

Launch of the Unbreakable Thread: Reflections on Non-Racialism
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Introduction

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, it's a pleasure to be here with you tonight at the launch of the new edition of *The Unbreakable Thread*; and particularly to share a platform with my counterparts from the family of legacy institutions, Sello and Shan.

This evening, I will share my reflections in three, possibly four parts: first by speaking broadly about Black Consciousness historically—given that the Steve Biko Foundation represents the legacy of the philosophy's God Father; secondly I will give some input on non-racialism in contemporary South Africa and finally end with some suggestions for the way forward. And should, by some miracle, Program Director, I have some time left, I will actually comment on the *Unbreakable Thread*.

Black Consciousness

First, to speak broadly about Black Consciousness: often, when people speak of Black Consciousness, they speak of it in the narrow confines of a political party. But the reality is that the essence of BC was that it was a broad movement that found expression in every facet of South African life. It was an outlook that initially took expression in the form of SASO—the South African Students Organization, a Black only student group that grew into a movement that encompassed journalists, artists, educators, high school students, political activists, community developers, the church, health care workers and many, many more. Ironically, to ascertain the full depth and breadth of the movement, one only needs to look at the list of organizations that were banned in the wake of Biko's death on October 19, 1977—Black Wednesday—to see the diversity of the movement.

In terms of race, Black Consciousness was in some ways a paradox. BCM's very definition of Black went beyond skin color to embrace anyone who was legally oppressed by apartheid; and as such included people of African, Asian and Mixed Race descent.

In their words, *being Black was not a matter of pigmentation, being Black was a reflection of a mental attitude.*

In this way, BC was non-racial; focusing not on the degrees of oppression among the marginalized racial groups, but on solidarity to overcome it.

BC articulated the worth and dignity of Black people and did not allow them to be victims. Rather, BC asserted that Black people could and should reject value systems that sought to make them foreigners in the land of their birth and to actively shape the society in which they lived. To quote Biko's article [Black Souls, White Skins], penned under his pseudonym FrankTalk:

“As long as Blacks are suffering from inferiority complex , a result of 300 years of deliberate oppression, denigration and derision, they will be useless as co-architects of normal society where man is nothing else but man for his own sake.” [Black Souls, White Skins]

In his offering on White Racism and Black Consciousness, Biko also said, *“It heralded a new era in which Blacks are beginning to take care of their own business and to see with greater clarity the immensity of their responsibility.” [White racism and BC]*

Black Consciousness was, in short, Black folks doing things on their terms, by themselves and for themselves. It was not about white people; to hijack Molefi Asante’s term, Afrocentricity, BC was Black-centric, not responding to white society but using the lived experiences of Black people, culture, heritage and customs as the starting point.

And in this way, we again see the paradox of Black Consciousness. In as much as it was about Black people, its very modus operandi resulted in an awakening of white consciousness. If Black people were not engaging from a position of inferiority, than whites could not engage from a position of superiority; BC forced white South Africans such as Donald Woods and Rick Turner to rethink their identity and what their contribution to the struggle should be. Rather than wanting to save Black people as a result of white guilt, or worse, direct Black people’s struggle to free themselves, BC challenged whites to go back to their own communities and to conscientize their peers.

Here I would like to quote from *The Unbreakable Thread’s* interview with Rev Francois Bin, a white man who was the chaplain at the University of Fort Hare from 1971 to 1974 as well as a lecturer at Federal Theological Seminary. In this excerpt he speaks of his experience with BC:

“Eventually I came to understand how important it was for Black people to undergo that process of psychological liberation. I came to realize that we, as whites, were actually projecting our guilt onto Blacks. You know, I have been involved in all these multi-racial efforts within the church and I’ve been extremely upset by the insensitivity of whites. White people are not good at listening- they are very good at telling other people what to do. So that when Black people are articulating - and don’t forget that they articulate in the language which is not their mother tongue - white people somehow just ride roughshod over that kind of expression of Black feelings.”

In this way, BC was conscientizing the entire society. It was working towards an outcome, which in the words of Biko, *“there shall be no minority, there shall be no majority, just the people. And those people shall have the same status before the law and they will have the same political rights before the law.”*

With that said, at this stage, I think it is important to note that BC was not and is not, merely a pit stop on the road to non-racialism; rather, it is a living, breathing, philosophy that challenged people to think about their identity, their complicity in either oppressing or being oppressed, and to actively contribute to a more equitable society.

BC’s view of non-racialism can be summed up in a term I’ve borrowed from Bishop Malusi Mpumlwana, a close friend of Biko’s and a BC activist: *conditional* non-racialism.

I know, some of you are thinking if it's conditional it's not non-racialism, and there again is the paradox. Biko was very clear, and eloquently articulated in his paper "Black Consciousness and the Quest for True Humanity" that South Africa's problem was white racism, and the only solution was Black solidarity. So long as this problem persisted, Black solidarity needed to persist. Biko's non-racialism was predicated on the lived and recognized equality of Black and white; with Black people operating not from a position of inferiority, and whites not operating from one of superiority; it was a non-racialism that recognized the injustices of the past and actively worked to overcome them.

Further, it is critical to state that in addition to BC's brand of non-racialism being conditional, it was also not about integration. In fact, Biko warns against the dangers—and I use that word dangers deliberately—of integration.

In his article, *Black Souls in White Skins*, Biko says,

"Does this mean that I am against integration? If by integration you understand a breakthrough into white society by Blacks, an assimilation and acceptance of Blacks into an already established set of norms and code of behavior set up and maintained by whites, then yes I am against it."

Non-Racialism Today

And this brings us to the challenge of non-racialism today. Regardless of the original intent behind non-racialism, whether by design or default, non-racialism has for many become synonymous with color-blindness, a situation in which race is purportedly immaterial. A situation in which assimilation (under the guise of integration or transformation) to white values—a particular twang, a certain school, and a specified circle of acquaintances—are marks of progress.

If we look across campuses in South Africa, the now defunct comments section of Media 24, the hubbub around the very white Springboks team and truth be told—some of our own Sunday lunches—non-racialism is not a reality.

I think it is safe and accurate to say that we would all like to live in a non-racial and egalitarian society. A society in which we are multicultural, and judged in the words of Dr Martin Luther King Jr, not by the color of our skin, but by the content of our character.

The truth is that we are not there.

Before I delve further into this, let me pause at this juncture to state a few caveats:

The first is to say that while race remains a protracted issue, the situation is not the same as apartheid South Africa. I think often, because of afro-pessimism, when we speak of SA or other countries on the Continent we tend to throw the baby out with the bath water. Truthfully, some progress has been made, but not enough.

Secondly: Let me also acknowledge that while I am speaking in a Black white binary, one of the things that has changed is that South Africa has a largely Black, government and has for the past 21 years. So again, some of the dynamics have changed, but not all of them. When we look at ownership of the economy for instance, we can see that the overwhelming majority of financial resources are in the hands of white South Africans. It was Dr. Kwame Nkrumah who said, "seek ye first the political kingdom

and all else shall be added unto you.” Yet years later, Ghana, South Africa and too many other countries have learned that this is not the case—political power without economic redress is very little power.

Thirdly: I also invoke Nkrumah, because in many ways, South Africa is in a post-colonial phase. As Fanon and so many other nations have taught, there is often a reproduction of colonial norms with the new indigenous elite.

Finally, while I am speaking in the binary of Black and white, in the same ways that women can serve as agents of patriarchy, so too can Black people—alongside white people, preserve the status quo—assimilation for a few, presented as non-racialism.

I think much of this problem, ironically, stems from the optimism of 1994, the idea of the rainbow nation and the publicity of the TRC. I think in many ways, people took what were laudable aspirations and began to treat them as realities. The very public process of reconciliation took from many white South Africans, the onus to acknowledge, own and redress apartheid.

What do I mean by that? In 2006/2007 SBF was working with a group of farmers in the Eastern Cape to establish a cooperative that would help them sell and export their crops more efficiently. As part of this effort, we considered purchasing some land to expand the project, so a colleague and I went to visit a farm owned by a white gentleman. As we walked the land, the gentleman told us how the land had been in the family since it was “acquired” in the mid-1800s and had been in the family since. He was selling some of it to finance his parents’ retirement and his kids schooling, none of whom had a particular interest in farming.

No mention was made of the Black kids I saw running around the farm, who really should have been in school, or what would happen to them once the farm sold, as by his own acknowledgement many of the families had been on the farm for generations.

As we got into our vehicle to drive away—we never bought a farm—I was deeply disturbed. I was disturbed because despite the coded language, I ascertained that the land was not purchased, it was taken during the frontier wars. As we left, I asked my colleague—a Xhosa male—how that man could stand there with no shame, having benefited from the dispossession of Black land, which resulted in the diminished opportunities of those who literally live side by side with him.

My colleague, rather glibly but correctly responded “why should he care? Tutu and the TRC took care of that for him.”

That is not to critique the TRC, but to say that throughout the country people continue to be in positions of privilege that they did not earn, while others continue to suffer from disadvantage they were born into.

And while this anecdote relates to rural South Africa, there are many such indignities repeated day in and day out throughout the borders of this beautiful country.

Last week I was in Cape Town with a colleague and we had dinner with a well-meaning white male associate and his Black wife. As we spoke of the realities of racism in our own lives, he told us in effect, race isn’t real, we shouldn’t talk about racism or think about it, eventually it will go away. Needless to

say he got massive side eye from his wife, from my colleague, and because I'm not exactly shy and retiring, a retort from me about how racism will not go away because we wish it away, but only if we work it away.

Truthfully I think one of the consequences of non-racialism today is that it is taboo to talk about race. And I find that this viewpoint or approach is one that is often used to silence. Rather than facing the hard and uncomfortable truths about how it's not only hard work that has earned certain of us opportunities that others don't have—it's inherited privilege; and similarly the truth that no matter how hard some of us work we will still be poor and dispossessed—we retreat behind the language of non-racialism.

Similarly, the language of non-racialism is all too often used to police Black anger. What for us, sitting in the rustic, beautiful, confines of Constitution Hill—the embodiment of our aspirations for an egalitarian society—the matters of race and redress can seem somewhat academic. For too many, the structural inequalities of racism are literally a matter of life and death, the consequences of race and racism speak to whether or not someone eats tonight, to their ability to access adequate healthcare and to their opportunities in life. Hence, the anger. In the words of Biko, “once the Black students want to do things for themselves suddenly they are regarded as being militant.” [No Fears Expressed]

Where to from here?

Many of you are asking, what then is the point, where do we go from here?

Let me first say this: I am not calling for a deluge of white guilt or self-flagellation; nor am I calling for a scenario in which Black people perpetually see themselves as victims.

Rather, what I am calling for is a conversation in the tradition of Black Consciousness. A conversation that involves a frank and honest assessment of the ways in which race historically disadvantaged some and advantaged others. I am calling for a conversation that recognizes that all things are not equal; a conversation in which perhaps one side—as articulated by Father Bin—listens a bit more, not to defend but to understand. I am calling for a conversation that does not rob Black people of agency or that promotes dependency; I'm calling for a conversation that instills responsibility; a conversation that results in consistent, tangible action in our personal, professional and political lives.

I am calling for a conversation which recognizes in the words of Biko, that:

“As people existing in a continuous struggle for truth we have to examine and question old values, concepts and systems. Having found the right answers we shall then work for consciousness among all people to make it possible for us to proceed toward putting these answers into effect”

Thank you.....