

RE-IMAGINING BIKO

Mangcu, Xolela (2012) **Biko: A biography**. Cape Town: Tafelberg.
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Xolela Mangcu's recent biography of Steve Biko takes up its place in the contested field of "Biko Studies". It remains an open question as to why, given the explosion of scholarly interest in Biko, and his ever-increasing popularity as an icon of the liberation struggle, it has taken this long for a self-declared biography of Biko to appear.

This is not to say that no previous biographical accounts of Biko have been published. Several have, although they are, for the most part, less biographies than personal testimonies. This is the case, self-admittedly, for both Aelred Stubbs (1978) and Donald Woods (1978), who published two of the earliest overviews of Biko's life. Stubbs's essay has been included in all subsequent reprints of Biko's collected writings, **I write what I like**, and thus remains a crucial document for students and followers of Biko's work. Woods's **Biko** by contrast, has become somewhat unfashionable, due no doubt in part to the fact that the book – like **Cry freedom** the film based upon it – slips from telling the story of Biko's life to focussing instead on Woods's own story. This, incidentally, is not enough to disqualify the book; it is a repository of much valuable personal and historical information on the foremost leader of South Africa's Black Consciousness Movement.

There is, in addition, Lindy Wilson's (2011) **Steve Biko**, a biographical essay which draws heavily on interviews with Biko's family and Black Consciousness allies and succeeds admirably in bringing her subject to life. Wilson's account is limited only by its length – it is of an "introduction to" variety, and does not constitute a "full" biography as such. Nonetheless, despite these accounts of Biko's life, and particularly in view of Gevisser's (2007) remarkable biography of Thabo Mbeki and J C Kannemeyer's recent (2013) tome-sized study of J M Coetzee, the question returns: why no definitive biography of Steve Bantu Biko?

Xolela Mangcu's new book was thus much anticipated, not only as the text that would helpfully address the conspicuous gap in the Biko literature eluded to above, but also as the first book-length biography of Biko that framed itself as such, and, moreover, the first such undertaking by a black South Africa author. So, does the book succeed? Well, yes and no. It is not of the scale of the biographies already cited, and as such

there is still room for a sustained re-imagining of Biko's life and his place in the popular imaginary of post-apartheid South Africa. On the other hand, Mangcu's text certainly illuminates pockets of history in the Biko life story, which is to say that it succeeds more as a text focussing on successive eras of Biko's life than as an integrated and adequately *literary* biography. Let me qualify and expound upon this comment by turning first to the book's accomplishments.

First among such achievements is the author's willingness to refute commonplaces about Biko. The longstanding rule of reading Biko through Fanon, of thinking Fanon as far and away Biko's most influential precursor – a trend exemplified in Gibson's (2011) recent **Fanonian practices in South Africa** – is nicely unsettled. Mangcu spends considerable time in sketching the Xhosa Eastern Cape heritage into which Biko was born, and thus provides a different set of anti-colonial inspirations. The point of linking Biko's Black Consciousness philosophy to a broader array of intellectual resources raises, incidentally, a topic that has yet to be sufficiently addressed: the relationship between Biko's understanding of conscientization and the tenets of Paulo Freire's **Pedagogy of the oppressed**, from which it was derived.

Mangcu also, importantly, asserts the importance of Biko's intellectual partnership with Barney Pityana, asserting thus the collaborative nature of Black Consciousness thought, *pace* the trend to see it as Biko's sole invention. Mangcu notes, in decidedly non-hagiographical style: "One of the most under-reported aspects of the formation of Black Consciousness was ... the role that Pityana played as Steve's philosophical counterpart. According to some in the movement Steve was not necessarily the brightest member of their group although certainly the most influential ... Steve had that overall edge in his force of persuasion, although he was not necessarily cleverer than everybody else." (p 183).

Mangcu, furthermore, collects a great deal of crucial information about Biko's life and his early school and university days from friends and associates. **Biko: a biography** is thus the best account of Biko's childhood that we have, including as it does a variety of anecdotes about Biko's popularity as a boy (he was dubbed "Goofy" by classmates), his penchant for pranks, making others laugh, and motivating his peers to apply themselves to their studies.

Mangcu, notably, shares Biko's Eastern Cape Ginsberg upbringing. His familiarity with this part of the country and its history, and the number of interviews he has carried out with Biko's family, friends and associated Black Consciousness colleagues, adds notably to the contextualization of Biko's life. Mangcu, moreover, is a journalist and author of considerable standing in South Africa, and he is adept at gathering and conveying information, and this much is certainly true here. That being said, the art of biography requires also a different set of literary skills, the tools and techniques of "creative non-fiction" or "life-writing", where the devices of fiction-writing are brought to the task of deepening a reader's involvement in non-fictional characters and settings. This is where chiefly journalist accounts of the lives of struggle heroes such as those recently produced on Chris Hani and Jacob Zuma (Smith & Tromp, 2009; Gordin, 2008, respectively) have failed. They lack the imaginative and literary spark needed to animate their subjects and to engender fresh insights into their lives.

Part of where Mangcu succeeds is in filling in the importance of those characters in Biko's life not often credited, or credited *enough*, in his life story, such as Africanist radical and PAC and later Poqo stalwart Aubrey Mokoape. In Mangcu's book, Mokoape becomes one of the long list of interlocutors who, even in his keen differences to Biko's emerging political philosophy, exercised a fundamental influence on the future leader. An engaging narrative line is brought to the fore here: Mokoape, already alive to the trap of well-intentioned white liberals who advocate collaboration but cringe at the prospect of any real personal political sacrifice, warns Biko to this effect and watches the latter's gradual disaffection with the politics of liberal multi-racialism. How much more engaging this might have been if Mokoape had been more vividly sketched, brought to life as a character – a real character, obviously – such that the pathos of this situation might have been even further heightened. Deeper characterizations would likewise have benefitted the book's treatment of Barney Pityana, Mamphela Ramphele, Bowke Mafuna and other associated confidants.

Admittedly, there are glimmers of this sort of characterization in Mangcu's introduction of Robert Sobukwe, the PAC leader who, on several occasions met with Biko. For the most part however, characters and situations are introduced by way of facts, rather than opened up and animated by intimation, by a type of literary description that, to invoke the old adage, "shows rather than tells".

This is also true in terms of scene-setting, in re-imagining certain of the most difficult and emotionally-fraught situations in Biko's life. The low-grade personal torture of banning orders – suffered by Biko and many other Black Consciousness associates – is, arguably, more vividly sketched by Mamphela Ramphele's autobiography, **A life** (1993), just as the brutal conditions of Biko's death are more harrowingly sketched by Wilson's **Steve Biko**. There are some exceptions though, Mangcu does – no doubt following Arnold's (1979) **The testimony of Steve Biko** – conjure a sense of the tension underlying Biko's testimony in the landmark BPC/SASO Trial, where Biko took on the precarious task of publically defining Black Consciousness in a clearly hostile, persecutory context. Mangcu does however paint a picture of the complications and apparent ambivalence that qualified Biko's initial approach to the trial. Biko believed that the men accused – charged with inciting anti-Government sentiment by celebrating FRELIMO's 1976 victory in Mozambique – deserved the benefit of any defence he could offer. Nonetheless, it is true also that the same colleagues had rejected his advice and thus called his leadership into question by going ahead with celebrations that Biko felt were unnecessarily risky. In this respect, Mangcu makes vital contributions to Biko scholarship, by opening up windows on the complexity of many of the familiar "set-pieces" of Biko's life, routinely – and often flatly - relayed by thumb-nail biographies.

Unfortunately, the book suffers from an overall lack of integration. Certain chapters have the feel of being written at different times, in slightly different registers (the second chapter makes for a formal history lesson, for example, where the closing chapter constitutes a semi-autobiographical account of Mangcu's own role in promoting Biko's legacy). At times this lack of integration could have been easily remedied, and one is left wondering why this was not the case. For example, lengthy emails to the author, responses to his requests for further information from friends and associates of Biko (Paula Ensor and Geoff Budlender), are included in the same form they were sent, without being paraphrased or, barely, commented upon. On such occasions, one wants

more of Mangcu, particularly *apropos* the synthesis of material and his own higher-order commentary and analysis. This after all is the task of the biographer, not simply to survey available documents, but to select aspects of the most salient material and then go on to develop a distinctive perspective on their subject.

In reference to the book's lack of integration, take the example of the second chapter, which focuses on the "Steve Biko in the intellectual history of the Eastern Cape". Mangcu has grabbed the bull by the horns here, taking up Moletsi Mbeki's controversial statement that Steve Biko should be viewed as a latter-day Xhosa prophet. The subsequent debate between attempts to view Biko as the outcome of a lineage of Xhosa prophet-intellectuals (represented by Moletsi Mbeki), and Biko as representing a definitively *non-ethnic* politics of black solidarity (Zubeida Jaffer's position), is, as Mangcu rightly notes, an unhelpful dualism. Neither of these perspectives needs be considered mutually exclusive, and Chapter 2 of Mangcu's book assembles a formidable array of historical information regarding earlier Xhosa prophet-intellectuals (most notably perhaps, Nxele and Ntsikana) and the role they played in struggles against various forms of colonial subjugation. Mangcu thus establishes a fascinating historical context, but ultimately delivers an unfinished analysis. He gestures to interesting points of resonance and convergence between Biko's political programme and earlier Xhosa history, but his observations lack the incisiveness of a rigorous analysis. We are left with a collection of facts and quotes, much of which is fascinating, but what is ultimately lacking is a critical synthesis that drives home a novel argument. One is left lamenting a lost opportunity: the sustained use of a comparative historical frame to engender fresh insights into Biko's cultural and political programme would be most welcome.

Mangcu's text will doubtless be a crucial source-book in future scholarship on Biko. It opens windows on the complexity of events in Biko's life and Biko's own responses to them, and it prompts us to ask questions about a series of historical events that have never been fully explicated. (What, for example, was the content of the highly-guarded Sobukwe-Biko meetings? The benefit of Mangcu's speculation in this regard - imaginative or otherwise - would have been much appreciated). Mangcu's text undeniably then starts the work of a re-imagining of Biko that will prove crucial as we move from the repeated re-telling of Biko's life story, to an appreciation of what may have been different about it, and its future significance, than we had previously imagined.

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