

THIRD WORLD REPORTS

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SOUTH AFRICA:
REMEMBERING ROBERT SOBUKWE

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LONDON, March 9 1988

The Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) in South Africa, like négritude in the Francophone world, is widely regarded as a manifestation of Black racism. If this were so, how would one account for the fact that the author of the ideology of Black Consciousness in South Africa, Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe, and his principal disciple, Steve Biko, counted White liberal South Africans among their close friends?

The extraordinary relationship formed by Biko with Donald and Wendy Woods has been brilliantly and authentically portrayed in Sir Richard Attenborough's film Cry Freedom. The deep friendship between Sobukwe and Benjamin Pogrund, the former deputy-editor of the Rand Daily Mail, will shortly be told in the collection of letters from Sobukwe being edited by Pogrund. Another of Sobukwe's trusted colleagues was the late Patrick Duncan, son of a former South African Governor-General.

Pogrund told how his relationship with Sobukwe developed in an address he delivered to the UN Special Committee against Apartheid on the tenth anniversary of Sobukwe's death on 26 February 1978. It is not without some political significance that the invitation to Pogrund to deliver this address came from the Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC), which was founded by Sobukwe.

If there is to be any hope of a non-racial society ever being established in South Africa it lies in the racial gulf being bridged during the present transition period, and in developing the social links between Blacks and Whites, and not just between their leaders.

The protagonists of négritude in the French colonial world - men like the former President of Senegal, Leopold Senghor, and the Martinique poet, and parliamentarian, Aimé Césaire - described their philosophy in Marxist language as a dialectical process: Black racisme (pride of race) is a necessary reaction against White racisme - thesis and antithesis - in order to develop a healthy synthesis of non-racialism.

Sobukwe, an anti-Marxist, described the aims of Black Consciousness in less complicated language at the founding conference of the PAC in 1959:

'We aim, politically, at government of the Africans by Africans for Africans, with everybody who owes his loyalty to Africa and who is prepared to accept the democratic rule of an African majority being regarded as an African.'

Sobukwe argued, however, that since the Black and White experience was so widely different, it was necessary for each racial community to wage their struggle against racialism through their own movements, and that the degree to which each community contributed politically to the creation of a democratic system would, at the end of the day, determine the nature of their relationship in a post-apartheid society.

Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe was born on 5 December 1924 in the Cape rural town of Graaff Reinet. His father was a labourer and his mother a domestic servant. His outstanding abilities as a pupil were recognised by his missionary teachers at Healdtown. As a scholarship student at the segregated university college of Fort Hare, he plunged into politics, joining the Youth League of the African National Congress (ANC). He became a teacher in the Transvaal rural town of Standerton where his ANC activities brought him into conflict with the authorities.

Despite his political activism, his academic qualities were recognized by the University of Witwatersrand which appointed him as a lecturer in Zulu. He combined teaching with studying for a second degree in languages. Living in Soweto, he became a driving force in the Africanist movement within the ANC.

The Africanists objected, among other things, to the multi-racial

connections of the ANC with the Indian National Congress and the Congress of Democrats, and felt that non-Blacks were exercising too much control over the ANC. They also objected to the communist influence of these two Congresses. Their disagreements came to a head in 1958, and in the following year the PAC was formed, with Sobukwe as its first president-general and its principal theoretician. In March 1960 the PAC launched a 'decisive action' campaign against the pass laws. With his close colleagues, Sobukwe surrendered himself to the police proclaiming his refusal to carry passes any longer. The anti-pass campaign evoked an immediate mass response. At a peaceful mass demonstration on the first day of the campaign 69 people were shot dead at Sharpeville - a watershed in South African politics.

Sobukwe and his colleagues were sentenced to three years under 'incitement laws'. But before his term of imprisonment ended on Robben Island, the Government introduced an amendment to the law enabling them to keep Sobukwe and others in indefinite detention.

It was while he was still a prisoner on Robben Island that he first communicated with Pogrund, who had fallen foul of the authorities because of a series of articles he published about prison conditions. Sobukwe wrote to him:

'I want to assure you that I am quite aware of the political implications of this case. And I do not wish history ever to record that for some opportunistic reason or other, I kept mum like Erer Rabbit, when I should have spoken, at the same time being quite voluble when I should have held my peace. If, then, at any time in the future, at any stage of this case, you should like me to testify please don't fear that your calling me as a witness will jeopardise my position. We have become so anxious to shield and spare our friends that we are virtual "collaborators".

This was the beginning of a correspondence that continued throughout the following six years that Sobukwe remained confined on Robben Island. When he was finally released in 1969 he was restricted to living in Kimberley under constant surveillance. Pogrund often visited him there. When he became ill - diagnosed too late as cancer - he came and stayed with the Pogrunds in Johannesburg for medical consultations.

Progrund describes him in Chaucer's phrase: a gentle, perfect knight. He adds: 'He was a modest man. He was sensitive and concerned about the needs and hurts of others. He was incapable of meanness. He had a matchless courage, speaking with the same grave politeness to high and low, young and old, friend and enemy. And so often there was that warm smile lighting up his face, that big grin, and that deep chuckle of amusement.'

Progrund concluded his anniversary address by saying: 'It is South Africa's terrible loss that Robert Sobukwe is no longer with us to take part in the struggle for liberty, to attack racism and divisive tribalism, to lead through personal example, and to inspire through his gift for drawing people to him.'

Sobukwe's legacy to South Africans is his teaching that: 'There is only one race to which we all belong, and that is the human race.'

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