

# In memory of a South African martyr

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BBC News, Johannesburg

**Thirty years after freedom fighter Steve Biko was beaten to death by police, his image is still instantly recognisable across South Africa.**

Like the South American revolutionary Che Guevara, T-shirts imprinted with Biko's distinctive face have become a must-have fashion accessory amongst young South Africans.



Young people spread Steve Biko's political ideology through fashion

For some that is a sign that post-apartheid youth culture still embraces Biko's message of racial pride and African unity.

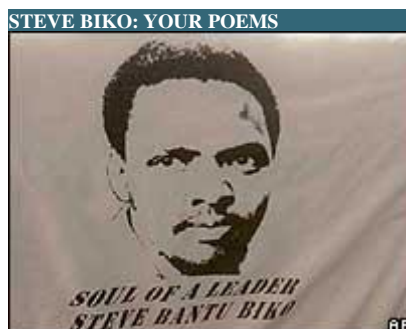
But graphic designer Mugabe Thugwana is not so sure: "I don't think young people know enough about Biko."

"We have American heroes from a tender age and consequently forget about our culture, our history and our identity," he adds.

"It's up to us to learn more about ourselves so that we can propel ourselves to a better Africa."

## Legacy

Stephen Bantu Biko is one of the most important figures in recent South African history and some are concerned about the commercialisation of his image. But it is undeniably one of the ways in which his legacy is kept alive.



“ If here today,  
where would you lead us?

Afro Pop musician Tonic still sings a lot about Steve Biko because he says he was committed to breaking the shackles of apartheid and to making sure black people took pride in themselves as well as their culture.

For we still cry,  
but they don't heed us  
The skin we wear,  
is still our burden

”

Vulindlela Moyo, Australia

[Read your Biko poems](#)

"I remember when I was still a boy, the first time I heard about Biko's history, I was so inspired I even saw him as a saint.

"To me he was no different to Jesus Christ and other prophets who came and changed the world."

Innocent Masuku, an actor from the popular drama series, Yizo Yizo says his political contribution was extremely important: "I respect Steve Biko. Today there is black empowerment because of him."

### Changed complexion

Just a year before his death, Biko's activism inspired students, frustrated with the apartheid government, to take their anger and pain onto the streets of the township of Soweto.

The march and its martyred children marked a turning point for black South Africans in their fight against white minority rule - an important step along the journey to freedom and equality for all.

Biko was a medical student at the University of Natal when he founded the Black Consciousness Movement aimed at empowering and mobilizing the urban black population.



Steve Biko was buried in his hometown, King William's Town

Biko believed that black South Africans had to free themselves from mental slavery first before they could be incorporated into a non-racial society.

### Further investigations

The journey to freedom was brutally cut short for Steve in September 1977 when he succumbed to injuries from severe

beatings inflicted by the police questioning him over his involvement in the country's liberation struggle.

South Africa's official opposition leader, Helen Zille, was a journalist at the time and exposed the truth behind Biko's death - but no policeman was ever convicted over his death.

In South Africa today, the Azanian People's Organization (Azapo) is trying to keep Steve Biko's teachings alive.

Strike Thugwana of Azapo says his organization is working on ensuring that the Pretoria prison cell in which Biko died is turned into a monument.



“ The best memorial to Steve Biko would be a South Africa where everyone respects themselves, has a positive self image filled with a proper self esteem and holds others in high regard ”

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

"It should not be used by other prisoners who may not even understand its significance. We regard it as a place that is holy."

"We would like September 12th to be declared a national holiday. In the Eastern Cape we are saying, why do we still have King Williams Town? Why can't we have it Biko Town?"

"If we say Biko Town the message will reach many people."

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