

# The Power of the Pen

## Blackness Under Attack from Within<sup>1</sup>

Mathatha Tsedu

My supreme gratitude goes to Pastor Xola Skosana and the leadership of Way of Life, for honouring me with an invitation to be a part of this mammoth week-long festival of celebrating blackness. That you chose to ask me to speak and speak today with its significance in the Christian calendar, is beyond me.

My mother Vho Muofhe, who died when I was five, would weep, I am sure, if she saw that her little last born orphan survived the rigours of motherlessness so well that he was being honoured in this way. But then maybe she sees me right now and is not weeping but smiling.

The work that is done here every year and every day is important. The living gospel that is not just blaster and bombast, but work on the ground in various ways is crucial for life, for blackness. The education programme for secondary kids, the introduction of this brand of black theology into an institution of higher learning like you have done, the food parcels for immune challenged people, are all material work that make a huge real difference in the lives of people.

But even more important, is the theoretical work and defence of blackness that this church has been championing. When descendants of settlers have the guts to call us refugees in our own country, blackness is under attack.

It needs defenders, who are fearless and who will tell the madam she is way off line. The banner outside makes it clear. Long ago we used to have a song, *Basi thathaphi isibindi esingaka, so ku thata i Azania ba enze yabo?* (Where to do they get the courage to take and run Azania?)

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<sup>1</sup> Paper delivered by Mathatha Tsedu on April 6, 2012 at the Way of Life Church in Khayelitsha, Cape Town under the theme *Black is Bright, Black is Right, Black is Beautiful*.

When this church organises week long functions that are dedicated to celebrating blackness, in a world where blackness is equated by some with impropriety, you are doing good work.

I work as a journalist and so I know how important this kind of work is. Words build, they live long, they become history to be revisited by latter generations. The pen uses its power to defend blackness from attack from outside.

But I thought I would tweak the topic a bit to focus on the onslaught we face as black people, not from the madam or Afri-forum, but from ourselves. In other words, what is it about us and our behaviour that gives other people the impression we are refugees in our own land and even have the guts to say so publicly?

Colonialism is always based on a number of precepts. Land dispossession, turning the indigenous into cheap labour for the imperial government, psychological subjugation based on the alleged superiority of the coloniser and his culture, and the concomitant denigration of everything local. These operational conditions are the hallmark of colonialism everywhere.

South Africa was no different. Our culture was said to be barbaric, our religion superstition, our clothing unacceptable, our jewellery worn by our mothers were abhorred as symbolising heathenism while necklaces bearing the cross were the thing to wear.

We were shorn of all history, of any past worthy of knowing, glorifying and celebrating. That our forefathers not only built the Pyramids of Giza, in Egypt, but taught the famed Greek mathematician Pythagoras the basics of maths that he used to popularise the Pythagoras theorem, was a fact of history never told.

That we were the same people that built the Great Zimbabwe with its symmetry that could only be done by mathematicians of note, was something we were never taught. That the papyrus as the platform of writing was developed on this our continent of Africa, was hidden.

That the Timbouctou manuscripts were written many years before the settlers set foot into Mali, in local dialect, is one of history's biggest secrets.

What we were instead taught was the lie that white settlers found us dangling from one tree branch to another eating bananas when we were tired of killing each other. We were told that history started when the three ships docked not too far away from here.

What we are taught is that had God not sent these settler angels, we would have wiped each other out by now. They were going for our heads, they knew that if you conquer psychologically, they police themselves and keep themselves in the place you have allotted them. In the circumstances, it was not surprising that a few generations after colonisation many blacks had internalised these self degrading concepts.

When Steve Biko arrived on the scene in the mid 1960s what confronted him and his generation? It was a cowed black community, leaderless and rudderless. Whiteness was supreme. If you lived here, spoke isiXhosa and you looked a bit light complexioned, you tried your luck at playing so-called coloured.

If you were so-called coloured and light enough to pass for white, you played white. If you could not do this, you tried other means to show you reject being black. And so, many women and some men tried hard to look white, by burning their skins with Ambi and He Man. Biko found people burning their heads as they tried to change their hair to something as close to white hair as is possible to try.

Biko found blackness under attack. He found blackness in a mess. What then is this Blackness? It is essentially being black. Black as in a state of mind and a way of life. It is about how you relate to who you are. It is the assertion of black being positive, being good, embodying only good, working always for good, for justice in its broadest sense. It is the assertion of caring because good people care, of sharing because good people share, of loving because good people love. It is black as being Bright, being Right and being Beautiful!

Blackness then, being our being, is what was supposed to have been affirmed by the events of 1994. Cadres of our different liberation movements, the ANC, PAC, Black Consciousness Movement such as Azapo, had embodied the characteristics of blackness.

They fought for what was right, they were jailed for standing up. Some, like Biko, Mlungisi Tshazibane, Mapetla Mohapi, Onkgopotse Tiro, Mthuli ka Shezi, Tshifhiwa Muofhe, Peter Nchabeleng, were killed for asserting blackness. I mean Mthuli ka Shezi was pushed in front of a moving train at Germiston station because he was telling the white guard who used to abuse black women each day, that his mothers cannot be abused in his presence.

Others went into exile to prosecute the struggle on a higher plane of armed struggle. When caught they defiantly went to the gallows with their hooded heads upright, like Solomon Mahlangu because they knew their deaths were a mere setback, they knew that victory was certain.

Others, like uTata, languished in prisons for decades, refusing to bow by accepting sham freedom in the Transkei.

I am saying these are the cadres whose combined efforts ushered in 1994, when these committed fighters for freedom and justice went into government on May 10 1994. These messiahs who gave their all would lead us and lead us to prosperity. The dream of a bright Mzansi that had kept us going was to be real.

What then happened? Nice sounding policies that are erratically implemented. But in the main what is the face of our government today? Whilst there are good people doing good work, in the main black people in government have turned it into



a looting zone. The most incapable people who can however ensure that tenders flow in the right direction are placed in positions of responsibility.

When today, you read a story in a newspaper or listen to the news and hear that a CEO of some institution has been suspended for either failing to do their work or for giving jobs to their relatives, does it ever cross your mind that the said CEO could be white? Or do you just know that it must some so-called comrade?

Public hospitals all over the country run short of critical medicines all the time. They have become places where poor black people go to die. The attitude of black nurses and other health professionals is sometimes just downright sickening. Remember the strike a year or two ago when nurses disrupted surgery that was underway and turned a black pregnant mother about to give birth away? There were no white nurses there. It was us.

Our schools in our areas in Guguletu and Khayelitsha or Mitchells Plain are for the poorest of the poor. The well to do and even those not so well to do send their children to former white schools. Teachers in our areas do not have their children in the schools where they teach. They send them to schools where teachers are white.

Who are the people who get tenders to build houses and then either do a shoddy job at best, or at worst just disappear with the money and never complete their work? Is it white reactionaries who are out to sabotage the revolution?

Limpopo provincial government is broke. Why? The government has been milked dry in officially sanctioned day light looting. Who did that? Was it some remnants of settler colonialism intent on thwarting the national democratic revolution?

The answer to all these questions is NO. And in the case of Limpopo, it was bankrupted by the people who say their blood is black, gold and green.

When the Jews take a seven day old boy and circumcise him, no one shouts about it being barbaric to subject a baby like that to such a cut. When we do it in the mountains of the eastern cape and Limpopo, to young men, all hell breaks loose.

We who give names to our cattle as we tender to them, should we decide we want to kill one of them, the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) will be issuing press releases about cruelty to animals.

The onslaught on our heritage is unceasing.

I am asserting here that our very being as black people is under attack. Not by enemies from outer space but from within. The people who are in government and who will not give you service they are paid to give unless you pay a bribe, are attacking blackness.

The tenderpreneur who takes money but does not build the houses or road or toilets, are attacking blackness. The teacher who is a member of a trade union who chooses to go to a meeting during school time, or go on strike just before exams is attacking blackness.

The judge who drinks and drives, gets caught and then does a Julius on the law to perpetuate his term in office, is attacking blackness. When Jackie Selebi allows himself to exchange integrity for a pair of Italian shoes and money, he is attacking blackness.

When Bheki Cele, the police general, signs millions of tax payers money away without reading the documents, the effect is not of bumbling Cele, it is bumbling blacks. When Gerald Majola uses Ali Bacher, the defender of apartheid cricket, as a role model for taking secret bonuses, he is attacking blackness.

When the community of Grabouw demands a school but choose to make their point by burning another school, that madness is an attack on blackness. When we protest lack of service delivery and burn community libraries, it is madness beyond belief.

When every other month we see a story from Khayelitsha or Delft, about a missing toddler who is later found raped or sodomised and killed, that is an assault on blackness.

And I am saying the attack is from within us, it is us against us. In this siege on blackness, who can and will save blackness? Who will defend right, who will stand up? Who will be our Isaiah as recorded in Chapter 6 verse 8 where the prophet says: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'" "

The salvation of blackness does not lie in other people's hands. It is in our hands, me and you. We are the ones making us not just look bad, but be bad. When virtually every woman you meet today is wearing hair from India or Brazil and trying hard not to look like themselves, are we not in trouble?

I mean what is wrong with your hair? How is that Brazillian hair different from the skin lightening creams that Steve Biko fought so successfully against? The Brazillian and Indian hair are today's Ambi. The mentality that feeds it has the same genetic makeup. Inferiority, rejection of self, wishing, oh so wishing to be something else, something different, yes something white!

Are we not ok as we are that we have to try and look like other people? Are we unhappy with the in the image of God that we have been created that we are now spending money we do not have buying expensive hair extensions and wigs we do not need? How is black bright, right and beautiful when we negate it through our actions?

Who shall be our Isaiah and say "Here I am Lord, Send me to save blackness from itself. Send me Lord to finish the work Biko and Mohapi could not complete".

Can you stand up today and say "Send me Oh Lord"? What will send me mean today? It means you only do what should be right and you know to be right, all the time.

Send me Oh Lord, is when you, at all times, do not do what should be so obviously wrong and you know to be wrong.

Send me Oh Lord means you speak out at all times when someone does what should be wrong or what you know to be wrong.

Send me Oh Lord is when you, at all times, do not keep quite in the face of deeds or actions that ought to be wrong or that you know to be wrong.

Send me oh Lord means standing up. And speaking up and protesting and joining others. It means if you are a member of a political organisation, you become active in the branch and make sure those elected to positions of leadership enhance blackness and do not hurt it

It means rejecting the false consciousness where you know what is right but consciously do the wrong thing, all the time pretending you are doing right. It means being real, and it starts with you. Do you crave to be someone else or are you comfortable in your skin and hair, as that special being created by God in His image?

When you are done with yourself, as they say on South African Airways (SAA), then you help the children or your neighbour. But fix your oxygen mask first.

But when you do that, it can get quite lonely. You have to be prepared to be "unpopular". Those intent on subverting blackness have means. They use their ill gotten wealth to buy influence. You may find resistance from within your own family, with your brothers or sisters saying "leave these things, this is how things are done these days, why worry if he is giving us money?"

When you succumb, we are dead. When you stand up and defy the wrong norm, the wrong fashion, like Jesus, you push the frontiers of righteousness, you change the world, you make the world a better place, inch by inch, centimetre by centimetre person by person, day by day.

Then we can join Bra Hugh Masekela in his song which says, Thuma Mina.