

# Chapter Four

## SPREAD OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

IN 1972 the debate about Black Consciousness increased tremendously in both black and white circles in South Africa whilst protagonists of the philosophy gained major successes through wider and more general acceptance of the Black Consciousness approach by many black organisations and institutions.

### **Definition**

The direct protagonists of Black Consciousness in South Africa were originally the South African Students Organisation and later the Black Peoples' Convention and other groups in the fields of theatre and drama, music, youth groups etc.

SASO's definition of the Black Consciousness philosophy seems to be the working basis for all black efforts in the country. This definition is contained in the SASO Policy Manifesto adopted at their 2nd General Students Council in July, 1971. We reproduce in part the SASO Policy Manifesto to bring out the definitions contained in it:

SASO believes that:

- 3.(a) South Africa is a country in which both black and white live and shall continue to live together;
- (b) that the white man must be made aware one is either part of the solution or part of the problem;

- (c) that, in this context, because of the privileges accorded to them by legislation and because of their continual maintenance of an oppressive regime, whites have defined themselves as part of the problem;
  - (d) that, therefore, we believe that in all matters relating to the struggle towards realising our aspirations, whites must be excluded;
  - (e) that this attitude must not be interpreted by blacks to imply 'anti-whitism' but merely a more positive way of attaining a normal situation in South Africa;
  - (f) that in pursuit of this direction, therefore, personal contact with whites, though it should not be legislated against, must be discouraged, especially where it tends to militate against the beliefs we hold dear.
4. (a) SASO upholds the concept of Black Consciousness and the drive towards black awareness as the most logical and significant means of ridding ourselves of the shackles that bind us to perpetual servitude.
- (b) SASO defines Black Consciousness as follows:
- (i) Black Consciousness is an attitude of mind, a way of life.
  - (ii) The basic tenet of Black Consciousness is that the Black man must reject all value systems that seek to make him a foreigner in the country of his birth and reduce his basic human dignity.
  - (iii) The black man must build up his own value systems, see himself as self-defined and not defined by others.
  - (iv) The concept of Black Consciousness implies the awareness by the black people of the power they wield as a group, both economically and politically, and hence group cohesion and solidarity are important facets of Black Consciousness.

- (v) Black Consciousness will always be enhanced by the totality of involvement of the oppressed people, hence the message of Black Consciousness has to be spread to reach all sections of the black community.
  - (c) SASO accepts the premise that before the black people should join the open society, they should first close their ranks, to form themselves into a solid group to oppose the definite racism that is meted out by the white society, to work out their direction clearly and bargain from a position of strength. SASO believes that a truly open society can only be achieved by blacks.
5. SASO believes that the concept of integration cannot be realised in an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust. Integration does not mean assimilation of blacks into an already established set of norms drawn up and motivated by white society. Integration implies free participation by individuals in a given society and proportionate contribution to the joint culture of the society by all constituent groups. Following this definition therefore, SASO believes that integration does not need to be enforced or worked for. Integration follows automatically when the doors to prejudice are closed through the attainment of a just and free society.
  6. SASO believes that all groups allegedly working for 'integration' in South Africa ... and here we note in particular the Progressive Party and other liberal institutions ... are not working for the kind of integration that would be acceptable to the black man. Their attempts are directed merely at relaxing certain oppressive legislations and to allow blacks into a white-type society.
  7. SASO, while upholding these beliefs, nevertheless wishes to state that Black Consciousness should not be associated with any particular political party or slogan.

### **Debate on the name**

The first issue to be picked up by the public, particularly the white public, was the usage of the term 'black' in place of 'non-white'. Following upon their positive assertion of blackness, SASO people ruled that black people are those who are 'by law or tradition, politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South

African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realisation of their aspirations'. In essence this definition carried with it a double set of criteria - first, those relating to oppression because of skin colour and, second, those relating to the willingness of the oppressed individual to identify with fellow oppressed people against the oppression. In the SASO glossary the term 'black' is used when referring to the broad population of African, Coloured and Indian people and the term 'non-white' is specifically used in a derogatory sense to refer to 'sell-outs' or 'collaborators' or 'lackeys'.

The argument that people must be referred to in a positive manner and not as negatives of others seems to have been received well by most blacks. To date all well-known political, educational and most sports groups use the term 'black' and reject the tag 'non-white'.

The greatest opposition to the usage of the term 'black' as an all-inclusive reference has been shown by some white newspapers, who argue that Coloureds and Indians may be offended by the term. In essence there has not been much evidence to support this view except for predictable individual reactions from some quarters.

The Natal Indian Congress which is the most outspoken 'all-Indian' political group uses the term 'black' freely. So does the Labour Party which is 'all-Coloured'.

Because of this and also because of some strong arm tactics by groups like SASO and BPC in their conferences, some institutions have made drastic revision of their attitudes towards blacks. The Institute of Race Relations after attempting to carry out a 'survey' on possible alternatives to the term 'non-white' decided ultimately to scrap the term 'non-white' and to accept the term 'black'.

The *Rand Daily Mail* in July changed attitudes in a period of one week over the same issue. At the beginning of the SASO Conference when the press was warned about usage of the term 'non-white', the *Rand Daily Mail* arrogantly asserted its right to use the term. A week later, following expulsion from the SASO Conference, resignation of a disgusted reporter and public reaction from groups and newspapers like *Post*, the *Rand Daily Mail* capitulated and took a policy decision to use the term 'black':

In the meantime, other newspapers, notably *The World*, *Post*, *Drum*, *The Leader*, and the *Daily News* long ago on their own decided to use the term 'black' both in news coverage and in editorial columns.

### **Some Manifestations of Black Consciousness**

The definition of Black Consciousness in terms of efforts towards self-reliance and non-dependence on white initiative and support has manifested itself in many aspects of black life in South Africa, particularly in 1972.

Mention has already been made of groups amongst blacks who have consolidated their work towards greater contribution to self-reliance of the black community.

Groups referred to in this regard were ASSECA, IDAMASA, BPC, AICA, SASO and some youth groups. The notable aspect of the work of all these groups is the change in direction from offering service to members to offering service to the community as a whole. In addition to these, there are a few other attempts worth mentioning.

(i) *Breakthrough in newspaper and literary world*

Sensitivity of the black community has been highest in respect to 'biased reporting' of events within the black community. Concern has been expressed by most groups that blacks will never communicate effectively until they control their own medium. It was also noted that the white-controlled press tends to give priority either to events that occur within the white world or to those aspects of black life that make good reading for the white readership of newspapers.

The Black Press Conference already referred to in Chapter 2 decided to work hard towards the establishment of a Black Press. The Ad Hoc Committee elected was given a mandate to start even with a monthly publication but to work towards a more regular means of communication.

Besides the attempts at establishing a Black Press, a number of agencies within the black ranks are making strides in the area of publications. The SASO Newsletter, started in 1970, has been consolidated and now commands a respectable position as an opinion-maker. In the meantime SASO is launching its first actual book, *Creativity and Development*, which is a collection of essays delivered at the SASO Conference Symposium on the same topic.

Other publications include *Essays on Black Theology* edited by Mokgethi Motlhabi and published by the Black Theology Project of the University Christian Movement and *Black Viewpoint* published by the Black Community Programmes. *Essays on Black Theology* was banned on 28 July, 1972, and according to the UCM dissolution conference report, will now be published by C. Hurst and Co., London, who have acquired exclusive world rights to publish it.

A new notable feature is attachment developed by blacks to poetry written by their own poets and also the apparent increase in sensitivity by poets to real issues affecting the black world. No longer are blacks apologetic when they write about the townships and slum areas, about

crime and murder in their areas, about new pride in self rediscovery. A new generation of poets is coming up but few of them have managed to have their works published. These are *Yakhal 'inkomo* by Wally Serote and *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum* by Oswald Mtshali, both published by Renoster Books, and *Cry Rage!* by James Matthews and Gladys Thomas, published by Spro-cas. All these are selling much more widely in the black community than any other current publications of literary value. In the meantime the SASO publications are being extended to become a fully fledged publishing house to take care of the mushrooming interest by blacks in publications.

### (ii) *Black Workers*

Elsewhere in this book we discuss in detail the position amongst black workers and the latest developments in this area. Traditionally, the worker field has been handled by groups who are highly resistant to so-called polarisation amongst groups. However latest developments point out to an increase in awareness amongst worker ranks of the need to assert one's humanity first before fighting for common humanity. The slogan 'workers of the world unite' is being scrutinised closely in the South African context. There is a growing belief that in the classical sense white workers cannot be regarded as genuine workers as long as they hide behind job reservation, discriminatory wages, discriminatory recognition of their trade unions and the general pool of privileges open to whites in South Africa. Black workers are beginning to realise how the system rests squarely on their shoulders while giving back just enough to enable them to come to work the following day.

As a result of this, the Black Workers Project and the Black Allied Workers' Union (formerly Salesman and Allied Workers Association) are making strides in their attempts to bring black workers together. The classical western elements of trade unionism have had to be modified to accommodate the fact that black worker interests extend beyond the factory; they extend to the ghetto where black workers stay together in hostels under squalid conditions; to the crowded trains and buses that carry workers in and out of town often at the risk of serious accidents; to the absence of amenities for black workers in and around town; to the stringent, irksome and humiliating application of influx control laws that result in a lot of blacks losing their job opportunities; to lack of proper channels whereby people could equip themselves with basic skills like reading and writing; to exposure to 'technical arrests' because of pass and curfew laws. These are aspects that are now being given considerable

attention over and above the orthodox western approach to trade unionism.

### *(iii) Arts and Entertainments*

In the field of arts and theatre there is also a new re-awakening as described elsewhere in this book. A new studio, the Black Arts Studio, has been opened in Durban. At their first exhibition, BAS displayed art from several black artists throughout the country. Black artists, some of whose emotionally linked creativity was stunted by criticism from controlling white art galleries, have now found an opening for their work and hence BAS is gaining a tremendous following. In addition, the black public, though still on a limited scale, is beginning to respond to creative expression by black artists. BAS hopes to open new galleries in major cities of South Africa.

More noticeably, drama and theatre groups are beginning to pick up the trend of Black Consciousness and to give expression to it through their work on stage. To date several groups like Theatre Council of Natal (TECON), Serpent Players (Port Elizabeth), Mihlothi Black Theatre (Johannesburg) and the Soweto Black Ensemble (Johannesburg) have taken on what is generally known as Black Theatre. This hinges around a proper enunciation of the feelings, emotions and hopes of ghetto dwellers through the medium of drama. In addition these groups have consolidated their strength by forming a union of their own - the South African Black Theatre Union (SABTU). In Johannesburg, a local confederation of all black theatre and musical groups, Mdali, has been formed to keep a lively link amongst black theatre groups and to promote black theatre, art, music and literature.

On a much more diffuse basis music lovers throughout the country have shown a tremendous liking for groups like OSIBISA of Nigeria, various black artistes in the United States and a recent feature is the skyrocketing rise in popularity of singers like Letta Mbuli and Hugh Masekela (South Africans in exile).

Pop and jazz festivals throughout the country are no longer complete without a demonstration of Black Power signs by the crowds. At a massive music festival 'Pina-Culo' held at Umgababa on the 2-4 September, crowds waved and shouted Black Power slogans whilst a number displayed slogans on their dress. More noticeable was the increase in participation of black-oriented music groups like 'Dashiki'. Similarly at the Pop and Jazz Festival organised by the Black Arts Studio

at Curries Fountain in Durban, crowds turned the occasion into a black revival meeting with their Black Power demonstrations.

What seems to be happening in the music world is that the black 'superiority' in music, of which blacks have condescendingly been told by white tourists and liberals for a long time, is now being used effectively as a means of communication, often running deeper than words.

#### *(iv) Sports*

In the field of sports too, apartheid seems to be boomeranging on its architects. Originally black people were withheld from participation in big-time sport by a number of factors amongst which were inadequate training facilities and lack of proper organisation at the top. As a result the only heroes black people knew in the sports they loved best were white people whom they saw in white events and in films. With the coming of greater organisation in soccer, tennis, rugby and other sports and the banning of black people from some white sports fields, blacks are beginning to develop an allegiance towards their own kind and no longer are young blacks very taken up by what they read of white sport in newspapers.

On the other hand, in a more positive way, the non-racial sports unions, most of whom are functionally black, have started consolidating African, Coloured and Indian sport and have now formed an association to which more than 10 unions are affiliated. Figures like Hassan Howa are commanding a lot of respect and following particularly because of their 'no-compromise' stand against white racist sport.

#### *(v) General*

Generally speaking, 1972 saw Black Consciousness gaining momentum in many aspects of black people's lives. The tremendous reaction that came from white society is itself indicative of the change in attitude by blacks - away from an acceptance of white trusteeship and guidance and in the direction of self-reliance and self-help.

The attack launched by blacks on traditional white values, including the 'condescending' attitude of whites of liberal opinion, has in a sense been responsible for the widespread reaction from the white community. Quite predictably, warnings about the dangers of Black Power and Black Nationalism came not so much from conservative traditional white



quarters as from liberals. In the meantime black consciousness advocates have consistently refused to be drawn into debate with whites on the pros and cons of black consciousness. The central message of black consciousness is regarded by them as the rejection of the monopoly by whites of truth. This is what has led to an independent assessment by blacks of value systems in the political, economic and social fields. Hence any authoritative evaluation of black consciousness by whites is regarded as a further manifestation of the same monopoly of truth and moral judgment that is a fault in our society.

On the other hand within the black ranks themselves fierce debates have arisen on aspects of black consciousness. Almost all political forces, including those operating within the system, have at one stage or the other assessed their attitudes towards black consciousness. Whilst points of friction over interpretation of 'policy' do exist, it can be generally said, for all black groups, that they see the advent of black consciousness as a healthy and positive development and have no quarrel with its basic principles. As a result of this there has been greater cohesion and consultation amongst black groups this year than before.

### **White Reactions to Black Consciousness**

The philosophy of Black Consciousness and the call for Black Solidarity evoked a variety of reactions from white people. The following newspaper and publication excerpts indicate this.

Towards the end of her paper on the occasion of the E.G. Malherbe Academic Freedom Lecture at the University of Natal, Nadine Gordimer examined Black Consciousness and its implications in the South African situation. She saw Black Consciousness as a revival of the philosophy of Negritude propounded by Aime Cesaire and Leopold Senghor, and as an essential step towards liberation. She therefore viewed the rejection of whites by blacks, particularly on the student front, and the determination of black students to 'go it alone', as a sign of 'healing negritude' (1).

Referring to the role of the liberals, she said: 'We shall need to see our efforts not so much as attempts to right wrongs on behalf of blacks as to set our society free of the lies upon which it is built. The role of proctor, honourable though it may have seemed, and great courage though it undoubtedly showed in certain individuals at certain times, is one of those lies'.

Reaction to Black Consciousness by traditional liberals is epitomised in the attitude expressed by Dr Alan Paton, last president of the now defunct Liberal Party. Reacting to an address given at a Black Theology Seminar in Pietermaritzburg by Mr Steve Biko, a former president of SASO, Alan Paton made the following points:

Pride in white skin and pride in black skin are, to him, both vulgarities, but that while the first is inexcusable, the second is not and contains elements not vulgar at all.

Black Consciousness obviously wants to change the order of things but the order of things cannot be changed without power. He therefore wanted to know how long the young zealots would be satisfied with a mush of culture, mysticism, lyricism and going round saying 'haven't I a lovely skin?'

SASO is directing its fire against the politically unarmed, viz. the liberals. Alan Paton therefore asked whether it was expected of liberals to leave the country; keep silent forever more; be trained as guerilla fighters or just lie down and die.

He believed that Black Consciousness might just become 'a refusal to believe, on principle, that any white man can speak the truth, and might end up being a twin of white nationalism' (2).

Alan Paton was also quoted as having said that Black Power was an inevitable consequence of white power and that if it were to be met with police vigilance some of the advocates of Black Power might go into exile and this would result in an intensification of external pressure and guerilla warfare. In his opinion the only way to adequately prevent this would be to create a just order of society. He also made the point that it was rather too early to make authoritative pronouncements about Black Power but he believed that the young blacks were the people to resolve the ambivalence between Black Consciousness and Black Power. He predicted that black voices were going to be heard more loudly and more often and more compellingly, and that they would not be saying 'Ja Baas' (3).

The following paragraphs have had to be deleted since they quote Dr Richard Turner, who has been banned (4).

Another typical white reaction to Black Consciousness opened with the phrase 'Black Power', which it said had rather a sinister connotation and yet was a phrase which reflected very much the attitude and thinking of many African intellectuals with whom whites would now have to come to terms (5). It said further that this view was supported by the Institute of Race Relations which drew attention to various manifestations of this consciousness, the call to blacks to go it alone, etc.

The article supported this new consciousness, but with reservations. The writer continued that a slogan like 'Black is Beautiful' was fine, but that those things had a tendency to go too far and instead of 'Black is Beautiful' there would always be some who would take this to mean that 'Black is always right' and that would be just as silly (and dangerous) as those who thought the same about whites.

Whites in their reaction to Black Consciousness, did not confine themselves to the political significance of this philosophy; they also concerned themselves with its theological aspect, Black Theology. This was evidenced by a report which appeared in *Die Transvaler* (6). According to this report, about 350 people, including ministers of religion and missionaries from the northern provinces and Rhodesia, attended a conference of ministers, which coincided with the opening of the faculty of theology in Pretoria.

In his opening address, Prof. Carel Boshoff stated that Black Theology originated in America and that if its full implications could be accepted by the black man in Africa, communication between blacks and whites would be very difficult. He conceded that Black Theology was situational and that the area which received full attention was the humanity of black people. This, he said, was understandable. He noted, however, that in the

process, unchristian methods were used and he therefore felt that Black Theology was not a true theology.

Another opinion on Black Consciousness came from René de Villiers, former editor of the *Star* and a columnist for *The Argus*. René de Villiers said that he was intrigued that the Nationalists were surprised at the decision of black students to 'go it alone'. He viewed this development as a natural consequence of 24 years of Nationalist rule. For 24 years people had been told to develop separately and it was therefore understandable that the message finally got through, he said (7). René de Villiers also expressed concern over Black Consciousness and warned that if two distinct nationalisms were created in one geographic area, a confrontation would definitely arise. Like Alan Paton, he noted that liberals have been singled out as Black Awareness targets.

The *Daily Dispatch* also joined the chorus of critics of Black Consciousness, expressing the feeling that this philosophy was a natural consequence of Apartheid. The writer also maintained that a case could be made out for SASO (advocates of Black Consciousness) if one's concern was the achievement of ends, but he felt strongly that means could never be separated from the end.

He stated that many whites did not fully understand the implications of Black Consciousness, even Nusas who supported 'in principle' the standpoint of the blacks only South African Students Organisation. In his opinion there could be no justification for 'supporting or condoning in blacks what we condemn in whites - exclusivity'. All racial programmes were, according to him, 'inclined to get out of hand and the temporary expedient invariably becomes the lasting madness' (8).

Whilst liberals pointed accusing fingers at the government for having encouraged Black Consciousness, the Deputy Minister of Coloured Affairs, Dr van der Merwe, entered the arena and blamed the 'militant anti-white tendency among 'non-white' students' on the hypocrisy of white liberals. Dr van der Merwe felt that this new move by black students was in line with government policy except that the government favoured friendly dialogue between groups. He felt that the hypocritical action of 'leftist whites' had forced blacks into rejecting dialogue completely. He also pointed to the example of the government which, as he saw it, had meaningful dialogue between itself and the homeland leaders and between itself and most Coloured leaders. He regretted, though, that the Coloured Labour Party was consistently refusing to co-operate with the government (9).

Another warning to black students who advocated Black Consciousness came from Mr Allister Sparks' column in the *Rand Daily Mail*, in which he volunteered to clear the apparent 'confusion' that had

been brought about by the emergence of Black Consciousness. Mr Sparks advanced the opinion that although Black Power may have started off as a good thing, it ran the danger of going out of control. He quoted the example of the Afrikaner who at the turn of the century had suffered the humiliation of having lost a war, his country and had feared he would lose his culture and identity, which resulted in Hertzog breaking away from the Smuts-Botha coalition, with the idea of having the Afrikaner establish himself and fuse back into society. As was expected Afrikaner nationalism turned out to be a political machine which generated its own momentum.

Mr Sparks concluded by sounding a note of warning to black students not to go creating a racist monster that they would not be able to control in the years ahead (10).

The political commentator of the *Sunday Times*, Mr Stanley Uys, took it upon himself to warn white society, especially the opposition political parties, that Black Consciousness was becoming a major political factor in this country, and that there was little time to mend bridges across the colour-line.

Stanley Uys saw Black Consciousness as a preparatory stage to Black Power and he also distinguished between Black Consciousness and Black Nationalism. He said that the outstanding characteristic of Black Nationalism of the 50's and early 60's was that it was prepared to work with whites whereas Black Consciousness was characterised by its rejection of whites by blacks.

He noted that Black Consciousness was growing from strength to strength and he illustrated this by quoting the recent developments in the black world, including the expulsion of a *Rand Daily Mail* reporter from the SASO Conference in July, 1972, when the Daily Mail persistently referred to Coloured, Indians and Africans collectively as 'non-whites' instead of 'black'. This expulsion, he believed, influenced the *Rand Daily Mail* to announce that the term 'black' would be used in future (11).

Perhaps the most representative example of the attitude of whites to Black Consciousness came from an open letter to SASO by the editor of *Deurbraak*, which started off by saying that he sympathised with the attempts by SASO to spread Black Consciousness, to confront the white man and to expose the discrimination that was practised by whites against blacks. The editor stated, however, that he could not sympathise with SASO's militant stance. He pointed out that it was the white man who was wielding political power and that if the black man wanted to share this power, he would have to persuade him to give away certain powers. The editor believed that the only way of achieving that was by co-operating with the white man. But if the black man wanted to take over

this power he would do well to remember that the white man would only allow it over his dead body. The editor further 'advised' SASO not to scream at the white man because this would only serve to convince whites that the black man was determined to chase them into the seas and therefore make him more adamant to cling to his power.

The editor also observed that blacks had been complaining that whites were always talking about them and not with them, but that when the whites now wanted to talk, the blacks were shunning them. He concluded by warning SASO that this attitude might get them into trouble (12).

An editorial in *Pro Veritate* illustrates yet another common trend in the reaction of whites to Black Consciousness. In that article the editor supported this movement and saw it as a political strategy (13).

He submitted that the recent dissolution of the University Christian Movement had been caused not only by government persecution but also by the rejection of white or multi-racial bodies by blacks.

The writer regarded this movement as a 'working method to achieve definite objectives' and the emergence of this movement, he said, was the result of the apartheid policy which had not allowed blacks to develop fully. He also stated that Black Consciousness viewed the 'homeland' policy as a bluff and that the government and opposition would do well to take 'due consideration of this rising black power'.

In an article entitled 'White Liberals and Black Power' in *The South African Outlook*, Gerald Stone submitted that Black Power was here to stay. He appealed to white liberals not to condemn it but rather to have faith in the blacks who had taken the responsibility in the struggle for freedom. He urged the whites to assist in whatever way they could, lest control of the movement fell into the hands of the advocates of hatred within it. He also warned the white liberals not to stand in the way of this movement, because if they really believed in justice they would not insist on dominating the black struggle for freedom (14).

The Rev Dr Robert McAfee Brown, an American theologian, viewed Black Consciousness as a reaction to the tendency by whites of 'partially accepting black people only if they are servile to white middle-class values'. He maintained that Blacks had been partially accepted in spite of their black skins and not because of it, with the result that many people were developing a black identity as an alternative. He urged whites to affirm the importance of Black Consciousness and at the same time promote racial contact and understanding, the task being to manifest the 'oneness' of humanity more fully. He expressed a strong desire that multi-racial contact be pushed to the edge of what was legally possible. He encouraged whites to continue with the effort to have multi-racial gatherings in spite of the fact that blacks might reject them either because

of the risk involved or because the genuineness of white concern was suspect (15).

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