

REFLECTIONS IN HONOUR OF THE REVEREND ERNEST NKATAZO BAARTMAN

Vuyani “Vido” Nyobole

Methodist Church of Southern Africa
nyobolevido@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

I count it a special honour and a singular privilege to be asked to write an essay on the life and contribution of this esteemed honourable son of the soil, the revered, Rev. Ernest Nkatazo Baartman—a personal intimate friend, brother and spiritual guide. Writing an essay on our esteemed leader, mentor, teacher, prophet and a fearless fighter, the Honourable Reverend Ernest Nkatazo Baartman was not easy as no amount of words can fully capture and describe who he was—his leadership contribution, work and witness in Church and society, what he means to most people who have been touched by his personality and Ministry—*Yingwe emabala bala* (“multi-talented”). The aim of this essay is to briefly capture the life, Ministry, leadership and contribution of Baartman in Church and society, locating that narrative in the socio-political context *in* which his Ministry and personality found roots and blossomed.

Keywords: creative thinking; ministry, leadership, pioneer

INTRODUCTION

We had come to reflect on the life of Baartman and his Ministry at a time when our country, Church and society are yearning for credible, visible leaders of his calibre and stature. The “xenophobic” attacks, which started with statues and rolled over to people, as well as all other forms of ills have befallen our beloved South Africa. These, in my view are but symptoms of what happens when a nation loses its moral compass, and has no capable leadership that can lead the nation into the future. Instead, we have witnessed political leadership that is entrenched in greed and corruption. Baartman belonged to an era of selfless leaders who were prepared to give themselves and make sacrifices for the good of the downtrodden. His condemnation of the homeland leaders



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as *ohlohl'esabo* (self-promoting) is well known. Little did he know that there would come a time when the country would fall in the hands of a breed of vipers who would unashamedly loot public resources for personal gain; a swarm of locusts who are out to destroy the gains made during the time of struggle—as well as the leadership legacy of the Bikos, Mandelas, Sisulus, Sobukwes to name a few. South Africa is in a state of crisis. I think we need to revive the spirit of Black Consciousness—call it “Ubuntu” Consciousness—a love tsunami that calls for collective affirmation, validation, respect, human dignity and unconditional acceptance of one another.

PERSONAL CONTACT

I met this giant of faith for the first time in July 1971 at the Langa Methodist Church. He was with Rev. Dr Alex Boraine. They had come to recruit young people for the National Youth Leadership Programme (NYLTP). The aim of the programme was to encourage young people of different races and cultural groups to give a year of their lives to the Church—three months in intense residential training and nine months in fieldwork.

The encounter was the beginning of a life-long friendship and brotherhood, which grew stronger and stronger as the years went by, up until he passed on. We referred to each other as *Scaka* (“servant”), not only because we regarded ourselves as servants of the Most High, but also because we were each other’s “keeper.” We were mutually accountable for each other. In times of crisis, we stood by each other, in times of happiness, we laughed together; in times of sorrow, we have comforted each other. We, as Apostle Peter would say, were “like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of us has received” as espoused in 1 Peter 4:10. (New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) 1989)

This article is therefore, a narrative of a long friendship journey that elaborates on Baartman’s personal developments and traits, his leadership approach, his contributions to the Church and society, as well as the lessons that may be relevant for future generations.

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Baartman, as he was affectionately known, was the eldest son of Tshomi Wilson and Noncedo Matilda “MaNdaba” Baartman. He was born in Touws Revier and grew up in Kensington. His father, whom he lost at a tender age was a railway worker and his mother a domestic worker. Together with his siblings he was brought up by MaNdaba, a strict disciplinarian who raised them according to principles of the Christian faith and impressed upon them the importance of education, proper conduct and organised home management. His poor, humble home and family background did not stop him from striving for greater things in life.

He started his elementary education at Langa Mission School and matriculated at Langa High School. He went to further his studies at Healdtown where he trained as a teacher during the time when Rev. Seth Mokitimi (the Brown Bomber) was the boarding master. Ernest (Baartman) was one of many young men whose lives were influenced by Rev. Seth Mokitimi, the first black president of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA). Father Seth's influence and example sowed the seed that ultimately saw Baartman answering a calling to full time, itinerant Ministry, while he was a principal at Mzamo (Mseki) Primary School in Nyanga West.

PERSONALITY TRAITS

Below are some of the personality traits that Baartman possessed that made him a cut above the rest:

SENSE OF CALLING

Baartman was driven by a compelling sense of calling. Throughout his Ministry he demonstrated the character of a person who has responded to God's calling:

- He had a living, vibrant experience of the encounter with Jesus Christ, the incarnate God as his personal Saviour and was ever grateful to Him.
- He had a burning desire and unwavering commitment to be an instrument that God can use "to sow love where there is hatred; pardon where there is injury; faith where there is doubt; hope where there is despair; light where there is darkness and joy where there is sadness."(Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi 1912)
- He had an unwavering passion to preach the Gospel, "in season and out of season" so that people may know the liberating grace and power of Jesus, the Christ.
- He had an irresistible compassion for the wretched of the earth, the downtrodden, the hurting, the wounded, and the marginalised. He was willing to suffer for the sake of the Kingdom. He clearly understood and appropriated the Wesleyan covenant prayer:

Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought to low for thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing."(Methodist Hymn Book and Methodist Service Book 1954)

Had it not been this strong sense of calling Baartman would not have survived some of the vicious storms that came his way. This for me, is what keeps one going when the going gets tough.

Sense of Purpose

Related to the above, Baartman was driven by a strong sense of purpose that rendered him courageous in the face of harsh ecclesiastic rigours of winter. It is this inner strength and courage which enabled him to sometimes swim against the stream, the populist route. He was one of the few who dared to speak out against the unjust practices within and outside the Church. He had the will power to overcome fear; conviction and fortitude to stand for what he believed in. He was not easily intimidated even by the constant surveillance of the apartheid security forces. He had internalised Victor Hugo's saying that it is better to die for a cause that will live than to live for a cause that will die.

SENSE OF HUMOUR

The sense of humour has always been Baartman's trademark. He had a unique art of bringing a smile to people's faces even during the darkest, tense moments. He would not finish a presentation, speech or sermon without throwing in something that would make people laugh. He knew that laughter is the sun that drives winter from the human face and heals all wounds.

At one stage we visited him with the Presiding Bishop Rev. Ziphozihle Siwa and Rev. Vukile Mehana, and his remark was *Ndigula kakhulu na kude kufike abefundisi abakhulu kangaka?* ("I become worried sick when I get visited by such prominent clergy?").

This sense of humour is what kept his audience captivated. He had mastered the art of how to motivate people by engaging their emotional and spiritual energies.

He had a sarcastic way of deflating people who were pompous or had an inflated ego. He would in a gentle, but harsh way, bring them down to mother earth. You had to be used to him in order not to take offence.

SENSE OF CONTENTMENT

Baartman lived by the philosophy that joy in life doesn't come from receiving, but that comes from giving. Someone once said we humans are wired to receive, but when we are in Christ and have God in our lives; and His Spirit rewires you to give. Baartman was not greedy, nor did he envy others who seemed to be more gifted and blessed than him. In fact, for him a blessing was a blessing, period. There was no greater and lesser blessing. He knew that contentment is the highest form of happiness. He was content with what he had and where he was. For him God was everything. When he retired from active Ministry, we encouraged him to have his own place where he would have peace of mind, but he would not relent. He was content to stay with his siblings in Gugulethu and later Thornton home.

He stood as a living model of what Paul's words: I am glad in God, far happier than you would ever guess... Actually, I don't have a sense of needing anything personally. I

have learned by now to be quite content whatever my circumstances. I am just as happy with little as with much, with much as with little. I have found the recipe for being happy whether full or hungry, hands full or hands empty. Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am (Philippians 4:11-13). Baartman lived a stress-free life.

LEADERSHIP APPROACH AND VISION

Philosophical Undergirds

Baartman's Ministry, leadership approach, teachings, preaching and initiatives/interventions were informed, underpinned and propelled by his theological understanding, ideological stance, philosophical perspectives and hermeneutical presuppositions.

Some of the wells from which he drank are the works of James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power*, Steve Biko's *I Write what I like* (1987), Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970 [1993]), Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Life Together and Letters and Papers from Prison* and (1959), Nosipho Majeke's *The Role of Missionaries in Conquest* (1952) to mention but a few. If you dig deeper into these works, you will be bound to make certain mind shifts, change gears, adopt new tactics and "cast the net on the other side."

Let me give you few examples of such shifts that were noticeable in Baartman's life:

- From orthodoxy (right belief) to orthopraxis (right action)
- From magical and naïve consciousness to critical consciousness
- From being a consumer of the dominant class ideologies to being the producer of own ideas and frames of reference
- From being a passive subject to being a subversive activist; and
- From being an actor on other people's scripts to being a writer of his own script.

Expressions of his Leadership

Equipping the Saints

Baartman understood his mission priority as that of equipping God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be edified (Ephesians 4:12). The success of his Ministry could be attributed to the ability he possessed to mobilise and equip people to drive their Ministries. He empowered them to unearth and nurture their talents, thus unlocking their potential. He was knighted in Mdantsane as "Sir Baart", because of his emphasis on the teaching Ministry. As Weenens (1993, 5) asserts, people are weary

of what GK Chesterton called cures that do not cure, blessings that do not bless, and solutions that do not solve.

People Involvement

Baartman mastery was not only in “empowering” the people but also in instilling in them a sense of dignity and ownership (the realisation that they are the Church), as well as a culture of sacrificial giving. He made room for the people of God to give expression to their God-given gifts and talents. He knew that collaborative action was the name of the game. Through his interactive, participative approach he inspired, motivated and built confidence in people. He lived the Wesleyan call of “every member ministry.” He applauded and affirmed people’s capabilities and efforts. People do not care how much you know, until they know how much you care.

Baartman recognised the importance of the relationship between leaders and followers. He believed that followers are empowered by leaders to do more than they can ever imagined. One of the legacies he left in the circuits he served is how he used Rona drive to make black circuits self-reliant and built their own sanctuaries without borrowing money. Even during his tenure as Bishop he was consistently discouraging circuits/organisations from depending on handouts. The Black Consciousness philosophy of *Black man! You are on your own* had become part of his DNA.

Bias for Action

Baartman avoided what I refer to as “the smart talk trap”—that is, when words become substitutes for action—when we use flowery words and trendy, pretentious language, (sometimes spiced with emotional undertones) as a camouflage for non-action—when one uses the gift of the gab to conceal, rationalise blind, lie, mystify etc. Many organisations, including churches are plagued by this particular inactivity. Baartman would always say *Bethuna, masithi sithetha sibe sisenza* (“Folks, let our talking be accompanied by action”). He knew how to usher his forces into a formidable army of activists. Baartman was a pragmatist, a doer.

Servanthood Posture

Baartman was a pastor at heart; in spite of his fighting spirit. He loved the people he was called to lead and serve. He would go out of his way, go an extra mile, as a local Minister, Superintendent and Bishop to care for those entrusted to his pastoral responsibility. He adopted a relational approach to Ministry—that is, he built and cultivated networks of relationship. Baartman recognised that relational Ministry is about cultivating, planting, harvesting and multiplying. It is about listening, empathising, walking alongside building networks. *Ungunmtu ebantwini* (“a person amongst other people”). He understood that a preacher of the gospel is a servant of all. Serving others is one of the greatest gifts of

the Ministry. We grow and are healed as we serve others (Isaiah 58:6-8). The power of the Gospel lies in combining the life-changing message with selfless service.

Dr Martin Luther King Jnr. is reported to have said: *Everyone can be great, because everyone can serve.* Baartman was a great, towering stalwart of the Church because he was prepared to “take the form of a servant.”

LEADERSHIP IN CHURCH AND IN SOCIETY

A Pioneer

Baartman’s leadership skills emerged even before he joined the Ministry. At Healdtown he received an award for best student in 1952, and was the founder, trainer and manager of the Kwezi Rugby Club. He also became the first black principal in Nyanga West.

During the 40 years of his active Ministry he became:

- the first black full-time General Secretary of the Christian Education and Youth Department;
- founder and one of the first directors of Black Community Programmes
- proponent and exponent of black theology;
- exponent of Black Awareness and Black Consciousness; as well as
- founder and first chairperson of the Black Methodist Consultation Patron of the Border Detainees’ Dependents Conference.

He also served as:

- the Secretary of Synod in the Natal Coastal district and Vice Chair of the Queenstown Grahamstown and Cape of Good Hope districts
- President of Conference (1986)
- YMG General President (1995–1998) and President of the Queenstown and Grahamstown Districts
- Bishop of Namibia (1992) and Queenstown District (1985–1990), as well as
- Superintendent of East London; Motherwell and Bongani circuits.

A Visionary

Baartman was a visionary leader. He was always a step ahead and always did forecasts of how things were and how they could be. He walked in faith. It is said that one cannot discover new oceans until they have courage to lose sight of the shore. Navigators of the old plotted their course by looking at the stars. They never reached the stars but they did reach their destination.

Dr Dion Foster in his *Random Ramblings*, has this to say about Rev. Baartman:

This was the visionary because he had the courage to see what the Church needed (black leaders) in an era when others could not, and would not, see it. He was visionary because even though he knew this would be dangerous, and threatening, endeavour, he was sustained by what few others, even many of his black denominations, could not see – the vision of a predominantly black denomination, in a white dominated country, led by black leaders. This could have cost him his ministry, but because he could see what God wanted he swam against the stream, and did the extraordinary thing that helped to transform our Church for the generations that followed. It takes great sensitivity to see what others cannot see. It takes courage to make that vision become a reality, even in the face of great adversity and opposition (www.spirituality.org.za/labels/Ernest%20Baartman.html).

A Critical Thinker

A critical thinker in my view is a person who analyses the situation, identifies, questions and expose its fundamental presumptions, value base and engage with it appropriately. Baartman's initiation of the Black Ministers Consultation, later known as Black Methodists Consultation was informed by this critical analysis of the Methodist Church's existential reality.

James Cone (1986) developed a new hermeneutic language, which was appropriated by many South African Black theologians; namely that of dealing with the experiences of oppression from the perspective of the oppressed, and evaluating the efforts of the latter to liberate themselves. Therefore, based on this, the role of theology is to invite, not only the critique of nonreligious ideologies that dominate the consciousness of societies, but also the critique of those very ideologies permeating and fostered by religious traditions. For Cone (1986), one's station in life determines not only how they perceive and relate to God, but also the questions they ask of God, from God and about God. These hermeneutical tools helped in shaping Baartman's critical thinking. That is why he was regarded as a "revolutionary" within the Church circles.

A Champion of Justice

Rev. Baartman had always opposed anything that was contrary to the dictates of the Gospel and values of the Kingdom. Baartman, together with others, in spearheading the formation of the BMC, grabbed the microphone from the white liberals who projected themselves as the black man's messiahs and acted as champions of the black man's struggle, speaking on our behalf on a selective basis. The formation of the BMC forced the Church to examine her own contradictions and distortions within her own life and took a stand on socio-economic and political issues.

Baartman was a prominent spokesperson of black people and also represented their aspirations in platforms within and outside the Church. He spoke plainly then—*wayetheth'uthyatyhiwe* ("never minced words") and some whites left the Methodist

Church. In fact many white circuits, including some black circuits refused to pay assessments for the Christian Education and Youth Department (CEYD). When Baartman was appointed the Assistant General Secretary of the Mission Department, more than five white circuits withdrew their support to the Mission and Extension Fund. During the South African Church Leaders Association (SACLA) Conference he brought a Dutch Reform to tears when in his usual undiplomatic manner, he challenged his perceptions.

As recorded in Cassidy's (1997) book, *I will heal their land*, Baartman once said:

As an adult I find it painful to sit in a Congress and listen to a White man telling me to set my sights on Jesus and my surroundings will be right. It is funny and hurtful to sit here as a Black man and listen to a White so insensitive as to tell me we are over concerned with material things when he does not get repeated warnings about influx laws. Please spare us that hurt, and humiliation. Christ calls us as Blacks to help ourselves out of this abyss of despair. (Cassidy 1997, 173)

On another occasion, he is reported to have said:

The White man was given a great opportunity to bring a Black man to the cross, but rather sought to take him to the thrones of Europe ... The White cannot dewesternise the Black man. This is the task of the Black man. Let an authentic Black man preach to Black young people. Yes, the African young person needs to be told by a Black man that God loves him, that he is the child of God and needs to accept this; that he is called to freedom. He is called to freedom from poverty, freedom from ignorance, freedom from darkness of sin, but also from physical darkness of the townships. He needs to hear that Jesus frees from the bondage of sin, but also from the bondage of man's oppression. The Black young person must be helped to love God, to love himself and to love the White man ... in order to help him (White) to understand what love is (Cassidy 1997, 173).

As a source of identity and survival, the faith of the church sustained the people when everything else has failed. God was that reality to which the people turned to for identity and worth, because the existing social, political, and economic structures of the time led them to believe that they were nobodies ... In the eyes of Almighty, they were children of God, whose future was not defined by the white structures that humiliated them...

CONCLUSION: THE LEADER WHO LIVES ON - LEGACY FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

The question is what can we learn from Baartman's legacy?

1. Ministry is a sacred responsibility and should not be taken lightly
2. Courage to be and to do—your action define impact
3. Consciousness to serve

4. Art of self-leadership
5. Unless you know how to follow, listen, and learn, you are not ready to lead.
6. The most important things in life aren't things, it is the invisible value one adds in people's lives

Baartman's legacy will forever live in the hearts and lives of many who had the privilege of being his acquaintances in Ministry. He spent his leadership equity wisely. *Sinokumfumana phi na umntu onje, onoMoya kaThixo* ("Where will we find a man like this, who is full of God's Spirit") as espoused in Genesis 41:38.

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