

**PROF MS MAKHANYA, PRINCIPAL AND VICE CHANCELLOR
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA
VIRTUAL 20TH ANNUAL STEVE BIKO MEMORIAL LECTURE
CO-HOSTED BY UNISA AND THE STEVE BIKO FOUNDATION
THE LECTURE DELIVERED BY REV. AL SHARPTON (USA)
12 SEPTEMBER 2020**

Thank you Programme Director.

It gives me great pleasure that we are virtually meeting today to commemorate the life of a legendary liberation leader, Bantu Stephen Biko who died on this day in 1977 in the apartheid prison cell after being brutally tortured. As I indicated to our speaker in our meeting yesterday that we would have loved to host him physically in his motherland in South Africa, but because of the global pandemic of Covid-19 and its restrictions, we have had to explore virtual platforms to hold this lecture.

It is also an honour for us as the University of South Africa together with the Steve Biko Foundation to host the 20th Edition of the Annual Steve Biko Memorial Lecture. We therefore extend our gratitude to the Biko Family and the Foundation for this honour and partnership that we have witnessed grow from strength to strength.

Considering what Steve Biko stood for and his relentless struggle against racism, it is most fitting today to invite the most recognizable figure leading the Black Lives Matter at the time when this has now spread across the world in the aftermath of the brutal murder of George Floyd. It is also a powerful reminder of the strong bonds between liberation movements and Pan-Africanism mutually reinforced from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

In his seminal book, *Souls of Black Folk in 1903*, WEB Dubois, proclaimed that “The Problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line-the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.” Little did we know that this problem would become the problem of the 21st century as well as indicated by resurgence of racism and rise of brutality of security forces towards blacks hence “Black Lives Matter” has become a rallying cry for justice.

There is no doubt in my mind that you will all agree that this lecture, which marks the 43rd commemoration of Biko’s death in the hands of the apartheid state, cannot be undertaken without us reflecting on at least three incidents which have ‘touched’ the “black world” in the last few weeks.

In America the world witnessed, in graphic details, a black man, George Floyd, pleading for his life and taking his last breath while being choked by a white police officer. Subsequently there have been many such incidents as they had happened before. In South Africa today the country is outraged by yet another racist incident in the advertising world of hair products at Clicks stores which denigrated and insulted black hair while placing white hair as the norm. Our interest as academics should be to understand the aesthetics, or suppression thereof, of blackness. And how blackness responds in the face of humiliation and persistent dehumanization. How do we understand the deeper meaning of the advert against what Frantz Fanon wrote?

There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born. In most cases, the black man lacks the advantage of being able to accomplish this descent into a real hell.¹

The advert depicted what it regarded as dry/arid hair, something that belongs to non-beings; reducing black people to nothingness.

We also meet against the backdrop of the killing of Nathaniel Julies, the 16-year-old with Down Syndrome from one of our depressed

¹ Fanon, Frantz (1986 [1952]) *Black Skin, White Masks*. London, Pluto Press. Pg. 10

townships, Eldorado Park. It will again be imprudent for me to comment on the merits of the case especially as it is being handled by IPID.² It does suffice that Julies' death brings into sharp focus the value of black life. The dignity of black people.

Connecting us to Revd Sharpton's home country is the recent incident relating to Daniel Prude, the black man who was suffocated to death by Rochester Police (United States) two weeks ago.³ Like George Floyd and many other black men who lose their lives in the hands of the police, Prude died while struggling to "breathe".

The overall backdrop against which we meet today is that of black people struggling, suffocating, shouting and crying: "We can't breathe!"

Steve Biko reflected on these developments and provided us with analytical tools that we must, as both the university and the Foundation, and many other institutions and organisations, use to understand and advance the condition of black people in particular. Thus, on the occasion of the commemoration of his death I wish to highlight a few vignettes from Biko's genius.

² Independent Police Investigation Directorate

³ Daniel Prude, suffering from a mental health episode, was killed on 23 March 2020 by Rochester Police when they put a 'spit hood' over his head, leading to his suffocation. The video showing how he died emerged recently and led to #BlackLivesMatter protests in the town. See Nir, Sarah M *et al* (2020) Rochester police suspend officers over man's death, *New Your Times*, September 04 2020

A careful examination of Biko's writings and philosophy reminds us that formal legal abolition of racist system on paper does not necessarily lead to the end of institutionalized racism which is embedded in the consciousness and finds expression in institutions long after the legal changes.

No wonder the African child learns to hate his heritage in his days at school. So negative is the image presented to him that he tends to find solace only in close identification with the white society.⁴

The treatment that black people receive in the hands of the system, whether it is the Clicks advert or the suffocation on the streets of Rochester, is a reflection of the institutionalised racism⁵ that black people continue to suffer the world over. Critically, Biko understands that this racism is not isolated. Neither is it a mistake or unconscious bias, as he wrote:

The racism we meet does not only exist on an individual basis; it is also institutionalised to make it look like the South African way of life. Although of late there has been a feeble attempt to gloss over the overt racist elements in the system, it is still true that the system derives its nourishment from the existence of anti-black attitudes in society.⁶

⁴ Biko, Steve (1978) *I Write What I Like*. London: Bowerdean Press. Pg. 29

⁵ Carmichael, Stokely & Hamilton, Charles V (1997) *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*. New York: Vintage.

⁶ Biko, Steve (1978) *I Write What I Like*. London: Bowerdean Press. Pg. 88

It is these anti-black attitudes that are still prevalent in our society, now manifesting themselves outside of state power, which must be confronted. Biko called on black people to love and respect themselves just as God made them. He would also urge us, as we are doing today, to understand the interconnectedness of the condition of black people. Hence it was comforting to see solidarity at the funeral service of Julies, breaking the barriers that the apartheid regime had sought to build among black South Africans. That they are all black and faced with the same challenges.

Similarly, the barriers that may exist between black people on the continent and those in the diaspora must be broken. Hence it is even more comforting to see the slogan “Black Lives Matter!” being hoisted here, in the United States, and across the globe. This is how best we can commemorate the legacy of Bantu Stephen Biko. Through insisting that “Black Lives Matter!”

So, why are we continuing with events like this – the Steve Biko lecture?

We have a duty as a university, a knowledge institution, through our research, to explore the meanings and reflections of Biko, the meanings of Fanon, WEB Dubois and many others, on the condition of blackness not only in South Africa but throughout the world.

I hope that our academics will continue with such endeavours. Including drawing the linkages and interconnectedness of the struggles of peoples across continents.

We are therefore pleased to welcome Revd Sharpton to share his wisdom. We also stretch a hand of solidarity across the ocean to confront the pandemic of racism that has engulfed our communities.

Revd Al Sharpton! You may present the 20th Steve Biko Annual Memorial Lecture, Sir, thank you.