

STEVE BIKO-

**I WRITE WHAT
I LIKE**

A selection of his writings
edited with a personal memoir by
Aelred Stubbs C.R.



Published in San Francisco by
HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS
New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London

8

Some African Cultural Concepts

This is a paper given by Steve at a conference called by IDAMASA (Interdenominational Association of African Ministers of Religion) and ASSECA (Association for the Educational and Cultural Development of the African people) at the Ecumenical Lay Training Centre, Edendale, Natal in 1971. The conference drew together a number of black organisations who might be interested in a closer association. Several papers were given including one by Chief Gatsha Buthelezi. This conference proved to be a staging post on the way to the formation of the Black People's Convention in Johannesburg in December of that year.

SOME AFRICAN CULTURAL CONCEPTS

One of the most difficult things to do these days is to talk with authority on anything to do with African culture. Somehow Africans are not expected to have any deep understanding of their own culture or even of themselves. Other people have become authorities on all aspects of the African life or to be more accurate on BANTU life. Thus we have the thickest of volumes on some of the strangest subjects – even “the feeding habits of the Urban Africans”, a publication by a fairly “liberal” group, Institute of Race Relations.

In my opinion it is not necessary to talk with Africans about African culture. However, in the light of the above statements one realises that there is so much confusion sown, not only amongst casual non-African readers, but even amongst Africans themselves, that perhaps a sincere attempt should be made at emphasising the authentic cultural aspects of the African people by Africans themselves.

Since that unfortunate date – 1652 – we have been experiencing a process of acculturation. It is perhaps presumptuous to call it “acculturation” because this term implies a fusion of different cultures. In

our case this fusion has been extremely one-sided. The two major cultures that met and “fused” were the African Culture and the Anglo-Boer Culture. Whereas the African culture was unsophisticated and simple, the Anglo-Boer culture had all the trappings of a colonialist culture and therefore was heavily equipped for conquest. Where they could, they conquered by persuasion, using a highly exclusive religion that denounced all other Gods and demanded a strict code of behaviour with respect to clothing, education ritual and custom. Where it was impossible to convert, fire-arms were readily available and used to advantage. Hence the Anglo-Boer culture was the more powerful culture in almost all facets. This is where the African began to lose a grip on himself and his surroundings.

Thus in taking a look at cultural aspects of the African people one inevitably finds himself having to compare. This is primarily because of the contempt that the “superior” culture shows towards the indigenous culture. To justify its exploitative basis the Anglo-Boer culture has at all times been directed at bestowing an inferior status to all cultural aspects of the indigenous people.

I am against the belief that African culture is time-bound, the notion that with the conquest of the African all his culture was obliterated. I am also against the belief that when one talks of African culture one is necessarily talking of the pre-Van Riebeeck culture. Obviously the African culture has had to sustain severe blows and may have been battered nearly out of shape by the belligerent cultures it collided with, yet in essence even today one can easily find the fundamental aspects of the pure African culture in the present day African. Hence in taking a look at African culture I am going to refer as well to what I have termed the modern African culture.

One of the most fundamental aspects of our culture is the importance we attach to Man. Ours has always been a Man-centred society. Westerners have in many occasions been surprised at the capacity we have for talking to each other – not for the sake of arriving at a particular conclusion but merely to enjoy the communication for its own sake. Intimacy is a term not exclusive for particular friends but applying to a whole group of people who find themselves together either through work or through residential requirements.

In fact in the traditional African culture, there is no such thing as two friends. Conversation groups were more or less naturally determined by age and division of labour. Thus one would find all boys whose job was to look after cattle periodically meeting at popular

spots to engage in conversation about their cattle, girlfriends, parents, heroes etc. All commonly shared their secrets, joys and woes. No one felt unnecessarily an intruder into someone else's business. The curiosity manifested was welcome. It came out of a desire to share. This pattern one would find in all age groups. House visiting was always a feature of the elderly folk's way of life. No reason was needed as a basis for visits. It was all part of our deep concern for each other.

These are things never done in the Westerner's culture. A visitor to someone's house, with the exception of friends, is always met with the question "what can I do for you?". This attitude to see people not as themselves but as agents for some particular function either to one's disadvantage or advantage is foreign to us. We are not a suspicious race. We believe in the inherent goodness of man. We enjoy man for himself. We regard our living together not as an unfortunate mishap warranting endless competition among us but as a deliberate act of God to make us a community of brothers and sisters jointly involved in the quest for a composite answer to the varied problems of life. Hence in all we do we always place Man first and hence all our action is usually joint community oriented action rather than the individualism which is the hallmark of the capitalist approach. We always refrain from using people as stepping stones. Instead we are prepared to have a much slower progress in an effort to make sure that all of us are marching to the same tune.

Nothing dramatises the eagerness of the African to communicate with each other more than their love for song and rhythm. Music in the African culture features in all emotional states. When we go to work, we share the burdens and pleasures of the work we are doing through music. This particular facet strangely enough has filtered through to the present day. Tourists always watch with amazement the synchrony of music and action as African working at a road side use their picks and shovels with well-timed precision to the accompaniment of a background song. Battle songs were a feature of the long march to war in the olden days. Girls and boys never played any games without using music and rhythm as its basis. In other words with Africans, music and rhythm were not luxuries but part and parcel of our way of communication. Any suffering we experienced was made much more real by song and rhythm. There is no doubt that the so called "Negro spirituals" sung by Black slaves in the States as they toiled under oppression were indicative of their

African heritage.

The major thing to note about our songs is that they never were songs for individuals. All African songs are group songs. Though many have words, this is not the most important thing about them. Tunes were adapted to suit the occasion and had the wonderful effect of making everybody read the same things from the common experience. In war the songs reassured those who were scared, highlighted the determination of the regiment to win a particular encounter and made much more urgent to the need to settle the score; in suffering, as in the case of the Black slaves, they derived sustenance out of a feeling of togetherness, at work the binding rhythm makes everybody brush off the burden and hence Africans can continue for hours on end because of this added energy.

Attitudes of Africans to property again show just how unindividualistic the African is. As everybody here knows, African society had the village community as its basis. Africans always believed in having many villages with a controllable number of people in each rather than the reverse. This obviously was a requirement to suit the needs of a community-based and man-centred society. Hence most things were jointly owned by the group, for instance there was no such thing as individual land ownership. The land belonged to the people and was merely under the control of the local chief on behalf of the people. When cattle went to graze it was on an open veld and not on anybody's specific farm.

Farming and agriculture, though on individual family basis, had many characteristics of joint efforts. Each person could by a simple request and holding of a special ceremony, invite neighbours to come and work on his plots. This service was returned in kind and no remuneration was ever given.

Poverty was a foreign concept. This could only be really brought about to the entire community by an adverse climate during a particular season. It never was considered repugnant to ask one's neighbours for help if one was struggling. In almost all instances there was help between individuals, tribe and tribe, chief and chief etc. even in spite of war.

Another important aspect of the African culture is our mental attitude to problems presented by life in general. Whereas the Westerner is geared to use a problem-solving approach following very trenchant analyses, our approach is that of situation-experiencing. I will quote from Dr Kaunda to illustrate

this point :

The Westerner has an aggressive mentality. When he sees a problem he will not rest until he has formulated some solution to it. He cannot live with contradictory ideas in his mind; he must settle for one or the other or else evolve a third idea in his mind which harmonises or reconciles the other two. And he is vigorously scientific in rejecting solutions for which there is no basis in logic. He draws a sharp line between the natural and the supernatural, the rational and non-rational, and more often than not, he dismisses the supernatural and non-rational as superstition. . . .

Africans being a pre-scientific people do not recognise any conceptual cleavage between the natural and supernatural. They experience a situation rather than face a problem. By this I mean they allow both the rational and non-rational elements to make an impact upon them, and any action they may take could be described more as a response of the total personality to the situation than the result of some mental exercise.

This I find a most apt analysis of the essential difference in the approach to life of these two groups. We as a community are prepared to accept that nature will have its enigmas which are beyond our powers to solve. Many people have interpreted this attitude as lack of initiative and drive yet in spite of my belief in the strong need for scientific experimentation I cannot help feeling that more time also should be spent in teaching man and man to live together and that perhaps the African personality with its attitude of laying less stress on power and more stress on man is well on the way to solving our confrontation problems.

All people are agreed that Africans are a deeply religious race. In the various forms of worship that one found throughout the Southern part of our Continent there was at least a common basis. We all accepted without any doubt the existence of a God. We had our own community of saints. We believed – and this was consistent with our views of life – that all people who died had a special place next to God. We felt that a communication with God, could only be through these people. We never knew anything about hell – we do not believe that God can create people only to punish them eternally after a short period on earth.

Another aspect of religious practices was the occasion of worship. Again we did not believe that religion could be featured as a separate part of our existence on earth. It was manifest in our daily lives. We thanked God through our ancestors before we drank beer, married, worked etc. We would obviously find it artificial to create special occasions for worship. Neither did we see it logical to have a particular building in which all worship would be conducted. We believed that God was always in communication with us and therefore merited attention everywhere and anywhere.

It was the missionaries who confused our people with their new religion. By some strange logic, they argued that theirs was a scientific religion and ours was mere superstition in spite of the biological discrepancies so obvious in the basis of their religion. They further went on to preach a theology of the existence of hell, scaring our fathers and mothers with stories about burning in eternal flames and gnashing of teeth and grinding of bone. This cold cruel religion was strange to us but our fore-fathers were sufficiently scared of the unknown impending anger to believe that it was worth a try. Down went our cultural values!

Yet it is difficult to kill the African heritage. There remains, in spite of the superficial cultural similarities between the detribalised and the Westerner, a number of cultural characteristics that mark out the detribalised as an African. I am not here making a case for separation on the basis of cultural differences. I am sufficiently proud to believe that under a normal situation, Africans can comfortably stay with people of other cultures and be able to contribute to the joint cultures of the communities they have joined. However, what I want to illustrate here is that even in a pluralistic society like ours, there are still some cultural traits that we can boast of which have been able to withstand the process of deliberate bastardisation. These are aspects of the modern African culture – a culture that has used concepts from the white world to expand on inherent cultural characteristics.

Thus we see that in the area of music, the African still expresses himself with conviction. The craze about jazz arises out of a conversion by the African artists of mere notes to meaningful music, expressive of real feelings. The Monkey Jive, Soul etc. are all aspects of a modern type African culture that expresses the same original feelings. Solos like those of Pat Boone and Elvis Presley could never really find expression within the African culture because it is not in us

to listen passively to pure musical notes. Yet when soul struck with its all-engulfing rhythm it immediately caught on and set hundreds of millions of black bodies in gyration throughout the world. These were people reading in soul the real meaning – the defiant message “say it loud! I’m black and I’m proud”. This is fast becoming our modern culture. A culture of defiance, self-assertion and group pride and solidarity. This is a culture that emanates from a situation of common experience of oppression. Just as it now finds expression in our music and our dress, it will spread to other aspects. This is the new and modern black culture to which we have given a major contribution. This is the modern black culture that is responsible for the restoration of our faith in ourselves and therefore offers a hope in the direction we are taking from here.

Thus in its entirety the African Culture spells us out as people particularly close to nature. As Kaunda puts it, our people may be unlettered and their physical horizons may be limited yet “they inhabit a larger world than the sophisticated Westerner who has magnified his physical senses through inverted gadgets at the price all too often of cutting out the dimension of the spiritual.” This close proximity to Nature enables the emotional component in us to be so much richer in that it makes it possible for us, without any apparent difficulty to feel for people and to easily identify with them in any emotional situation arising out of suffering.

The advent of the Western Culture has changed our outlook almost drastically. No more could we run our own affairs. We were required to fit in as people tolerated with great restraint in a western type society. We were tolerated simply because our cheap labour is needed. Hence we are judged in terms of standards we are not responsible for. Whenever colonisation sets in with its dominant culture it devours the native culture and leaves behind a bastardised culture that can only thrive at the rate and pace allowed it by the dominant culture. This is what has happened to the African culture. It is called a sub-culture purely because the African people in the urban complexes are mimicking the white man rather unashamedly.

In rejecting Western values, therefore, 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 relationship. 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.

9

The Definition of Black Consciousness

This is a paper produced for a SASO leadership training course, probably in December 1971, and is included here as an example of Steve talking to members of his own organisation, and therefore speaking from the heart of his and their experience.

THE DEFINITION OF BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

We have in our policy manifesto 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 realisation of their aspirations. This definition illustrates to us a number of things:

1. Being black is not a matter of pigmentation – being black is a reflection of a mental attitude.
2. Merely by describing yourself as black you have started on a road towards emancipation, you have committed yourself to fight against all forces that seek to use your blackness as a stamp that marks you out as a subservient being.

From the above observations therefore, we can see that the term black is not necessarily all-inclusive; i.e. the fact we are all *not white* does not necessarily mean that we are all *black*. Non-whites do exist and will continue to exist and will continue to exist for quite a long time. If one's aspiration is whiteness but his pigmentation makes attainment of this impossible, then that person is a non-white. Any man who calls a white man "Baas", any man who serves in the police force or Security Branch is *ipso facto* a non-white. Black people – real black people – are those who can manage to hold their heads

high in defiance rather than willingly surrender their souls to the white man.

Briefly defined therefore, Black Consciousness is in essence the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their operation – 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. It is a manifestation of a new realisation that by seeking to run away from themselves and to emulate the white man, blacks are insulting the intelligence of whoever created them black. Black Consciousness therefore, takes cognizance of the deliberateness of God's plan in creating black people black. 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 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 realised 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.

The surge towards Black Consciousness is a phenomenon that has manifested itself through out the so-called Third World. There is no doubt that discrimination against the black man the world over fetches its origin from the exploitative attitude of the white man. Colonisation of white countries by whites has throughout history resulted in nothing more sinister than mere cultural or geographical fusion at worst, or language bastardisation at best. It is true that the history of weaker nations is shaped by bigger nations, but nowhere in the world today do we see whites exploiting whites on a scale even remotely similar to what is happening in South Africa. Hence, one is forced to conclude that it is not coincidence that black people are exploited. It was a deliberate plan which has culminated in even so called black independent countries not attaining any real independence.

With this background in mind we are forced, therefore, to believe that it is a case of *haves* against *have-nots* where whites have been deliberately made *haves* and blacks *have-nots*. There is for instance no worker in the classical sense among whites in South Africa, for even the most down-trodden white worker still has a lot to lose if the system is changed. He is protected by several laws against competition at work from the majority. He has a vote and he uses it to return the Nationalist Government to power because he sees them as the only people who, through job reservation laws, are bent on looking after his interests against competition with the "Natives".

It should therefore be accepted that an analysis of our situation in terms of one's colour at once takes care of the greatest single determinant for political action – i.e. colour – while also validly describing the blacks as the only real workers in South Africa. It immediately kills all suggestions that there could ever be effective rapport between the real workers, i.e. blacks, and the privileged white workers since we have shown that the latter are the greatest supporters of the system. True enough, the system has allowed so dangerous an anti-black attitude to build up amongst whites that it is taken as almost a sin to be black and hence the poor whites, who are economically nearest to the blacks, demonstrate the distance between themselves and the blacks by an exaggerated reactionary attitude towards blacks. Hence the greatest anti-black feeling is to be found amongst the very poor whites whom the Class Theory calls upon to be with black workers in the struggle for emancipation. This is the kind of twisted logic that the Black Consciousness approach seeks to eradicate.

In terms of the Black Consciousness approach we recognise the existence of one major force in South Africa. This is White Racism. It is the one force against which all of us are pitted. It works with unnerving totality, featuring both on the offensive and in our defence. Its greatest ally to date has been the refusal by us to club together as blacks because we are told to do so would be racist. So, while we progressively lose ourselves in a world of colourlessness and amorphous common humanity, whites are deriving pleasure and security in entrenching white racism and further exploiting the minds and bodies of the unsuspecting black masses. Their agents are ever present amongst us, telling us that it is immoral to withdraw into a cocoon, that dialogue is the answer to our problem and that it is unfortunate that there is white racism in some quarters but you must

understand that things are changing. These in fact are the greatest racists for they refuse to credit us with any intelligence to know what we want. Their intentions are obvious; they want to be barometers by which the rest of the white society can measure feelings in the black world. This then is WHAT MAKES US believe that white power presents its self as a totality not only provoking us but also controlling our response to the provocation. This is an important point to note because it is often missed by those who believe that there are a few good whites. Sure there are a few good whites just as much as there are a few bad blacks.

However what we are concerned here with is group attitudes and group politics. The exception does not make a lie of the rule – it merely substantiates it.

The overall analysis therefore, based on the Hegelian theory of dialectic materialism, is as follows. That since the thesis is a white racism there can only be one valid antithesis i.e. a solid black unity to counterbalance the scale. If South Africa is to be a land where black and white live together in harmony without fear of group exploitation, it is only when these two opposites have interplayed and produced a viable synthesis of ideas and a *modus vivendi*. We can never wage any struggle without offering a strong counterpoint to the white races that permeate our society so effectively.

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 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 through the world a number of people who are not aware that they too are people. Our adherence to values that we set for ourselves can also not be reversed because it will always be a lie to accept white values as necessarily the best. The fact that a synthesis may be attained only relates to adherence to power politics. Some one somewhere along the line will be forced to accept the truth and here we believe that ours is the truth.

The future of South Africa in the case where blacks adopt Black Consciousness is the subject for concern especially among initiates. What do we do when we have attained our Consciousness? Do we propose to kick whites out? I believe personally that the answers to these questions ought to be found in the SASO Policy Manifesto and

in our analysis of the situation in South Africa. We have defined what we mean by true integration and the very fact that such a definition exists does illustrate what our standpoint is. In any case we are much more concerned about what is happening now, than what will happen in the future. The future will always be shaped by the sequence of present-day events.

The importance of black solidarity to the various segments of the black community must not be understated. There have been in the past a lot of suggestions that there can be no viable unity amongst blacks because they hold each other in contempt. Coloureds despise Africans because they, (the former) by their proximity to the Africans, may lose the chances of assimilation into the white world. Africans despise the Coloureds and Indians for a variety of reasons. Indians not only despise Africans but in many instances also exploit the Africans in job and shop situations. All these stereotype attitudes have led to mountainous inter-group suspicions amongst the blacks.

What we should at all times look at is the fact that:

1. We are all oppressed by the same system.
2. That we are oppressed to varying degrees is a deliberate design to stratify us not only socially but also in terms of aspirations.
3. Therefore it is to be expected that in terms of the enemy's plan there must be this suspicion and that if we are committed to the problem of emancipation to the same degree it is part of our duty to bring to the attention of the black people the deliberateness of the enemy's subjugation scheme.
4. That we should go on with our programme, attracting to it only committed people and not just those eager to see an equitable distribution of groups amongst our ranks. This is a game common amongst liberals. The one criterion that must govern all our action is commitment.

Further implications of Black Consciousness are to do with correcting false images of ourselves in terms of Culture, Education, Religion, Economics. The importance of this also must not be understated. There is always an interplay between the history of a people i.e. the past, and their faith in themselves and hopes for their future. We are aware of the terrible role played by our education and religion in creating amongst us a false understanding of ourselves. We must therefore work out schemes not only to correct this, but further to be our own authorities rather than wait to be interpreted by others. Whites can only see us from the outside and as such can

never extract and analyse the ethos in the black community. In summary therefore one need only refer this house to the SASO Policy Manifesto which carries most of the salient points in the definition of Black Consciousness. I wish to stress again the need for us to know very clearly what we mean by certain terms and what our understanding is when we talk of Black Consciousness.