

## THE PARADOX OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS IN SOUTH AFRICA (GLEANNING ISSUES FROM STEVE BIKO)

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### ABSTRACT

The question of African identity from various philosophical or ideological perspectives has been interestingly playing a role that appears to negate the psyche of the African personality. This negation paradoxically has been unconsciously exhumed by the flare for Black Consciousness. Steve Biko's Philosophy of Black Consciousness though exposed the contradictions inherent in the position held by the "Liberals" in South Africa, but he failed to resolve the core matter of African Identity. We argue that the notion of Black Consciousness instead of promoting neutrality of human nature and African identity, it created and built into the psyche of the people and current generation a vengeful disposition which contradicts identity of the core African.

**KEYWORDS:** African Identity, Personality, Philosophy

### INTRODUCTION

The question of African identity has been the engagement of scholars in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. Another question is why should we border about defining the concept African identity? This question takes us to the perceived phobia that Africans appears to be at the risk of a nameless people without clearly defined qualities. The qualities of matter in traditional metaphysics which is referred to as accidents are size, shape, colour etc. These qualities distinguish one being from the other, what distinguishes the African from others and why search for identity?

The emergence of the Philosophy of Black Consciousness is a search for true Identity, self realization, expression and place in global political landscape. The Philosophy of Black Consciousness has actually not solved the problem of "*Who is African*", instead, its major achievement is the arrival of democracy in South Africa in 1994. More than twenty years after the coming of democracy in South African, one question that we are asking is what relevance is this philosophical movement for the contemporary people of South African?

In what follows, we shall proceed by assessing peripherally the pseudo conception of an African and the perceived origin of identity crisis. Within this purview we shall attempt a definition of who is African. Secondly, we shall view the motivating factor for the rise of Steve Biko's Philosophy of Black Consciousness in an attempt at resolving the true identity of the African which has been distorted; thirdly, we shall address issues and aftermath of the struggle and its negative implication on the psyche of the South African including its body politics.

### WHO IS AFRICAN?

An African can be defined as any individual who by birth or ancestry belongs to the geographical location of the continent of Africa. However, Ki-Zerbo<sup>(1)</sup> states that Africa is used to denote the land of sunshine of black race and mostly

refers to the Sub Saharan Regions of Negroes. By implication Ki-Zerbo is stating that an African is anyone with the dark or black skin.

Etymologically, Africa is traced to the Latin adjective ‘*Aprica*’ which means *Sunny*. By this, the distinctive feature is the hot sun. In an attempt to know “Who is African” F.O.C. Njoku<sup>(2)</sup> posits that the question of who is an African transcends geographical location. The reason being that there are so many people in the African Continent who are not Africans as there are many people from Africa in Diaspora who do not accept that they are Africans. Thus, characteristics such as birth, ancestry, colour or geographical location does not answer the question of who is an Africa.

The position held by F.O.C. Njoku compounds and paralyzes attempts at a clear definition and destroys the fact in the case. An African denying or not accepting that he or she is an African does not make him or her an American or British, why do we say African-Americans as a description for Black Americans. The reason is that by ancestry they were Africans and now by birth Americans. We adjure you to ask a White South African “*Are you an African?*” Instinctively the answer will be “I am a south African” Ask a Proud Nigerian “*Are you an African?*” He will be quick to make the distinction I am a Nigerian, the same goes if he is an Algerian etc., the reason is that every individual likes to be associated with success and would not want to be associated with an impoverished nation. That is why the answers are not “Yes I am an African” we wish to state that if anyone answers emphatically that he or she is African without his country, then his country is either very poor or turn apart by war. In spite of these expressions within the less African social Milieu, both the poor, poorer or better developing nations within this geographical location are all African nations and all its citizens are Africans despite their colour. On this basis any other definition devoid of birth, ancestry or geographical location are products of inferior or superior complex and racism.

It may be reasonable to ask ourselves, why these anomalies in being proud to be identified as Africans. Why ask: Who is African? The reason may be predicated on the pseudo conception of an African which has been handed down to us through education, propaganda and experiences.

### **Pseudo Conception of an African and the Origin of Identity Crisis**

The greatest evil that could come upon man besides death is the enslavement of the mind through propaganda and manipulation through any form of insinuation or dogma. The problem poised as identity crisis has an historical base, and within this historical antecedents are ideological and cultural bias that have formed the basis of education of the Western Youths. We shall view these in a sort of chronological sequences. Firstly, we should see the dehumanization of Africans. Secondly, ideological and cultural bias and lastly, colonialism and the search for identity. In these, we shall see how consciously or unconsciously the pseudo conception of the African has made him appear to have lost his identity.

### **Dehumanization and Confiscation of Rights**

The beginning of the pseudo conception of an African is traceable to the industrial revolution in the Western world. The growing industries in the 16<sup>th</sup> century lacked adequate man power for the factories and plantations that produce sugar cane for Europe, and other products such as, rice, cocoa, tobacco, cotton etc. The Africans have been noted as strong and energetic in agriculture and cattle rearing. In addition, it was observed that the Africans were resistant to tropical diseases, thus their necessity in farms and factories of Europe. With this knowledge, there was greater motivation for slave trade that began as industries grew.

Historically, it was observed that Portugal started slave trade in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, Majority of the slaves were sent to Brazil, the Caribbean and other Spanish speaking regions of South and Central America. Ship owners considered the slaves as Cargo to be transported to the Americas as quickly and cheaply as possible<sup>(3)</sup>. By the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century slavery had hardened as a racial caste; they and their offsprings were legally the property of their owners and children born to slave mothers were slaves. The people were considered merchandize or units of labour and were sold with other goods and services at the markets. The estimated number of Africans shipped across the Atlantic was twelve million<sup>(4)</sup>. The historian Walter Rodney<sup>(5)</sup> argued against this trade between African Kingdoms and European traders, he posits that this business relationship was an unequal relationship, with Africans being forced into a “colonial” trade with the more economically developed Europeans, exchanging raw materials and slaves for manufactured goods. He argued that it was this economic trade agreement dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century that led to African being underdeveloped in his own time.

We wish to cap this dehumanization with an example of the letter written by King Afonso to the King Joao III of Portugal as regards the inhuman treatment of his people. He writes: “Each day, the traders are kidnapping our people-children of this country, sons of our nobles and vassals, even people of our own family. This corruption and depravity are so widespread that our land is entirely depopulated. We need in this kingdom only priests and school teachers, and no merchandise, unless it is wine and flour for mass. It is our wish that this kingdom not be a place for the trade or transport of slaves .... As soon as the captives are in the hands of white men they are branded with a red-hot iron”<sup>(6)</sup>.

This branding shows the inhuman feeling of the slave traders from Europe. They assume that the slaves were tantamount to animals, without human feelings. It must however be added that the African chiefs assisted the slave raiders and traders to achieve their objectives. It is said that the king of Bonny (Now in Nigeria) reacted on occasion of the abolition of slave trade. He said thus “We think this trade must go on. That is the verdict of our oracle and the priests. They say that your country, however great, can never stop a trade ordained by God Himself”<sup>(7)</sup>.

The result of the slave trade and the conception of the blacks as strong, resistant to tropical diseases and almost animals are products of the slave trade, evolutionary theories ideological and cultural bias.

### **Ideological and Cultural Bias**

The history and beginning of slave trade and the dehumanization of the African were both seen, thought and learnt in schools by the upcoming youths within the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century in the western hemisphere. These youths grew up to believe that Africans were less humans. The effect of the slave trade, ideological and cultural bias must have affected young Hegel as he grew up to become a leader of thought. He saw the peak of the slave trade and had a pseudo conception of blacks as intellectually inferior. He wrote: “The Negro as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality – all that we call feeling – if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character ....” He proceeds in his Philosophy of History “In Negro life, the characteristics point is the fact that conscience has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence.... Cannibalism is looked upon as quite costmary and proper”<sup>(8)</sup>.

It is said that the philosopher Hegel provided a basis for modern racism. Popper<sup>(9)</sup> for instance, sees in Hegel the founder of German racialism and sees a connection between him and Nazism. Hume in the first edition of the *Treatise on Human Nature* stated that “there has not been any invention, any sign of civilization among the blacks”<sup>(10)</sup>. These are to

buttress the possibility of the effect of slavery, and ideological bias in the hearts of leaders of thought as regards black Africans.

It should be noteworthy that the words of these leaders of thought and the avalanche of others not mentioned influenced the generation after them and the intellectual climate created a superiority complex. Most western scholars devalue African culture. August Comte structured the growth of societies in three stages and placed his western society at the pinnacle of the development ladder. An analysis on the words of a contemporary philosopher of science (Alex Rosenberg), shows the “idol of the mind” that has been laid in his heart through propaganda on the superiority of the West. His words show how biased he was and the ideology he got from his predecessors, he writes: “Whether we like it or not, science seems to be the only universally welcome contribution of European civilization to all the rest of the world. It is arguably the only thing developed in Europe which every other society culture, region, nation population and ethnicity have learned about it and adopted from Europe”<sup>(11)</sup>.

It is a fact of life that each of us becomes culturally encapsulated during our socialization in childhood. We tend to accept the assumption of our community, culture, internalize the value, views of the universe, misconceptions and stereotypes. Most Europeans or western individuals have few opportunities to become free of cultural assumptions and perspectives that are mono-cultural, that devalue Africa<sup>(12)</sup>.

### **Colonialism and the Search for Identity**

Propaganda has been the most solid tool by which governments, individuals or co-operate bodies put across ideas which are of great interest to them. Attempts to change the opinions of others are as old as the development of language. “Through speech comes the power to manipulate or persuade people without necessarily resorting to physical force”<sup>(13)</sup>. It has been observed that the use of force has never in history succeeded in changing the opinions of people. Force might lead to submission to the will of the brute enforcing it but would surely not stand the test of time which comes in form of violent revolutions.

The above is a mirror of the black man in the continent of Africa. He has been made to see himself as sub human, intellectually inferior, a brute that needs to be tamed. The Europeans also came to believe that the only way to “tame” Africans was to colonize them.

According to F.O.C. Njoku<sup>(14)</sup> colonialism came as a gospel of redemption and elevation. The colonialist observed that it was cheaper and appears humane to exploit Africa through political manipulation than through slave trade. Missionaries took an interesting part in extending European interest through evangelism and trade. They realized that profitable trade depended on maintenance of peace through administration and control of the African state.

The African, of no fault of his have passed through experiences that have altered the state of his psyche. He saw the brutal slave trade, racial discrimination and colonialism. His land was the field for conflicting ambitions of major European colonial powers. J. Baldwin gave a clear picture of the helpless psychological state of the black man in his **Nobody Knows my name**<sup>(15)</sup>. He posits that the search for an African identity as an intellectual discourse emerged from the consciousness built by slavery, discrimination and colonialism. Thus, the memory of the African, in a major sense, is the memory of destined episodes of racism and imperialism, which still hunt the African till present. This position is also held by Idowu Williams<sup>(16)</sup>.

Africans have been denied a past by Eurocentric teleologism. The propaganda either consciously or unconsciously of a “higher race” governing Africa as colonial masters has destroyed the identity of the Africans. Idowu w. Williams comment on the debased claims of the African past is noteworthy. He states: “This is validated in A.P. Newton’s assertion in 1923 before the Royal African Society that Africa had “No Past before the coming of the Europeans” The Oxford Professor of History Hugh Trevor – Roper also made a notorious variant of Newton’s remark in 1962 that: Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present there is none: there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness .... And darkness is not a subject of history<sup>(17)</sup>.

The attempts for the Africans to reaffirm their heritage and personality that is collapsing before western bias and to define their responsibility to access the riches and promise of their culture as part of the process of self affirmation and identification created the search for a clear identity.

### **The Struggle for Identification and the Rise of Black Consciousness**

African search for identity is a search on whom they are and who they can become. The blacks in South Africa are a special case study because their struggle for identity is motivated more by the feeling of rejection and racism in their home land. The sense of alienation from their culture, tradition and natural resources precipitated by the colonial and racist government gave the motivation for the emergence of Black consciousness. Poor wages together with ‘inhuman’ working and living conditions were among the major causes of worker disgruntlement.

In addition, successive administration deprived black communities of their land, this crucial resources was arguably the most important factor leading to the impoverishment and marginalization of African communities (Aborigines). The South Africans in the apartheid regime were turning to nameless actors in the global stage. Their search for identity was a quest for true humanity, a situation which has been lost through western incursion. The black consciousness stood against what they saw as traditional white values, especially the disparaging values of the “liberals”. They rejected the opinions of the white liberals. Steve Biko states “For the Liberals, the thesis is apartheid, the antithesis is non racism – and the synthesis very feebly defined ... Black consciousness defines the situation differently. The thesis is in fact a strong white racism – and therefore, Ipso Facto, the antithesis to this must be a strong solidarity among the Blacks on whom this racism seeks to prey. Out of these two situations we can therefore hope to reach some kind of balance- a true humanity where power politics will have no place<sup>(18)</sup>

The Black Consciousness posits that racism was institutionalized in South Africa and that it was really difficulty for Blacks to acquire good and skilled education. This consequently made it impossible for them to become economists’, engineers etc and on this grounds they were seen as inferior and had no opportunity for good jobs. Those who oppose this system were seen as militants and impatient men. Thus, the blacks came together due to 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”<sup>(19)</sup>

### **Issues in the Philosophy or Black Consciousness**

The Philosophy of Black Consciousness is replete with statements that we see as negation of neutrality of human nature. It appears that the intent of this movement was to alter the state of consciousness of the blacks towards a vengeful disposition. This vengeful disposition called for aggressive confrontation against the whites in order to change the socio-economic situation of the blacks.

Steve Biko's philosophy is an aggressive philosophy of propaganda against the whites. It was an attempt to rouse a great contempt not just on the apartheid regime but on whites. It was for the blacks not to "tolerate attempts by anybody to dwarf the significance of his manhood"<sup>(20)</sup>. He continued that there is a "constant tendency by whites to depict an inferior status to what is black". The whites brought "highly suspicious religion quite foreign to the black indigenous people; the blacks are seen to imbibe "false values from white society ... the poor has always been black".

In addition, Black Consciousness did not only see the apartheid regime as bad but saw the whites as artificial and unnatural while the conception is that Africans are closer to nature and altruistic. Biko described the propagators of the apartheid regime as "irresponsible people from coca-cola and hamburger cultural backgrounds"<sup>(21)</sup>. His words depicts a person really obsessed by anything white, hence whatever contribution made by any white under any name, be it "Liberals", leftist etc to stop apartheid is seen as farce. He states concerning the whites: "These are people who claim that they too feel the oppression just as acutely as the blacks and therefore should be jointly involved in the black man's struggle for a place under the sun;... blacks are being treated as perpetual under – 16s"<sup>(22)</sup>. He explained further that "in ultimate analysis no white person can escape being part of the oppressor camp ... is only possible because whites are indifferent to suffering and patient with cruelty meted out to the black man"<sup>(23)</sup>.

There are more inciting statements, but these few examples are expressions that amount to brain washing against whites. The position of this paper is that Biko played on the emotions of the blacks negatively and it led to violence that claimed many lives. The movements played a great part in the mass protest of school children and the uprising in the Black township of Soweto, near Johannesburg. This uprising resulted in at least 575 deaths by February 1977<sup>(24)</sup>. The youths made the township ungovernable when it became clear that the government could not meet their demands. The apartheid regime also observed that apartheid was no longer viable since they could not hold to power through its repressive security policies; neither could the other seize power through an armed "Liberation" struggle. The option for both became narrower and importantly more crystallized. After the release of Nelson Mandela, Multiparty negotiations began in preparation for a democratic government.

The issue here is that despite the contribution made by Biko's philosophy in the disbanding of the apartheid regime, the blacks in South Africa have been negatively indoctrinated towards racism, a vice they intended to eliminate believing that in it lies the root of apartheid.

### **Aftermath of the Struggle and the Distortion of the Psyche**

The election that ended the apartheid regime was structured by many forces including the propaganda of the Black Consciousness movement. The black people who voted for ANC in April 1994 did so in the belief that the political transformation represented by black majority rule would rapidly usher in a social and economic transformation as well. However, all their expectations were "unrealistic" they have observed now that the whites are not the major problem but the government in power. They have come to understand that good policies by good rulers should be preferred as against racist bias. But the problem now is that they have been indoctrinated to believe that anything white in power amounts to another apartheid. The Black Consciousness under Biko posits that the whites see any person black as inferior, thus the blacks have come to believe that anybody white in power, no matter how good he or she may be is a potential propagator of apartheid. On this ground, no white led party however good the leader may be, may find it difficult to win an election. This is a major negative part of the Black Consciousness movement.

Advocates of Biko's ideology may argue that he did not propagate racism, but the aftermath of his philosophy has infused racism in the hearts of the blacks. Consciously or unconsciously, the blacks have developed phobia to white rulership. A phobia precipitated by long years of propaganda and indoctrination that the whites having nothing good for the blacks in South Africa. This position is buttressed by the continuous victory of the ANC since 1994. The African National Congress (ANC) is totally dominated by blacks. This year 2014 makes it twenty years since this party has been in power despite accusation of wide spread corruption by its leaders. In a publication entitled "ANC seals fifth successive election victory in South Africa"<sup>(25)</sup> In the guardian news online of 9<sup>th</sup> May, 2014. The article proceeds: "The result guarantees a second five years term for the controversial president Jacob Zuma"<sup>(26)</sup>.

The question now is why should the blacks continue to vote for ANC despite the fact that their hope for change since 1994 has been unrealistic since the end of apartheid government? The answer emphatically lies in indoctrination and bias against the whites by the philosophy of Black Consciousness. In addition, to buttress this position, there is a vengeful disposition precipitated by this movement against the whites. An assessment of the position of the Democratic Alliance, a party often criticized as white dominated. This party improved this year 2014 by few percentages (22.2%) as against previous years of 16.6%. The believe is that about seven hundred thousand (700,000) blacks voted in favour of Democratic Alliance. These blacks were those who have seen the handwriting on the wall that whites were not the problem of South Africa. However, majority are still wallowing in the "idol of the mind" which posits that whites should not climb the ladder of leadership again.

Post apartheid South African blacks are now racists as a result of Biko's philosophy. Party members of the Democratic Alliance are really not sure of the presidency of South Africa. This, some feel can only be possible when there is a change of leadership from white to black. Thus, some have called the presidential candidate Hellen Zille "Who is white, to make way for a black opposition leader"<sup>(27)</sup>. What this implies is that there is prejudice against the whites. The black knows that Hellen Zille is good enough to rule South Africa, but the phobia created by the philosophy of Black Consciousness has altered their sense of reason. Thus, there are more racists blacks in South Africa, as against the perception of those outside South Africa.

## CONCLUSIONS

Black consciousness as a philosophy has done more harm than good in post apartheid South Africa. It is paradoxical that it fought to eliminate apartheid and racism but instead has become the root of racial phobia. Its leaders have not been able to eradicate poverty or make a change to buttress the essence of its philosophy. Africans naturally have no racist tendency, but this movement has introduced racism. This is a negation of the African personality.

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