

STEVE BIKO INTERVIEWED BY GREG LANNING, 5 JUNE 1971

LANNING: Obviously something like SASO is based on some historical analysis. How would you explain the founding of SASO in these terms?

BIKO: My attitude to the South African set-up is that I think for a long time we have been involved in attempts at constructing some response to the provocation along very wrong lines. [The assumption has been] ... that you had apartheid as your problem and that in order to oppose this from a strong position you had to get very strong non-racialism. And that whatever synthesis you arrived at had these two as extreme opposites.

Now I believe that essentially the real assessment and real analysis should be that we have in fact a totality of white power in this country, definite white racism. And what we need in fact is a strong black response to this white racism. Whatever synthesis we get we will have these *two*, therefore, as extreme polarised points.

Now I think SASO basically came about in the same sort of way, using the student world as a model. In that with the death of political parties in the black world especially, and the harassment of the Liberal Party – and in fact the non-acceptability of Liberal Party opinion in white circles – NUSAS as the major student organisation at the time took upon its shoulders this responsibility of verbalising black complaints. And it began to be seen on the black campuses and elsewhere (even among the black community to some extent) as the foremost movement which was expressing black aspirations. And in fact black students who took part in NUSAS did so not so much as students in a student origin, but as a form of political action directed at the system.

Obviously, therefore, there was bound to be a rethink, simply because the model itself -that is, the NUSAS model-was not perfect. People carried with them into this NUSAS set-up their own feelings of superiority and inferiority and there was too much time spent on trying to build up a perfect model. Blacks and whites in NUSAS were trying to be equal and failing to be equal. The whites had to make a real attempt to be equal to the blacks; and the blacks, on the other hand, were hovering there simply feeling the inferiority, not really being able to live as themselves, but trying to build up to some kind of imagined personality which the whites had built up. And in this sort of framework, therefore, NUSAS was not a very, very important adversary to the government -or in fact a very important platform from which to formulate any proper opinions because it is a false model...

And after trying this sort of experiment organisation for a number of years -that is, pressurising white leadership opinion within the framework of NUSAS -I think blacks came to the conclusion anyway that this was a futile exercise and hence they started thinking about their real role in this kind of society. Hence the discussions about the need for a black group polarity, student group...

LANNING: Do you feel any need to explain at all to white students what you are about?

BIKO: When we started we thought it was fair. We saw NUSAS and their student groups which were politically involved not as direct adversaries, but as obstacles in a programme which we built up for ourselves. They were insisting on being involved with us, and we were insisting on being left alone. So that we felt that since they were not real adversaries, we had to consult with them and to get across to them our whole outlook.

So after the first consultation which was in Turfloop in 1969 we sent a cable [message] to black students who were at the NUSAS conference to put forward a motion in NUSAS getting that organisation to recognise SASO and to arrange for proper dialogue. This was rejected... And then we went on. We had our conference the following year at which we completely withdrew our recognition of NUSAS as our national union. And this step we decided was probably unprecedented in this country...

So we sent along delegates to the NUSAS conference to put across our thoughts on this particular issue. We did this and we were subjected to an extremely searching interrogation by some diehard liberals who felt that we were breaking an age-old tradition of a fairly shining contact with liberals and telling NUSAS where to jump off. So we explained ourselves, and tried to get our point across. We were not properly received. We withdrew from the discussion and allowed them to take it over and discuss among themselves.

There were at this conference about seven international students who all agreed with us that the liberal opinion in this country had become extremely dogmatic, to the point where it could not really accommodate any criticism from the blacks who in fact were the cause, or the main thrust, in the whole field of resistance...

LANNING: Do you see SASO as primarily a student organisation?

BIKO: In terms of this structure, yes. But ultimately it has got ramifications that encompass the entire black oppressed group. I think essentially students -black students -see themselves as black first and students afterwards. And I think this has been said quite often at SASO conferences and in SASO publications. By which we mean that the little that we experience by way of restriction at university and at

colleges is really a tiny bit of the overall manifestation of oppression elsewhere in our lives. We don't believe really that one can compartmentalise freedom into academic freedom, this type of freedom, and so on. We believe that you can only have freedom in an academic sphere when you live in a society that is itself liberated. And hence our involvement, though manifesting itself as a student involvement, in fact ramifies throughout the whole community.

LANNING: How do you involve yourself with the whole community as an organisation? I don't mean that you are not part of the community...

BIKO: Basically I think we recognise that to some extent the resistance in the black world has been crushed. The normal structures that were set up by the black people have been outlawed in this country, and hence there has been a drop in the vocal opposition as well as all other forms. We have picked up vocal opposition to the government, in fact not only government, but to the entire system. First of all we do not really see government itself as the real enemy. (That) the entire system has support by a major segment of white society is in fact the problem.

LANNING: Including the white liberals?

BIKO: We believe that the white liberals do not really understand what they are talking about. We believe that they are not really fighting for the kind of emancipation that we are envisaging. They might be genuinely motivated in thinking they are fighting for freedom, but we do not believe that their freedom is our freedom, and that the type of freedom they are fighting for is not necessarily the same as what we are fighting for.

So we are at least trying to build up a spirit of black consciousness among the community. We recognise that we are a very small percentage, only about a tenth of them (black students) in all universities and colleges out of a total population of about 17 million people. And we can only do this by relating to other black organisations which I would prefer not to name. In doing so we are trying to get whatever black organisation that exists in this country to see itself first and foremost [as initiating] the kind of awareness that makes black people reject feeling inferior. And part of our approach – in fact the essence of our approach – is that in the totality of our involvement we are trying not to create polarisations within the black world.

We believe that all of us must be involved individually and collectively, and this is a very difficult thing to get across. Hence we have been involved in meetings; we take platforms when we can take them in the relevant places; and in getting out relevant publications. This is the degree of our involvement. We are trying to make students feel a part of the community, and as far as the community, to see the students as a part of them. This we are doing through our fieldwork projects, which can only really

be to a very minor scale. But the importance of it is more than just teaching the students what it is to be involved. We recognise that each student is going to be a source of energy wherever he goes after university. And if this kind of thing can be done on a large enough scale, and over a long enough period, we can probably be in a position later on to see this kind of awareness that we were talking about being actually brought about.

LANNING: Because this is a major problem of any student organisation – it's elitist, almost by definition. And how you break this down, get into society, is a major problem for students.

BIKO: Our relation, I must say, with many groups has been up to now only a terribly superficial level, because most of the organisations we relate with are themselves elitist organisations (if you see what I mean).

And there was no proper communication between leadership and mass except by way of action. In other words, if you wanted to see Labour Party people, whatever we discuss with them does not get down to their following...So that unless there is a reorientation in all black groups it is going to be impossible for us to reach any particular segment of society through any of the existing groups.

We ourselves can relate to our mass because firstly, our mass is readily available. It's a student mass. They are people who read papers, people who want to participate directly in whatever programme we have on the campus. But on the other hand they are directing a larger group which they cannot necessarily reach directly. So this is the problem at the present moment. So what we are essentially doing goes even beyond the confines of the student organisation that is SASO. It involves us as members of the community – an infiltration approach in our organisation outside the university sphere.

LANNING: Do you think it is even possible to conceive of a strategy of liberation for the mass of oppressed people in this situation? A meaningful one?

BIKO: I think it is quite conceivable. But I think it is the kind of thing in this country which cannot be discussed and made public even among the oppressed people themselves. So that what we are developing is a simple, above-board type of strategy, which is using the individual [as] source of energy, you know. The fact that one can on his own see himself as a man means you will not allow someone else to treat you as something less than a man. Hence your own preparedness as an individual to participate in an emancipation action is ensured. And what that emancipation action will be is a little bit beyond the scope of an organisation like SASO. In other words, we get involved in step 1. Who will be responsible for steps 2 and 3, I don't know.

LANNING: The situation is such that as a result of action over the last few years, blacks won't have to go back and start all over again. Is that what you are saying?

BIKO: Yes. I think that the major obstacle in the path of meaningful involvement of blacks in black action is essentially *fear*. You see, unless we rid ourselves of this fear we will never move one inch. And this fear is in fact historically determined. In a sense it is a feather in the Nationalists' cap that they struck at the right moment when the blacks were emotionally strong and believing... The Nats cracked down and they cracked down so hard, and they uncovered so much of the plans and arrested so many of the leadership that they left the black world completely destitute. Now this brings me back to the original point, that as long as you have a few people being your energy source and not individuals, you have [not] started revolutionising people.

LANNING: You have said that it is possible to realise the dream of black cohesion within the foreseeable future. But is it a dream or is it something you can realise?

BIKO: I think that to the extent that SASO moves into the community, not necessarily involving the community directly, but to [the] extent this community work can become a meaningful exercise... I think this is possible.

LANNING: What do you see the major enemy of this task of cohesion in the black community as? What is the main obstacle to achieving this cohesion?

BIKO: I believe essentially, as I said, it is partly the degree to which black people have been successfully brainwashed by accepting white values. Partly the degree to which the black world has been divided through economic stratification. And thirdly, fear. The first one applies a hell of a lot to urban communities, I think. There is quite a large element of people who have themselves been born in a capitalist structure. They have become so used to this system as to see no other -hence the danger again of liberal doctrines.

There are people to this day – many, many people in the black world who will reject black cohesion because they believe essentially that it is a racist move. They don't see it, even when you put it to them in economic terms – they do not see the need for workers or for poor people to rally together to fight against the exploiter. They believe essentially in the free competition doctrines of the Western world. Now the liberal establishment has also capitalised a hell of a lot on this, and to furnish organisational ties with the black people -and especially [of a sort in which] blacks [need] ... white help...

A number of black people have come to accept that there are good whites who should not be disturbed. If white number so-and-so says to him to make his bed – they talk in racist terms. They don't want to accept it as the truth. Now the point in question here

is not so much what white number so-and-so is saying, but the fact that black number so-and-so accepts it because it is said by a white man -over and above what is being said by other black people. Now I don't myself doubt that there are good whites, but I think that essentially those good whites miss the problem initially, having the analysis all wrong.

LANNING: There seems a reluctance to make an analysis on class lines that everyone is perhaps mystified by the race divisions. Is this true?

BIKO: I suppose if you have stayed long enough in this country you will have seen that no longer is the race issue used to prop up class distinctions, but in fact it has become a terrible complication on its own. There was a time when one could easily say that the problem is that of poor and rich in this country, or worker and exploiter. I think our problems have gone beyond the stage now where the most difficult person to reach in this type of society is the white worker. You know essentially in this country there is no such thing as a white worker. By pure definition white workers have been elevated into a class of their own; and out of the system of racial classification they derive benefits that they should not really have, such that in fact they are exploiters.

A large mass of black people are employed as domestic servants by white worker class. And the white worker himself exhibits the same type of sickness by paying these black workers so little, the type of salary or wages that he himself would never even dream of accepting. And over and above this the black worker can never challenge white workers to any degree whatsoever insofar as the jobs are concerned. These are assured as white jobs: so the white worker is mindful of the gains he gets out of the system because he is white. He knows that he gets this R130 simply because black workers get some R30 or so -and that if it was a free market for the job he would probably get something like R80. Hence he has got something to protect – so that he is a small-time capitalist himself.

And you know during the days of the Communist Party a brief experiment was tried. The Communist Party was restricted to whites, not by law or by any resolution of theirs, but they merely canvassed among whites initially. Then they decided to open up in the 1930s when the 10 per cent started growing up. It was felt by local communists that there was a hell of a lot of potential within the black camp, and they got a number of good trade unionists among the blacks who could do a hell of a good job in getting members and so on. Strikes were organised, especially in the Rand area, on a bilateral basis, involving both black and white workers, and in most occasions where demonstrations failed there was some sort of internal strife between black and white workers. I can recall at least reading about one particular incident of a march from the City Hall in Joburg going to see some representative or other of the government who somehow caused an internal strike among the workers and the whites were beating up the blacks... And there was some sort of wall between the two

ranks... and thereafter in fact the racist inclination became more blatant, with white workers crying for unity among workers of the world but to keep South Africa white. I mean this is what a slogan said in the Communist Party meetings. And the communists realised in no time that the most difficult thing was to keep black and white workers together. It was easy to keep intellectuals together, or students together, but not workers. So that in a sense the whole stratification analysis on a class basis fell foul at this stage and people began to see that the real problem in fact was racial prejudice. And to this day this is true.

LANNING: Some of the liberal objections would like to show – like in rallying to a concept of black awareness. Black people, aren't you rejecting integration or genuinely multiracial situations as a means and as an end? Or is it just as a means?

BIKO: My attitude here is simply that there is no such thing as an integrated society as one's goal. Neither is there any such thing as a multiracial society. Because we have a multiracial society now, and we have an interracial society at this moment. I think what we want is a nonracial society. That is non-racial within the context of the country and peoples where we are.

First of all, I think if you go to any particular country anywhere in the world -in Germany you become a citizen within the German makeup. In Australia you become Australian within the Australian make-up. But strangely enough in this country, you know, you find that there is an extension of Europe into Africa, where indigenous people are expected to live according to values and attitudes as determined back home in Europe. Now if one is fighting for integration, then one would have to accept according to the present literature. It would be integration into the European system which we have at the moment.

By rejecting white values and opting for a revival of a black, a real black approach, what you are really doing is to offset a wrong which has been in operation for a long time. It does not mean simply because whites have been living in this country that you cannot give this country back to itself.

We believe that we have to reject their economic system, their political system, and values that govern human relationship, in order to establish the kind of society that we as indigenous people want here. And that kind of society is not exclusively for us. It is for everybody who is here -but it has trappings which are obviously indigenous.

To get to that stage we have to be properly orientated to being ourselves, into a proper force to know what the alternative is about, to live it within ourselves. As I said, we are not really fighting against the government; we are fighting against an entire system. And in order to do so we need this kind of rallying around each other. We are a defeated people. We are moving against some kind of system which

permeates our whole society. Even if we're alone as blacks, a white man is already there. You know? Because my whole attitude, my language, my everything when I talk to other black people, is white. Now I don't necessarily think that black is better than white, but I am just saying that black is relevant here, in this country. You see? And because this is a country in Africa, and because I believe it was never meant to be an extension of Europe into Africa, I am fighting for a reinstatement of what I feel it should be down here. And we cannot do this therefore within the kind of system which makes us lose our identity.

Now all non-racial movements in the past concentrated on people losing their identity. And in that sort of complex the blacks never had an identity here anyway because they were oppressed. And the whites have an identity which permeated and even governed the minds of the people oppressed... The whole modus operandi politically was determined by whites. The entire system, goals, were built up on a white model. And the black man knew nothing else but this white model of the black society for which it was fighting. And this is all bunkum.

We want to build up our type of model society, on our values, and this does not necessarily mean that you have connotations of race prejudice. Obviously it won't. But because it springs from us, it will relate with our own values. And therefore it will be up to the white man to adjust himself to an African country and an African economy. This is basically what we're saying.

LANNING: Those who push the non-racial line, white liberals as well as some African leaders, feel that this is some concession to your outlook -and that you are seeking to exploit the structure of apartheid as it has been set up. Do you think this is mistaken?

BIKO: I think this is quite false logic. There are obviously very superficial similarities in that an organisation like SASO springs up at a time and place where separation is being preached from the government platform. But if one really examines even that kind of separation that they are preaching, it is obviously a very different complexion to the kind of thing we are talking about.

We reject the fact that any minority government should dictate to a majority about where it should stay, how they should govern themselves, and so on. We reject the defined freedom that you are being asked to fight for in the bantustans... We reject even the very basis of a group deciding for us all these things. We are not for a separation of races; we are for a true South Africa being achieved here and now. As I said, bearing all the manifestations of the fact that this is a country in Africa, in which everyone will live, participate, with this in mind. That is all. We don't say whites can't live here. We are not fighting for a black South Africa. We are fighting for a South Africa which has got a real traditional or indigenous basis...

LANNING: How do you react to those who seek to exploit the structure set up under separate development?

BIKO: ...Everybody tends to assume that new liberals are exploiting the system. They could very well be just a manifestation of the system. Personally, I reject this concept. I do not think they are exploiting the system at all. A few of them may be aiming at exploiting the system, but I think the system was intelligent enough -to design the entire approach such that people must join with the idea of exploiting it and find themselves caught up with it. This is my opposition to the Labour Party, [Mangosuthu] Buthelezi and [Kaizer] Matanzima and so on. This concept of working within the system, especially in a powerful set-up, like the South African set-up, is obviously very misleading. You involve yourself in a vicious sort of circle from which you can never emerge.

LANNING: Yes, if thinking English students have come to the same conclusion in England, or English radicals – that there is just no chance of working within the system...and if this is true in England, I am sure it must be true here.

BIKO: The system gets you to fight a type of war that it designed for you to fight. If you join the Labour Party, then you will talk about coloured rights. You join the Zulu Territorial Authority, then you will talk about Zululand. Matanzima will then talk in the Transkeian Parliament about the Transkeian land, and the whites killing the Transkei and so on. And the system can so easily undermine your struggle by simply giving you all the concessions you want at some stage after making it very difficult for you to get them...

In the meantime your vociferous Left is going to be coerced one way or the other to support the militant demands by Buthelezi or Matanzima, so that the Left finds itself featuring in this sort of struggle for sectional gains. And as such no one can call for a totality of emancipation of blacks. And anyone can quickly say all the blacks are looking for in South Africa is to own 10 per cent of the land. Or for the coloured people to be listened to when they make their representations. Or for the Indian people to be listened to when they make their representations. And apparently at that stage the government line, or the line the government is selling, will hold water. They have already, I think, reached that stage now and hence I personally would opt for the complete rejection of any opposition which envisages the system as part of the means.

LANNING: How do you see the role of foreign, overseas action?

BIKO: In this country? Take away their money, their firms, their technical know-how. Leave South Africa alone.

LANNING: What would you say to radical students in England and America as their role in this situation? Is it only secondary?

BIKO: Yes. I think the tradition has been established in the States at the moment, has been to inspect the role more of America in the South African economy, to keep on pressurising firms to withdraw. I think the importance of this anyway is to highlight the fact that South Africa is strong merely because it gets propped up by foreign governments, foreign firms, and as long as the economy here is strong, the government is going to be strong, the army is going to be strong.

Now the British approach has been different slightly in that it has taken a number of side issues like cricket tours and so on. And so its role is socialising the whites here in this country to the idea of integrated sports, and in fact a social way of living. Now this is less important but more successful in generating opinion down here, whereas the United States approach is more important but far less successful here and obviously even better at home in the States.

I think it is a reflection of the English liberal tradition which lays more emphasis on political rights that it does on economic rights. The whole philosophical tradition is if you have got the vote then you must be free to put it at its most naive. I think this is probably why.

Needless to say, I think it is important to continue isolating South Africa in all forms of international involvement, and this merely serves to make them listen more carefully to black opinion down here.

Now I don't think one would ever achieve any measure of success by persuading whites down here to change their ways. But I think the more jittery the society down here becomes, then the more apt the situation becomes for a real change, which is going to take a hell of a long time. You might find that we get political rights at some stage long before there is any real change in the overall system. I don't know how it is going to come about, and I don't know when either. But I think all the same it is important to make the whites also feel involved in the idea of trying to change the system down here. I feel the more they do so, the more receptive they will be to whatever is done by blacks.