

"AFRICAN" vs "BLACK"?

by VANESCO MAFORA

On February 26, 1978 Comrade Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe, also known as "the Professor" and "the Defier of the Undefiable", passed away. The Soweto Action Committee, then the torchbearer of BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS (BC), organized Sobukwe's funeral.

The then Chairperson of the Soweto Action Committee, Ishmael Mkhabela, made the following prophecy at this funeral:

"Sobukwe's death could be a signal of the beginning of a chapter."

With the benefit of hindsight, we can confidently assert that Mkhabela was absolutely correct.

The immediate aftermath of the Prof's burial was the launch of a new political organisation expounding the ideology of BC. This was the AZANIAN PEOPLE'S ORGANISATION.

Historical organisations were jolted by the pathbreaking role of the Black consciousness Movement: all their excuses about the impossibility of "above-ground" mobilization were finally shattered on the streets of Soweto in 1976. No organisation remained untouched by BC ideology: in fact, BC cadres streamed into all the historical organisations in exile.

Within the country, Charterists felt the need either to woo the BCM or to create their own organisations by wooing away the membership of the BCM. When it became obvious that AZAPO was determined to retain its organisational independence, Charterist organisations mushroomed across the country and liberalism breathed easily again.

At the NACTU Congress held on 6-7 August 1988, the term "Black" in the NACTU constitution was replaced by the term "African". Tensions became apparent within the "Azania School", with people defining themselves as BC or Pan-Africanist.

The reasons given for the change from "Black" to "African" are pathetic in the extreme, with some even accusing BC of being racist in its outlook and in particular

in its exclusion of whites from its ranks.

The term "Black" is not an invention of the BCM: it finds expression in the 1959 Africanist Manifesto and the constitution of the Azanian National Youth Unity (AZANYU) – a youth organisation aligning itself with the Pan Africanist Movement (PAM) as well.

While it is true that it was the BCM which gave a crisp definition to the term "Black", the term itself emerged from mass struggles against racism. "Black" emerged as its own *self-identity and not from any Congress resolution. It represents the self-consciousness of a racially oppressed people. Black is beautiful! Black is revolutionary!*

The flimsy attempt to de-emphasize Black and the race/class struggle has the same compromising effect that the usage of "non-European" and "non-white" had some years ago. It minimizes our long, continuing mass struggle to finish the Azanian revolution.

In this last decade of the 20th century, the Black revolution remains unfinished. Thus to replace Black as an expression of the universal of freedom with African defined as a "ready-made" universal of culture is a flight from the harsh Azanian reality.

To be sure, any attempt to render "Black" against "African" amounts to a distortion of pan-Africanism itself. Both in the BCM and the PAM there are elements who are actively attempting to sabotage the inexorable synthesis of the pan-Africanist and BC ideologies which is referred to in the *Position Paper* (see pg. 89). We call Prof as our witness:

". . . In every struggle, whether national or class, the masses do not fight an abstraction. They do not hate oppression or capitalism. They concretise these and hate the oppressor, be he the Governor-General or a colonial power, the landlord or the factory-owner or, in South Africa, the white man. But they hate these groups because they associate them with their oppression! Remove the association and you remove the hatred . . . (It is plain dishonesty to say I hate the sjam-

bok and not the one who wields it."

– "Future of the Africanist Movement", *The Africanist*, January 1959

Lest there be any doubt, BC's position is that biologically speaking, "races" do not exist. Hence BC states, as does Pan-Africanism, that there is ONLY ONE RACE viz THE HUMAN RACE. Nevertheless, BC – like Pan-Africanism – points out that people are divided into oppressors and oppressed, colonizers and colonized etc and, in this context, race exists as a political concept.

There is no doubt that the primitive nature of the debate on the concepts "Black" and "African" fails to recognize that these terms are in no way irreconcilable and that both terms belong to our rich tapestry of struggle.

In an interview held during March 1989, a leader of the PAC told *International Viewpoint*:

"What I'm trying to explain is that the revival of the PAC's activities, of pan-Africanism, was hindered first by the banings and the punishments, and secondly by following BCM ideology, thinking that it was a PAC ideology . . ." ("The fall and rise of the Pan Africanist Congress" IV No 165, June 12, 1989 at 23).

The launch of PAM occurred at Soweto on 2-3 December 1989. We earnestly hope that the long overdue synthesis between Pan Africanism and BC becomes top priority on the liberation agenda. The Azania School needs to close ranks now as never before.

We believe that there is a dire need to enter the debate about the alleged differences between Pan Africanism and BC to clarify and refine the ideological issues. We believe that the *Position Paper* helps in doing this and, while we are aware that its contents will be controversial, we hope that it stimulates sharp debate and struggle on an ideological plane rather than the banal argument more suited to a children's playground which runs "My organisation/ideology is better/older than yours, so there!" ■