility of white people. When the façade of whiteness fades, the nakedness of their brutality and acquiescence gets revealed dramatically

– their birth nakedness brings us to the true conclusion that “people are people” and therefore let us be people. Black consciousness and Christianity- on this subject Biko says this is a vexed question that troubles our fundamental orientation in life. Christianity for most black people is purely a formal matter. In that respect Christianity in essence as the bedrock of colonialism, dispossession and injustice meant natives had to abandon cultural practices which included abandoning dress codes in favour of the colonisers dress, food and means of livelihood. This reminds me of how King Moshoeshoe the Founder of the Basotho nation brought the French missionaries for purposes of introducing education and military innovation. But when the missionaries wanted to impose the abolition of polygamy which would have forced him to divorce his wives, he refused to be a convert. He asked a pertinent question of what then happens to my responsibility over the covenant I have with my wives. Biko as a Calvinist navigates this with excellent dexterity especially deploying Beyers Naude’s contradictions as he traversed this transformational journey of apartheid. On the subject of Black people's Convention – Biko aimed to connect black aspirations with an action by the intellectuals, however fully mindful of the propensity of these intellectuals falling prey to being manipulated by the dominant white system. The homelands were a subject of discussion - here Biko concluded that this was a mixed bag of sympathy for people and dilution and division of the cause of struggle. The latter being the instrument in the hands of the colonizing agent made him conclude that this was betrayal of the struggle. To this end he was specifically worried by the stance that Chief Minister Mangosuthu took. He said “Some blacks support the government policy of separate development in the homelands for the sake of peace but not as a movement. Here we will have to look carefully into the kind of support that Gatsha Buthelezi gets. He has a tribal following among the Zulus. He

had managed to combine many elements as a traditional chief in a nonurban setting. For a long time, he opposed apartheid, but today he is the governmentally paid leader of the Zulus. In this way he managed to gain a following. We oppose Gatsha. He dilutes the cause by operating on a government platform.” Shenge passed left this world last Saturday after a long and colourful career in the political landscape. As Biko receives him I believe we have the possibility of oozing with wisdom. Communism – Biko said as a theme confronting the strategic options such as the conscious choice the BCM made to operate within the law and communism on the other hand as a banned concept, it is not possible to administer in practice. It is thus not an option. South Africa and the US - South Africa is a pawn in the politics of pragmatism in the game of power between the US and Russia he concluded. The US is waking to the reality that it is losing power with Russia ascending in circles of post-colonial Africa. On the subject of Black Communalism – Biko said in contradistinction to capitalism Vs communism South Africa has to seek what best suits it. To this end whilst the details of an alternative are not clear, the true north is the search for a just system and Black Communalism captures this ideal. The future – On the subject of the future the path is set. It can only be escalation of hostilities. This is so because the Afrikaners have cornered themselves in an untenable situation of hoarding power. If they backtrack from that position, they will lose credibility with their constituencies. Regarding the Role of foreign individuals – Biko contended that albeit the role of individuals abroad is limited however, they are privileged with analysis and insights that can influence amongst others, policies in the foreign lands on South Africa. On the future of America – Biko said what the US can do is to support the struggle as a legitimate instrument for universal human rights. Otherwise, the US will continue to lose ground to Russia. On Beyers Naude – Steve

Biko said although Dr Naude might be seen as a turncoat because of how he changes, there is a remarkable consistency in the way he changes – he actually listens to the scriptures and those readings influence his propensity to change. He is therefore worth listening to, Biko concluded. Finally on the Human bond – Biko said it is about identifying and unifying on the elements of struggle.

Steve Bantu Biko has provided a laboratory of eleven pointed issues that vex us today in these interview he had three months before he was brutally murdered.

Steve Bantu Biko the thinker was very much aware of the weaknesses of the oppressor and recognised the limitations of arrogant ignorance of oppression. This included their vulnerabilities. He left Justice Kruger paralysed, and in fact, intellectually frozen on the subject of confrontation and violence. He agitated confrontation and saw no violence in confrontation. We are in that space where we have to confront our demons today of lack of system design and paucity of design thinking which are largely responsible for corruption, bribery, poor service delivery, unemployment without violence.

To that end we have to anchor our discourse in what our ancestors bestowed to us in words that reflect experience of practice. They remained authentic in hearing themselves out in meting justice. I had asked myself several questions on why I was invited to deliver the lecture. In my search I found a strange correlation and left with no clarity I committed a cardinal statistical sin of turning one fact of correlation into causality. Having done so I suggested to myself some answers of what could possibly anchor Steve Biko's thoughts in the interview with Bernard Zylstra. My evidence of one common point in 1977 is that Bishop Desmond Tutu who presided over Steve Biko's funeral was at the National

University of Lesotho where I was a second-year student in Economics and Statistics. To this end I would like to interpret Steve Biko's life of struggle through this prism and vantage point of the high mountains and generalise these surfacing principles of Steve Biko in the light of his condensed views with Bernard Zylstra. As a Mosotho I tried to dig deep in the language, and I came with crucial nuggets that may serve as points of departure and generalisation that assist me to interpret the legacy of struggle through the eyes of Steve Biko.

In court and in his work life of struggle, Steve Biko gathered instructions from the principle in the Sesotho language which would be there in Nguni orthography, I should presume. Amongst these is that in court or khotla the Sesotho language teaches us that Moro Khotla ha o okoloe mafura – that is the fat floating on broth cannot be skimmed off, it has to be drunk as hot as it is. Biko stuck to this principle. Yet he was a pragmatist, who saw in Beyers Naude a person whose path of change as intriguing with its consistent inconsistency. To this end Biko could be drawing from the Sesotho ancestry which says one who offends or talks out of turn in court cannot be persecuted he enjoys the protection of the court. Moa khotla ha a tsekisoe, after all letlaila le tlailela Morena, which means any discordance in song is welcome when it is done to favour the ears of the king – that is our intentions must be intentional. On the question of the system. Biko is clear that it may not be capitalism, nor can it be communism but rather as we search, the African communalism is most appealing and we have to seek it out in the practice and theory and on the basis of such advise our economic system accordingly. In this regard being your brother's keeper is an essential and core principle. Captured in the Sesotho idiom, that captures the principle it is Banna ba tents'ana ts'ea .



We cannot exhaust the qualities of Steve Bantu Biko as an architect of the Black Conscious Movement, a Christian of Calvinist orientation and a humanist and humanitarian. To sum all these virtues, I found the book he read – the Bible quite revealing - Numbers 23 verse 19 summarises his qualities aptly. God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfil?

Biko was not a human being prone to lying, prone to living like a candle in the wind and following the herd. He however, followed the truthfulness of being human. To this end he always acted on his conscience to ensure that he is in the act of continuously being human. He did not lie, except by agreement with PC Jones revealed during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that on that fateful day of the 18<sup>th</sup> of August 1977, they agreed on what framing they should adopt should they be caught on that mission. They were caught and both stuck to the instructions they agreed on. They were never going to betray the cause of the struggle. He did not speak and not act; he did not promise and not fulfil.

In his article in the Independent Saths Cooper says Steve Biko was the spark that ignited our open resistance to physical, mental, social and economic subjugation in the southern tip of the African continent. We have yet to however fulfil the Mission of Biko by:

- deepening and safeguarding our democratic gains;
- building the necessary bridges in a sea of tumultuous contestation, divisive rhetoric and intolerance;
- consciously escaping the marks of our origin, our historic limitations, rising above ethnicity and ideology, and finally

- working together to restore our common humanity while building a country that works and forging a nation that all of us can be proud of.

The theme “Activating the agency of the people to free the land, mind, and the spirit,” is grounded on the Setswana idiom of if you do not own cattle you lose sleep and if own them, there too you sleep. As it is true for cattle it is also true for freedom. When you do not have freedom you lose sleep and equally when you have freedom you loose sleep. The question freedom asks you of itself is how diligent or reckless are you with it. Biko to have sacrificed his youth for us to be who we are today forty-six years on have us to hold our heads in utter shame. There is absolutely no excuse - some of our apologists for our failure argue that apartheid catered for a few. That it true. It catered for a few. But in the knowledge that the struggle was about having to cater for more and fail to do so is inexcusable. It reflects absence of design thinking and system design. Steve Biko talks of African Communalism as an essential approach. Ours is to develop this communalism that anchored our struggle. Our failures are a sign that we did not follow through on the eleven core principles that Biko talked about, key amongst them interrogating the notion of African Communalism. Ours to date reflects a deformed architecture. It suggests to us that our development model and the mold we use, in actual fact continued to produce and reproduce designs made for the few in our full knowledge that we are many many more. We walked into that architecture with our eyes wide open and defined the more people as a surplus population thus relegating them to oceans of poverty where they swim in sewerage on a daily basis, exposed to poor education and unemployment. This bastions of disadvantage are now manmade factories churning out the deplorable situation we are in today. These

have in the long run become an irritant to our newly found freedom that funneled only a few to hold the crumbs at the master's table. We have refrain from talking the language of the many these, the many that as a mission challenge of struggle. The 20000 plus that attended Biko's funeral must remain our defining pot of what freedom means. It must be freedom for all. The tools that we deploy therefore must change so that all constraints can be removed. For almost three decades we are given reason after reason why we cannot afford free higher education.

Fifteen years ago, at the 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Steve Biko Memorial Lecture, on 11 September 2008, the then Minister of Finance, Trevor Manuel, concluded “This moment could define our collective future. Let us utilise it for a national catharsis. Let us work together as advised by Unger who writes, “Social solidarity must rest (instead) on the sole secure basis it can have direct responsibility of people for one another. Such responsibility can be realized through the principle that every able-bodied adult holds a position within a caring economy – the part of the economy in which people care for one another – as well as within the production system.” To dare any less would be to abandon the vision of leaders in the mould of Bantu Steve Biko.”

Now back in Qheberha today, I am reminded of 2011 October when I led the census and the community of Silvertown Kwa Sakhele were not going to participate. What they raised as matters of service delivery were as true then as they are today with the difference that the conditions have deteriorated further. They had three demands. Bring our counsellor back, get us corrugated iron to fix our homes, and fix our roads. My answer was the usual bureaucratic nonsense, that my responsibility is confined to counting and not to deliver on any of the items on the list. No

sooner had I said that they said to me we saw you with President Mandela on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October. We were told he cannot be seen but you did. So you have the power. I realized that my responsibility that is public facing is not about my being a Statistician-General and not being a counsellor or manager of municipality. My responsibility straddled all those. Faced with this dilemma I had to give a response that will ultimately ensure that the bureaucracy is seamless and delivers to the citizens. This meant I had to hold all other bureaucrats to account through the data and systems of evidence. I then said to the Silvertown community allow me to count you and I will deliver results to you that you can use to get your counsellor back. Twelve months later in October 2012 I was in Silvertown with results that aggregated their collective voice of misery. Not only the counsellor of Silvertown, but the mayor of Nelson Mandela Metropolitan and premier of the province were compelled to look into the searing power of the evidence and Silvertown looked like a place about to receive the president of the country. However, that is not how public policy should be directed. It cannot pit the statistician-general against the system unless in extreme cases such as was Silvertown. At the heart of public policy is design thinking and system design within which evidence co-locates. This is the space where Biko who is not a human being but instead is being human leads. But South Africa has just become that extreme case where you witness Silvertown everywhere.

It is in this context that the Interfaith Forum of South Africa issued a Statement that we the Interfaith Forum of South Africa express our deep concern about the social and moral crisis in our country. South Africa is in a state of crisis because:

- Poverty continues to haunt us.
- Inequality has deepened.

- Social ills, such as violence against women and children remain a major blight on our society.
- The collapse of coherent and stable family life
- Extreme violence is the order of the day.
- Racial and gender discrimination continue to bedevil our society.
- Endemic corruption is strangling the life out of our economy.
- With the highest unemployment rates in the world the majority of South Africans are excluded from the productive economy and many are bystanders in the political project.

Interfaith Forum of South Africa (TIFSA) is a collaborative effort of various faith traditions and communities in South Africa, who have come together to lead a national effort to address the state of South Africa because as a nation, we are in a state of crisis. The Interfaith Forum of South Africa, we reject this trajectory that we are currently set on, and we make the call for us to move to a different direction that brings us all together to realise the full potential of our nation. As religious leaders, we affirm the responsibility we have as the faith community to use our platforms to uphold the moral fabric of who we are as a People.

We came to Robben Island, a place that represented both the pain and sacrifices and the triumph of the human spirit in the resilience of the survival of hope. It is in that spirit that we declare our hope for a better future, for we believe in the people of this nation.

To address the morass of our country, we suggest three part practical responses to improve the situation:

1. We therefore wish to announce today, that from 9-11 October 2023, TIFSA will be hosting a solutions-driven National Convening, which will bring together representatives from all walks of life, to begin the process of righting the wrongs of our national trajectory. We need to brainstorm as a nation and we are convening a national brainstorming convention to look for solutions.

2. Secondly, we call on every South African to stand up as a warrior against corruption and the peril faced by whistleblowers. In that context we also express our disappointment at the slow pace of bringing to book those fingered by report of the Judicial Commission of Inquiry into Allegations of State Capture, otherwise known as the Zondo Commission, and call on the government to expedite the delivery on the specific findings and recommendations of the commission.

3. Thirdly, we commit to use our spaces to embark on a nationwide campaign for voter education. We are here at Robben Island to mark the sacrifices of those who gave their lives for the vote.

The solutions to our challenges lie with the citizens of this country. South Africa is our nation, our responsibility. As communities we have what it takes within us, to work together to reconfigure the trajectory of our nation. Let us come together to craft the pathway from a divided and racially and ethnically polarised past, to ONE SOUTH AFRICA FOR A DIGNIFIED & SECURED LIVING! This is the South Africa we want, this is the South Africa we pray for!

This and many initiatives in our nation should and keep the spirit of Steve Biko alive Numbers 23 verse 19 summarising his qualities aptly. God is not human, that he should lie, not a human being, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfil?

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Nelson Mandela University