

LECTURE DELIVERED BY THE PRESIDENT OF SOUTH AFRICA, THABO MBEKI, ON THE OCCASION OF THE 30<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH OF STEPHEN BANTU BIKO: CAPE TOWN, 12 SEPTEMBER 2007.

Director of Ceremonies,  
Members of the Biko Family,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Ladies and Gentlemen:

We meet here today to commemorate the death of an outstanding young South African patriot, Stephen Bantu Biko.

The bloody decade of the 1970s in our country, which included the Soweto Uprising of 1976, took the lives of many fighters for our liberation, both young and old. I stand here this evening to speak in celebration of one of the martyrs of this period, Stephen Bantu Biko.

The distinguished and learned audience in this auditorium and the thousands in our country and Continent who are listening to this Lecture, which is carried live by our Public Broadcaster, the SABC, will know that I would have asked myself the question – what should I say on this historic occasion!

Echoing the views of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century US poet, Walt Whitman, expressed in his poem, “A child said, What is the grass?” I too would like to say:

*“I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,  
and the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.  
What do you think has become of the young and old men?  
What do you think has become of the women and children?”*

Perhaps, today, I have no choice but to translate in the context of our current realities, the hints about our dead young men and women of the 1970s and the following decades, such as Steve Biko, and the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring, including Steve Biko, taken soon out of their laps.

We have gathered here exactly 30 years to the day after Steve Bantu Biko was murdered by those responsible for the apartheid crime against humanity. We have convened here not to mourn his death but to celebrate his life, his thoughts and the immense contribution he made to the liberation of our country and people.

I would like sincerely to thank his wife and my sister, Sis' Ntsiki, his son Nkosinathi, the rest of the Biko family, the Biko Foundation, and all who were his close friends and comrades, for the honour they have given me to deliver this particular Biko Memorial Lecture, exactly thirty years after the dark forces of evil cruelly robbed our country, our Continent and the world of an outstanding young revolutionary who would, today, have been one of the eminent architects of the new world we are striving to build.

In what now seems to be a long time ago, during the years of our exile, I had the rare privilege to reflect on who Steve Biko was, what his ideas were, what he fought for, how and with whom he strived to realise his ideals, what impact he had on his comrades, our country and people, and what his cruel and untimely death meant to those who had recognised him as a harbinger of a future that, distant as it might have seemed, was nevertheless certain to become tomorrow's happy reality.

The unique opportunity for all this was provided by the visit to Lusaka, Zambia, by an eminent English worker in the creative arts, a militant opponent of oppression wherever it might occur, a passionately loyal friend of our people, a good man – Sir Richard Attenborough.

He came into our midst to discuss with the ANC, especially those who knew or had engaged in struggle with and under the leadership of Steve Biko, the script he used to construct the film – Cry Freedom.

He came to Lusaka from London, England because he was determined that the remarkable Steve Biko story should be told to the whole world, and told truthfully. He was convinced that the telling of the story of Steve Biko, that would become known to millions of cinema goers across the globe, would mobilise these millions to stand up to fight the apartheid crime against humanity that had killed Steve Biko.

He came also to tell us the unadorned truth that all feature films of the day could not be produced and successfully marketed without access to the

necessary finance, all of which would be provided by people who, regardless of their good souls, nevertheless had to demand that the films they financed would earn the necessary return on the money they had invested.

In the end, regardless of what we thought and said as we interacted with Dick Attenborough, and the impact of all this on the film script, we conceded the right to the film-maker to produce and direct the film that ultimately appeared on the cinema screens across the world as *Cry Freedom*, whatever its limitations in terms of a comprehensive representation of who and what Steve Biko was, and what he died for.

During this particular week of intense discussion with Dick Attenborough, I learnt many things about Steve Biko, his life and times, and thoughts and actions, sitting, as it were, at the feet of younger comrades who, inspired by his message and example, had joined the ANC in exile to fulfil the mission for which he had perished in the most painful circumstances.

Born in 1946, Steve Biko was 16 years old when I left our country to go into exile in 1962. A year earlier, in 1961, when we organised for and launched the African Students Association (ASA), the historical parent, with ASUSA, of SASO, I did not meet him.

However, my political history from my early youth at school, and since then, has to some extent overlapped with the political life of a close friend and comrade of Steve Biko, Nyameko Barney Pityana.

Barney and I were students and members of the ANC Youth League at Lovedale Institution during the latter years of my studies at this once renowned centre of learning at Alice, across the Thyume River that separates Lovedale from the neighbouring Fort Hare.

I mention this today because the young Barney Pityana served as a vital link between the accumulated national experience and wisdom of the struggle for liberation concentrated in the ANC until it was banned in 1960, and the time in 1969, when he and Steve Biko established SASO, the first organised formation of the Black Consciousness Movement, nine years after the long-established ANC and the very young PAC were banned.

I am very pleased that today, 30 years after the death of his comrade, Steve Biko, Barney Pityana, is also delivering a lecture on Steve Bantu Biko, far to

our North, at the UNISA campus in Pretoria/Tshwane. It must surely be something of note that members of the ANC Youth League of 50 years ago speak on the same day, in different geographical settings in our country, to pay tribute to a young patriot who assumed the mantle of leadership during some of the most difficult years of our struggle for liberation, and perished as a result.

In his great epic work, “The Rise of Shaka”, the late Mazisi Kunene says:

*“Those who feast on the grounds of others  
Often are forced into gestures of friendship they do not desire.  
But we are the generation that cannot be bypassed.  
We shall not be blinded by gifts from feasts.  
With our own fire we shall stand above the mountains, as the sun.”*

These words, which could easily have been uttered by the militant generation of the 1970s to which Steve Biko belonged, are attributed to Shaka, an equally young militant of some one and half centuries before the turbulences that defined the 1970s.

Faced with the resistance of his superiors to the far-reaching military changes that he wanted to introduce, Shaka argued that if the status quo remained they would not be able to withstand the military assaults of their enemies and thus his people would continue to feast on the grounds of others and accordingly be forced into gestures of friendship they did not desire.

Today we mark the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of an African patriot who, at a particular time, lit our road to freedom like a burning meteor, shining brighter than the system that had sought to minimise his humanity, along with that of the people whose yearnings he symbolised.

To celebrate the life of Stephen Bantu Biko is to invoke a vision that has over the years inspired all freedom loving South Africans decisively to defeat the monster of apartheid and racism and realise the dream of liberation.

As it must, our commemoration of the death of Steve Biko resonates with heroism, a steely human resolve and a remarkable vision for human freedom, the antithesis of the intolerable racism in our country which the whole world came to characterise as a crime against humanity.

In this regard, we may be forgiven for making so bold as to suggest that in remembering this brave patriot we could use this occasion as a metaphor for all that is bitter and all that is sweet in South African history.

We are surely entitled to feel bitter at the needless snuffing out of the pulsating life of a freedom fighter by small-minded human beings who had arrogated to themselves the absolute right to determine, with impunity, who should qualify to be considered and treated as a human being.

On the other hand, our souls are surely sweetened by the certain knowledge that the high principles of freedom and equality for which Biko struggled and died have, over time, and because of the determination of our people relentlessly to sustain the struggle for freedom, given birth to the reality of today's free and democratic South Africa.

Like Shaka and many others that came before him, Steve Biko understood very well that 'those who feast on the grounds of others often are forced into gestures of friendship they do not desire'.

Biko himself said that: "What Black Consciousness seeks to do is to produce at the output end of the process, real black people who do not regard themselves as appendages to white society. This truth cannot be reversed. We do not need to apologise for this because it is true that the white systems have produced throughout the world a number of people who are not aware that they too are people."

It would seem to me that three particular historical circumstances were central to the formation of Steve Biko as an outstanding leader of our revolutionary struggle and an eminent representative of his generation.

The first of these is that Steve Biko's life was defined by the apartheid reality of "separate development", which the National Party sought to create from the first day of its electoral victory in 1948.

The second is that as Steve Biko came into his maturity, the national liberation struggle was in full retreat, arising from the banning of the ANC and the PAC, the destruction of the organised structures of the liberation movement, and the systematic decapitation of the movement by the arrest of its leaders and activists.

The third is that this period of extreme reaction following the Sharpeville Massacre, intended to perpetuate the apartheid system into which Steve Biko was born, seemed totally to have demobilised the oppressed through fear of arrest, torture, imprisonment and death in the hands of the repressive security organs of the apartheid state.

With regard to the first of these historical circumstances, Steve Biko has said: “Born shortly before 1948, I have live all my conscious life in the framework of institutionalised separate development. My friendships, my love, my education, my thinking and every other facet of my life have been carved and shaped within the context of separate development. In stages during my life I have managed to outgrow some of the things the system taught me.”

Relating to the second of these circumstances, Steve Biko wrote: “Since the banning and harassment of black political parties – a dangerous vacuum has been created. The African National Congress and later the Pan-African Congress were banned in 1960...Ever since there has been no coordinated opinion emanating from the black ranks.

“Perhaps the Kliptown (Freedom) Charter – objectionable as the circumstances surrounding it might have been – was the last attempt ever made to instil some amount of positiveness in stating categorically what blacks felt on political questions in the land of their forefathers. After the banning of the black political parties in South Africa, people’s hearts were gripped by some kind of foreboding fear for anything political. Not only were politics a closed book, but at every corner one was greeted by a slave-like apathy that often bordered on timidity.”

With regard to the third of the historical circumstances to which we have referred, Steve Biko wrote: “Black people under the Smuts government were oppressed but they were still men. They failed to change the system for many reasons which we shall not consider here. But the type of black man we have today has lost his manhood. Reduced to an obliging shell, he looks with awe at the white power structure and accepts what he regard as the ‘inevitable position’...All in all the black man has become a shell, a shadow of man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity.”

A critically important part of the strategic brilliance of the intervention that Steve Biko and his comrades in the Black Consciousness Movement made to reenergise our liberation struggle was to mobilise the black oppressed around one message that would respond to these three historical circumstances. In a manner of speaking, this meant that the BCM threw one stone to kill three birds!

But what was this stone, this particular weapon of struggle!

Authentic and honest African scholarship has consistently recognised the integrity and interconnectedness of the African experience through many centuries, including the experience of the Africans of the Diaspora.

One of us among the latter, whom we will always salute as one of our own leaders, was the immortal African-American giant, WEB du Bois. More than a century ago, in 1903, du Bois' groundbreaking treatise, "The Souls of Black Folk", was published in the United States.

Among other things, relevant to what we have to say this evening, WEB du Bois wrote:

"Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem?...I answer seldom a word...

"Du Bois then told a story of how white children had suddenly excluded him while they were playing together. He wrote:

"Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil...

"With other black boys the strife was not so fiercely sunny: their youth shrunk into tasteless sycophancy, or into silent hatred of the pale world about them and mocking distrust of everything white; or wasted itself in a bitter cry, Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house? The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all: walls strait and

stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue above.

“After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”

Steve Biko understood that to attain our freedom we had to rebel against the notion that we are a problem, that we should no longer merely cry out - Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?, that we should stop looking at ourselves through the eyes of others, and measuring our souls by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.

He understood that to defeat the brutal racial oppression of the apartheid system, we had to rise up against the very ideology of racism, to internalise in our hearts and minds as the critical driving force inspiring the risen masses, a complete and thoroughgoing repudiation of all racist ideas and all their consequences.

In this regard, Steve Biko wrote: “The philosophy of Black Consciousness...expresses group pride and the determination by the blacks to rise and attain the envisaged self. At the heart of this kind of thinking is the realisation by the blacks that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed. Once the latter has been so effectively manipulated and controlled by the oppressor as to make the oppressed believe that he is a liability to the white man, then there will be nothing the oppressed can do that will really scare the powerful masters. Hence thinking along lines of Black Consciousness makes the black man see himself as being entire in himself, and not as an extension of a broom or additional leverage to some machine. At the end of it all, he cannot tolerate attempts by anybody to dwarf the significance of his manhood. Once this happens, we shall know that the real man in the black person is beginning to shine through...Various black groups...are beginning to rid their minds of



imprisoning notions which are the legacy of the control of their attitude by whites.”

It was to this that I referred when I said: A critically important part of the strategic brilliance of the intervention that Steve Biko and his comrades in the Black Consciousness Movement made to reenergise our liberation struggle was to mobilise the black oppressed around one message that would respond to (the three historical circumstances that conditioned Steve Biko’s development.) (And as I said), In a manner of speaking, this meant that the BCM threw one stone to kill three birds!

This one stone was the militant and uncompromising offensive to defeat what Steve Biko described as “the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor, (this being) the mind of the oppressed.”

This strategic intervention recognised that to defeat the pernicious apartheid system that held the country in thrall, to rebuild the national liberation movement, to defeat the pervasive atmosphere gripping the country, and therefore resume the offensive for the overthrow of the apartheid regime, the black masses of our country had to refuse to feast on the grounds of others, often forced into gestures of friendship they did not desire.

The historic struggle waged by the Black Consciousness Movement against the inhuman ideology of racism put the spotlight on the fact that the racism upheld by the captains of apartheid was, in fact, but the most pernicious expression of white anti-black racism that emerged in Europe especially in the 18th century.

In his 2007 book, “Race and the Construction of the Dispensable Other”, Professor Ben Magubane quotes the 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish Enlightenment philosopher, David Hume, thus:

“I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all other species of men...to be naturally inferior to whites. There never was a civilised nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures among them, no arts, no sciences...Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men.”

Professor Magubane also quotes one Edward Long, an admirer of David Hume, who wrote "The history of Jamaica", published in 1774. In this book, Long describes Africans as:

"proud, lazy, treacherous, thievish, hot, and addicted to all kinds of lust, and most ready to promote them in others, as pimps, panders, incestuous, brutish, and savage, cruel and revengeful, devourers of human flesh, and quaffers of human blood, inconstant, base, treacherous, and cowardly; fond of and addicted to all sorts of superstition and witchcraft; and, in a word, to every vice that came in their way, or within their reach... They are inhuman, drunkards, deceitful, covetous and perfidious to the highest degree... It is as impossible to be an African and not lascivious, as it is impossible to be born in Africa and not be an African... (Their) faculties are truly bestial, no less their commerce with other sexes; in these acts they are libidinous and shameless as monkeys, or baboons. The equally hot temperament of their women has given probability to the charge of their admitting these animals frequently to their embrace."

To come closer home, Professor Magubane quotes Cecil Rhodes, then Premier of the Cape Colony, as having said:

"I will lay down my own policy on this Native Question. Either you receive them on an equal footing as citizens, or call them a subject race. Well, I have made up my mind... that we have to treat the natives, where they are in a state of barbarism, in a different way from ourselves. We are to be lords over them... The native is to be treated as a child and denied the franchise."

Contributing his share to the deluge of demeaning racist insults, General Smuts said: "Natives have the simplest minds, understand only simple ideas or ideals, and are almost animal-like in the simplicity of their minds and ways... They are different not only in colour but in minds and in political capacity, and their political institutions should be different, while always proceeding on the basis of self-government."

When Steve Biko said, "What Black Consciousness seeks to do is to produce at the output end of the process real black people who do not regard themselves as appendages to white society", he signalled a revolutionary uprising against more than two centuries of a racist ideology that had been used to justify slavery, imperialism, colonialism and apartheid.

He argued that the black people had to reassert their self-worth, their confidence in themselves as makers of history, reclaim their human dignity and define themselves, rather than look at themselves through the eyes of others, measuring their souls by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity, to use WEB du Bois' words. He argued that these masses had the obligation to undo the damage that had been done by "white systems (that) have produced throughout the world a number of people who are not aware that they too are people."

None of us present here today can question the reality that what the Black Consciousness Movement brought into our liberation struggle during a decade of the greatest general retreat of the liberation movement on many fronts since the ANC was formed in 1912, served as one of the principal catalysts that ended the general retreat.

It helped to open the way to the two-decade long general offensive on all fronts that triumphed with the victory of the democratic revolution in 1994.

However the challenge posed by Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement especially to the black people, did not lose its relevance with our historic victory of 1994.

I speak here of the challenge to defeat the centuries-old attempt "to dwarf the significance of (our) manhood", to treat us as children, to define us as sub-humans whom nature has condemned to be inferior to white people, an animal-like species characterised by limited intellectual capacity, bestiality, lasciviousness and moral depravity, obliged, in our own interest, to accept that the white segment of humanity should, in perpetuity, serve as our lord and master.

As I speak here today, to celebrate the life of an outstanding son of our people, a selfless patriot and fearless revolutionary, Steve Bantu Biko, I must respond to what Walt Whitman commanded, and try with reference to our contemporary reality, thirteen years after the victory of the Democratic Revolution, to "translate the hints about the dead young men and women, and the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps."

Together, including the latter-day admirers of Steve Biko, some of whom seek to redefine him by stripping him of his revolutionary credentials and

place him outside the continuum of our more than century-old national democratic struggle and movement, we must critically examine our society today.

In this context, we must ask ourselves whether the majority of our people, for whose freedom Steve Biko sacrificed his life, are truly aware that they too are people, and whether they do not, still, regard themselves as appendages of our self-appointed superiors.

Together we must pose the question and answer it honestly – have all of us accepted that nobody should be obliged to feast on the grounds of others! Has the majority taken advantage of its victory in 1994 to repudiate the practice of resorting to forced gestures of friendship it does not desire!

Have we all, the former oppressor and former oppressed national groups, broken down the walls of what WEB du Bois described as a “prison-house”, which was constructed to represent and give permanence to the seemingly incontrovertible truth that those who are white had a manifest destiny to govern and civilise those who are black, and those who are black should, in their own interest, accept the white people as their benevolent and caring guardians, however cruel, insulting and inhumane their conduct!

In his work, “The coloniser’s model of the world”, the historian, J.M Blaut, says: “This belief is the notion that European civilisation – the West – has had some unique historical advantage, some special quality of race or culture or environment or mind or spirit, which gives this human community a permanent superiority over all other communities, at all times in history and down to the present...Therefore, the world has a permanent geographical centre and a permanent periphery; an Inside and an Outside. Inside leads, Outside lags. Inside innovates, Outside imitates”.

Reflecting on this racist and hegemonic Eurocentrism in his 2001 paper, “The Metamorphosis of Colonialism”, immanent in the commercial process of globalisation, Jeremy Seabrook writes:

“Alien values are implanted into the lives of the people... alien, not merely in the sense of foreign or exotic, but alien to humanity...At first it was partly resisted, but with time, it became more and more acceptable, until it has now become a major determinant on the lives of the young, displacing all earlier forms of acculturation, other ways of answering need, other ways of being in

the world. This process of forgetting, beyond recall, but perhaps not quiet beyond reclamation, is a form of colonialism far more effective than that which held so much of the world in thrall in an earlier empire,”

Caught between the pincers of a mind-set that educated us to imagine and internalise the notion of an Inside that leads, and an Outside that lags, an Inside that innovates, and an Outside that imitates, and objective social reality that dictates that we should forget our identity and historical and human value systems, beyond recall, we must ask ourselves the challenging question – have we liberated ourselves from what Steve Biko identified as the “imprisoning (and demeaning) notions which are the legacy of the control of (our) attitude by whites”!

In this regard he said: “One writer makes the point that an in 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...No wonder the African child learns to hate his heritage in his days at school. So negative is the image presented to him that he tends to finds solace only in close identification with the white society...No doubt, therefore, part of the approach envisaged in bringing about ‘black consciousness’ has to be directed to the past, to seek to rewrite the history of the black man and to produce in it the heroes who form the core of the African background...A people without a positive history is like a vehicle without an engine...Then too one can extract from our indigenous cultures a lot of positive virtues which could teach the Westerner a lesson or two.”

In his well-known book, *Decolonising the Mind*, the Kenyan novelist and writer, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, describes a stormy debate that once took place at the University of Nairobi about the restructuring of the English Department. Ngugi says:

“Three African lecturers and researchers at the University responded...by calling for the abolition of the English Department as then constituted. They questioned the underlying assumption that the English tradition and the

emergence of the modern west were the central root of Kenya's and Africa's consciousness and cultural heritage. They rejected the underlying notion that Africa was an extension of the West. Then followed the crucial rejoinder:

“Here then, is our main question: if there is a need for a study of the historic continuity of a single culture, why can't this be African? Why can't African literature be at the centre so that we can view other cultures in relationship to it?”

This of course raises the question – what is African culture? What constitutes an African identity, the opposite of negative stereotype of ourselves which colonialism and racism presented to the African child so that he or she tended to find solace only in close identification with the white society?

During our years of liberation, many voices have been raised expressing grave concern at the prevalence of many negative developments in our society. One of these is the incidence of crime and the particular forms some of these crimes assume. These would include the rape of children and women, including the elderly. They would also include murders that suggest the most callous disdain for the value of human life.

Similarly, many have expressed concern at what seems to be an entrenched value system centred on the personal acquisition of wealth at all costs and by all means, including wilful resort to corruption and fraud.

These negative social phenomena and others, which occasioned the call for moral regeneration, have suggested that our society has been captured by a rapacious individualism which is corroding our social cohesion, which is repudiating the value and practice of human solidarity, and which totally rejects the fundamental precept of Ubuntu – umntu ngumntu ngabanye!

The question is therefore posed correctly – is this the kind of society that Steve Biko visualised, that he fought and died for! When he wrote that, “The philosophy of Black Consciousness...expresses group pride and the determination by the blacks to rise and attain the envisaged self”, surely he did not imagine an ‘envisaged self’ characterised by the rapacious and venal individualism we have just mentioned!



To reclaim or rediscover the African identity and build a society that is new not only in its political and economic arrangements, but also in terms of the values it upholds, somewhat tentative calls have been made to re-educate our society about the Ubuntu value system.

As did the African lecturers and researchers at the University of Nairobi, perhaps we too should ask the question - why can't an African world view, such as Ubuntu, be at the centre so that we can view other cultures in relationship to it?

Ubuntu, which reminds us that 'a person is a person through other people', does not allow for an individualism that overrides the collective interests of a community.

It stands in contra-distinction to the idea that an individual is the be-all and end-all, without, at the same time, positing that an individual is right-less or dispensable in the grand scheme of things.

Ubuntu places a premium on the values of human solidarity, compassion and human dignity. It is a lived philosophy which enables members of the community to achieve higher results through collective efforts.

It is firmly based on recognising the humanity in everyone. It emphasises the importance of knowing oneself and accepting the uniqueness in all of us so as to render meaningless the complexes of inferiority and superiority. Indeed, Ubuntu connects all of humanity irrespective of ethnicity or racial origins.

Clearly, the onset of democracy has opened up space for our indigenous cultures to assert themselves as historical agencies in and of themselves, of course influenced by the imperatives thrown up by current socio-political conditions.

And yet we must admit that we have so far failed to use these historical agencies to infuse into our society the new value system that must replace the value construct that was an attendant part of the socio-economic reality that emerged during and out of the long years of colonialism and apartheid.

In that sense we must admit that we have not as yet accomplished all the tasks that Steve Biko and his comrades set when they called for an uprising

against the ideology of racism, which was born in Europe, and the reassertion of our pride and dignity.

In this regard, Steve Biko wrote:

“In rejecting Western values...we are rejecting those things that are not only foreign to us but that seek to destroy the most cherished of our beliefs – that the corner-stone of society is man himself – not just his welfare, not his material wellbeing but just man himself with all his ramifications. We reject the power-based society of the Westerner that seems to be ever concerned with perfecting their technological know-how while losing out on their spiritual dimension. We believe that in the long run the special contribution to the world by Africa will be in this field of human relationships. The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gift still has to come from Africa – giving the world a more human face.”

When Steve Biko made this prophecy, saying after Mazisi Kunene, “With our own fire we shall stand above the mountains, as the sun”, he was following in the footsteps of other great giants of our liberation struggle.

In his famous 1906 article, "The Regeneration of Africa", Pixley ka Isaka Seme said: “The regeneration of Africa means that a new and unique civilization is soon to be added to the world. The African is not a proletarian in the world of science and art. He has precious creations of his own, of ivory, of copper and of gold, fine, plated willow-ware and weapons of superior workmanship. Civilization resembles an organic being in its development - it is born, it perishes, and it can propagate itself. More particularly, it resembles a plant, it takes root in the teeming earth, and when the seeds fall in other soils new varieties sprout up. The most essential departure of this new civilization is that it shall be thoroughly spiritual and humanistic - indeed a regeneration moral and eternal!”

In his 1961 Nobel Lecture, entitled “Africa and Freedom”, Inkosi Albert Luthuli enlarged on this vision and said:

“Still licking the scars of past wrongs perpetrated on her, could (Africa) not be magnanimous and practise no revenge? Her hand of friendship scornfully rejected, her pleas for justice and fair-play spurned, should she not nonetheless seek to turn enmity into amity? Though robbed of her lands, her



independence and opportunities - this, oddly enough, often in the name of civilization and even Christianity - should she not see her destiny as being that of making a distinctive contribution to human progress and human relationships with a peculiar new African flavour enriched by the diversity of cultures she enjoys, thus building on the summits of present human achievement an edifice that would be one of the finest tributes to the genius of man? She should see this hour of her fulfilment as a challenge to her to labour on until she is purged of racial domination, and as an opportunity of reassuring the world that her national aspiration lies, not in overthrowing white domination to replace it by a black caste, but in building a non-racial democracy that shall be a monumental brotherhood, a "brotherly community" with none discriminated against on grounds of race or colour...

"Africa's qualification for this noble task is incontestable, for her own fight has never been and is not now a fight for conquest of land, for accumulation of wealth or domination of peoples, but for the recognition and preservation of the rights of man and the establishment of a truly free world for a free people."

The challenging question we must ask ourselves is - have we used the freedom for which Steve Biko sacrificed his life to position our country to contribute to an African civilisation that is "thoroughly spiritual and humanistic - indeed a regeneration moral and eternal!", as Pixley Seme said, that will make "a distinctive contribution to human progress and human relationships with a peculiar new African flavour enriched by the diversity of cultures she enjoys, thus building on the summits of present human achievement an edifice that would be one of the finest tributes to the genius of man", as Albert Luthuli said, that will bestow "the great gift (to humanity of) giving the world a more human face", as Steve Biko said?

We dare not allow this noble vision handed down to us by these great titans of our struggle to perish. Its translation into reality, first of all in our own country, must surely be the monument we build in memory of a dear son of our people, Stephen Bantu Biko.

Steve Biko, like Shaka, belonged to a generation that could not be bypassed. As he died only 31 years old, his life's work had just begun. But he left us with the task to translate into our programmes intended to give birth to a new society, the hints about the dead young men and women of his

generation, and the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring taken soon out of their laps.

Dr Wendy Orr has written in the Sunday Independent that in the Steve Biko file kept at the Headquarters of our Department of Justice, Steve is reported as having said to his killers: "I ask for water to wash myself with and also soap, a washing cloth and a comb. I want to be allowed to buy food. I live on bread only here. Is it compulsory for me to be naked? I am naked since I came here."

These few and simple words, which speak to the most basic human needs, tell everything that needs to be told about why Steve Biko was right to dedicate his life to the defeat of the criminal ideology of racism, to liberate our country from the clutches of racist fanatics to whom the souls of black folk meant nothing.

When he ceased to breathe, in the cruel and callous hands of his torturers, his was what the poet Ben Okri would describe as "a gigantic death". But, at the same time, this gigantic death of a man deliberately kept by his captors naked and unwashed, also constituted "an enormous birth".

And so it is that we must listen carefully to what the poet, Ben Okri, said in his "Mental Flight".

*...A sense of the limited time we have  
Here on earth to live magnificently  
To be as great and happy as we can  
To explore our potential to the fullest  
And to lose our fear of death  
Having gained a greater love  
And reverence for life  
And its incommensurable golden brevity*

*So it is with this moment  
A gigantic death  
And an enormous birth.  
In timelessness.*

From the gigantic death of Stephen Bantu Biko thirty years ago today, must, in time, arise an enormous birth. Stephen Bantu Biko died, but his vision has not perished.

I thank you for your attention.