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THE MEANING OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS: AN OVERVIEW

by

Harry Nongwenkulu

A proper analysis of *Black Consciousness* should begin with an adequate and comprehensive definition; which would serve as a context within which we could begin an exposition of the philosophy and ideology which are the basic tenets of Black Consciousness.

The 1972 *Policy Manifesto* of the *South African Students Organization (SASO)* defines *Black Consciousness* as "an attitude of mind, a way of life whose basic tenet is that the Black must reject all value systems that seek to make him a foreigner in the country of birth and reduce his basic dignity." The concept of Black Consciousness therefore implies an awareness of and pride in their blackness by Black people and implies that Black people should and must appreciate their value as human beings.

Black Consciousness also means that Black people should be aware of the significance and importance of their own value systems, i.e. their socio-economic, political and cultural values. Implied in this appreciation of their value systems is the need to reject those foreign, alien value systems which were forced down Black people's throats as part of the oppressor's logic of maintaining and perpetrating its brutal system of exploitation and emasculation.

Thus the essence of this search for our indigenous value system is the need to redefine ourselves and our value systems which are today engulfed in the foreign and alien exploitative and oppressive values which have been imposed upon us, both physically and psychologically, by our oppressors in order to make us malleable to subjugation. The challenge of Black Consciousness for any Black man in South Africa today is the need for a new and incisive redefinition, reidentification and reappraisal of the Black totality in the context of a capitalist, racist and exploitative South Africa, presided over by a self-appointed white minority acting as the missionary of international capitalism and finance capital.

Another significant aspect of Black Consciousness is the call for cohesive group solidarity, i.e. Black solidarity. Thus the quintessence of Black Consciousness is the realization and acceptance by Blacks in South Africa that, in order to play a positive role in the struggle for liberation and

emancipation, they must effectively employ the concept of group power and thereby build a strong base from which to counter the oppressor's policy of divide and rule. The philosophy of Black Consciousness therefore means group pride and determination by Black people in South Africa to rise together from the death bed of oppression and exploitation.

At the heart of Black Consciousness is the realization by Blacks that the most potent and effective weapon of oppression and exploitation in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed. In South Africa, the oppressor has so attempted to twist and manipulate our minds to make us mentally and psychologically pliable to his exploitation and manipulation.

Black Consciousness therefore calls for a psychological revolution in the Black community; this will be a revolution which is directed towards the elimination of all stereotypes by Blacks about themselves and one which is directed towards the complete eradication of the slave-mentality and feelings of inadequacy characteristic of an oppressed and exploited society. The basic logic inherent in Black Consciousness is that no man can wage a meaningful war of liberation unless and until he has effectively eradicated his slave-mentality and accepted himself as a full human being who has a role to play in his own salvation.

Black Consciousness therefore forces Black people to see themselves as full human beings, complete, full and total in themselves, and not as extensions of others.

Some people have accused proponents of Black Consciousness of rejecting and spurning a coalition between white liberals and the Blacks. However, assessment and evaluation of the history of the involvement of the *white liberal establishment* in the Black struggle have convinced us that *white liberals* have indeed been criminally responsible for arresting and aborting the struggle by playing the role of a bulwark, a kind of buffer zone between the Blacks and the White system which has been oppressing us for centuries. In fact, to us, the white liberal establishment is part and parcel of the white system; indeed, the driving force behind the white liberal establishment's involvement in the Black struggle is its desire to kill the revolutionary zeal of the Black masses by promising them a "controlled" change which will result in some mystical, "mosaic" multi-racialism. This multi-racialism is never defined precisely lest it reveal to Blacks that it is nothing but a polished and sophisticated version of the racist system which has been responsible for the dehumanization of Blacks in South Africa.

*Implications of community projects in the context of
Black Consciousness in South Africa*

One of the basic tenets of Black Consciousness which SASO has emphasized is the development of socio-political awareness amongst Blacks in South Africa, i.e., to activate the Black community into thinking seriously and positively about the socio-economic and political problems that beset them in their country and to seek solutions to emancipate themselves from these dehumanizing shackles.

This aim is to be achieved chiefly through community projects which, as devised and run by the Black Consciousness movement (before the banning) in South Africa, is designed "to heighten the sense of awareness and encourage [Blacks] to become involved in the political, economic and social development of the Black people".

Thus SASO sees itself as a training ground for future Black leaders who will relate to the Black community and will be capable of assessing and directing the attitudes, goals and aspirations of the Black community.

Vicious white racism and massive economic exploitation has placed upon the Black people a psychological yoke of dependency, helplessness and dependency which kills the initiative, originality and will of a people. Creative instincts and skills of Black people have not surfaced due primarily to the lack of opportunities but also because they have come to rely on whites, who, ironically, are their oppressors and would not open venues for the social and political development of their victims. We have indeed, shockingly perhaps, come to rely on whites even for our own salvation.

It is for this reason that SASO and other Black Consciousness movements saw fit to take as its ideology one which heightens the awareness and consciousness of the Black people, and confronts them with the realities of their situation, i.e. their oppression and exploitation. Only in this way would it be possible to redirect Black energies towards the goal of Black liberation and emancipation.

The concept of Black Consciousness implies the awareness by the Black people of the power they wield as a group, both economically and politically. Hence group cohesion and solidarity are important elements of that ideology, all the more so in view of the "divide and rule" colonial strategy practiced by the white establishment. Our endeavor, therefore, is to try to arouse the entire Black community to strive for its liberation.

Thus the main aim of our community development projects is to inculcate in our people a sense of *self-reliance, initiative and solidarity* that is essential in our struggle to free ourselves from white racism, capitalism, colonialism and psychological servitude instilled in us during all these centuries of colonial emasculation.

One must, however, also be patient when one is involved in community development geared toward raising consciousness and political awareness. One should never assume that it is easy to eradicate psychological attitudes which took the oppressor centuries to cultivate.

Another problem we face in our community development projects is in the area of communication between the community and students. Perhaps one of the ugliest aspects of oppression is that the oppressor systematically cuts off meaningful communication amongst the oppressed. In fact it is one of the essential aspects of the oppressor's strategy to keep the oppressed divided and not to allow communication amongst them lest they plot against him.

Thus police harrassment, intimidation, banning orders and other means are employed to make it difficult for the oppressed to organize themselves. One must constantly fight against fear which is a ubiquitous factor in the Black community and dogs even the most ardent exponent of Black Consciousness.

It is fear founded on the realities of the situation—fear of finding oneself on Robben Island or banned—that has led to the frightening silence in the Black community in South Africa. The regime wastes no time in sustaining and perpetuating this fear in order to preserve and perpetuate the *status quo*. Indeed all the factors that create this epidemic fear in our community have become integral parts of the entire societal structure in South Africa.

Black people know that the entire structure is against them. Hence it is not the individual white they are afraid of. It is the entire racist monolithic white structure that has lynched, maimed and exploited them.

One is thus faced with the problem of convincing our people that despite the real and great hazards, we must do something positive about our fate; we have to fight for our liberation.

This is why we try to communicate with our people through community projects rather than inviting them to a political discussion which they would often be afraid to attend.

In this way we develop rapport between them and ourselves. Once confidence has been built up it becomes easier to talk about more fundamental issues of liberation.

Indeed the basic rationale behind our community projects is that community development is inherently liberating because it enables a person to become aware of the inadequacy of his present situation and, moreover, it enables him to act or respond in such a way that he will be able to bring about change in his situation.

Our community development projects are designed to instil a sense of self-reliance and initiative in our people. Thus the aim of our community development programme is to politicize and revitalize Black individuals to help them to deliver themselves from the situation.

When we talk of community development projects, we mean projects that will revolutionize and transform the entire colonial capitalist society in which we live and thereby to destroy forever the economic exploitation and dependency of our people.

We have designed our community projects as means of assisting our people to find themselves and also to create a conducive climate for creative rapport and communion between Black students and the Black community, a communion that is essential for our liberation.

One of the most important and essential aspects of our community development projects is a programme of leadership training both for the students and the community. In this way we try to give the participants the basic theoretical and practical skills of leadership in dealing with an oppressive and exploitative situation. This is in fact political education. It also has the aim of minimizing the chances of our projects becoming welfare projects.

What we always keep in mind is that the project must always involve the community it is intended to assist i.e., we must work *with* the community rather than *for* the community.

Black political climate in the 1960's and the formation of SASO

The outlawing of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan African Congress (PAC) in 1960 and the Sharpeville massacre of the same year brought about a certain amount of political quietness in the Black community for the major part of the 1960s. This quietness was perhaps understandable when one takes into consideration that there were no political organizations around which Black people could rally. Black or-

ganizations like the *Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM)* did not have a large following.

With the banning and outlawing of *ANC* and *PAC*, the Sharpeville massacre and the subsequent mass arrests, trials, detention and imprisonment of Black leaders, Blacks began to feel that it was futile for them to become involved in politics. Fear and frustration therefore was the dominant mood of the 1960s, even though a number of Blacks continued to be arrested and tried for their political activities. It was particularly on the student level, however, that there was still some political activity, and a number of Black student associations were formed after the banning of *ANC* and *PAC*.

These Black student associations, however, formed along sectional political lines. For example, students who owed allegiance to *ANC* formed the *African Students Association (ASA)* and those loyal to *PAC* formed the *African Students Union of South Africa (ASUSA)*. Students whose ideological affiliations were those of *NEUM* formed the *Durban Student Union (Natal)* and the *(Cape) Peninsula Students Union*: these two later merged to form the *Progressive National Students Organization*.

These associations saw themselves as national organizations and, as such, concerned themselves with national issues. However, the ideological differences of *ANC*, *PAC* and *NEUM* were so acute as to preclude any idea of co-operation or amalgamation. Their differences also stemmed from relationships with the *National Union of South African Students (NUSAS)*. Both *ASUSA* and the *Progressive National Students Organization* were fanatically opposed to any co-operation with the whites. Perhaps the fact that for a long time Black students never attained any strong and viable solidarity on the campuses was attributable to these divided loyalties.

This also led to a yawning lack of co-ordination and progress in the articulation of the interests and aspirations of Black students. Furthermore, *NUSAS* was by no means a spent force among Black students and commanded an appreciable following. Eventually, the differences between *ASA*, *ASUSA* and the *Progressive National Students Organization* coupled with intimidation and harrassment of the leadership of these associations by university authorities and the police led to the collapse of both *ASA* and *ASUSA*.

With the establishment of separate universities for Blacks, a period of isolation ensued for Black students. Furthermore, none of these universities was allowed to have any contact with *NUSAS*, the only students association which assumed the role of a spokesman for the plight of Black students. This

situation resulted in a good deal of frustration for Black students. Dogged by fear of victimization by university authorities and harassment by the security police and colonies of informers, and in view of the general political apathy pervading the entire Black community, many Black students resigned themselves to acquiescence of the situation obtaining on the campuses and the country as a whole.

There was also growing disillusionment and disenchantment with NUSAS. Concern was expressed that such organizations as NUSAS and the University Christian Movement were white-dominated and, as such, paid very little attention to problems pertaining to the Black students community. In fact, some people began to doubt the very competence of a pluralistic group to examine without bias problems affecting one group, especially where the unaffected group is from the oppressor camp. It was felt that a time had come when Blacks had to formulate their own thinking unpolluted by ideas emanating from a group with a good deal at stake in the *status quo*.

By 1967, there was a noticeable resurgence of political interest amongst Black students while in the general Black community the word politics was still considered a taboo. This then was the political climate in the Black community in 1968, when the *South African Students' Organization (SASO)* was formed.

The impact of Black Consciousness on the South African political scene.

The advent of Black Consciousness on the South African political scene has had a tremendous impact on both whites and Blacks.

For whites, the Black Consciousness movement represents the imminent unleashing of Black avalanche that is about to engulf them and thereby upset the *status quo*. Whites fear that the "beautiful" and "healthy" society which they believe they have so painstakingly built around the "virtues" and "values" of a "superior" western civilization and culture will be destroyed.

Even the white liberal establishment, traditionally assumed to be the friend, ally and comrade of the oppressed Blacks, has been shocked by the birth and growth of Black Consciousness. To the white liberal establishment, Black Consciousness is "bad" because it has destroyed the basis of the society they claimed they were attempting to build. The Black Consciousness movement has destroyed the whole pseudo-philosophy of the so-called multi-racialism. Perhaps the anger and frustration of the white liberal establishment and its hostile, though

somewhat subdued, reaction towards the Black Consciousness movement is understandable if one looks at it from the point of view of an advocate of multi-racialism.

Indeed the first main focus of the attack by the Black Consciousness movement, was the white liberal establishment itself because we believed that it was the cause of the frustrations that have characterized our struggle. Before the advent of Black Consciousness the white liberal establishment, with a certain amount of arrogance, arrogated to itself the role of the natural leader and pace setters of the Black struggle in South Africa. The Black Consciousness movement has completely destroyed this myth. There is no doubt that the Black struggle will never again experience the pangs inflicted by this group of arrogant white "messiahs". We have always been convinced that we do not need white liberals to further our struggle.

The impact of the Black Consciousness on the general white community was on the whole even more devastating because to them it was inconceivable that Blacks could organize themselves so effectively without the assistance of the white liberals who had always run the affairs of Blacks, claiming to be the champions of the Black cause which, in case, they never understood and they can never understand.

Generally speaking, the reaction of the white community, including the white liberal establishment, has been characterized by the desire and determination to eradicate the Black Consciousness movement. There are certain individual whites, however, who have tried to accommodate themselves to the existence of the Black Consciousness movement, if only because they realized that the Black Consciousness movement has come to stay.

The failure of the white community to uproot Black Consciousness has been reflected in the massive arrests of the exponents of Black Consciousness and the trials and persecutions which are going on at present in South Africa.

The impact of Black Consciousness on the Black community has also been tremendous. There is no doubt that Black Consciousness is accepted by the vast majority of the Black people. Although initially the response of the Black community was mixed, we now enjoy massive support amongst our people. The popularity of Black Consciousness today is also reflected in the fact that even the regime's stooges and puppets in the Bantustans are also parroting Black Consciousness because they realize that they lack the power and resources to counter the growing popularity of Black Consciousness.

We are convinced that we are on the right track in our

desire to create a society in which there will not be any *exploitation* of man by man and consequent *alienation* of man from himself.

Another point which should be mentioned is that the Black Consciousness movement has played and continues to play an important role in the reactivation of political awareness amongst the Black people in South Africa. This role has been underplayed internationally. Black Consciousness has come to stay and has become a political force to reckon with. All the strikes that have occurred in the country since 1970 are a reflection of the role being played, directly or indirectly, by the Black Consciousness movement.

Finally, we wish to affirm our belief that radical change and transformation and the creation of an egalitarian society in South Africa and the birth of a proud Azania can only come about if and when Blacks come together and form a *united* Black solidarity movement; this is the objective we have set for ourselves. The rejection and exclusion from our movement of all members from the enemy camp is a precondition for this solidarity, we will also bear in mind that the black stooges who are furthering the regime's Bantustan policy and the balkanization of our country have chosen to become appendages of the white oppressive power structure and, as such, they have *no* place in this Black solidarity.

So we in the Black Consciousness movement are determined to march forward. Forward we are marching; forward we must march and we will continue to march until we achieve our victory. Time is on our side and victory assuredly ours.