Introductory observations

Let me start by thanking the hosts of this important occasion for considering me worthy of being part of this important reflection. Allow me to also commend you for the courage to choose Bantu Biko as your subject of focus. I regard your decision as courageous because the dominant trend is to choose subjects that make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for Black people to have an honest, penetrating and meaningful discourse about the issues that face them. Some refer to this trend as feel-goodism.

I make this point because, speaking at a similar occasion as this one, at the Durban University of Technology, I remarked: “Steve Biko is a difficult and complex ontological subject, whose essence compels us to think the unthinkable, say the unsayable and do the undoable”.

Biko is an iconoclastic and disruptive subject and, therefore, to have a meaningful conversation on the importance of this subject today requires not just intellectual fearlessness but also an unshakeable commitment to truth and, above all, an uncompromising commitment to justice for Black people.

This kind of approach is critical because, in my view, it is consistent with the kind of person Biko was, and I hope that in my presentation here today I will not subtract from the essence of who Biko was. The timing and location of this event coincides with a number of other important moments in the contemporary history of Black people.

We gather here today a few kilometres away from what is now called Khosi Mampuru Correctional Centre. This is, as you might know, the dungeon where Biko’s lifeless body arrived, after a long, cold and lonely journey from Port Elizabeth. For the duration of this journey, Biko was naked and chained to the floor of a Land Rover. Before he was brought to Kgosi Mampuru, he was held captive in Port Elizabeth, at Walmer police station and Sanlam Building.

At Walmer, he was kept naked and chained for 20 days. His torturers at Sanlam had been told that Biko had been treated with some degree of respect at Walmer and they were also aware that he was going to fight back if they tried to be rough with him, so they resolved to show him who is baas.

True to their savage nature, as soon as he arrived, they were on to him like a cackle of hyenas. From 6 September onwards, they intensified the torture on his body. This resulted in him sustaining a massive brain haemorrhage and at least three brain lacerations.
Even though they knew he had suffered injury to the brain and was speaking with a slur, they still kept him in a standing position and chained his hands and feet to the metal grille of the cell door. Not only was Biko brutally tortured, but also, his tormentors wickedly delighted in the fact that they had in their captivity the leader of a movement that teaches Black people to stand tall, so they used every opportunity available to humiliate Biko as much as they could.

In almost similar circumstances as those as Biko, on this day, 40 years ago, a brilliant young Black leader, Phakamile Mabija, was flung from the seventh floor of the notorious Transvaal road police station in the land of Kgosi Galeshewere, Kimberley. He was falsely accused of being involved in a local bus boycott.

This month marks the 27th anniversary of the mysterious death of one of Biko’s comrades, Muntu Myeza, on 3 July 1990. Myeza was part of a group of Black Consciousness leaders who were charged under the notorious Terrorism Act for organising the 1974 Viva Frelimo rallies. These rallies celebrated the victory of Black people over the Portuguese in Mozambique.

Biko was called to testify in defence of the accused. He instead used the opportunity to deliver a breath-taking lecture on the meaning, depth and scope of Black Consciousness. This led to some news reporters saying that it was actually the philosophy of Black Consciousness that was on trial.

This month marks the 70th anniversary of the mysterious death of one of the pioneers of 20th century Black radical thought in the South Africa, Muziwakhe Lemdede. Lemdede died on 30 July 1947.

This month marks the birth of one of Afrika’s finest sons, Patrice Emery Lumumba, who, as you know, was assassinated through a conspiracy of the security apparatus of the Belgian, French and AmeriKKKan governments. In 2002, the Belgian government issued an apology for their part in Lumumba’s assassination and in 2013, the US State Department admitted to their involvement, through the Eisenhower administration. Had he been alive today, Lumumba would be 92 this month.

This month marks the 92nd anniversary of the birth of one of the most influential Black theoreticians of our time, the psychiatrist, philosopher and revolutionary, Frantz Omar Fanon.

This month marks the 19th anniversary of the transitioning of one of the grand teachers of our race, a warrior scholar and unwavering Pan-Afrikanist, Dr. John Henrik Clarke, on 12 July 1998.

This month marks the second anniversary of the murder in detention of Sandra Bland, on 13 July 2015. As you know, Bland was a 28-year-old unapologetic anti-white supremacist activist in AmeriKKKa, who died under almost similar circumstances as Biko’s, after being stopped for an alleged traffic offence.

This month also marks the 1st anniversary of the brutal killing of Alton Sterling on July 5 last year. Sterling, a 37-year-old black man, was shot several times at close range while held down on the ground by two police officers.

Regardless of the period within which they existed or the parts of the world they lived in, the individuals I have mentioned are connected to Biko by virtue of the fact that, like him, their Black skins magnetically and automatically attracted anti-Black violence and death. Others are connected to him because, like him, in their own time and space, they have made an invaluable contribution to Black people’s fight against white supremacy.

In trying to dissect the subject I have been given, I propose to look at the following:

- Biko’s conception of consciousness of being;
- The consequences of the absence of Bikos’ consciousness of being on the part of the leadership of the Black world in South Africa today;
- The consequences of the absence of Biko’s consciousness of the part of the today’s Afrikan leaders; and
Some critical issues that characterise the nature of Black existence in the world today.

2. Biko's conception of consciousness of being

Consciousness of being is not just critical for human beings to develop a sense of self; it is also critical for their survival and continued existence. Consciousness of being empowers human beings to answer the fundamental questions of existence. Some of which are: who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I? Where am I going or where should I be going? What is my relationship to others, and perhaps most fundamentally, why do I exist?

Those human beings or groups who do not possess a consciousness of being are more likely to be dominated by those human beings or groups who possess a consciousness of being. In some contexts, such domination may result in the marginalisation, exploitation, oppression and extermination of the dominated individuals or groups.

This means that, whatever level of importance an individual or particularly group of people attach to the function of understanding the essence of their being could determine not just their relationship with other groups of human beings but also whether such a relationship will preserve or threaten their very existence. This is an existential dialectic that we as Black people have yet to learn.

If there is one group in the world for whom the question of consciousness of being is a matter of extreme importance and urgency, it is definitely Black people. This is so because the place that Black people occupy in human history is not identical to that of any other group. And it is for this reason that I think the decision to have Biko, as a reference point for this topic, was an intellectually sound one.

In his essay, *The Definition of Black Consciousness*, Biko explains Black Consciousness as follows:

“We have defined blacks as those who are by law or tradition politically, economically and socially discriminated against as a group in the South African society and identifying themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realization of their aspirations....Black Consciousness is in essence the realization by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their oppression - the blackness of their skin - and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude. It seeks to demonstrate the lie that black is an aberration from the "normal" which is white...One must immediately dispel the thought that Black Consciousness is merely a methodology or a means towards an end. What Black Consciousness seeks to do is to produce at the output end of the process very black people who do not regard themselves as the appendages to white society. This truth cannot be reserved....It seeks to infuse the black community with a new-found pride in themselves, their efforts, their value systems, their culture, their religion and their outlook to life. The interrelationship between the consciousness of the self and the emancipatory programme is of a paramount importance. Blacks no longer seek to reform the system because so doing implies acceptance of the major points around which the system revolves. Blacks are out to completely transform the system and to make of it what they wish. Such a major undertaking can only be realized in an atmosphere where people are convinced of the truth inherent in their stand. Liberation therefore is of paramount importance in the concept of Black Consciousness, for we cannot be conscious of ourselves and yet remain in bondage. We want to attain the envisioned self which is a free self.....”

There are a couple of useful deductions we can make from Biko's definition of Black Consciousness and they are:

1. It deliberately and specifically addresses itself to Black people in the South African context and their condition of oppression;
2. It is predicated on knowledge of self, group solidarity and action;
3. It is not a neutral or amorphous state of consciousness but an existential consciousness with a political agenda;
4. It is an act of self-definition; and
5. It also seeks to inspire an emancipatory programme whose ultimate outcome should be the...
liberation of the Black people.

3. Consequences of the absence of Biko’s consciousness of being on the part of the leaders of the Black world in South Africa today

What obligations does Biko’s understanding of consciousness of being impose on the leadership of the Black world in South Africa today? It compels them to confront the bloody contradiction wherein a state that is managed by people who look like them, periodically unleashes state-sanctioned brutality on the bodies of their own kin such as Andries Tatane, Nqobile Nzuza, Jan Rivombo, Mike Tshele, Osiah Rahube, Lerato Seema, and Mgcineni Noki.

It compels them to confront the contradiction wherein, white supremacist groups like Afri-Forum are allowed to exist and operate legally, but each time an individual Black person (not a group), stands up to legitimately defend the dignity of Black people, such a Black person is threatened with legal action for what is strangely referred to as ‘hate speech’.

It compels them to confront the reality that the brutal murder of 16-year-old Mathlomola Mosweu, in April this year, is a direct result of their failure to boldly and unapologetically address the persistence of Black landlessness in South Africa.

Biko’s understanding of consciousness of being compels the leadership of the Black world in South Africa to confront the sin of their complicity in the oppression of their own people. The leadership of the Black world in South Africa are voluntarily gripped by a conspiracy of silence against Black people, which manifests itself in, amongst others, a culture of self-censorship. Biko helps us to understand this self-imposed censorship when he says:

“There is in South Africa an over-riding idea to move towards “comfortable” politics, between leaders. And they hold discussions among themselves about this. Comfortable politics in the sense that we must move at a pace that doesn't rock the boat. In other words, people are shaped by the system even in their consideration of approaches against the system. Not shaped in the sense of working out meaningful strategies, but shaped in the sense of working out an approach that won’t lead them into any confrontation with the system. So they tend to accommodate the system, to censure themselves, in a much stronger way than the system would probably censure them.”

4. Consequences of the absence of Biko’s consciousness of being on the part of today’s Afrikan leaders

In context of the Afrikan continent, Biko’s consciousness of being compels today’s Afrikan leaders to bow their heads in shame for allowing a situation where, even after declaring independence, countries such as Benin, Burkina Faso, Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Togo, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, are forced by France, through an imperialist policy called Francafrique to store their national reserves in the French central bank. These Afrikan countries are essentially paying France for colonising them.

It compels Afrikan leaders to bow their heads in shame for being co-conspirators in the looting of the natural wealth of the continent, especially in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Sudan, as well as facilitating the systematic genocide and displacing of Afrikans all over the continent.

It compels today’s Afrikan leaders to explain why they are aiding the new scramble for Afrika by the Chinese or why they are allowing the Arabs to continue to attack, capture, enslave, and kill Afrikans in places such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, the Arab world and Israel.

Most disturbingly, Biko’s consciousness of being compels today’s Afrikan leaders to explain why Uganda’s Kasese massacre, or the continued drowning of Afrikans in the Mediterranean, does not receive the same global attention as the attacks on the white citizens of France.

5. Some critical issues that characterise the nature of Black existence in the world today

The contradictions inherent in the conditions of Black people in South Africa and Afrika, are pieces of
a bigger puzzle that constitute the global Black condition. And they are in large measure a result of
the adoption of what Biko refers to as ‘comfortable politics’, on the part of the leadership of the
Black world.

The consequences of these ‘comfortable politics’ has produced conformist-type Black leaders, who
would regularly go to multilateral platforms such as the United Nations to deliberate or vote on the
plight of the Palestinians and the Syrians, but would fail to draw the world’s attention to the genocide
over 6 million of their kin in Sudan or over 500 000 in Papua New Guinea.

The consequences of these ‘comfortable politics’ are responsible for the paradox where the
prominent leaders of the Black world would join the western chorus that is critical of Afrikan leaders,
but they would not say a word against the leaders of countries like the United States of AmeriKKKa,
whose governments continue the lynching of Black people.

You do not hear the prominent leaders of the Black world calling for justice for Black people such as
Amadou Diallo, Tamir Rice, Henry Green, John Crawford, Sandra Bland, Sam Dubose, Tanisha
Andersen, Mike Brown, Laquan McDonald, Freddie Gray, Bettie Jones, Alton Sterling and recently,
Philando Castille. Why are Black leaders able to call for justice on behalf of the Palestinians and
Syrians, but fail to do the same for their own kind?

Concluding observations

Forty years after Biko’s murder in detention, the world we live in has not changed fundamentally for
Black people. Regardless of where you reside in the world, how educated you are, religious,
progressive or nice you may think you are- if you are Black- you are guaranteed they type of scorn,
humiliation, violence and death that Biko and others had to confront.

Forty years after Biko’s death, Black people continue to find themselves in the existential conundrum
wherein they have to constantly explain themselves to others. The perpetual under-16s Biko refers
to. Even at their own occasions, Black people voluntarily torture themselves by adopting the
language and idiom of others. To add to their torture, then they make an extraordinary effort of
ensuring that they speak the languages of their slave masters with the required ‘sophistication’.

In the overwhelmingly violent and anti-Black context Black people live in today, Biko’s understanding
of consciousness of being helps Black people to see the world for what it is and not for what they
want it to be. It empowers them to see the self and the world through their own cultural, spiritual
and intellectual lens.

It empowers Black people to be in a position to develop a framework and a language of resistance
for all the contexts they confront. It assurs Black people of the validity of the view that the slavish
position they continue to occupy in the world arises mainly from the fact of the colour of their skin
and not so much from their personality idiosyncrasies, class position, poverty, economic growth or
failure to attract foreign investment.

Most fundamentally, Biko’s consciousness of being helps Blacks to realise the flaw in their
psychological make-up that makes them believe they are born to be servants of other groups or
supporters of what others do. Blacks are the only people in the world who continue to think that
everything they think or do must first be endorsed by others, in order for it to have any validity.

All the other non-Black groups in the world are organising themselves exclusively and their ability to
do this enables them to maintain their dominance over Black people in all areas of human
endeavour. This is even true in those countries where Black people are the majority.

Unless Black people, everywhere in the world understand that, the only way they can guarantee
their continued survival and existence is by organising themselves exclusively; if they continue to
fail to understand this fundamental law of nature, the other groups will continue to prey on them.
This is for me the most fundamental lesson that Black people must learn from Biko’s understanding
of consciousness of being.
Consciousness of being: Re-imagining Biko 40 years on
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Selected references


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