



Perverting black power

Steve Biko's memory and meanings are diluted by capitalism and a new form of racism in the media, says Sandile Memela.

Steve Biko's meanings, and how he is remembered in post-apartheid South Africa, are undermined by meaningless interpretations of his Black Consciousness, the absence of a strategy for uniting (with) grassroots communities and the lack of vigorous practical plans to uphold his legacy and re-inspire black people to pursue an agenda for self-determination.

These weaknesses have made it easy for worn out "black power" exponents to be passively absorbed into a racist, money-driven status quo that disrespects African people and values.

The media are still largely in white hands. Young, gifted and black professionals, who pay allegiance to capitalism, are promoted and sponsored in and through the media to serve their interests. No matter what anyone's hopes are, today black media practitioners stand diametrically opposed to what Steve Biko, as a revolutionary analytical journalist, represented.

Ten years into freedom and democracy, the twin forces of racism and capitalism not only dish out high-profile positions to inexperienced but articulate black 30-somethings indiscriminately and as quickly as possible, but they are unleashing them to the so-called black market (sic) to destroy everything that stands for black pride.

This runs counter to the defiant spirit of Biko, who was not about rolling over to die, or willy-nilly accepting dictates from bosses. Ironically, this is what is now considered a pragmatic way of dealing with the racist capitalist system: becoming part of the problem by allowing oneself to be absorbed into the system's ranks. Until journalists, irrespective of skin colour, offer editorial visions, strategies and content aligned with the genuine aspirations of the African poor majority and promote an agenda of

“
The second decade
of freedom and
democracy needs a
revolutionary mindset.
”

critical political consciousness and individual self-determination, there is little hope that we can give meaning to our memory of Biko.

The ascent of the “rainbow nation” philosophy alone did not undermine the struggle to maintain Biko’s relevance in the period leading up to Nelson Mandela’s release from prison. It was dimmed by an internal weakness in the character of Black Consciousness exponents and a keenness to gain privilege. Biko emphasised non-collaboration with a racist, capitalist system, adopting a philosophy that encouraged people to embrace communalism and the ethic of “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”.

It was therefore important that the so-called non-racial movement not only co-opt clear-thinking leaders who upheld his legacy, but to destroy his vestiges. The internecine wars of the 1980s saw the assassination of Black Consciousness leaders, the incarceration of others, the infiltration and undermining of community and student organisations as part of the programme to corrupt and repress Biko’s militant spirit.

As more and more self-seeking exponents of his philosophy joined non-racial organisations, including the media, the best and brightest of his disciples were removed from working within their own communities. Instead, they suddenly mushroomed in white-controlled institutions where funds were available in excess. The setting was thus ripe for relegating Biko’s memory and meanings to the dustbin of history.

Today, a significant number of Black Consciousness-inclined media people and other professionals have been sucked into the vacuum-cleaner of predominantly white-controlled institutions. Among these are opinion-making journalists and intellectuals with solid struggle credentials, now widely considered “stars” because of an original and unique point of view, embedded in Biko’s thinking. Alas, that they are only rewarded with irregular eccentric columns, meaningless walk-about office work in newsrooms as mentors, lucrative perks that include mortgages in suburbs, allowances for status cars, and allowed to do as they please with the company’s time. If they were dedicated, and keeping the memory of Biko was not risky, why after 10 years into freedom and democracy is there no large body of protégées creating waves in the media (and other fields) to reshape a new nation with critical consciousness?

The second decade of freedom and democracy needs a revolutionary mindset. Instead, Biko’s disciples have become sought-after speakers on the cocktail circuit offering them a sycophantic audience of movers and shakers enjoying the economic crumbs of black economic empowerment. They waste their time and energy in long-haul flights to attend international conferences and seminars in the capitals of the world, when they should channel their energies to educating their people, including their own children, for critical self-examination and appreciation of indigenous languages and culture.

Unlike Biko (who declined offers for scholarships abroad), his disciples are lured like any ignorant, unprincipled and weak human being by the promise of 15 seconds of fame on TV programmes, unprecedented salaries and material wealth. By speaking of the myriad ways in which some of Biko’s disciples are seduced and tempted, the idea is not to point an accusing finger. However, few will deny that there is an urgent need to jostle us out of our complacency, to pause and ponder, to speak a word of caution. This would create a more sober mood for critical vigilance.

If exponents of Black Consciousness in the

media and other facets of life abandon their responsibility to do much more than enhance their status and material accumulation, they are complicit with those corrupting structures which desire to leave the black African majority behind. Yes, we are creating a self-annihilating environment, where media professionals are hijacked at gunpoint, insulted at glittering functions, have booze thrown onto their faces and are dismissed as “irrelevant black tokens”. This would be an expression of the loss of confidence in the media, lack of trust for journalists in a world where hopelessness and rage are the order of the order. Are we not there already?

It is this neo-colonial globalised social context that has seen narrow nationalists emerge as so-called symbols of black achievement. These opportunistic careerists, largely paraded as movers and shakers in the media, have gone back to the abandoned African majority to exploit their longing for clear-thinking leaders who intuitively understand their spiritual and economic crisis. They have correctly identified the growing chasm between the elite and the poor, and responded by projecting themselves as the bridge to achieving the impossible in the absurd. Of course, this strategy is to mislead the gullible masses to believe that, yes, it is possible to grow up in a matchbox house in Soweto and to end up owning a mansion in Sandton.

It is not, however, a meaningful intervention for Biko’s disciples, even if self-appointed, to collaborate with narrow-minded new Pan African nationalists, if their engagement is not linked with strategies to reconnect his philosophy with the grassroots. Sadly, desperation has made more and more folks inclined to embrace conservatives who support the status quo because they are able to deliver some bread on the table, even if it is without butter and cheese.

These are the smooth-talking individuals, who offer a measure of hope and are prevalent among the needy majority. They have intimidated fearlessly independent Black Consciousness exponents, who have allowed their integrity to be compromised because they, too, now want to indulge in the never-ending material supper. Many of Biko’s former contemporaries have abandoned pursuing the agenda of black self-determination, while those enjoying the always short-lived limelight in the media have toned down their clear radicalism.

In fact, some like Xolela Mangcu, the Executive Director of the Steve Biko Foundation and political commentator, had his column in the *Sunday Independent* discontinued because he would not translate the late Minister of Safety and Security Steve Tshwete’s clan names into English. Obviously, his self-determining and assertive attitude was seen as a problem because he was not willing to kow-tow to white figures of authority.

This is a common occurrence, especially when Black Consciousness-inclined journalists make their white colleagues feel abandoned, irrelevant and unimportant in the articulation of an authentic African vision and agenda.

Phrases like “black man, you are on your own”, and “black self-determination”, used to be on the lips and in the writing of Biko’s exponents, but have been dropped from popular vocabulary. It is political manoeuvring on the part of Black Consciousness exponents not to use these phrases because they conjure up offensive images of white exclusion and unfounded black racism.

Ironically, most people respond with embarrassment when Biko’s political language is not covered in abstract jargon. In fact, those who use his kind of plain language are considered as caught in a time warp, backward, or lacking worldly sophistication.

Yet terms like black majority and black self-determination still accurately depict and project the plight and aspiration of the African people. Unfortunately, this reminds us that apartheid is still alive and has only shifted gear from politics to economics.

This realisation is unwelcome because it not only shatters the myth of the “rainbow nation”, but reveals that white power continues to over-determine and shape the destiny of most black people, especially those celebrated movers and shakers.

Despite class differences, many black people are subjected to racist assaults which undermine the spirit of black self-pride that Biko represented.

Significantly, the less privileged the individual, the less likely the media are to highlight and defend their human rights as enshrined in the Constitution.

Biko did not hesitate to engage (at an intellectual level too) an ordinary black hand, so to speak, who recognised racism and white exploitation. He wrote about these experiences in his seminal anthology of columns, *I write what I like*. He desired efforts to empower people from diverse backgrounds, including the lowly, and this entailed more than just paying lip service to the philosophy. He lived and died for it.

Of course, black movers and shakers in the media and other fields can come up with creative strategies to liberate themselves both psychologically and materially. We do not have to wait until black people own most facets of the economy before we can live and enjoy our lives as human beings. A measure of our self-determination is always in our own hands.

The memory and meaning of Steve Biko in the media should be a radical liberatory subjectivity, which puts self-determination into our thinking and habits of being in ways that give us the confidence to pursue the truth, wherever it takes us. Then our democracy will be founded on solid foundations. It can become a reality for every journalist irrespective of skin colour, class or background, only if we construct a liberated vision of a better life for all that will concretely improve the lives of the African majority. For example, there is nothing wrong with the much acclaimed Steve Biko Memorial Lecture taking place at the hallowed halls of the University of Cape Town and being turned into exclusive invitation-only banquets in Sandton. Or that programmes to uphold his legacy should be confined to a select few or one region of the country. But there is no reason why occasions that promote the memory and meanings of Biko, encouraging critical thinking and debate, should not be taking place among the ordinary folks to inspire them/us and give them/us a sense of self-determining political purpose.

These consciousness-raising opportunities rarely happen the way Biko did things because most black people across class and ideology have left community-rooted Black Consciousness behind. Even though an increasing number of black people have moved into Sandton and other suburbs, they are all socialised by the media to identify with values, habits, lifestyle and attitudes that remove them from the centres of their own lives: the “I am black and proud” African personality.

When the black-run media denies people access to content and programmes which are not rooted in their own memories and the meanings of their heroes, it splits the heart and mind and makes life harder and more painful.

Although the African Renaissance we see and hear of today echoes Steve Biko, 10 years into freedom there is very little that acknowledges his self-sacrifice, relevance and memory.

A shame.



Sandile Memela is acting editor of the weekly *Sunday World*, South Africa’s original tabloid newspaper. He writes a provocative column, “Mamelang” that critically focuses on the role of the black middle class, examines the soul of black folks and celebrates the prevailing confusion that is post-apartheid new South Africa. Issues of class division, race consciousness and the co-option of the black middle class keep this multi-award-winning journalist from sleeping.