

Lessons from Black Wednesday Speech

For: The Cape Town Press Club and the Aggrey Klaaste Trust (AKT)

By: Jerome Klaaste

Good morning everyone.

Thank you very much for this wonderful opportunity.

I am deeply humbled and overjoyed to speak to you today about the lessons we've learned from the watershed moments that took place on October 19, 1977, a day infamously known Black Wednesday and celebrated today as Media Freedom Day.

Last year the Aggrey Klaaste Trust (AKT) commemorated Black Wednesday with a special virtual colloquium in partnership with *Sowetan*, Wits, SANEF and DM5 Incorporated under the theme: "Surviving 2020 and Media Credibility Going Forward..."

In addition to celebrating the courageous spirit of all those journalists, editors and activists who stood against apartheid and nurtured a people's desire for freedom, the aim of the colloquium was to address pressing issues currently facing the media and the country at large.

We were extremely fortunate to gather an amazing panel of renowned speakers to reflect on that dark day in our history.

Our speakers included:

- Our chairman of the board of trustees at the AKT, veteran journalist and pro-liberation activist, Dr Joe Thloloe;
- The head of Wits journalism and radio, Prof. Franz Kruger;
- Former journalist, National Development Plan Commissioner and AKT trustee, Dr Thami Mazwai;
- The trailblazing *Sowetan* Editor, Mrs. Nwabisa Makunga;
- The forward-thinking Daily Maverick CEO and publisher, Mr Styli Charalambous and

- The impressive South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF) Chairman and Newzroom Afrika Political Editor, Mr Sbu Ngalwa.
- The colloquium was facilitated by the remarkable Eye-Witness-News Editor, Mrs. Mahlatse Mahlase and broadcast live on the SABC SA Today News channel.

The event was a great success, however our chairman Ntate Joe Thloloe observed something very important about the previous Black Wednesday celebrations.

He noted that usually around this time of the year there were many organisations celebrating Black Wednesday with small events that competed for the same audience and ended up drowning each other's message out in the process.

He proposed that we gather all these organisations to collaborate on a single commemorative event to observe this special day to have a greater impact.

This was a daunting task. It took some time to put together, but I am very grateful that Ntate Brent Meersman and his team at the Cape Town Press Club, put up their hands to help us make Ntate Joe Thloloe's vision come true.

With their help we were able to gather over 14 organisations in the media and Black Consciousness community to collaborate in a series of Black Wednesday commemorative events under a single umbrella theme called "Nation Building Conversations With Each Other".

The first event on the "Nation Building Conversations With Each Other" calendar was the re-launch of Aggrey Klaaste's nation building philosophy earlier this month on 9 October 2021 by the Aggrey Klaaste Trust (AKT) in partnership with Wits University and The Forge in Braamfontein, Johannesburg.

The second event on the "Nation Building Conversations With Each Other" calendar was the South African National Editors' Forum

(SANEF) gala dinner in commemoration of Black Wednesday. This event also marked 25 years of SANEF defending media freedom.

The next event in our calendar was the riveting public dialogue by the Steve Biko Foundation reflecting on the impact of Black Wednesday on the Black Consciousness message.

This event took place yesterday at the striking Steve Biko Center in Ginsberg, King William's Town, in the Eastern Cape.

Today's discussion on the "Lessons From Black Wednesday" is one of five events happening today under our single umbrella theme of *"Nation Building Conversations With Each Other"*.

The other events are:

- The Annual Percy Qoboza Lecture by the National Press Club, UNISA and The Qoboza Foundation;
- The Freedom Park "Social Memory" book launch by the National Press Club, UNISA with Prof. Muxe Nkondo and Mrs Jane Mufamadi;
- The Annual Aggrey Klaaste Colloquium by the AKT, Sowetan, SANEF, DM5 Incorporated and Wits University and;
- The soft launch of this year's Local Government Elections Media Coverage Report by Media Monitoring Africa.

Thank you very much to Ntate Brent Meersman and his team at the Cape Town Press Club for your unwavering support in putting together the *"Nation Building Conversations With Each Other"* and for inviting me to contribute to this important dialogue today.

It is inspiring to see how all these organisations in the media and Black Consciousness community have come together, in the spirit of Aggrey Klaaste's moral vision of nation building, to celebrate this day by reflecting on the events that took place forty-four years ago, on October 19, 1977.

The chilly Wednesday morning of October 19, 1977 would remain forever seared into my father, Aggrey Klaaste's memory.

At 7am that fateful morning, the infamous security police of the apartheid government descended like a ton of bricks on the small Klaaste home in Meadowlands, Soweto, south of Johannesburg, violently rattling doors and windows.

Aggrey Klaaste was alone with his mother, Regina Mantoa Klaaste, inside the house, terrified.

His mother's pleas for her son's safety fell on deaf ears, as the police swiftly bundled Aggrey into the back seat of the police car, squeezing in his petite frame between two unfriendly giants.

On that historic day, forty-four years ago, the apartheid government clamped down on a number of organisations and newspapers sympathetic to the Black Consciousness (BC) philosophy.

More than 19 organisations and three newspapers, *The World*, *Weekend World* and *Pro Veritate*, were banned.

The clampdown was aimed at stifling media freedom and silencing those who spoke out against apartheid.

The slight figure of the 37-year-old Aggrey Klaaste, who at the time was the news editor of the *Weekend World* newspaper, was among the scores of journalists, editors and activists rounded up and detained by the apartheid government in a countrywide dragnet.

A gentle soul with a passion for jazz, literature, journalism and politics, my father, Aggrey Klaaste contemplated many years later on his detention in his *Sowetan* column titled "*On the Line*", stating that:

... "I was among those caught in the countrywide net, many of us were so incensed with the events preceding this date, that detention seemed inevitable, almost the honorable thing to happen to one"...

His arrest was under Section 10 of the Internal Security Act. A law that was introduced during the Soweto Uprising in 1976 to remove political activists from the political arena and to make a provision for the long-term detention of detainees for up to 12 months without trial.

Over the past five years I've spent most of my early mornings poring through my father's articles and columns, searching for him, trying to get a better sense of who he was and the historical events that shaped and moulded his entire being.

As I read up on him different dimensions of him were revealed to me. I was introduced to Aggrey Klaaste the writer, thinker, editor and community builder.

I was particularly intrigued by his community building initiatives which sought to rebuild the broken down structures in our communities that had been devastated by apartheid.

The more I read the more I became enthused to follow in his footsteps to continue his nation building legacy. With the help of a handful respected trustees my family and I have since established the Aggrey Klaaste Trust, AKT in short.

AKT is named after my father, Aggrey Klaaste, the famous journalist, editor and community builder.

He's famous for his nation building philosophy which he launched thirty three years ago, on October 22, 1988.

This was shortly after he became editor of the *Sowetan*, then the country's leading daily newspaper for the black community. He edited the *Sowetan* from 1988 until 2002.

Apart from his superb intellect and captivating writing, Klaaste was a visionary who advocated for the rebuilding of community structures that had been shattered by the political violence of mid-1980s.

He wanted his community to rekindle the spirit of self-pride and Ubuntu to get his people psychologically ready for freedom that was clearly on the horizon.

Using *Sowetan* as a platform to champion his views, he initiated many nation-building projects that sought to bring out the best from members of his community.

These included the Early Childhood Development Awards; Young Communicators' Awards; Business Woman of the Year and favourite - the Community Builder of the Year Awards, a special contest that sought to identify and celebrate ordinary South Africans implementing extraordinary community-based projects to uplift their communities and empower others.

Delivering his speech at the 10th Anniversary of the Community Builder of the Year Awards in 1998, President Nelson Mandela stated that: *"it required profound vision for the Sowetan to conceive its Nation Building Programme and the Nation Building programme has done our nation a service"*.

Millions of South Africans watched on national television as the community builders from various communities all across the nation were recognised and awarded prizes at a glitzy gala dinner for their selfless efforts to empower others.

Aggrey Klaaste loved his community. He sought solutions for seemingly intractable problems. He wanted to see thriving communities that brimmed with hope for the future. His whole

being was shaped by events in South Africa and he sought to contribute towards finding unifying measures and solutions through his nation building philosophy.

In 2004, shortly after Aggrey Klaaste passed away, former South African President Thabo Mbeki described him in the following manner:

“Aggrey Klaaste will always be remembered for his contributions to spirited journalism and nation building. His brave stance against the tyranny of apartheid in the days of repression of blacks inspired particularly the youth of South Africa. He represented the established reality of black intellectual achievement, many years before the arrival of the democracy for which he struggled.”

That was the kind of man Aggrey Klaaste was.

He was a visionary. He was a champion for less fortunate. He was a wonderful writer. He was a man of the people. He was compassionate. When he died in 2004, everyone in the land recognised him for the great man he was.

Before he became *the* Aggrey Klaaste who is widely admired as a crusading editor and community builder, he was among the many journalists and editors detained by the security police for simply doing their jobs of telling the truth about what was happening in black communities under apartheid.

On September 2, 1984, almost a decade after Black Wednesday, Klaaste recounts, in his *Sowetan* column, those terrifying moments of that cold morning in the backseat of that police car:

...“We took the road past Phefeni station to Orlando West. Drove towards Hlaku Rachidi’s house and there I saw the professional detainee go through the motions. He spoke cheerfully with the cops, like old friends. Almost backslapping kind of jocular thing going on here. He came out looking fresh and breezy, dressed like he was going

mountain climbing, bag and all. I only had the flimsy gear I had put on that morning in my fright and ignorance. But I felt great with Hlaku around. I was not alone. He had seen me and if I disappeared or something, there were at least two of us.”

At the time Hlaku Rachidi was the president of the Black People’s Convention, (BPC), an umbrella organisation of the Black Consciousness Movement).

Even though Aggrey Klaaste was consoled by Hlaku Rachidi’s presence in that police car, he was still very frightened for his life.

As a journalist he knew very well what the security police, also known as the “mad forces”, were capable of. He’d covered harrowing stories of people being arrested, tortured and viciously killed by the police.

Klaaste and Rachidi were escorted to the Protea Police Station in Soweto, south of Johannesburg before they were taken to the notorious John Vorster Square police station, in the Johannesburg city centre, which is now called the Johannesburg Central Police Station.

Back in the 1970s John Vorster Square police station was widely feared as the pinnacle torture chambers of the Security Branch.

It was on the infamous 10th floor of John Vorster Square where countless political prisoners were tortured with some even been thrown out of the windows to plunge to their tragic deaths.

Klaaste arrived at John Vorster Square police station to find that they were not the only ones picked up by the police that day.

There were scores of activists and prominent leaders in the black community. The dragnet was as comprehensive as it was brutal, there were leaders such as Dr Ntatho Motlana, Dr Leonard Mosala, Dr Douglas Lolwane and many others.

Even though this was not Aggrey's first stint behind bars, the imposing John Vorster Square police station flooded his mind with nightmarish thoughts of police brutality and torture.

He wrote:

"John Vorster Square with or without all those familiar faces around me had my mind flitting like a rat. How does it feel like to be...? I wanted to ask them. No. I did not wish to know. Too ghastly. How does it feel like when they apply...No. You silly fool. Relax. Relax, that's funny! This is only Section Ten, not Six, you oaf. But how does it really feel like when they...Jesus!"

Police brutality, torture and murder was a bone-chilling reality for those who stood up to fight against apartheid.

A mere month before the security police descended on Aggrey's home in Meadowlands, Bantu Stephen Biko, the young champion of the Black Consciousness Movement, was callously murdered by the police.

Reflecting on that day in his column, years later, Klaaste further wrote:

"All things considered those were turbulent days, something similar to what has been happening lately. Among the more searing and heartrending events was the death of Steve Biko, followed by those chilling words from the then Minister of Justice, Jimmy Kruger."

Steve Biko's vicious murder was without a doubt a catalyst for the events that took place on October 19, 1977, but let's take a few steps back to set the scene.

In the aftermath of the Sharpeville massacre which took place on March 21, 1960, the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), the two leading anti-apartheid political organisations of the time, were banned.

Black political leaders were either imprisoned, in exile or killed by the state. This left a gaping void in the black political arena.

It seemed as if the apartheid state had succeeded in breaking the spirit of the resistance in South Africa.

Meanwhile the “winds of change” were blowing across the African continent. Numerous African states busied themselves with the important business of breaking the chains of colonialism.

Back in South Africa something began to stir in universities all across the nation in the late 1960s.

The changes taking place on the continent alongside the Civil Rights Movement in the United States inspired young black South Africans to take a stand against apartheid.

University students began cutting their teeth in politics through organisations such as the University Christian Movement (UCM) and the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS).

Disillusioned by both organisations with their failure to act against racist policies in the universities Steve Biko, Barney Pityana, Mamphela Ramphela and others formed the South African Students' Organisation (SASO).

The break away from NUSAS was partly inspired by the emergence of Black Consciousness (BC) founded by Steve Biko.

In the early 1970s SASO was asserting the Black Consciousness ideological stance and the independence of black students from white supremacy in universities.

By the mid-1970s the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) had spread like a wild fire amongst young black people and began captivating the imagination of adults in the black community with its message.

Biko and his disciples emphasised the importance of black people taking the lead in the struggle against apartheid.

Their movement set out to legitimise blackness through affirming a proud and strong black identity against white supremacy.

The BCM further created numerous Black Community Projects aimed at addressing social ills facing black communities.

The Black Consciousness Movement took the country by storm and left the apartheid authorities feeling anxious, because it was becoming clear that the BCM would succeed in providing an alternative political ideology that opposed apartheid to fill the void left by the earlier banning of the ANC and PAC.

At about the same time black journalists were also taking a stand, proclaiming that they were black before they were journalists.

They formed the Union of Black Journalists (UBJ) not only to improve their working conditions, but to push on with their mission to tell the truth as it were about life for black people under apartheid.

For their efforts, the UBJ's members found themselves continuously harassed and detained by the security forces.

To shed more light on the situation facing black journalists at the time former member of the Union of Black Journalists, Juby Mayet, in 1997 stated that: *"I personally was not a political person, but the problem was, if you were black in those days, you were political whether you liked it or not."*

Now that the scene has been set, let us proceed with our story.

The apartheid government responded to the BC message by ruthlessly assassinating Steve Biko, on September 12, 1977. However the BCM did not die as the Nationalist government had hoped.

On receiving the news of Biko's death, the then Minister of Justice, Jimmy Kruger famously stated that the murder left him cold. This statement enraged the black oppressed majority and mass protests ensued nationwide.

Aggrey Klaaste and his peers at *The World* and *Weekend World* took to their pens, wielding them as weapons to launch an assault on the apartheid state.

The uprisings in 1976, Steve Biko's death and Black Wednesday were the final push that spurred a global movement against apartheid.

From the notorious John Vorster Square police station, the impressive catch of journalists, editors and activists was bundled off to Modderbee prison, near Benoni, east of Johannesburg.

Klaaste draws a picture of what was happening for us once more: *"As we drive through one gate after the other, the echo of heavy gates is like the death-clap. Dr Motlana says rather airily, this is it. We will not be seeing the outside for some time now chaps, brace up."*

It soon became clear to Klaaste that he was not only arrested for his uncompromising writing against the repressive state, but also due to his involvement in the Committee of Ten, an organisation that sought to fill the gap in leadership created in Soweto when the Urban Bantu Councils were discredited.

Klaaste began to show signs of his social activism in early 1977, when he together with the Percy Peter Qoboza, his friend and editor at *The World*, spearheaded the initiative to gather respected leaders from Soweto for the Committee of Ten.

Fifteen years or so after Black Wednesday, Klaaste wrote in his memoir that:

“We thought we would pre-empt the government from putting another of their crazy puppet bodies in power.”

While others were arrested in the early hours of October 19, 1977 and dragged from their blankets in that countrywide clampdown, Qoboza was arrested at work in front of baffled staff members.

He was arrested while giving an interview to a television crew from abroad.

In his *On the Line* Sowetan column, Klaaste takes us back to the moment Percy Qoboza was arrested:

“When we were detained on that black Wednesday in 1977. Percy almost stage-managed his being picked up. While some of us lesser beings were spirited off rather shamefully in the early hours of the morning from our beds, the police played into Percy’s hands by detaining him at his offices and slamming the paper with a ban at about the same time.”

Other senior journalists of *The World* newspaper who were behind bars during this time included, Joe Thloloe, Thami Mazwai and Willie Bokala.

Dr Motlana was right. Aggrey and his fellow detainees would not be seeing the outside for some time.

He spent over six months in detention before he was released in 1978.

The World was banned, so when he was released he re-united with Percy Qoboza at the newly formed *Post Transvaal* newspaper and predecessor of the *Sowetan* newspaper.

Last year in an interview leading up to the Aggrey Klaaste Colloquium hosted each year on October 19 by AKT, Wits University, SANEF, Sowetan and DM5 Incorporated Ntate Joe Thloloe was asked how many times he had been arrested, over his illustrious five-decade journalism career, for simply doing his job as a journalist in search for the truth. He replied by stating that:

... "It's a very difficult question in the sense that to the Nationalist government, you were a terrorist if you thought differently from the way they were thinking, so you can't say that this or that happened to me because I was a journalist. The idea was that my thinking was different from theirs period.

For several days after that interview I struggled to get my head around the fact that not too long ago, people in my country were detained without trial, tortured and even killed for their thoughts, their ideas.

I vaguely remember my father telling me and my brothers that ideas were very powerful. I could have never imagined that ideas are so powerful, in fact, that people were willing to sacrifice their lives for them.

In reading my father's writings and spending time listening to some of his peers, a few of those important ideas jumped at me.

1. The idea that everyone is free to express themselves, in a medium of their choice.
2. The idea that everyone is free to determine their own destiny.
3. The idea that everyone deserves to be treated with respect and dignity.

I believe that it is important to reflect on what the brave journalists, editors and activists of 1977 were fighting for to see where we, as a nation are.

Sadly it is evident that the struggle is not over.

- Many families are still going to bed hungry.
- There are major inequalities in our economy, education and health systems.
- The moral fibre of our society is in tatters.
- Our media industry is facing a serious crisis.
- To make matters worse our journalists are constantly under attack, creating even more problems for our society.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened the problems we already had in our nation.

It is clear that South Africa is in a grave state of crisis and nation building is needed now more than ever! We must pick up from where the heroes and heroines of October 19, 1977 left off.

But where do we start?

As part of the inaugural Aggrey Klaaste Colloquium in 2020, I have been fortunate to listen in on a few interviews where visionaries in the media space shared some of their wisdom on how we can address pressing issues facing the media and society at large. This what I have learned.

I believe that we can all learn a lot from Ntate Thloloe's daily exercise of waking up every morning to ask himself, what he can do today to make his environment better for myself and those around him.

This exercise can help each and every one of us take the responsibility of changing our lives for the better into our own hands. This is the first step in the nation building process.

When it comes to the issues of fake news, disinformation and cyber bullying Ntate Thloloe suggested that we start teaching our children a media literacy module from the earliest levels of education.

Nowadays every man, woman and child has become their own reporter, sub-editor and distributor, but the problem with this is that the ethical standards that apply to journalists do not apply to ordinary citizens and that has to change.

In line with the nation building ethos, each person must ask themselves if what they are about to post will contribute towards making their environment better for themselves and those around them or not. If not then why post it.

The AKT is already in dialogues with various leading universities in the country to see how we can introduce this media literacy module in all levels of our education system. This initiative is particularly important in an education system that is increasingly becoming more technology based.

Then I got the chance to listen to Bab' Penwell Dlamini, the Sowetan journalist, interview Ntate Anton Harber at his home in

Johannesburg with the legendary photojournalist, Ntate Antonio Muchave.

When asked about the role of press freedom in strengthening democracy Ntate Harber stated that a democracy cannot exist without a free, open and critical media, because the essence of a democracy is that those in power must be accountable to voters and the media plays a critical role in monitoring that accountability.

The media empowers citizens with information about their leaders, their political parties and debates to make informed decisions when casting their vote.

I was intrigued when he added that all other rights, such as the right to housing, health, education and employment are protected by the media giving people information around these matters.

Two days later I arrived at Bab' Thami Mazwai's home for our next interview. Bab' Mazwai spoke about the importance of the media making sure that the people on the ground were heard.

He added that there must be a change in the mindset of the media to initiate a campaign aimed at reminding the nation about matters affecting social cohesion on a constant basis.

"The people will not suffer forever, at some point they will say enough is enough and inevitably there will be an explosion," he

warned. Echoes of my father's call for the people to start rebuilding the nation immediately, before liberation came, rang in my ears.

There was a sense of urgency in Bab' Mazwai's words.

Unfortunately he was correct because 9 months later, in July this year, we all witnessed the violent protests that shook the entire country to its core.

Listening to Bab' Sibusiso Ngalwa, the Newzroom Afrika Political Editor and SANEF chairman speak about the plight of journalists due to COVID-19 was moving.

He reminded us that the carnage inflicted by the pandemic on the economy translated to empty pockets, families going hungry and many journalists losing their jobs with over 80 community newspapers closing.

Bab' Ngalwa said that this also meant that the industry was shrinking and with that reducing the number of diverse voices that speak for society.

Amidst all the gloom, he added, that there were some green shoots. He mentioned two of his former colleagues who had recently created digital media platforms. This indeed was inspiring.

A few days later it was Ntate Styli Charalambous, the Daily Maverick publisher and CEO, who offered his pearls of wisdom. He stated that

all industries were becoming digital and the media must follow suit and explore different ways of generating revenue in the digital space and other sectors going forward.

These ideas alongside our nation building manifesto have played an important role in informing us, at the AKT, on how we can structure our programmes to help tackle the pressing issues currently facing our media and society at large.

Our manifesto reads as follows:

Nation building means picking up the pieces and rebuilding all structures that have collapsed in our communities:

It means striving for the best in all that we do for ourselves and our people;

It is the search for the acquisition and control of structures of power required for the survival of a nation;

It is creating an efficient leadership and increasing the value and quality of life among all inhabitants of our country;

We have a vision of a future society we want to create for ourselves and our children.

Nation building is our hope for the future.

Inclosing I'd like to ask you to please continue to follow our "*Nation Building Conversations With Each Other*" series of Black Wednesday commemorative events.

Tomorrow, 20 October 2021 we have two more events:

- A workshop by the Institute for the Advancement of Journalism, Wits University and AKT titled: "*The Need For Responsible Journalism in Nation Building*" and
- An inspiring dialogue on Women in Media by AKT and Wits University on Newzroom Afrika with Cathy Mohlahlane.

On 30 October we have:

- The political revival discussion at The Forge focussing on the Black Consciousness message in contemporary SA and
- Dr Mosubudi Mangena's book launch hosted by the Steve Biko Foundation.

We at the AKT and our partners, are inspired by the heroes and heroines of Black Wednesday, those who dared to take a stand to rebuild our nation.

Thank you very much.