

Black Liberations Movement Mosaic
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Oral History Interview
with
Mr. Mzwandile Piliso
By Atandi Anyona
King William's Town, South Africa
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Interview with Mr. Mzwandile Piliso

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Black Liberation Movements

Atandi Anyona: My name is Atandi Anyona, from Dickinson College, and we are doing a research on the Black Consciousness Movement and the anti-apartheid struggle. Okay, would you please tell me a little about yourself, like who you are and what you do.

Mzwandile Piliso: Oh yes. Thank you very much, sir. My name is Mzwandile Sele Piliso, an Educational Specialist in the Department of Education in the Eastern Province.

Atandi Anyona: Okay. Having lived here in the post-independence period, can you give me a little background of how it was during the apartheid times?

Mzwandile Piliso: Very slight difference has occurred since, but to some few there is a great change which has happened. Most of the people are still living in poverty. Very little change has been there due to many factors: the backlogs of the past, the severity, the damage that has been caused by the apartheid regime, which has lasted for almost three hundred years. I can also exclaim that within these 14 years of this new dispensation, we couldn't have expected that much

to have happened, but at least we thought that by this time we would have tasted some of the promises that were forwarded to us before the elections. Very little has since happened.

Atandi Anyona: And since you live here in King William's Town, which is regarded as one of the principle places that Steve Biko worked, what does Black Consciousness mean to you?

Mzwandile Piliso: To me, generally, Black Consciousness means the revival of the black man's dignity. It brought about some very close relations, especially among black people, so that they would face the apartheid regime with one voice. For quite some time, black people have been seen as nothing else, but ever since the organization was formed, it played quite a very much significant role in trying to foster some respect and dignity by other nations to the black man.

But I can also state that Black Consciousness doesn't only mean to me, in order for one to belong in the principles thereof has to be black. What is important is what is going on in one's mind. All those who think alike, all those who do influence the Principles of Black Consciousness, to me, they are the same as black people. So it is not the color that counts most. Yes.

Atandi Anyona: And how would you say, lets say Steve Biko and BC [Black Consciousness], how did that help to...in the liberation struggle?

Mzwandile Piliso: It played quite a very much significant role in the liberation struggle. As black people were treated like slaves, but they were very much afraid of raising their concerns because they could be easily victimized if they voiced them individually. But BCM [Black Consciousness

Movement], it brought about that unity among black people. As a result thereof, they could easily stand before all the persecutions that they were confronted with during those years.

Atandi Anyona: Now, it has almost been thirty years since Biko passed away, and we have the issue around the memorials, you know; whose memorial should be elected and whose should be put down. Which memorial should be put up or should some of them be destroyed; what do you think should happen to remember people like Steve Biko?

Mzwandile Piliso: Yes, to me, memorials play quite a very significant role in our lives, as they will keep reminding us about our past; where do we come from; how far have we gone up to now. So it's quite important for us not to look down upon them. Also the changing, I mean, the naming of the streets, some buildings, airports, has already happened in some places. They also do contribute to our history. But I also think it should not be selective, it should involve whomever must have played a role in the liberation of the black man. Not necessarily the black man in this sense, everybody for that matter. Because in a democratic dispensation, everybody should be equal; they should be treated accordingly. And again, with regard to the removal of the previous, governments, how can I put it - memorials, I don't believe they should all be erased because they are a reality; something that has happened; something that can't be wished away. And in order for us to be able to compare the past with the present, we should go through all those things. And at the same time, I also believe that not that much should be spent on such things, on the renaming of streets, as, like what is happening these days, because they are quite expensive. Money that could have been utilized in some processes of alleviating poverty could have been better utilized. And what is also happening now, whenever there is a new government

in place, that's what we almost see, the changing of those names: street names, buildings etcetera. I think they should be preserved, all of them equally.

Atandi Anyona: Okay, and thinking of, in addition, now that we have Black Consciousness Movement, do you think that kind of philosophy is still present in modern day, or did it die with Biko?

Mzwandile Piliso: No. It never died with Biko. Although it is a little bit diluted now because most [Incomprehensible] of black people are becoming so westernized. Culture has changed so significantly. Although there are some things thereof here and there. But that should never be forgotten; otherwise we won't be able to identify ourselves. It's quite a very much good tool by which you can identify yourself.

Atandi Anyona: And being in the teaching profession, is the history of Black Consciousness and the anti- apartheid struggle, do they teach it in school or has it just become something of the past?

Mzwandile Piliso: Not that much has changed with regard to the syllabus in schools, especially in history. It is only the strategies that have changed but not the content. So to me, I don't believe that we are giving the upcoming generation enough feedback so as to be able to identify themselves with the Black Consciousness Movement.

Atandi Anyona: So, let's say, the youth of today, the present youth, do you think that they have any connection to Black Consciousness, or they have forgotten since most of them were not there during things like the Bhishe massacre and things like that? Do you think they can relate to the anti-apartheid struggle or theirs is a very different generation than, let's say, yours?

Mzwandile Piliso: Generally speaking, most of today's youth have detached themselves from politics. Those who are still interested seem as if they are only concerned with themselves. They see politics as a vehicle by which they can easily enrich themselves. On the ground, generally youth are not interested in politics, as I can assume; very few are interested. That can be seen in the way they behave, the way they socialize: liquor, drugs, sex, that's what counts to most of them. Education is also something that they are not that serious about. So I think there is a lot that need to be done if we want to keep the fires burning with regard to the politics in our country.

Atandi Anyona: And since the Black Consciousness Movement now is not as popular as it used to be, has any other organization or movement taken up the same kind of philosophy as BC?

Mzwandile Piliso: There are some organizations, although they are not that powerful.

Organizations like AZAPO, organizations like PAC, but it has since changed its name, now I just forgot that name. Their principles stood here and there; they are almost the same as those of the BCM.

Atandi Anyona: In comparison to the BCM, why would you say an organization such as AZAPO is not as successful or popular as the BCM?

Mzwandile Piliso: They are not as vigorous as BCM was due to many factors, because they wanted not to be seen as BCM. They wanted to be seen as a unique organization that is - doesn't have anything to do with it, although the principles are almost the same.

Atandi Anyona: Okay, also in addition to that, I know one of the things that BCM used to advocate was the community development groups instead of always relying on the government. Do you think that is still applicable now, instead of relying on the government, to continue the community development groups?

Mzwandile Piliso: With regard to community development, it's pockets here and there that is in progress. It's mostly in the rural areas where they are mostly needed, even in urban areas, they are not as vigorous as they should. As a result, many people, they rely on the government for whatever they may contribute into their livelihoods. Also, the government, I can partly blame it for that because of the social grants that are always being dished out to people; different kinds of it. And most of these grants, they make these people to be so dependent; that syndrome of dependence, it will never, it won't likely get away to them. So I think people are not being empowered enough to know the value and contribution that could be played by community development. Because if communities own and participate in their development, they will trust it, they will protect it, they will nourish it and they will sustain it at all costs, because it's something of their own making.

Atandi Anyona: Now, let's say for instance, if Biko was to come back, do you think he would be happy about the present government or how the things are in the free South Africa, or would he be disappointed?

Mzwandile Piliso: Eh, I'm afraid I have some reservations about him being happy if he could see what is prevailing now in our country. We started quite promisingly, especially during the era of Nelson Mandela. President Thabo [Mbeki] has also got a promising start at the beginning of it, but with no time, everything seems to be now in chaos, and people are becoming gradually impatient because it seems as if it's still a very long road to run before we get to that Promised Land. So I'm afraid I don't believe he would be happy if he could see what is happening, as I have already stated that we are becoming en-culturized now more than anything else. Our cultures are being trampled mostly by us. There are no values any longer, no respect and people are only concerned with themselves; they care less about others. So I don't believe he would be happy if he could see what is prevailing now. The infightings in our parties; politicking is being seen as the only tool for quickly self enrichment. It is no longer about people's problems, but about those who want to be elected. And when they get there, they forget very quickly where they come from. So I think it is still a very long way to go.

Atandi Anyona: And also being in the academic profession, what do you think the role of education is, or should be, to help the economy of the country to move forward?

Mzwandile Piliso: I think education so far, it doesn't duly serve the peoples' for which it was made. We don't take advantage of it, especially in this new dispensation. What is being considered important is the political rightfulness of that particular somebody. Whether skills are there or not, but what is of importance nowadays is how you are politicking more than anything else. Whereas education is quite an indispensable tool by which we can free ourselves in all aspects. Being free doesn't necessarily mean for one to have all the rights that he needs. Rights are there, responsibilities are the last things to be considered. And then at the same time, economically, most of the population doesn't even feel that freedom because everything has got its price. It's not only words that can make a great change. So to me, I do say that, I mean, I do concur with those who say that our freedom is just the beginning of it. Otherwise, our hopes are fading.

Atandi Anyona: And now, I just want to ask you if there are any last comments you would like to make about BCM or about South Africa in general. Any last comments?

Mzwandile Piliso: My comment about BCM is the wishes that I have for us to be able to live in the past, because it was quite a vibrant country due to such philosophies of Black Consciousness. And in order for you to master it you have to read extensively and you also have to have full respect, first self respect, then you can also be able to respect other people. Our values that we used to have need to be revived. Pertaining to what is prevailing in our country presently, although there is nothing that I can do, but I can't say there is nothing that I can do one day to play a role in the changing of the circumstances prevailing in our country. Otherwise, I am sure to many of us, this is not what we envisaged. We thought by this time everybody would be

feeling that we are really a new country, especially the elderly like us. We have survived all these governments - apartheid government, homeland government - this is our last hope and it seems with regards to change, a lot still needs to be done. Thank you.

Atandi Anyona: Thank you very much. Yes.

[End of Tape]