

AFRICAN TRAGEDY

PHYLLIS NTANTALA.

It is the sad story of a whole people—8,535,000 souls, landless, homeless, destitute; a people who have been ruthlessly uprooted from the country but not allowed to develop roots in the towns; victims of a vicious worked-out system to render them homeless, propertyless and poor so that they can be pushed into the labour market to still the economic cries of the industrial age. The Native Reserves have them by the thousand—those young men who have never known life; husbands and fathers who have never known what home is, what family life is; fathers who do not know even their own children. It is the tragic story of thousands of young women who are widowed long before they reach the age of thirty; young married women who have never been mothers; young women whose life has been one long song of sorrow—burying one baby after another and lastly burying the husband—that lover she has never known as husband and father. To them—both men and women—adulthood means the end of life; it means loneliness, sorrow, tears and death; it means a life without a future because there is no present.

Hoping to escape misery in the reserves, they form a never-ending line to the cities where they crowd themselves with relatives and friends in the city slums, in the “pondokkie” or shanty towns sprawling round the big cities.¹ Johannesburg has its share of these slums—Alexandra Township, that black “city” of eroded streets—streets made boggy by ever-dripping water taps, a place of filth, disease, vice, and acts of violence. It has its Orlando Shelters, that grey “city” of breeze blocks, overflowing sanitation buckets fermenting in the hot Transvaal sun, a place of stench and disease that fill the air—a hot-bed of all kinds of social evils.

And Cape Town. Cape Town has its Windermere the beauty of whose name sneers at the cluster of dun-coloured beaten-out oil drums, beaten-out motor car shells, rusty bits of iron—all put together to form a roof over so many heads—a confusion of ill-constructed, badly-lighted shacks surrounded by pools of mud, urine and excreta. It has its Blouvillei, Cook’s Bush, Vrygrond, Eureka Estate, Rylands Estate, Sakkiesdorp—all death-traps winter and

¹ According to the figures of the 1951 census, this population constantly moving between town and country numbered 569,000 a year, and it consisted of 503,000 males and 66,000 females—two-thirds of whom were between twenty and thirty-nine years old and nearly 94% younger than fifty years. (Tomlinson Report P. 53.)

summer alike, for the rickety structures cannot stand the Cape Peninsula winter floods and in summer they are too hot to live in. Durban has its Cato Manor; Port Elizabeth its Korsten; East London its East and West Bank locations—none of them fit for human habitation. Here stay men and women who refuse to succumb to the conditions of squalor in which they live. It is in these places and because of the deplorable inhuman conditions under which people are forced to live, that many a young life is ruined. It is these erosive conditions that have given rise to the Skollie, the Tsotsi, the thief, the cut-throat and murderer. What is amazing is that so many of these people still manage to remain decent, respectable and law-abiding.

In the Cape Peninsula in 1954 there were at least thirty-eight of these pondokkie villages on the Cape Flats and in Goodwood, Parow and Bellville, "Black Spots" with about 17,000 people living in them. All 17,000 had moved to these villages because they could not find accommodation in the slums of Cape Town, nor in Langa and Nyanga locations. Here they built their own shacks on someone's ground at a rental of about five to ten shillings a month; many, however, were sub-tenants. There are no amenities even of the barest kind—no water, no lights, no sanitation. Water they buy at a penny per four-gallon tin from a hawker, the bush and sand dunes serve as latrines. In a few like Eureka Estate, whose Xhosa name is "Kwa Qhobosh 'imfene"—meaning "at the place where a baboon is knee-haltered"—and Windermere, known to the people as "e Mtsheko" "purging with belly-ache", there is some form of bucket sanitation, but these are always overflowing and with the pools of water, mud, excreta, there is a foul-smelling slough that for ever surrounds these pondokkies. In all of them life is insecure, for these are hot-beds of vice and crime. In winter these flimsy shacks are beaten by storms and rivers of water form right inside the pondokkies, washing away kitchen utensils, household goods and other possessions.

During the winter of 1954 the whole of Cook's Bush was flooded neck-high and most of the pondokkies were submerged, and nearly 600 people rescued from the floods lost everything they had. And summer with its strong South-Easter in the months of October and November is equally dreaded. A fire breaking out in one of these iron and paper shacks spreads so quickly to the others, and fanned by the South-Easter, the flames leap from structure to structure so easily that often fifty to sixty of these structures are eaten up by flames within a few minutes and hundreds of people rendered

homeless with everything lost. Many a man, woman and child has been burnt to death in these fires; many a savings of many years of hard toil have been lost in these fires and many a hard-earned wardrobe has been burnt to ashes in these fires.

The *Cape Times* of 3 November 1954, carried this caption: "URGENT PLAN TO CLEAR BLACK SPOTS" and went on to announce that the Divisional Council was waiting for the Government green light to go ahead with a plan to establish an emergency camp in Nyanga where 18,000 pondokkie dwellers would be settled. This meant that all Squatters' camps or Black Spots would now be controlled by the Divisional Council, and a plan of some sort in the building of the pondokkies and the camps be followed. Each family would be allotted a site on which to build and for which the Divisional Council would pocket the sum of £1 per site. The owners would have to provide their own building material. This "Emergency Camp" has since been established. There are three of these camps in this area—"Kraaifontein", whose people came mainly from pondokkies in the Kraaifontein, Bellville and Goodwood areas. Here there is a main road of sorts, the sand dunes have been levelled out by the Council, there is a pit latrine to each family, a water tap, and all the pondokkies stand in rows, and here the people have shown how ingenious they can be, shown their desire to have a home, real homes, stopping at nothing to make these temporary shelters presentable. They have used every penny they could spare to put up strong well-constructed pondokkies. The ugly rusty iron has been painted by most, the insides neatly finished off with brown paper over the sheets of cardboard; some have the insides lined with ceiling board, the floors lined with bricks and covered with flooring board; some even have pieces of dining room, bedroom and kitchen furniture. Needless to say, this is the show-piece of the Divisional Council even though perhaps the Council's contribution towards making this camp presentable has been the slightest.

Then there is "Brown's Farm". Here too most of the pondokkies are arranged in rows, strongly built, of a fairly large size. But there is neither water nor sanitation—for latrines, the people hide behind the bush and the sand dunes. Most of these people came from Cook's Bush and are the victims of the 1954 floods. "Sakkiesdorp" is the oldest of these camps, but there are many new arrivals in that part of the camp further in the bush. As the name implies this was a camp of hessian or sack shelters, but since the change-over, the people have been made to use iron

and timber. In the older portion of this camp, the pondokkies stand irregularly on little knolls around which stand pools of water and mud. These pondokkies look small and rickety. Those further in the bush stand in rows. Here also the people have used all their money to put up respectable pondokkies; these are neat and clean; some have plants ready to put in the ground when the time comes. As in "Kraaifontein" there are pit latrines—one to two families—white boxes that look very much like phone booths. But as in "Brown's Farm" there is no water here—water is bought from a hawker who brings it in a big drum on his horse-cart and sells it to the people at a penny per four-gallon tin and half a crown per drum. Only three shops serve the whole population of the Nyanga area and these three camps—one shop near the Cement Works Factory and the other two on the main road. To the people in Sakkiesdorp the nearest shop is about a mile away through bush and to those in Kraaifontein about two miles away. Fortunately, some Indian traders from Bellville and Parow bring them groceries twice a week and from them they make their weekly purchases.

It was in Sakkiesdorp that we met Mrs. Dumani. Her pondokkie is one of the big ones—a fairly large bedroom and a kitchen-living room in front. When we visited her, her husband who works at night in a factory in Parow was busy partitioning off the kitchen. (As he works at night, Mr. Dumani should have been sleeping at this time, but how can a man sleep when there is a home to build for a man's family?) It is a neat little place, this pondokkie, with walls and ceiling neatly lined off with cardboard over which are neatly pasted sheets of brown paper. The wooden floor is firm and well-laid—in the bedroom there was a clean square of linoleum covering the floor and on top of the wardrobe was another roll of linoleum waiting to be laid on the dining room floor when that was finished. There were still stacks of material outside—iron, timber and cardboard; Mrs. Dumani's plants stood in tins outside ready to be put in when all was ready. The material for all this had cost them £40 and it is lucky for Mr. Dumani that he can wield a hammer, for he has done all the work himself with the help of a friend over the weekends. His neighbour Mr. Cwaka instead has had to pay £150 for material and labour for his pondokkie—a man prepared to spend so much money on a temporary structure which he may be ordered to pull off the next day?

The Dumani family came to Sakkiesdorp from Tiervlei where they shared a house with a Coloured family. And before Tiervlei and Sakkiesdorp?

“Mr. Dumani here is my second husband—my first died here in Cape Town in 1949—he was Mr. Sahluko and we both came from the Engcobo district in the Transkei. ‘U Sathana wandicela mna ku Thixo, waza u Thixo wampha’—The Devil asked God to give me to Him for a present and God did. I was only nineteen years when I got married to my first husband in 1932; he was already a worker here in Cape Town. He was one of four brothers and of these only his eldest had a piece of land to till—this having been handed down to him from his grandfather. But we too hoped that some day we would have a piece of our own and remain in the reserves. It was a silly hope.”

“Although I was pregnant and my husband and I would have loved to be together when our first child was born, he was forced to leave me six months after our marriage and come to seek work in Cape Town. The child was born five months afterwards—a boy. But his father never saw him, for the child died at the age of fifteen months before his father could afford to join us again. It was not until the end of 1935 that my husband could come home—the years 1933 and 1934 were very bad years—there was drought in the reserves, the stock had died, very little had been reaped from the fields and all the money he sent home was used for buying food. So bad was the position that in all the two years he managed to buy just two beasts. Towards the end of 1936 I got my second baby—another boy. This baby my husband saw because in spite of our difficulties he was determined to stay by me until the child was born. He left for the city again in 1937 when the baby was three months. He never saw him again. The baby died at the age of ten months. My husband’s intention when he left in 1937 was to remain in town for only two years and then return to the reserves for good and build his own home. But he lost his job—a good job that paid him £8 a month—and after hunting for a job for three months he managed to get a £6 job as a cleaner.”

“So in 1938 we decided that I should join him in town. We shared a room with two other couples—also from Engcobo—in Napier Street and for the room we paid £1 per family per month. Three couples in one room! Just like animals, no privacy at all! I got a job as cook soon after my arrival and this brought in another £6 so between the two of us we had £12 a month. But in 1940 I fell pregnant and did not go back to service until my baby-daughter was two years old. I had to go back to work, but with a baby on my back there was no hope of finding a job. So I was forced to part with her. I sent her away under charge of some friends who

happened to be returning 'home' to the reserves—to be looked after by her father's mother. I went into service again, this time getting an extra ten shillings to my six pounds a month and my husband also had got a better paying job in one of the Bazaars at £3 a week. Putting 1945 as our dead-line for going back to the reserves, we tried to save as much as we could, putting away in the Post Office every penny of my wages and trying to make do with my husband's £3 a week; my husband walking to his work in the Bazaar in town and I coming out to the room once or twice a week and sending £3 every two months for the maintenance of the child in the reserves."

"So in April 1945, we packed and left for the reserves for good—so we thought. When we got there we quickly put up a home of our own not very far from that of the old people, bought two cows and two oxen and then started the vain search for a piece of land; even one to hire if we could not get one of our own. You can have no idea how scarce these allotments are. There was a time when a bribe could secure one some arable plot, but by 1945 these were so scarce that even your fattest heifer could not secure you a single acre. My husband was in the Engcobo Land Office every Tuesday, waiting there with many others and he used to tell me how of the twenty to thirty people there on any Tuesday, only five or six would get land allotted them. Twice he was told that as his father and brother had allotments he could not get any. There were men as old as his father who had never had any allotments. Meanwhile the drought was becoming worse and worse—there hadn't been any milk now for five years since the castration² of the bulls in 1939-40, the field crop had been poor and the stock had died of thirst and hunger—one of our cows too had died in the winter of 1946 after calving. The little money we had brought with us was fast being spent."

"And so it was that my husband left for Cape Town in February of 1947. I never saw him again. He spent most of 1947 in and out of hospital and in 1948 he died of T.B. here in Cape Town. I could not even come down for the funeral—I had no money for the journey. It was only months after that I could manage to come down, leaving my home and my child. I never saw my daughter again. She died in 1951 at the age of eleven. And so the

² In 1939-40 the Government sent its officials to castrate the bulls of the people in the Transkei (each herd usually had its own bull), on the promise that the Government would send the people milk-producing bulls that would improve their stock. But instead of the Friesland, Jersey and Shorthorn bulls that the officials had spoken of, Afrikaner bulls—non-milk-producers—were sent. These were so few—one bull to each Ward—that very few cows were ever covered in a year and very few calves were born. This was the first factor that made milk so scarce in the reserves.

last link with my late husband was gone. There was nothing left of what I had with him—the home in which we had hardly lived together during our nineteen years of married life was in a bad state of repair, our few beasts had not increased, the little money we had was gone and now our only surviving child was dead; everything was gone. So even though his people wanted me to stay on with them I could not—what was there to remain for?”

“So back to town I came and in 1952 I met and married Mr. Dumani who worked in a furniture shop in town earning £3 5s. a week. We stayed as sub-tenants in a room in Kensington paying a rent of £3 a month. I got back to the job I left before going home in 1951. In 1953 we were ejected from this room for failure to pay rent. The chief tenant to whom we paid our £3 a month never paid a penny to the landlord for nine months, and though the landlord was sympathetic there was nothing he could do for us—according to the law we had not paid our rent. To Cook’s Bush we moved, then built our own shack in March 1953. We lost this with everything we had in a fire that broke out one night in November then. We soon put up new ones—these were flooded out in the winter floods of 1954 when the water rose neck-high and our pondokkies were like little boats in an ocean of water. There again we lost everything except the clothes we stood in and a blanket each. This time it was really hard for we had not recovered from the fire of the previous year. So, rather than go to Nyanga, we decided to look for a place—dry and solid even if it meant paying three pounds for rent. We managed to get this place in Tiervlei where we shared a house with a coloured family. My husband had got a job near—in Parow—the job he has now. Here again we were not to stay—the Inspectors came; they wanted ‘no natives among coloured people’—we had to go to the emergency camp in Nyanga or I would have to go back to the reserves.”

“So one wet morning we were brought here by lorry, dumped in the bush and had to do what best we could to provide shelter for ourselves and our possessions. On occasions like these I sometimes feel thankful I have no children; it is really heart-breaking to those who have children and have to run around in the cold with them on their backs, carrying them around as a cat carries its young in its teeth. This is another pondokkies-land and we will be smoked out of this place one day just as we used to be smoked out in Cooks’ Bush. The £40 we used in the building of this place is about all the savings we had; transport is

bad, it costs so much. Return to the reserves, they say. What is there to go back to? Those from the reserves tell us that the position there is worse than it is in the towns—at least here one can still take in washing and get some five to ten shillings for it depending on how liberal one's mistress is. In the Ciskei where my husband comes from the position is worse than it is in the Transkei; for generations now so very few have had arable plots of land; all his brothers are in the big cities working, so are his sisters and their husbands; his mother and father were in the cities too, they only went back to die in the reserves. There is nothing to go back to. What is there to go back to?"

Her story is typical of many of these people who are forever moving up and down between town and country, every day of every month of every year. The reserves are eroded bare and cannot provide any livelihood for the people. It is not a question of overstocking and the bad farming methods of the "native" as some would have us believe, but a question of over-population and a crying demand for the re-distribution of the land. There is not enough land for those who would like to remain on the land as peasants, not because the land has been used as pasture but because it has been occupied by the increasing population. The Native Reserves to-day are so over-crowded that in some areas the population density is from 94 to over 200 per square mile—the wonder is that there is still a blade of grass growing. If the cattle owned by the Africans were to be divided among the people there would not be enough to go round, for each person would get just a horn and an ear. This is against seventy head of cattle per white farmer. It is so with the sheep too, for to every five sheep that an African owns there are ninety per white farmer. These figures then explode the lie of overstocking. Milk to-day in the reserves is a luxury, so much of a luxury that many children born ten to fifteen years ago have never seen milk from a cow, never tasted *amasi*³ from the family cow for there is no family cow. If they know milk at all it is as it is sold in tins in the shops. "Bad farming methods of the native"—and who is there to produce crops for consumption and market, when all the able-bodied men and women are in the work centres and if young women there are, it is those far advanced in pregnancy and those with young babies? The reserves to-day are a haven for the infirm, the aged and the children.

The Glen Grey Act and all the Land Acts never gave the African

³ A form of buttermilk.

land; the reserves were never meant to provide the African with land from which to squeeze out a livelihood. In the first place most of the land in the reserves is crown land and the people have no rights on it, they can be moved any day and receive compensation only for the huts they have put on it; even in those areas where there is some form of individual tenure of land, in fact the people have no rights. For they may not dispose of the land as they like, they may not stay away from it beyond a certain period, it may not be mortgaged nor is it divisible by will and is inheritable only in terms of a Table of Succession, based on a system of primogeniture. If we compare the rural land area with the rural population we find that 124,186,000 morgen of land are owned and occupied by only 700,000 Whites, while 6,025,547 Africans are crowded into 17,518,977 morgen of crown land called the "Native Reserves". The problem of the African, the cause behind this story of a people's agony is *LANDLESSNESS: LANDLESSNESS*, so that the people will be forced out into the labour market, to the mines and farms where they will be herded together in camps, compounds and locations, where each white industrialist, farmer and housewife will be allotted his or her fair share of hands. In the towns only their labour is wanted—their selves not.

Each day after they have given of their labour, they must go and hide themselves away behind some bush or sand dune, to come out only when their hands are wanted again. To remain in the towns they must carry permits—documents legalising their stay, and every man and woman and every boy of sixteen and over must carry on his or her person this document of permission and must produce it on demand by an official anywhere and at any time; failure to produce it may mean going to jail as if one were a criminal; it may mean work on a work-colony; it may mean being trucked back to the reserves whether one has a home there or not. It is not that the town does not want them, not that their hands are not needed—these are the people who rear the white child the moment it arrives from the nursing home until it is a teen-ager; the people who keep the white man and his home clean; the people who cook his food, the people who have built the great towers in which the white man lives; the people who have made him rich. The purpose is to make them forever feel unwanted, insecure, feel that they are in town because of some kind and benevolent Government official, feel inferior and sub-human and not fit to reap the ordinary fruits of their labour.