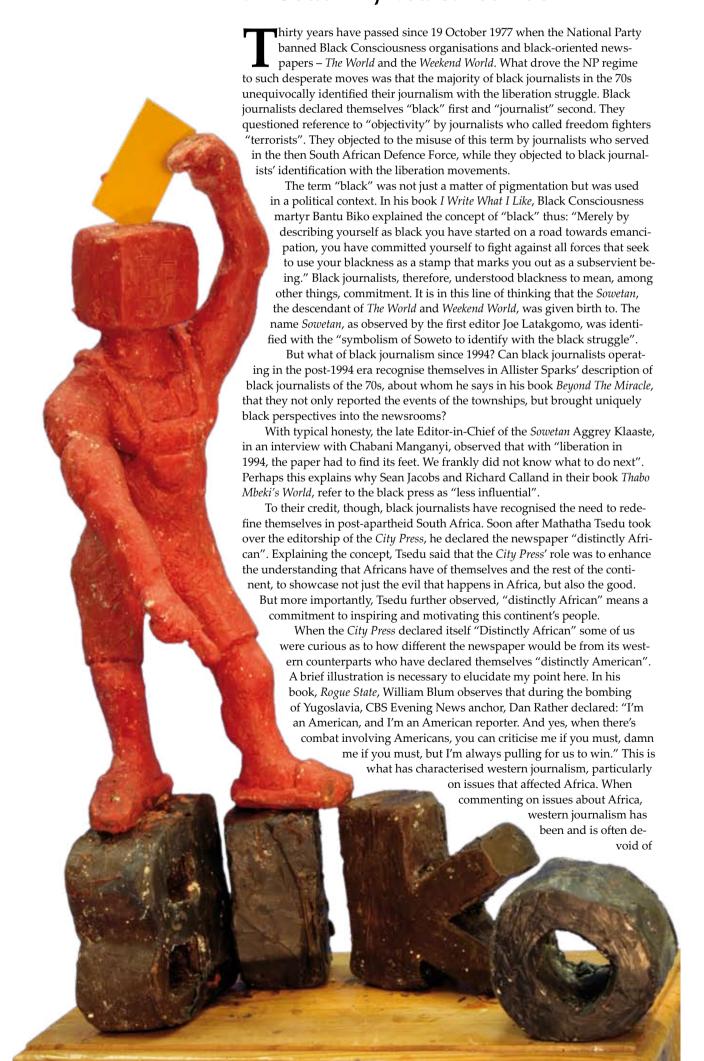
Distinctly

A reflection on black journalism in South Africa since 1994



African

by Simphiwe Sesanti

historical contexts. How "distinctly African" has been the City Press for instance on the wildly and widely publicised Zimbabwean issue?

To his credit, when commenting on the recent beatings of Zimbabwe's Movement for Democratic Change leader, Morgan Tsvangirai, the City Press' current editor Khathu Mamaila, attempted to give a historical context to the Zimbabwean crisis. Rightly so, he asked the question: what went wrong? Unlike many journalists in South Africa who refused to recognise any good in Mugabe, Mamaila acknowledged that Mugabe started massive educational and developmental programmes. But the City Press' reporting of the "beating of the opposition" was somewhat "dimly African". Of the 16 paragraphs of its story on the beatings, it dedicated only two short paragraphs to the bombing of two policewomen in a police station in Harare who were badly injured. Mugabe's government accused the MDC of the bombing.

When the London-based New African published the scarred head of Morgan Tsvangirai and that of the scalded face of Constable Vusani Moyo side by side, Tsvangirai's ordeal paled in comparison. No differently from other "distinctly Western" newspapers, the City Press devoted yet another column to Zimbabwean journalist Tsvangirayi Mukwazhi, who told of "his horror at beatings he and MDC members suffered last week". On seeing Tsvangirai beaten, he thought he "was dreaming because I could not imagine this was happening to such an important and respected man in Zimbabwe". No guesses as to where this journalist's sympathies lay!

What is expected from "distinctly African" newspapers like the City Press is no more or less than what Tsedu himself committed his newspaper to: "We commit to showcasing the good, the evil, the bad and the ugly that happens, and to do so without fear or favour" (italics mine).

Considering that the question of Zimbabwe has been used to condemn President Thabo Mbeki for most of his time in in office, there has been little effort in answering Mamaila's appropriate question about "what went wrong". Failure to do so on the part of black journalists is a great disappointment because they – since they were part of the liberation struggle – occupy a unique position to write with insight and empathy.

In dealing with Mbeki's fiercely criticised "quiet diplomacy", the South African media failed to report the fact that – as former African Union secretarygeneral, Amara Essy, told the New African – when Mugabe tried to address the land question in 1990 "it was African heads of state who told him to be quiet" since they did not want to "scare the white people in South Africa". It is against this background that former Mozambican President Joacquim Chissano told the Sunday Times in July 2003 that "President Mbeki belongs to a team, our team". In clearer terms the African heads of states' team, which chose a multi-lateral approach as opposed to a unilateral approach.

But the South African media, including black journalists, ignored this reality. Had the South African media given this historical background the attention it deserved, light would have been shed on why it took Mugabe 20 years to address the land question. With all its shortcomings, Ronald Suresh Roberts' book Fit to Govern must be commended for addressing this question in an enlighten-

Roberts notes: "Between 1990 and 1994, as the FW de Klerk propaganda machine attempted to unsettle world opinion by presenting African democracy as a monstrous project, Mugabe was asked by the ANC to delay land reform in Zimbabwe and he agreed. The 10-year constitutional moratorium had expired in 1990, the year of Mandela's release." This sorely missing context and dimension is what should set apart "distinctly African" media from the rest.

While the City Press has correctly declared itself "distinctly African" there are those, like Bill Saidi, deputy editor of The Standard, in Zimbabwe, who argues that "there can be no such thing as African journalism". Really? In advancing his argument in his Friday column in the Sowetan, "State we're in", Saidi notes that after Ghana's independence in 1957, "it appeared as if there would be a new animal called African journalism" that "would be different from the



journalism of other countries". This African journalism, Saidi continues, "would hear no evil and see no evil in African governance. It would praise the leaders until kingdom come, or until they died, either of natural causes or by the bullet of a soldier or a hired assassin". This description of African journalism that would protect despots is certainly undesirable, but it is wrong on the part of Saidi to throw the baby out with the bath water. In defining their mission as "distinctly African" the City Press certainly did not mean that.

While the world shares common problems, there are those that are particular to certain people and must be dealt with in a particular way - hence the need for African journalism. In her chapter "African Politics and American Reporting" in a book entitled Media and Democracy In Africa (edited by Goran Hyden, Michael Leslie and Folu Ogundimu), Beverly Hawk laments the tendency by western journalists to portray "African culture as the problem and western institutions as the solution" when dealing with problems of the African continent. She notes that instead of contextualising African problems, western journalists tend to reduce African problems to a "tribal problem": "Focusing on tribalism as a problem, therefore, mutes other conflicts of interest between groups and distracts us from covert causes of many African conflicts. Consequently, class conflicts become tribalism; regional conflicts become tribalism; responses to structural adjustment programmes become tribalism."

Bantu Biko made a similar observation before he left for the ancestral world: "One writer makes the point that in an effort to destroy completely the structures that had been built up in the African society and to impose their imperialism with an unnerving totality, the colonialists were not satisfied merely with holding a people in their grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content, they turned to the past of the oppressed people and distorted, disfigured and destroyed it. No longer was reference made to African culture, it became barbarism. Africa was the 'dark continent'. Religious practices and customs were referred to as superstition. The history of African society was reduced to tribal battles and internecine wars."

It is against this background that African journalism is required – to contextualise issues and put African culture or cultures into perspective. In addressing the issue of African culture/s the challenge for black journalists who hold positions of authority is to give space to more black women journalists to address issues of culture. In many African communities cultural power is political power. Giving more writing space to black women journalists is necessary so that they can begin to challenge the self-serving notions of African culture used by some male chauvinists to entrench ill-gotten privileges.

A number of years ago, veteran black woman journalist Nomavenda Mathiane pointed out that, come 1994, some black male journalists who cried foul against white male journalists-only club, have since tasted the sweetness of power. Writing on the 25th anniversary of the City Press, the newspaper's features editor Mapula Sibanda observed: "Today, with the progressive male editor Mathatha Tsedu, each section of the paper has a female writer either leading the pack or making a substantial contribution, save for politics, still the preserve of testosterone." The challenge facing female black journalists is to challenge the $\,$ status quo – or else no gender equality! *Aluta continua*!





Biko-inspired artwork by students of the Carinus Art School in Grahamstown. Left: Microcrystalline, wax and plastic sculpture by Lucas Antoni (Grade 12); Above top: Linocut by Xanadu Loesch (Grade 10); **Above middle: Linocut by** Megan Riddin (Grade 11); **Above: Linocut by Joseph** Coetzee (Grade 10).

...or dimly African?