

AFRO-AMERICAN INFLUENCES
ON THE
BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS MOVEMENT

by

NYAMEKO PITYANA

TO THE
CONFERENCE ON

"AFRO-AMERICAN INTERRELATIONSHIPS WITH SOUTHERN AFRICA"

27-29 MAY 1979

AFRICAN STUDIES AND RESEARCH PROGRAM
HOWARD UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON D.C. 20059.

AFRO-AMERICAN INFLUENCES ON BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

The early 60's saw the great, if hesitant, resurgence of African nationalism as one by one the colonialist, imperialist powers retreated from Africa by the back door. Not unnaturally, in South Africa, this awareness, this happening, whetted the appetites of the freedom-loving people and the struggle was waged with a greater sense of urgency and impatience. The result was that oppressive measures were stepped up with greater brutality by the White protectionist regime. When those bullets were fired at Sharpeville and many defenceless black people died, that ushered in a new era in the struggle for liberation in South Africa whose true nature was to be manifested a decade later.

When the newly independent governments in Africa were beginning to settle down, bothered nonetheless by the teething problems of the post-colonial era and by neo-colonialism, the mood in Africa was changing to a new search for truly African values; for the African soul and African personality. It became clear that any attempt at trying to be the black skinned imitators of the colonial masters was not going to work.

The late 60's saw in America and Europe a great tidal wave of campus power, a rejection by young people of the decadent values of the passing generation and a challenge to authority that was unprecedented hitherto. In Sorbonne and Berkeley, California students sought to exert their power and idealism. There was a serious examination of the norms of society and an attempt at evolving societal values

that countered the spiritual and psychological alienation of the individual that so many felt.

Black America too was seething with discontent. Many of the Black Americans realised that their lot had to be improved. Thousands of Black Americans were known to be marching from Selma to Alabama in protest against their subjugation by the American system. Confrontations with the police and right-wing white groups must have convinced many that they were on the right path. The rhetoric of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X reverberated across the oceans, to break the hot, still air of the Black ghettos in South Africa. But even more than that the realistic, sharp analyses of Black liberation concepts by Stokeley Carmichael and the Black Panthers shook the very roots of complacency in the hearts and minds of the Black student sitting in a tribal 'bush' college in S.A. the very essence of the creature of the system.

And so in tracing the Afro-American influences on Black Consciousness I am obliged to present this global perspective. The era which saw the rejection and subsequent defeat of American imperialist pretensions in Vietnam, the racist subjugation of Black American people at home, the rejection of authority and value-systems in capitalist Europe, the search for a truly African perspective in independent Africa, was bound to produce, in an even stronger manner among those Black people in South Africa who were floating along on the waves of oppression, dazed into unconsciousness by the blasting gale force, fearful to challenge the powers that unsteadied him, a true and

meaningful examination of the self and a redirection of the collective perspectives of the oppressed people.

Let me add, perhaps, at this point, that it has been said by the minions of the racist oppressive giant in South Africa that Black Consciousness was nothing but an importation of Black power ideas from America, as if that was wrong in itself. The Schibusch Commission¹ in investigating "certain organisations" which did not include SASO or BPC, nonetheless found that the ideology, strategy and finance of Black Consciousness organisations were imported from America. Steve Biko and myself were accused of propagating Black power ideas verbatim "to promote Black Theology and polarisation."² In another context the Commission suggests that "this promotion of polarisation was a strategy inspired from abroad and not a natural development arising from local conditions and problems."³ In his review of Aelred Stubb's collection of Steve Biko's essays for the New York Review, an Smiley makes the observation that "Much of his (i.e. Steve Biko's) message echoed that of Lembede, with updated borrowings from American Black nationalist rhetoric of the 1960s."⁴ Elsewhere, the same reviewer says that "yet many of his ideas were a jumble of well-worn platitudes borrowed from African utopian ideologists - Sekou Toure, Franz Fanon, Kaunda and so forth."⁵ It now remains for me to examine the above theses.

When we talk about Afro-Americans, I believe we are referring to those American people, citizens, who are of African descent. They were brought to America as slaves and have since occupied the lowest stratum of American society.

We talk about (Negroes) when we refer to those Black Americans who seem resigned to imitating the White Man and seeking acceptance by him into his own scale of values or in his own terms. I take (Black or Afro-Americans) to be those revolutionary brothers who will not accept a secondary role according to the terms of the Whites, indeed, who refuse to be seen in terms of White people. They are those who assert their right to exist on their own terms and to pursue their goal of social and political emancipation. In the nature of things he forms a minority of the people of America. But the curious thing is that while he cannot claim America as of right so too the White Americans have not that right. The truly indigenous people of America were decimated by the European settlers whose remnants have become a rather insignificant group. Afro-Americanism therefore, is not only a struggle for power but it is also a search for identity; it is a resurgence of cultural values. It is a rejection of the oppressive system and yet a challenge to it. And so this resuscitation of the soul, the very essence of being in the Black was a movement that was to challenge the very fabric of American society. They are Black people speaking to Black people. Linda Porter, in this poem MY MOTHER WAS A BLACK WOMAN says

"She said that being Black was right
For how could God be wrong?
He made us in His Image,
And He made the Black ones strong."⁶

And in these words she expresses Stokely Carmichael's cry BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL. There is an air of negative protest in these lines, by Thomas L. Parker:

"America
 Tell me why you hate me
 Why you torture me, then negate me?
 O, people
 Why won't you accept me
 I want to feel part of you
 But your skin is black..."⁷

This would express the view we had of the civil rights movement as popularised by the late Martin Luther King Jr. This mournful tone was of the nature of eagerness for acceptance in white terms. It appears that when Parker speaks about 'America' she refers to White America. Yet the fact is that White Americans do not possess the land to the exclusion of the other citizens, to give and withdraw as they please. This apologetic note however, was to be abolished for good when Malcom X told the grass roots that all revolutions are violent and the struggle was not for a right to share the same toilet facilities with the Whites. Eric Lincoln once told us that the one great contribution of the Black Panthers to the Black community was to declare by their example (1) that Black people care for one another and (2) that this love could translate itself into a willingness to die for your people. Indeed it was Malcom X who pointed out very forcefully that generations of Black people had died in far away lands for America. And therefore, gradually "the Essence of Blackness" the "You" that Porter⁸ again talks about was the revolution, the "burn baby, burn" of Harlem's Powell; the destruction of all that makes for the negative in the American system. And so, 1968 was to see America galloping from Black consciousness to Black power.

And in South Africa a clarion call was sounded in the Black campuses at first, and later to an ever widening gyre of eager disciples which caused Jimmy Kruger to confess on 19th October 1977, with W.B. Yeats

"... things fall apart
The centre cannot hold"

and he banned Black consciousness organisations. The "centre" this point of reference and authority is not only the governing Afrikans elite but also the entire system. The process is reversed because when a settler White minority came, at first, with the hospitality and humaneness of our forebears, soon paved its way by bullet and bible to a position of dominance. My own grandfather, S.E.K. Mqhayi, a Xhosa poet, was to observe with his irrepressible sarcasm:

"Mighty Britain!
Here she comes with bible and bottle,
Here she comes, a missionary escorted by a soldier,
with gunpower and guns,
with canons and breachloader
Forgive me, O Father, but which of this must we accept?"
(translated by Sindi Sayedwa: S.A. Outlook Vol. 109
No. 1255, Dec. 1975).

However it was not so funny particularly when the "eater of my country's inheritance" was not only brutal in physical and therefore political subjection; he does not give you the choice but he also grabs the very soul of your being. He deculturises you and enslaves you and makes you dependent on him. You become his lapdog as all that was your own is no longer yours. Lewis Nkosi aptly points out that "Black consciousness really begins with the shock of discovery that one is not only black but is also non-white"⁹ except that I would remove the "also". This discovery therefore was what hit us in 1968. We came to realise that

we were not people in the land of our birth. We came to understand that we were a defeated people resigned to our fate and unable to put up even a token resistance. This resignation was what sapped our strength, as we were fearful of our very shadows. We were living in the pale existence of between twilight and darkness. There was also "fear that erodes the soul of Black people in S.A.... It is a fear so basic in the considered actions of Black people as to make it impossible for them to behave like people - let alone free people" says Steve Biko.¹⁰ A drive, a crusade, therefore, was soon under way, to evangelise and pump life into the empty shell of the blackman.

And it was this crusade, therefore, that owes a lot to the Afro-American struggle. However the ~~genre~~ of our struggle was rooted in Africa. It was rooted in the circumstances of the Blackman in the land of his forefathers. There was a truly pan-Africanist streak built into the SASO constitution when it was declared that

"there is a crying need in S.A. for Blacks to reassert their pride and group identity; and recognising the principle of the Kumasi Declaration of January 1971 to commit ourselves to the realisation of the worth of the blackman, the assertion of his human dignity and promoting consciousness and self-reliance of the Black community."

The conference of African students meeting in Kumasi, Ghana noted the evils of colonialism, capitalism, imperialism and racism, realised the need for a reawakening of the Continent and the peoples therein and the common plight of our brothers in some other continents. Black Consciousness accordingly, was to spearhead the struggle for "liberation of the Black" man from psychological oppression by themselves

through inferiority complex and secondly from the physical act occurring out of living in a White racist society."

It quickly withheld membership from all those who are not

"by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in S.A. society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realisation of their aspirations"

(SASO POLICY MANIFESTO)

Pertinent truths by Black Americans like James Baldwin when he writes:

"All attempts at dialogue between the subdued and the subduer between those placed within history and those dispersed outside, break down. The subdued and the subduer, do not speak the same language."¹¹

were used more and more in support of our exclusivist position. However I still submit that there are in S.A. equally eminent authorities who could have expressed the same ideas perhaps even better but the problem was that some may have been banned and therefore cannot be quoted. It must be remembered that the struggle had, hitherto, until ANC/PAC went into exile,^{been} that of reforming the system. It was a commitment by Blacks to take over from Whites the instruments of economic and constitutional power. And the new Blackvoice was echoing the revolutionary demands of the liberation movements who were in exile. Revolution means a complete overhaul of the system and Steve Biko says that "we shall then lay it (our table) in true African style."¹² What was involved here was a realisation that no Blackman can appeal to the sense of justice and fairplay of the victorious system. We could not appeal to an application of civil rights as enshrined in the American Constitution. Blacks have come to realise that the whole constitutional

system hatched in Westminster was never intended to open for the Blackman avenues for political control. And so, with Julius Lester, Black consciousness tells Black people:

"You ain't free as long as you let somebody else tell you who you are. We got Black people today walking around, in slavery cause they let them White folks tell 'em who they are."13

Hence BPC was constrained to differ with Ambassador Andy Young, when, it declared in a statement in 1977 objecting to Young's likening of our struggle to the Civil Rights Movement:

"We are however convinced that our struggle is a struggle against settler colonialism and imperialism and it is certainly not a civil rights struggle. We are fighting for total liberation and not the kind of meaningless and deceptive concessions given to American blacks."

The racist Judge Bushoff himself had to note that

"The Blackman is committed not to the improvement of the system, because improvement implies an acceptance of some of the major points around which the system revolves, but to a radical transformation of the entire structure of this society."14

Black consciousness constitutes a revolution of ideas of values and of standards. Conscientisation would engage black people in the emancipatory process. Therefore black people were called upon not only to become aware of or to realise their oppressive situation but that they must take active steps to free themselves from that morass. And so Black Consciousness cried out to the Blackman in the factory, at home, on the train, in the shebeen, at the playing fields, in the classroom:

"Blackman, you are on your own."

I have already mentioned that there is a very close affinity between the ways in which this campaign of

conscientization was handled in America with the way in which Black consciousness exponents carried the message from ghetto to ghetto in S.A. When you hear Ranwedzi Nengwekhulu, addressing a crowd wild with excitement squatting on a rugby field at the Alan Taylor Residence, you'd imagine you were listening to Malcom X himself. His simple matter-of-fact almost banal speech signified the emergence of new no-nonsense leadership:

"They tried to manifest, of course, in a vile way, that we are not human beings, we are products, extensions, a people which cannot evolve beyond the level of a modern lizard. A people which is part of the environment. And of course, we are not supposed to go beyond or evolve beyond our environment, we are primitive, dirty, filthy and, of course, they got every right to destroy a filthy thing."15

A sudden flair for poetry of protest and anger mushroomed in the Black townships. It was the poetry expressing the mood of the ghetto written to the people in the ghetto. This caused Richard Rive, a sophisticated coloured poet who had just spent a few years at Oxford to explain that that was not poetry. James Matthew and Mandlenkosi Langa state very clearly that they have no time for metre but they "cry rage". Mota and Saths Cooper were to be sent to Rōben Island for their poetry. This is part of Saths' poem reflecting on the Sharpeville massacres.

"We remember
irrepressible dignity
undying courage
a fervent belief in themselves
against an army
of oppression and violence
rooted in an insane fear.

this part of us forever lost
forever gained."16

Compare these intense expressions of black anger and rejection:

"We don't want your money, white man
An you kin keep yo' womin too.
We don't wanna mix blood either
'Cause we thank we's good as you."17

by American Glenn C. Sanders and this one by South

African Wally Serote:

"Now I'm talking about this;
"Shit" you hear an old woman say,
Right there, squeezed in her little match-box
With her fatness and gigantic life experience,
Which makes her a child,
'Cause the next day she's right there
Right there serving tea to the woman
Who's lying in bed at 10 a.m. sick with wealth,
Which she's prepared to give her life for
"Rather than you marry my son or daughter.

I'm learning to pronounce this "shit" well,
Since the other day
At the pass office,
When I went to get employment
The officer there endorsed me to Middleburg
So I said, hard and with all my might, "Shit!"
I felt a little better.
But what's good is I said it in his face
A thing my father wouldn't dare do.
That what's in this black "Shit"!18

Listen to the strident irony in Mandlenkosi Langa's

WE BEG YOUR PARDON SOUTH AFRICA:18

"We beg your pardon South Africa,
for those who claim your time is running out"

and then the tone of confident affirmation that expresses
the hope, neah, the optimism of Black Consciousness.

"And that time is coming
for you to say to all people:
'I beg your pardon'".

Afro-American Linx Cousins, on the other hand, in the prosaic

PORTRAIT IN BLACK SOUL, prefers to issue a warning to the

White World:

"Go out and tell the white world that they better learn
That I'm getting tired of being held back
Just 'cause my skin happens to be black."20

Perhaps the empathy between Afro-American and Black Consciousness can best manifest itself in the community development programmes. There is no doubt a great deal of value in preaching a revolution of ideas, of thinking. However in essence Black consciousness was also a "way of life". And so this "attitude of the mind" must soon translate itself into action. It is obviously true that both Black Americans and Black South Africans were victims of a capitalist-imperialist economic system. The excesses in wealth and deprivation are to be seen cheek by jowl in the same locality. People are imbued by the system with the notion that they have only themselves to blame for being without the necessary means of livelihood. There is lack of housing for Blacks, discrimination in employment and thus poverty. Poverty results in a high rate of crime in the ghetto and absence of adequate medical and educational facilities. Education in S.A. is controlled by the enemy who is committed to ensuring that the Blackman is kept in his station in life. And so we became the victims of handouts and charity from our good friends from the privileged class, who gave to us on their terms what they would throw away to the dogs. They do not seek to enable us to earn sufficient that there would be no need for their charity. Hence these friends became 'kings' angels' in the townships with their debilitating charity.

Therefore Blacks took it upon themselves to care for their fellow oppressed without recourse to the means provided by the enemy. The great effect of the Black Panther 'soup kitchens' or people's breakfast were to influence a great deal of thinking at home. Many campus

branches of SASO sought to relate to the needs of the neighbouring village. They ran soup kitchens and clinics. For the people the kind of treatment received by them at Zanempilo from one who cared was to be imprinted for all time in their psyche. It was Blacks doing things for themselves and offering the best possible service. At another level, the work of the Black Community Programmes in publishing Black thought and assessments of the Black experience was notable. Self-help schemes directed at the entire community were as much of a feature of this new Black happening as was the case in America. New ideas on Black education began to surface and an experiment was begun developing thinking away from conventional criticisms of Bantu Education. For once Blacks stated that they were not interested in the same education that was taught to whites because that was meant to meet the needs of Whites. Blacks were saying that they would devise their own education system - for liberation and development. That Blacks must not be educated for alienation from their own people but that education prepares for greater engagement in the community. And if the Free University idea had taken root we would have to look to Afro-American thinking for its initial development.

I have said in another context that Black people are notoriously religious. By that I meant that religion is so much a part of the Blackman's life that it cannot be separated from him: it affects his thinking and his human relationships. Afro-Americans have made no small contribution to the development of independent churches in S.A. The African Methodist Episcopal Church is still

controlled from America. James *Dwane* first developed his ideas in America that led to the founding of the Ethiopian Church. However it has been Black Theology that has caught the imagination of Black South Africans who think deeply about the implications of their faith in the light of their life experiences. The religion that set the minds of the people in a heavenly utopia and individual salvation no longer has a place in Black thinking. We worship the Christ whose mission was to

"Bring good news to the poor
... to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind;
to set free the oppressed" LUKE 4 . 18-19.

We are the prophets who challenged the rulers for their social evils and prophecied God's judgment against them. We worship the God who loves us and assures us that we are people with human dignity and we believe, who calls upon us to even resort to violence as morally justifiable, to stop all assaults on our God-created worth and humanity. James Cone of course influenced a great deal of thinking in this respect. This opened the avenues for faith which had hitherto been closed to many. For how can I believe in a God who seems to favour my oppressor all the time, who justifies slavery, and inhumanity to man, who orders unquestioning obedience to authority, even corrupt, sinful authority? We are therefore called upon in Black Consciousness to prophecy to those dead bones so that they may have life.

In acknowledging some Afro-American influences on Black Consciousness, however, I have to state that, contray to

what many would say, Black Consciousness has a particular aversion for capitalism. We have seen how capitalism, at home has led to racism; destroyed by this two-edged malady we found we rejected most categorically all the premises of capitalism. We noted with Karl Marx that it produces in us, the poor alienation from the self and from our fellow-man. We have become mere cogs in the inexorable wheel of human destruction. And so true human virtues cause us to reject the acquisitiveness and profit motives of capitalism and to seek a more human manner of conducting our affairs with our fellowmen. We do not accept that capitalism can ever be rescued from its inevitable decline and the worship of money and wordly or material goods. And so we say "away with capitalism" we do not seek entry into the capitalist market economy but we believe socialism points the direction towards a greater understanding in our human relationships. (And, therefore, there is bound to be some negative influences by Afro-Americanism on Black Consciousness. When you see Blacks in Ebony and film in a sickening state of wealth you say that's not how it should be. You say someone has less somewhere because this one has more than he actually needs.

And so we share with many Afro-Americans a rejection of these false values that lead to our oppression and deprivation. The same Big Brother who oppresses in the states oppresses us in South Africa. They are the big multi-nationals who control the economy of the Third World. Who wield such immense power that America can go to war in Vietnam to protect the interests of those few who do not

themselves meet their deaths in the frontline. I have often been ridiculed for proferring the thesis that we are still to see similar interventionist adventures in South Africa itself if American investments are not abated and eventually withdrawn. The spectacle of South African soldiers being given arms by America to kill our brothers in Angola has not been forgotten. And so, ladies and gentleman, I say that the struggle is one.

"Come let us turn away from this scab,
this evil

We have the key to life, to love, to the future
We will raise our fists to 'the sun' god,
and in defiant supplication to the lilywhite prophet
we will then smash the shackles of bondage
a new sun rises in the East."21

1. Otherwise called "Commission on Certain Organisations" The organisations investigated were: National Union of South African Students (NUSAS); South African Institute of Race Relations (SAIRR); 'Christian Institute of South Africa (CI) and the University Christian Movement (UCM).
2. Schlebusch Report, p.
3. Op.cit., p.
4. New York Review, p.
5. Op.cit., p.
6. CRY AT BIRTH collected by the BOOKERS: McGraw-Hill, p.4. It may be interesting to compare this anthology with a similar South African one edited by James Matthew: BLACK VOICES SHOUT!
7. Op.cit., p.5.
8. Op.cit., p.7.
9. MODERN POETRY FROM AFRICA, G. MOORE AND U. BEIER (eds) Pelican African Library, p.15.
10. Essays by Steve Biko: I WRITE WHAT I LIKE; Aelred Stubbs C.R. (ed.), Bowerdean Press, London, 1978.
11. Quoted in SASO Newsletter.
12. A. STUBBS (Ed.) *ibid.*, p.
13. Quoted in SASO Newsletter.
14. S. COOPER AND OTHERS, Dec. 1976, unpublished judgement.
15. Quoted by Boshoff I. in his Judgment. Apparently Ramuedzi Nengwokhalu's speech was taped by the security police because it was not written. It has always puzzled us why they did not prosecute him in terms of the Terrorism Act then.
16. DEDICATION by Saths Cooper.
17. THE BOOKERS (Eds.) *ibid.*, p.107.
18. YAKHAL' INKOMO poems by Wally Mongane Serote; Renoster Books; Johannesburg, 1974, p.8.
19. SASO NEWSLETTER.
20. THE BOOKERS (EDS) *Ibid.*, p.159.
21. Unacknowledged poem recited by Sam Moodley in 1973. Her husband Strini is the likely poet but he could not be quoted since he was banned.