Thirty years have passed since 19 October 1977 when the National Party banned Black Consciousness organisations and black-oriented newspapers – *The World* and the *Weekend World*. What drove the NP regime to such desperate moves was that the majority of black journalists in the 70s unequivocally identified their journalism with the liberation struggle. Black journalists declared themselves “black” first and “journalist” second. They questioned reference to “objectivity” by journalists who called freedom fighters “terrorists”. They objected to the misuse of this term by journalists who served in the then South African Defence Force, while they objected to black journalists’ identification with the liberation movements.

The term “black” was not just a matter of pigmentation but was used in a political context. In his book *I Write What I Like*, Black Consciousness martyr Bantu Biko explained the concept of “black” thus: “Merely by describing yourself as black you have started on a road towards emancipation, you have committed yourself to fight against all forces that seek to use your blackness as a stamp that marks you out as a subservient being.” Black journalists, therefore, understood blackness to mean, among other things, commitment. It is in this line of thinking that the *Sowetan*, the descendant of *The World* and *Weekend World*, was given birth to. The name *Sowetan*, as observed by the first editor Joe Latakgomo, was identified with the “symbolism of Soweto to identify with the black struggle.”

But what of black journalism since 1994? Can black journalists operating in the post-1994 era recognise themselves in Allister Sparks’ description of black journalists of the 70s, about whom he says in his book *Beyond The Miracle*, that they not only reported the events of the townships, but brought uniquely black perspectives into the newsrooms?

With typical honesty, the late Editor-in-Chief of the *Sowetan* Aggrey Klaaste, in an interview with Chabani Manganyi, observed that with “liberation in 1994, the paper had to find its feet. We frankly did not know what to do next”. Perhaps this explains why Sean Jacobs and Richard Calland in their book *Thabo Mbeki’s World*, refer to the black press as “less influential.”

To their credit, though, black journalists have recognised the need to redefine themselves in post-apartheid South Africa. Soon after Mathatha Tsedu took over the editorship of the *City Press*, he declared the newspaper “distinctly African”. Explaining the concept, Tsedu said that the *City Press* role was to enhance the understanding that Africans have of themselves and the rest of the continent, to showcase not just the evil that happens in Africa, but also the good. But more importantly, Tsedu further observed, “distinctly African” means a commitment to inspiring and motivating this continent’s people.

When the *City Press* declared itself “Distinctly African” some of us were curious as to how different the newspaper would be from its western counterparts who have declared themselves “distinctly American”. A brief illustration is necessary to elucidate my point here. In his book *Rogue State*, William Blum observes that during the bombing of Yugoslavia, CBS Evening News anchor, Dan Rather declared: “I’m an American, and I’m an American reporter. And yes, when there’s combat involving Americans, you can criticise me if you must, damn me if you must, but I’m always pulling for us to win.” This is what has characterised western journalism, particularly on issues that affected Africa. When commenting on issues about Africa, western journalism has been and is often devoid of...
Distinctly Africannotes that after Ghana’s independence in 1957, “it appeared as if there would ing his argument in his Friday column in the
gues that “there can be no such thing as African journalism”. Really? In advanc
sion is what should set apart “distinctly African” media from the rest.

Zimbabwe and he agreed. The 10-year constitutional moratorium had expired
machine attempted to unsettle world opinion by presenting African democracy

Fit to Govern

dress the land question. With all its shortcomings, Ronald Suresh Roberts’ book
it deserved, light would have been shed on why it took Mugabe 20 years to ad
approach as opposed to a unilateral approach.

this background that former Mozambican President Joacquim Chissano told the
land question in 1990 “it was African heads of state who told him to be quiet”
African media failed to report the fact that – as former African Union secretary-
position to write with insight and empathy.

Failure to do so on the part of black journalists is a great disappointment

tions of authority is to give space to more black women journalists to address is

Giving more writing space to black women journalists is necessary so that they
sues of culture. In many African communities cultural power is political power.

In dealing with Mbeki’s fiercely criticised “quiet diplomacy”, the South
Africa media failed to report the fact that – as former African Union secretary-

Mathiane pointed out that, come 1994, some black male journalists who cried
male chauvinists to entrench ill-gotten privileges. The history of African society was

It became barbarism. Africa was the ‘dark continent’. Religious practices and
perialism with an unnerving totality, the colonialists were not satisfied merely
with holding a people in their grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form

The history of African society was reduced to tribal battles and internecine wars.”

It is against this background that African journalism is required – to contextu

A number of years ago, veteran black woman journalist Nomavenda
Mathiane pointed out that, come 1994, some black male journalists who cried
foul against white male journalists-only club, have since tasted the sweetness of

An African journalist, Saidi continues, “would hear no evil and see no evil in African governance. It would praise the lead
ers until kingdom come, or until they died, either of natural causes or by the
bullet of a soldier or a hired assassin”. This description of African journalism

journalism of other countries”. This African journalism, Saidi continues, “would
hear no evil and see no evil in African governance. It would praise the lead
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bullet of a soldier or a hired assassin”. This description of African journalism

While the world shares common problems, there are those that are particu
lar to certain people and must be dealt with in a particular way – hence the need
ning” in a book entitled Media and Democracy In Africa (edited by Goran Hyden,
Michael Leslie and Folu Ogundimu), Beverly Hawk lamented the tendency by
western journalists to portray “African culture as the problem and western in
stitutions as the solution” when dealing with problems of the African continent.
She notes that instead of contextualising African problems, western journalists
tend to reduce African problems to a “tribal problem”: “Focusing on tribalism
as a problem, therefore, mutes other conflicts of interest between groups and
distacts us from covert causes of many African conflicts. Consequently, class
conflicts become tribalism; regional conflicts become tribalism; responses to
structural adjustment programmes become tribalism.”

Bantu Biko made a similar observation before he left for the ancestral
world: “One writer makes the point that in an effort to destroy completely the
structures that had been built up in the African society and to impose their im
perialism with an unnerving totality, the colonialists were not satisfied merely
with holding a people in their grip and emptying the native’s brain of all form and
content, they turned to the past of the oppressed people and distorted, disfigured and destroyed it. No longer was reference made to African culture, it became barbarism. Africa was the ‘dark continent’. Religious practices and
customs were referred to as superstition. The history of African society was
reduced to tribal battles and internecine wars.”

It is against this background that African journalism is required – to contex
tualise issues and put African culture or cultures into perspective. In addressing
the issue of African culture/s the challenge for black journalists who hold posi
tions of authority is to give space to more black women journalists to address is
sues of culture. In many African communities cultural power is political power.

Giving more writing space to black women journalists is necessary so that they
can begin to challenge the self-serving notions of African culture used by some
male chauvinists to entrench ill-gotten privileges.

A number of years ago, veteran black woman journalist Nomavenda
Mathiane pointed out that, come 1994, some black male journalists who cried
foul against white male journalists-only club, have since tasted the sweetness of
power. Writing on the 25th anniversary of the City Press, the newspaper’s fea
tures editor Mapula Sibanda observed: “Today, with the progressive male editor
Mathatha Tsedu, each section of the paper has a female writer either leading the
pack or making a substantial contribution, save for politics, still the preserve of
testosterone.” The challenge facing female black journalists is to challenge the
status quo – or else no gender equality! _Aluta continua!_