

**A STEVE BIKO MEMORIAL LECTURE DELIVERED BY AZAPO PRESIDENT, MOSIBUDI MANGENA,  
AT THE PENINSULA TECHNIKON, CAPE TOWN, ON 12 SEPTEMBER 2001**

***Consciousness Defines Who We Are***

The World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Durban last week under the auspices of the United Nations, put the spotlight on the inhumanity of people to others. It focused the gaze of the world on some of the cruel, irrational and painful systems, attitudes, beliefs and practices that continue to impact negatively on the lives of millions of people on this earth. These injustices range from the caste system in India to the plight of indigenous communities in different parts of the globe, to the suffering of the Palestinian people under a murderous Israeli occupation.

The conference was intended to help all of us to build a better, humane and more just world. However, it became evident to many very early on, that justice is still a captive of the rich and powerful.

Led by the United States, Western countries did not want to recognise the humanity and dignity of Africans and people of African descent. They were opposed to the proposals that slavery, the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism be declared crimes against humanity. In intensive debates running deep into the night over a ten day period, they refused to apologise for taking Africans into slavery, exploiting their labour to build their now strong economies, occupying African territories, plundering their resources and ruling Africans against their will. They resisted every suggestion that they pay reparations to the victims of their inhuman acts.

The United States, in her usual arrogant big brother attitude, ordered everybody to stop talking about slavery and reparations, or else. When no one obeyed, they walked out in a huff, believing that their departure would mark the collapse of the conference. It is to the credit of the world that it was demonstrated to the US that they might be filthy rich and armed to the teeth, but that their moral authority over humanity is in the pits.

Black delegates to the conference were quite clear that their major sources of racism and poverty of Blacks everywhere are slavery and colonialism. They were convinced that a just and humane world is not possible in the absence of recognition by slavers, oppressors, colonialists and racists of their crimes. You cannot build a fairer, democratic and righteous world on a false foundation.

Our own country is a miniature replica of the unfair world the conference focused on. Indeed the sources of the poverty and suffering of the majority Black people in this country are settler-colonialism and racism.

The gross inequalities that exist in our country today follow exactly the same patterns that were established by settler-colonialism and/or apartheid. These cover all aspects of our lives except the voting booth. Otherwise land ownership, economic ownership and control, the generation

and spread of ideas and the enjoyment of social services and amenities, are all just as the previous dispensation ordered.

Of course, like their big brother in the US, those who are the beneficiaries of our oppression and exploitation do not think they have an obligation to acknowledge their misdeeds and take corrective action. They do not even want us to talk about it. They accuse us of being obsessed with the past and refusing to look to the future. They would not acknowledge the fact that seven million Black people live in shacks and more than three million have no safe drinking water, has anything to do with their oppressive rule.

At the same Durban conference, the President of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni, while urging the slavers, colonialists and racists to accept the devastating effects of their actions on Black people, also urged Blacks to recognise their own weaknesses. He demanded to know why we allowed ourselves to be taken into slavery, why we allowed our territories to be conquered and occupied by others and why we allowed others to discriminate against us. He counselled that, in the real world, the strong prey upon the weak.

Museveni did not know that he was espousing Black Consciousness. Those of us, who are exponents of this philosophy, heard the great Steve Biko speaking through the lips of Yoweri Museveni. The President of Uganda thought that he was just speaking the truth. But that is what Black Consciousness is – the truth.

Remember that Black Consciousness is defined as a way of life, an attitude of the mind. It demands of real Black people to seek to define themselves and refuse to be defined by others. It asserts that this positive portrayal of the self is a prerequisite for the attainment of true liberation and genuine equality with others. It therefore implies that the entrenchment, deepening and maintenance of democracy in our country would be impossible in a population riddled with inferiority complexes that derive from their many centuries of oppression and degradation.

All Black people in this country, generation after generation, were born, and most led all their lives under a white racist system that despised everything about Blacks and sought to obliterate it. Our hair, skin and features were ugly, our names were pagan and had to be discarded, our culture was backward and our languages inferior. Our intelligence was in doubt.

These many centuries of explicit and implicit domination, exploitation, contempt, brainwashing and derision have produced Black people who doubt their equality with others. After all, if you tell a lie often and for a long time, it becomes truth. These lies were told to Blacks for over three centuries, and to many, many generations. So, there is an induced inferiority complex among Blacks which becomes the source of their self-imposed psychological oppression. In fact, psychological oppression is the most effective and devastating form of oppression any people could suffer from.

Black Consciousness contends that physical liberation is impossible without psychological liberation. People who are not proud of themselves, do not love themselves and have no confidence in themselves. Because they have no confidence in themselves they cannot be free to exercise true freedom when they come across one. If this assertion was theoretical in Steve Biko's days, now it is vindicated and proved by the reality of our situation in this country.

Why are Black people, who are the vast majority in this country, the only ones complaining about racism and being discriminated against by the white minority? Why is it never the other way round? If race relations are not as good as they should be, why are racist killings, acts of racial abuse and ill treatment not mutual between the two groups?

Why are taxi people killing one another over routes and passengers? Why are we the only people who routinely kill one another for business reasons?

Why are Blacks, as a group, not so appalled by *mikhukhu*, that they go on a robust and sustained campaign to eradicate them? If Blacks are in power politically and presumably in charge of the national budget, why don't they effectively use that power to eradicate this disgrace which further dehumanises our people? How can anybody lead a life of dignity and bring up children in such an environment?

Why is the Black intelligentsia mimicking everything western, to an extent that it has done nothing to transform the state into one that has a relationship to the culture and ethos of Black people? Why is this intelligentsia trying to force the majority of Blacks to conform to this state as opposed to designing a state to suit the culture and ethos of the people?

Why is the same intelligentsia not doing enough to transform the Eurocentric education system into an Afrocentric one?

All these are practical manifestations of a mental slavery. It all means that whilst the sources of white racism and Black suffering and poverty are slavery, colonialism and oppressive rule, that white racism is now sustained by Black slave mentality.

To be truly free, we need to be strong, cohesive and in solidarity with one another. For that to happen, we need to give ourselves generous doses of Black Consciousness. Then, and only then, shall we be able to build an open, democratic and more equal society in which the colour of your skin will count for nought.

I thank you.