

Are South African blacks... *Free at Last...?* not by a long shot, says one black South African reporter

by Rob Cowles
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Visiting South African journalist Siphon Ngcobo was a guest lecturer at Brevard College's journalism 101 class last week. Although Ngcobo smiled often as he told of his imprisonment and torturing, the class could see beyond the brave grin of the short yet defiant reporter from Soweto. This is his story.

Christmas was over, stories were hard to come by, and the newsroom was less than bustling. Sitting in his chair pondering on ideas, Siphon Ngcobo, *Business Day's* South African political reporter decided to take a break and visit some journalists on the other side of the building.

Upon return, Ngcobo turned the corner into the hallway looking up just in time to see two large, suspicious-looking white men standing outside the newsroom. Composed, yet wary of trouble, he instinctively cleared out of the hallway and hid until they left.

Immediately, he ran to his supervisor to find out who they were and what they wanted. Sure enough, they were cops from the South African government secret police.

Suddenly, a phone rang. Among all the confusion, Ngcobo picked it up not realizing what he had just done. It was a woman from the secret police posing unimportant questions verifying that Ngcobo was indeed there. Overcome by fear and shock, Ngcobo scampered off to a hiding place as quickly as possible. Within two minutes the policemen were searching for him, making a shambles of his desk, although managing to take most of his important notebooks first. The two men urged Ngcobo's supervisor to turn him over to the authorities simply for questioning; he would not be arrested. As Ngcobo came through the doorway his mind went haywire as the cops grabbed him, arrested him, and dragged him off to prison.

As the policemen rotated shifts, Ngcobo slumped over in lethargic desperation. Questioned for hours and hours, sometimes whole days, faces blurred, his head spun, his voice ached, and his throat was dry. Ngcobo became so exhausted he couldn't speak.

Reminiscing back on that month of solitary confinement, he remembers thinking, "I was just sitting in that cell, praying I wouldn't be killed."

Ngcobo got lucky, he says, when he was released after spending two months



Speaking to a BC journalism class on Feb. 1, South African journalist Siphon Ngcobo tells the young reporters how he was tortured and beaten for writing the truth. (Clarion photo by Jock Lauterer)

in jail. Pressure had been brought to bear on the government by the international press associations.

This was the most recent term he spent in jail, but it definitely was not the scariest.

In 1977, Ngcobo was eagerly waiting for a passport that would get him safely to America. One day, as he peeked out the shades, he bore witness to a frightening sight: dozens of barrels of guns targeting him at the window. Threatening to storm the house, the cops relinquished when Ngcobo sadly left his family with the possibility of his never returning home. Would they ever see him again?

After two years of utter hell, having survived electric shock to his genitals, being nearly crippled and bleeding from his ears, he was given a trial. As soon as he was proven innocent, a new law, which had been passed during his tenure in jail, almost condemned him to a period of more torture. Fortunately he was released, frantically disappearing into the underground for a while to regain his composure.

The once-fearless youth, who had once slept in burned out cars and constantly been running from the secret police, was tired out. The grandson of a Zulu chief, he felt the cruelty of racism floating, suppressing the air in South Africa.

He could not quit now. His living knowledge and experience gained writing for publications as the secretary of the outlawed Pan Africanism Congress (PAC) helped him land a job with the *Rand Daily Mail*. With a possible punishment of a \$20,000 fine or 10 years in jail for writing "subversive literature", Ngcobo had learned that "You cannot write a lot of what you see without permission of the Commissioner of Police."

Apartheid thrives in South Africa, where the blacks, which comprise 75 percent of total population, are reduced to existing in grinding poverty. Even in this day and age, racism flourishes throughout the heart of this aristocratically ruled country.

In South Africa, where Ngcobo lived illegally in a white neighborhood, blacks are forced to commute 20 miles into the city to sweat in the hot sun "working for peanuts" just to meander back to the ghettos exhausted. This daily ritual is common all over South Africa where welfare is never heard of, minimum wage is nonexistent and prejudice is guaranteed to ignite riots for years to come.

Apartheid can be described as "separation in all spheres of life," Ngcobo says. Whites cannot live in black townships and blacks found living

in white townships are persecuted. No blacks can own houses; they can only rent. In Soweto alone there are 40,000 homeless. At one time it was legal for cops to follow people around to ensure no races would mix. This "Immorality Act" has since been scrapped, but Ngcobo points out that the laws are constructed in such a way as to always be in favor of the whites.

Describing the history of South Africa, Ngcobo told how Indians were brought by the Dutch to South Africa and put to work on sugarcane plantations. Ngcobo laughs at the thought that the Dutch "discovered" South Africa in 1652, replying, "We've been there all along."

He points out, "in South Africa you're either with the oppressed, or the oppressor, even as a journalist... Indians and mixed races (called 'colored people' in South Africa) live in only slightly better ghettos."

One day, as he was following the police for a story, a skirmish broke out with demonstrators, forcing him to take a dive to the ground. He says, "I was lying on the ground without moving for 45 minutes because if I'd moved I'd have been shot. The police would have thought I was a demonstrator and the demonstrators would have thought I was with the police."

Another time he said, "A friend of mine was shot. A camera man with Reuters. The police were firing just like cowboys; he was standing right beside me. The police shot him and they could see he was a journalist!"

Safe and sound in a Brevard College classroom, the students sat entranced for two hours learning about reality in South Africa.

Ngcobo is learning from us too. He is spending a year with the *Hendersonville Times-News* learning American journalism and attempting to erase many myths about South Africa.

Approached by a student's question concerning jailed black leader Nelson Mandela's possible release in the near future, Ngcobo said, "So what? Mandela is more effective in a jailhouse than he would be out. When they let Mandela go, 3,000 more still will be in prison. Will that mean Apartheid is over?"

As the bell rang, bags zipped and notebooks closed. In the rush for class, one more question emerged: "Will you ever go back? To South Africa?"

Ngcobo calmly replied, "I must return, it is in my soul."