

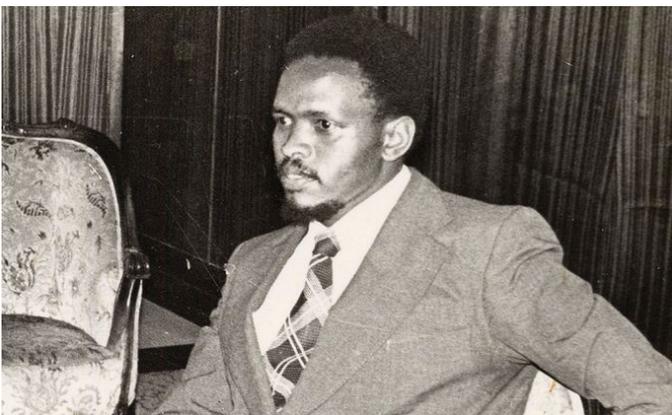
Bantu Steve Biko's Presidential Address to the 1st National Formation School of SASO

University of Natal-Black Section, Wentworth, Durban

1-4 December 1969

Advice for teachers/parents/guardians:

(1) Begin by asking students to read the *Introduction* to the Bantu Steve Biko entry on South African History Online (<https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/stephen-bantu-biko>). (2) Then ask students to find and write out the definitions of all the bolded words below. (3) Ask students to read through the address and answer/discuss the questions alone or as a group.



Bantu Steve Biko, co-founder of the South African Students Association and the Black Consciousness Movement

“Very few of the South African students’ organisations have elicited as mixed a response on their establishment as SASO seems to have done. It would seem that only the middle-of-the-roaders have accepted SASO. Cries of “shame” were heard from the white students who have struggled for years to maintain interracial contact. From some of the black militants’ point of view SASO was far from the answer, it was still too **amorphous** to be of any real help. No one was sure of the real direction of SASO. Everybody expressed fears that SASO was a **conformist** organisation. A few of the white students expressed fears that this was a sign to turn towards militancy. In the middle of it all was the SASO executive. Those people were called upon to make countless explanations on what this all was about.

I am surprised that this had to be so. Not only was the move taken by the non-white students defensible but it was a long overdue step. It seems sometimes that it is a crime for the non-white students to think for themselves. The idea of

everything being done for the blacks is an old one and all liberals take pride in it; but once the black students want to do things for themselves suddenly they are regarded as becoming “militant”.

Probably it would be of use at this stage to paraphrase the aims of SASO as an organisation.

These are:

- To **crystallise** the needs and aspirations of the non-white students and to seek to make known their grievances.
- Where possible to put into effect programmes designed to meet the needs of the non-white students and to act on a collective basis in an effort to solve some of the problems which beset the centres individually.
- To heighten the degree of contact not only amongst the non-white students but also amongst these and the rest of the South African student population, to make the non-white students accepted on their own terms as an integral part of the South African student community.
- To establish a solid identity amongst the non-white students and to ensure that these students are always treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.
- To protect the interests of the member centres and to act as a pressure group on all institutions and organisations for the benefit of the non-white students.

- To boost up the **morale** of the non-white students, to heighten their own confidence in themselves and to contribute largely to the direction of thought taken by the various institutions on social, political, and other current topics.

NUSAS – National Union of South African Students

National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). NUSAS was a liberal organisation dominated by White students. When it was formed in 1924, it was an exclusively White student body that represented student interests. In the 1960s White members became sympathetic to the Black students cause. As a result, Black students membership began to increase. Many of these students, the majority of whom were based at the University of Natal, became increasingly dissatisfied with the inability of NUSAS to tackle deep racist structures and policies of both the government and universities.

From South African History Online, sahistory.org.za

SASO – South African Students Association

The South African Student Organisation (SASO) was formed in 1968 after some members of the University of Natal's Black Campus **SRC (Student Representative Council)** decided to break away from the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS).

From South African History Online, sahistory.org.za

The above aims give in a nutshell the role of SASO as an organisation. The fact that the whole **ideology** centres around non-white students as a group might make a few people to believe that the organisation is racially inclined. Yet what SASO has done is simply to take stock of the present scene in the country and to realise that not unless the non-white students decide to lift themselves from the doldrums will they ever hope to get out of them. What we want is not black visibility but real black participation. In other words it does not help us to see several quiet black faces in a multiracial student gathering which ultimately concentrates on what the white students believe are the needs for the black students. Because of our sheer bargaining power as an organisation we can manage in fact to bring about a more meaningful contact between the various colour groups in the student world.

The idea that SASO is a form of “Black NUSAS” has been thrown around. Let it be known that SASO is not a national union and has never claimed to be one. Neither is SASO opposed to NUSAS as a national union. SASO accepts the principle that in

any one country at any time a national union must be open to all students in that country, and in our country NUSAS is the national union and SASO accepts her fully as such and offers no competition in that direction. What SASO objects to is the dichotomy between principle and practice so apparent among members of that organisation. While very few would like to criticise NUSAS policy and principles as they appear on paper one tends to get worried at all **hypocrisy** practised by the members of that organisation. This serves to make the non-white members feel unaccepted and insulted in many instances. One may also add that the mere numbers fail to reflect a true picture of the South African scene. There shall always be a white majority in the organisation. This in itself does not matter except that where there is conflict of interests between the two colour groups the non-white always get off the poorer. These are some of the problems SASO looks into. We would not like to see the black centres being forced out of NUSAS by a swing to the right. Hence it becomes our concern to exert our influence on NUSAS where possible for the benefit of the non-white centres who are members of that organisation.

Another popular question is why SASO does not **affiliate** to NUSAS. SASO has a specific role to play and it has been set up as the custodian of non-white interests. It can best serve this purpose by maintaining only functional relationships with other student organisations but not structural ones. It is true that one of the reasons why SASO was formed was that organisations like NUSAS were **anathema** at the University Colleges. However our decision not to affiliate to NUSAS arises out of the consideration of our role as an organisation in that we do not want to develop any structural relationships that may later interfere with our effectiveness.

SASO has met with a number of difficulties shortly after its inception.

- There is the **chronic** problem of not having enough financial resources. It does seem that this is where most non-white organisations fail. However we hope to clear out of this difficulty soon and we

shall in the process need lots of help from the stronger centres.

- Traditional sectionalisation still makes correspondence a very sluggish business with some centres. Most of the university colleges have a long history of isolation. Some of them have grabbed at the chance to break free from their cocoons. A few still cling tenaciously to them. We have for instance been unable to get through to Bellville. We have difficulty in getting to a few other centres. But I am happy to say that most centres realise the exciting possibilities of this meaningful form of communication. We hope in time that we shall all be able to join in the happy community of those who share their problems.
- The bogey of authority also seems a real problem. Understandably lots of students are afraid that any involvement with anybody beyond their own university might attract **unwarranted** attention not only from local but also from national authority. However, one hopes that there will be more example of those courageous few who built up the SRC at places like Turfloop to the point where it had a lot of **bargaining power** with the Rector.
- Non-acceptance by NUSAS sparked off lots of unwelcome problems. To many centres accepting SASO became an automatic step towards withdrawing from NUSAS. Very few centres seem to be able to grasp the differences in focal points between the two organisations.

- There has been considerable lack of support from the various SRCs for those involved in the organisation. A lot of people even from the affiliated centres seem to regard themselves as observers.

However besides these problems the Executive has continued applying itself diligently towards setting a really solid foundation for the future. There is reason to believe that SASO will grow from strength to strength as more and more centres join.

The future of SASO highly depends on a number of things. Personally I believe that there will be a swing to the right on the white campuses. This will result in the death of NUSAS or a change in that

organisation that will virtually exclude all non-whites. All sensible people will strive to delay the advent of that moment. I believe that SASO too should. But if the day when it shall come is inevitable, when it does come SASO will shoulder the full responsibility of being the only student organisation catering for the needs of the non-white students. And in all probability SASO will be the only student organisation still concerned about contact between various colour groups.

Lastly I wish to call upon all student leaders at the non-white institutions to put their weight solidly behind SASO and to guarantee the continued existence of the organisation not only in name but also in effectiveness. This is a challenge to test the independence of the non-white student leaders not only organisationally but also ideologically. The fact that we have differences of approach should not cloud the issue. We have a responsibility not only to ourselves but also to the society from which we spring. No one else will ever take the challenge up until we, of our own accord, accept the inevitable fact that ultimately the leadership of the non-white peoples in this country rests with us.”

Summary Questions

1. Why were some people opposed to the founding of SASO?
2. Review the six aims of SASO. What do they tell us about the way that Black students were being treated by NUSAS and the South African education system?
3. Why does Biko think SASO should focus on the Black student community?
4. Review the five difficulties Biko says SASO has faced in getting established. What do they tell us about the tactics used by the apartheid state to suppress Black liberation?
5. Throughout his life, Biko criticised the paternalism and complicity of white students in NUSAS with the apartheid regime. Explain what this means and use evidence from the source to demonstrate Biko's criticisms.
6. Why do you think Biko rejected the idea that SASO was a “Black NUSAS”?
7. What are some of the structural issues that Biko identifies in NUSAS?
8. What does Biko predict is going to happen with NUSAS in the future?