

SOUTH AFRICA'S URBAN BLACKS

M. G. Whisson reviews South Africa's Urban Blacks: Problems and Challenges.

ed. G. Marais and R. van der Kooy, Centre for Management Studies, School of Business Leadership, U.N.I.S.A. pp. 370.

"Cheshire-Puss", she began . . . "Would you tell me, please which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to", said the Cat. "In **that** direction lives a Hatter — and in **that** direction lives a March Hare. Visit either you like — they're both mad".

"But I don't want to go among mad people", Alice remarked.

"Oh you can't help that", said the Cat. "We're all mad here".

It is with cheerful fatalism of the Cheshire Cat that one feels a sense of identity on reading this volume, although the semantics of Humpty Dumpty spring more to mind on reading Robert R. Tusenius's contribution "**The problem, holistically, realistically, rationally and objectively**". The contributions to the book can be grouped into three categories. Five chapters are very general — "**Urbanisation**", "**A sociological view of a new society**", "**The psychology of the urban black : the gap between tribe and city**", "**The problem, holistically, etc.**", "**Fact, Fiction and philosophy**". Four chapters address themselves to more specific socio-political issues — "**The dilemma of the church**", "**Education for free development**", "**Political spectators**", "**Urban blacks and nationhood**". Five chapters deal with economic issues — consumer behaviour, black workers, black entrepreneurs, economic constraints and black mobility.

The general chapters, while not necessarily coming to the same conclusions in detail, are predicated on a number of assumptions which give them measure of unity. The assumptions are worth parading as they are not always explicit. First, it is assumed that black and white are, of necessity, categories of fundamental and immutable socio-political significance. There cannot be a government, it must be **white** or **black** or some arrangement whereby the one limits the other. A second assumption might seem to contradict the first but is, in fact, subordinate to it. The second assumption is that as blacks are enabled to become more like middle-class whites, they will not only do so, but will be more moderate in their demands. Third, there is an evolutionist assumption — that blacks are evolving from a tribal society towards a western society, becoming more like the writers' reference group as they slowly slough off their tribal ways.

"Although the lifestyle of the black in the tribe is already undoubtedly affected by contact with other cultures, he has a particular relationship with his environment. In contrast to modern man, whose approach to life is objectively analytical and whose spirit is accordingly also divided into value, thought and feeling systems, blacks have a different approach. They do not face the world objectively and at a distance but live in it". (p. 76)

Fourth, it is assumed that it is possible, given the resources available in South Africa, for an acceptable measure of

social and economic justice to be achieved without the privileged elite making massive, costly and risky concessions to the aspirations of the blacks. Finally, it is assumed that a peaceful resolution of South Africa's conflicts of interest is possible.

Thus it can be affirmed "Nobody should be left in any doubt about the fact that white people have sovereign status in their own country, South Africa, and that their Government has the sole right to exercise authority over everybody within its borders". (p. 324)

"The (government's political) blue print, therefore, should be sufficiently realistic for it to be (or capable of being made) acceptable to 'realistic people of goodwill' irrespective of race or political persuasion. (The term '**realistic people of goodwill**' is defined as: Those who are prepared to support the government in its forward-going third phase policies, either because they agree with these policies, or because they accept the fact that if peaceful change is to be achieved at all, it will of necessity have to be achieved in terms of the mandate given to the Government during the past nearly 30 years . . .)" (p. 341).

Not all the writing is as discouraging as the quotations above, and most contributors make constructive proposals which might ameliorate existing tensions if only by providing a substantial minority of blacks with a fragile hope of better things to come. But if every concession proposed by the contributors were to be granted and the constitutional castles plucked from the air and planted in the cities and various divisions of our land, the essential problem would remain unsolved. In fact, one suspects that on the evidence of history, the revolutionary potential of the blacks would be enhanced by their increasing numbers and economic strength. The revolution that the contributors seek to avert will not be made by the hopeless and starving millions who are being herded into the "homelands". It will be made by the educated children of the new bourgeoisie and skilled workers — those to whom the Urban Foundation directs such a high proportion of its constructive effort.

The contributions dealing with specific socio-political issues are generally unsentimental and factual presentations of the urban situations, contain useful recent statistics on such matters as expenditure on black education and make a number of practical suggestions as to how problems can be resolved. There is something of a contradiction between the ethos of these chapters, which emphasise the need for the government and the whites to do things for and to the blacks in order to "bring them up to white levels", and the ethos of the economic chapters which is that of **laissez faire** liberalism. The paradox is easily resolved — there are areas, like education, where even the most hard nosed devotee of **laissez faire** today recognises the virtue of state involvement on a massive scale. But in the areas of industry and commerce the removal of inhibitions on the free market in labour, training, retailing and entrepreneur-

ship is seen as being the golden route to economic prosperity and inter-group harmony. Some assistance is obviously required and the work of the publisher is given appropriate recognition in the analysis of black entrepreneurship (pp. 238-9).

The question of whether a *laissez faire* economy can produce social and economic justice in a world in which few of the classical pre-conditions for perfect competition exist is not faced squarely. South Africa is a land of monopoly or oligopoly capitalism – due partly to the economies of scale in its major extractive industries, partly to the state controlled sectors of economy, partly to the dependence on multi-national corporations with their high technology and massive capitalisation. Under those circumstances the rich tend to get richer and poor poorer unless substantial and effective redistributive mechanisms exist. The thrust of the political dispensations proposed by the contributors does little to resolve and much to exacerbate the existing problems of poverty and inequality. They offer a little protection to the urban dwellers at the expense of a growing army of impoverished and desperate “home-land” dwellers who will continue to contribute to the “white” economy as migrant workers but who will cease to be the responsibility of the “white” government. Instead

the impoverished mass will have to support itself in “its own areas” and under its own governments.

In short, since the assumptions upon which this volume is based are faulty and to some extent the goals mutually contradictory, **South Africa's Urban Blacks** fails to resolve the problems or to meet the challenges of a rapidly growing and increasingly restive black population which can not be classified “urban” and “rural” by bureaucratic fiat – and the “rural” dismissed to do their own thing in their own way. The problems cannot be solved by constitutional dispensations – if such formulae worked, Africa would be a continent of model democracies and the Irish problem long since solved. They have also gone beyond the reach of the benign forces of a free market economy – even if one were available to help.

These caveats, substantial as they may be, should not deter the concerned South African reader from exploring this book himself. It is a valuable insight into the heart and mind of enlightened, if not quite mainstream, Afrikanerdom. It probably says more about the near future of our country than most liberal publications. The glossy cover is 90% white with birds of passage and hope fluttering over the cities. The hard cover beneath is 95% black. □

BRIEF REMARKS ON ZULU LITERATURE

by D. B. Ntuli

(From a paper read at the Congress of the Afrikaans Writers Guild).

Various scholars have expressed their views on Zulu literature. Regarding fiction the main criticism has been that the Zulu writers are unable to portray characters convincingly. Ziervogel, for example, remarks:

Depiction of characters has not been developed by modern writers. They are often much better in describing incidents. (Ziervogel, p. 9)

Nyembezi is of the same opinion. He says:

Quite often characters are mere pegs on which the events hang. (Nyembezi, p. 9)

Referring to our review of Zulu literature which appeared in 1968, Gerard says that these

... comments teem with rather damaging strictures: clumsiness in plot development, unconvincing characterization, unnecessary didacticism, weird improbabilities ... (Gerard, p. 266)

One of the criticisms against Zulu writers is that they limit themselves to a few themes. We should point out here that no critic can express displeasure with a book simply because it is based on a popular theme. Thematic proto-types are limited and it would be absurd for any critic to expect writers to produce completely original works. We would insist, however, that a writer should abandon his story if he cannot add his individuality to the treatment of a well-known theme.

It is encouraging to note that some of the recent publications indicate the writers' attempt to modify the treatment

of well-known themes. The forbidden-love stories of the seventies, for example, have a new freshness because writers give an acceptable motivation for the father's reluctance to encourage an affair between his daughter and an apparently worthless boy.

Critics of Zulu poetry do not seem to have a very high opinion of this genre either. Mazisi Kunene does make a few encouraging remarks about the poetry produced up to about 1960. But his general feeling is that this work is immature. (Kunene, 1961, p. 231). An exception to this criticism is B. W. Vilakazi. As recently as 1974, about 40 years after the appearance of his first book of poems, Cope says:

Vilakazi is still the most successful Zulu poet to write in the Zulu language. (Cope, p. 64)

While the critics generally agree that we have not produced a second Vilakazi yet, I think recent publications show a definite improvement. There is a trend from the simple and straight-forward descriptions of phenomena towards a more philosophical outlook on life. We now find poems whose depth demands a reader's concentration if they are to be fully appreciated.

In a very severe criticism, Jahn, in fact, thinks South African Bantu literature is degenerating. He remarks:

Neo-African literature on the African continent began in South Africa ... The three great South African Bantu languages – Sotho, Xhosa, and Zulu – moved into the foreground one after another at about the interval of a