

Harnessed by history

By Shea Karssing

In 1967 Rhodes University hosted the annual National Union of South African Students (Nusas) conference. Black delegates were told that they could not be accommodated in the university residences and the Vice-Chancellor banned all racially-mixed social gatherings. Along with many other delegates, Steve Biko walked out of the conference, an incident that contributed to the formation of the South African Students Association (Saso). Now Rhodes University's Vice-Chancellor has written a book about it.

On Monday 19 October, National Press Freedom Day and the day commemorating the banning of black newspapers, Rhodes University hosted the book launch of Dr Saleem Badat's *Black Man, You Are On Your Own* in a packed Arts Major lecture theatre. The book launch served as the University's official commemoration of the day.

Nkosinathi Biko, CEO of the Steve Biko Foundation and son of Steve, approached Badat to republish a section from his 2002 book *Black Student Politics from Saso to Sanso*. Badat agreed, and the result is the compact, soft-cover book that aims to be scholarly but accessible.

Standing in front of a larger-than-life poster of his famous father, Biko said that Badat had written an "important book". The Steve Biko Foundation aims to "make materials of the movement accessible to the youth today. It's important to see where we come from so we can see where we are going," Biko said.

"Saso played a key role in constructing the doctrine of black consciousness and reviving black oppression," Badat said, "common positions of inferiority among black students created a bond which formed a basis for political mobilisation." The book discusses student politics with a particular focus on the formation of Saso, analysing its emergence as well as the ideological and political character shifts that took place within the organisation in the 1970s.

But why is it important to relay this historical struggle in the democratic South Africa of 2009? Badat indicated a number of reasons for the book's relevance. He said that "it is too easy to neglect asking how much the past has really been transformed". In a university environment, Badat questioned whether black students, black academics, and a black V-C are assimilated into a "white" culture, or if there is an openness enabled by diversity. "I would like to think it the latter," he said.

Badat also said that "the black consciousness concerns with identity exclusivity need not be retrogressive" and could be an important contribution to eventual non-racialism. He said that there is much we can take away from organisations such as Saso. "The apartheid government ultimately failed to crush the political opposition. The members of Saso refused to be victims; they were intellectuals, thinkers and historical agents, the Vice-

Chancellor said, adding that “student activists are growing ever-vaguer; it is useful to be aware of one’s own place in the stream of history.”

Badat also feels that his book fills a gap in academic writing: “South Africa has a politically rich history with students and activism, but this is hardly reflected in scholarly literature.”

In a confession that did not feature in his speech notes, Badat acknowledged a more personal reason for writing the book. He said that the book forms “part of settling what may have been a blind spot for me in the 1970s and 1980s. It was a settling of scores with myself to take black consciousness more seriously.” Badat said he came through a generation which had gravitated away from black consciousness. “Where we came from, black consciousness was almost instinctive because we saw things in terms of white and black.”

In *Black Man, You Are On Your Own*, Badat has also tried to point out what he feels other authors have overlooked or misinterpreted. In particular, he feels that much of the literature misses out the cultural, expressive and symbolic elements of black consciousness, such as the “black is beautiful” assertion, the afro hairstyle, clenched fist salute, and the slogans, songs, poetry, and drama that emerged from the movement.

Even in a new South Africa, this kind of energy should not be forgotten. Badat said the issues raised by black consciousness “remain highly relevant today”. “We must tackle them boldly with the energetic, uncompromising, intellectual manner of Biko and the Saso generation. The rest you can read in the book...” the Vice-Chancellor concluded.

And it seems many who attended decided to do so, leaving the auditorium harnessed by history and clutching a copy.

Black Man You Are On Your Own from STE Publishers is available from bookstores nationwide for R175.