
My First Five Years 2

Encounters with a School Principal

J. AMIE

THE YEAR 1962 will always be remembered as a particularly momentous one at this school. For it was the year of the "wild" matrics and the Great March. On 31st May, 1961, the old Union of South Africa was formally replaced by the Republic of South Africa. In the Cape, the Administrator, as head of the province and most of its schools, suggested that it would be appreciated if schools would celebrate the first birthday of the Republic in a fitting manner. If ceremonies were held at schools such schools could close early. The price of not celebrating was a normal school day. Many progressive schools decided to ignore the Administrator's advice. Our school, unfortunately, was not a progressive school.

To my surprise my principal approached me about a month prior to Republic Day with the request that I should prepare a short survey of the history of South Africa from the earliest times up to the establishment of the Republic in 1961. Before I could reply he was saying:

"But I want only facts. I don't want comment."

"But in any summary, one will have to select facts so that interpretation is inevitable."

"I don't want interpretation, only the bare facts."

"One cannot just have bare facts. They must be arranged, put in order of importance . . ."

"I don't want any political analysis."

"But any historical survey will necessarily have to show the compiler's approach to history. His ideas about current history will be apparent . . ."

"Only the facts."

"In South African history the mere facts, of course, can be very damning . . ."

"Well, in any event, no propaganda. See what you can do."

"But surely, I have not yet agreed to do this survey. There are a few features about the whole matter that I do not like."

Of course, if this had been a progressive school one could have given a really trenchant background to the establishment of the Republic of South Africa in 1961. The origin and purpose of segregation could have been traced. One could have shown what lay behind the Great Trek, how the "liberty-loving" Boers included a clause of no equality between Black and White in Church and State in all their constitutions. One would have traced the long

history of the wars of dispossession which began in the 17th century and culminated in the crushing of the indigenous South West Africans by the Germans in 1907. One could have dealt with the South African Act, drafted at the National Convention and passed by the British Parliament, which completely ignored the majority of South Africans and which laid the constitutional basis for discrimination and racist oppression and exploitation. The history of South Africa since 1910 could have been analysed as attempts of the "Herrenvolk" to entrench themselves.

But, as I have said, this was no progressive school, and I had to tell the principal that for reasons of conscience and political principles I could never do his survey. The Vice-Principal was then assigned the task, but apparently he found it too laborious so the scheme was dropped.

However, I was now *persona non grata* No. 1 with the principal.

THE CLIMAX WAS YET to be. Tuesday, 29th May, 1961 (the next day Republic Day would be celebrated, for the 31st May was Ascension Day) started as usual. But the atmosphere at school seemed tense and different to that of other days. A sense of expectancy and foreboding was in the air. Everything seemed uncanny.

The first period had hardly been on for about twenty minutes when the whole school suddenly vibrated to the voice over the intercom.:

"The whole school—pupils and all staff members—must go to the quadrangle immediately." Urgency and anger were mixed in the tone. Something was most decidedly amiss.

When the whole school was assembled in the quad the principal began:

"I have called you here now for a very important reason. As you know, we had planned to say something fitting later in the day to commemorate the first anniversary of the founding of the Republic. However, agitation has been at work so as to upset our plans. It is with deep regret that I have to make known that it has come to my notice that some of the standard X boys had been going about the school yesterday telling the other pupils to boycott the proceedings to-day. I have not words enough to describe this despicable action of theirs. Of course, they have been but the willing tools of agitators, who are also represented—to my shame—on my own staff.

"I now wish to issue a challenge. I want all those students and staff members who had not intended to attend our commemoration ceremony later to-day to go back to their classrooms now. Do so now."

The response to this challenge was overwhelming and came like a bombshell to the principal and his teacher hangers-on. Evidently the chief had thought that no student would dare move for fear of victimization and that only a small number of teachers would perhaps accept the challenge.

But he had completely underestimated the political consciousness of the students.

A tense silence lasting about three seconds followed the principal's words. And then a Standard X boy stepped

J. AMIE is a *nom-de-plume*.

sideways and it had happened. The Great March had begun.

In another few moments about 70 per cent of the students, from Standard VI to Standard X, were moving to their classrooms, following the lead of the senior class.

THIS WAS SOMETHING quite extraordinary, something unique. The vast majority of a school population was openly defying a principal who had always thought he had things under complete control. To the principal, no doubt, it was a most unpleasant eye-opener, a shocking disillusionment. To me, this moment was immensely moving. This was bliss. My heart could not but beat with joy and satisfaction.

For the youth had shown they could be relied upon. They were not victims of pro-Apartheid indoctrination. They clearly demonstrated that they had human dignity and self-respect and would have nothing to do with Herenvolk Republican celebrations.

If the students had exhibited an enlightened attitude, this was not the case with their teachers. Sad to relate, only seven of the thirty teachers had walked off. The rest had supported their principal.

In the staff room later that day a few of us had heated arguments with the opposing group. They maintained that the pupils had been influenced, that they were victims of political propagandists, that many of them did not know why they had walked off. And so on. Only they, it seemed, had acted on principle in siding with the principal. Some even had the audacity to say that they had remained behind because no ceremony involving flag-raising had been contemplated! When the political conscience is under fire, the crudest forms of rationalization come shamefacedly to the fore.

Needless to say, like the progressive schools, our school too had a full day without any further interruption in the normal school work.

But the matter could obviously not rest there. The animals after all had revolted. Heads, therefore, would most decidedly have to fall.

Authority was informed. The parents of senior pupils were approached. Even the parents of some of the recalcitrant teachers received word from the principal. The matriculants who had taken the lead became the heroes of most pupils and the enemies of most teachers. Some senior teachers refused to greet the Standard X class. Of course, the principal was furious for the rest of the year.

At this school, as elsewhere, an annual farewell function is held for the matriculants. But, as you have no doubt guessed, no such ceremony took place in December, 1962. Wild, uncouth and impertinent teenagers deserved no farewell party, it was declared.

AT THE FIRST STAFF MEETING in January, 1963, the principal laid down rules again and generally aired his views. Suddenly he remarked:

"And ladies and gentlemen, please be very careful about what you say in the classroom. Remember, as I have

said so many times before, I have my means of finding out what goes on in the classrooms. You can be sure of that . . .

"And do not foist your own personal opinions on the pupils. You will be surprised to know how easy it is to gauge from the examination scripts of pupils what goes on in the classrooms." I could tell something was afoot.

The following day a circular from the principal was sent round to the teachers. Amongst other innocuous routine things was the following point:

"Teachers must confine themselves strictly to the textbooks. No interpretations are permissible. The personal views of teachers are of no value. This applies especially to the teaching of history."

I refused to acknowledge this and requested an interview with the principal. As a teacher, and especially a history teacher, I could never accept such an injunction. Not unsurprisingly, other teachers remained quiet, thinking falsely that they were not the target of attack. They failed to see that a matter of grave educational import was at stake: the right of the teacher to teach in a scientific, humanistic and conscientious manner. In short: the right of the teacher to educate truly. But apparently because the principal had seen fit to formulate a rule like that, there was presumably something in it. Of course, there was very much more than just something in it. The whole thing was disgraceful.

MY SUBSEQUENT INTERVIEW with the principal proceeded more or less as follows:

"I have refused to acknowledge that particular point, for I feel it amounts to a complete negation of educational principles and methodology."

"Yes, go on," he said, looking very stern.

"I think the one who formulated that particular clause could not seriously have meant what he had written. For if one had to follow that instruction, one would have to stop teaching entirely and just read from the prescribed textbook.

"If one is to give a lesson on the basis of a particular textbook, one obviously cannot quote verbatim the words of the author concerned. One cannot even give all the facts as presented in the book. Therefore even if a teacher prepares a lesson only on the basis of his textbook, he will still have to decide what aspects of the subject require more stress than others. And to do this he himself will have to evaluate the material in the textbook. In other words, he must interpret the material for the class.

"Furthermore," I went on, "the language of a textbook is very formal, and one will have to transform this formal language into clear, direct classroom language by the technique of simplification, analogy, cross references and so forth. Thus the injunction is self-contradictory: Even if you adhere strictly to one textbook, you must necessarily interpret. In other words, you cannot adhere to a single textbook and *not* interpret.

"But surely the conscientious teacher does not adhere to one textbook only? Surely, reference books, magazine articles, and sometimes even newspapers, are consulted

and during the lesson the knowledge gained in this way will be conveyed to the class?

"And if the teacher may not interpret, how on earth will literature — a novel, a play, a poem — be discussed in class? Surely, a teacher's interpretation of a particular poem or character is the *sine qua non* of teaching literature?"

"But I was not referring to literature," the principal cut in. "What you say of literature is true, but I had history teaching in mind."

"But you did not put it that way. Those first three sentences are clearly meant to apply to all subjects. There is no qualification. It is only the fourth sentence that specifically refers to history and then presumably as one of many subjects.

"Now, let us consider history. For our Senior History Course there are quite a few textbooks to choose from. We have Fowler and Smit, Boeseken, Boyce, Otto, Geen and Van Jaarsveld for example. These books all have their good features but none is exhaustive enough to be used alone. So you will have to use most or all of them in order to supplement one another. These books refer the teacher and student to other books and references for further study. And rightly so.

"In history teaching interpretation is essential. Just think of something like the causes of World War I or the reasons for the rise of Nazism. Various given causes will have to be interpreted and their relative importance assessed. Or consider the causes of the Great Trek — where will the emphasis be laid? Or compare the functioning of a unitary constitution with that of a federal one. Without the teacher's personal assessment and interpretation the student will be lost.

"There are, in fact, history questions set by the Education Department which require candidates to compare things, for example, the Cape Constitution of 1854 with that of the Transvaal of 1858. The student is actually asked to state which one he considers the more democratic. Obviously, interpretation here plays a great role and the teacher will have to give guidance."

"But, Mr. X," said the principal, "we have examined your Standard X history scripts of last June and we have found that the pupils had used certain terms in inverted commas, like "European" and "non-European". Surely, you must admit that you have been influencing the pupils with your own personal views."

(I later on discovered that this practice of scrutinising the scripts of students of certain teachers had been going on for some time. Signs of political influence were looked for. Apparently in my case they had found more than enough.)

"But what is the point at issue?" I asked. "Is it not a question of what is true, historical and scientific? And is it not probable that my views on the subject are more scientific than those of most South African school history textbook writers whose works have often been condemned by overseas educationalists, like Professor Lauwerys of London University?"

"The use of inverted commas is quite a legitimate practice. Either one is quoting from another work or author or one wishes to indicate one does not entirely

agree with the formulation or designation concerned. I think the latter has been the case here. I am a scientific humanist and accept the basic scientific fact that all mankind belongs to one, indivisible biological entity — *homo sapiens*. All mankind I consider to be one, diverse family. And I must admit that in my teaching this idea always forms the basis of my approach to things. Arbitrary divisions and labels I have no time for."

"So," he spoke triumphantly, "you admit that you have been influencing the pupils politically. Thank you, for the admission. At least now we know where we stand."

"I shall readily admit that I have at all times endeavoured to adhere to scientific facts and ideas about mankind. If that is a crime, I willingly plead guilty."

"But don't you think that if you tell people there are really no Whites and non-Whites, only human beings, that you are in fact encouraging them to be anti-White, to hate the White people?"

"It is most difficult to see how a philosophy of humanism based on the acceptance of the equal worth and grandeur of all mankind can by any stretch of the imagination be construed as fostering any form of racialism. On the contrary, it is the iniquitous system of Apartheid that breeds racialism . . ." And so on.

At the end of the interview the principal said he was not going to change the injunction concerned, as that was still how he felt. He warned me that I should be careful as to what I said, especially in class. In future, he would visit my classes more often to see just what exactly was going on. I should furthermore remember that higher authorities had been informed of my attitude.

UP TO NOW I have concentrated on a survey of my relations with the principal, for he was the central figure and chief agent of government aims and methods at the school. And remember the above only covers the five years up to, and including, 1963. The Coloured Affairs Department only took over formally in January, 1964, but, as has been indicated, the seeds of regimentation and brain-washing had been planted long ago, at least at certain schools.

As to the teachers, at this particular school they came and left in a steady stream. Some of the best teachers had left because of the intolerable conditions obtaining at the school. Some of these had been very progressive, politically conscious, and above all, dedicated educators. However, the vast majority of teachers I had to work with were disappointing. To them teaching consisted merely in re-hashing of text-books. Very few of them consulted reference works. Reading — general fiction and non-fiction — seemed almost taboo, other than works by their favourite authors who appeared to range from James Hadley Chase to Frank Slaughter.

Discussions in the staff room were on the whole dull or frivolous. Occasionally a national or international event would cause some people to air their reactionary views. Sustained, logical argument was rare.

The support from the teachers for the cultural society of the school had been shockingly disappointing. The reason could have been that the principal did not at first

recognise the society which was founded in 1961 and that it did not have his official blessing. The society provided a forum for the students to broaden their mental outlook by debates, symposia, lectures and quizzes. It had been suggested at the time that the 1962 matriculants gained their militancy largely in the cultural society. No wonder that the panel inspectors' report of that year referred to it, sarcastically, as a so-called cultural society.

THE ONLY REDEEMING FEATURE about life at such a school was the students. Many of them were determined young people who earnestly sought to increase their knowledge and understanding of things. Some seniors, of course, were lazy and lax and did not seem to have any goal. Many juniors again, I found to be rather frivolous. But

in Standard IX things seemed to change and a more matured and responsible attitude towards life and work was slowly discernible in many of them.

I have often been asked why it was that I remained so long at this particular school and under those adverse conditions. The gist of my reply has always been that if it were not for the joys, exhilaration and intellectual stimulation that my contact with the youth provided me, I am afraid that I too would have left long ago.

But, if all progressive teachers deserted schools like this one, would they not in fact leave the growing generation in the lurch? Should not the torch of true education, enlightenment and civilisation be kept burning wherever possible?

Come, should not we — the teachers — live for our children? ●

To the Editor

The Radical Review?

SIR, — After the death of the gallant *Africa South*, the birth of *The New African* gave some of us hope that the radical viewpoint in South Africa was not lost. Instead, over the years we have seen "The Radical Review" shift steadily further to the right, until it might better be called the Anti-Radical Review. In the last few issues even Blaar Coetzee could find an article or two which would not offend him.

Your last issue (2 May, 1964) was astonishing. A non-African non-Marxist writes about "how Africa sees the Marxist interpretation of the African revolution", and makes the ridiculous assertion that the Marxist interpretation denies the Africans the ability to make their own history in their own way. As though a knowledge of the causes of an illness prevents you from curing the disease. Then an attack by a Coloured school-teacher on his principal, that utterly ignores the gross pressures on schools of Coloured Education, and stays on a level of bicker and complaint. And yet another African in "Pass" troubles. Then a typically flip piece of James Baldwin, including one wasted column purporting to define Baldwin's following: Smith College girls . . . teary old ladies . . . Hands off Cuba groups. Next an appraisal of Lumumba, "The sycophant outshone by the meteor", in which the author dismisses Lumumba as "inept" and "a midget". And lastly, we are told by your radical review the old, old story that the Communists have

destroyed C.N.D., and are devilishly responsible for blackening big business in the pamphlet "The Collaborators" (indicting business for its apartheid links). Oh, and I forgot, there is the inevitable run-around, by a P.A.C. supporter, of the smooth arguments for African nationalism, with all the woolly sentiment, a bland denial of implicit racialism, and a strenuous avoidance of any discussion of what *really* has to be fought: poverty, ignorance and disease.

The New African gives me the following impression of the Africa of 1964: it is a country in which a mystic sense of African personality is developing; in which wicked leftists are struggling to sabotage the splendid economic system; in which it is self-evident that apartheid is so shocking that when it is defeated all will be for the best in the best of all possible worlds, and that we needn't do anything more; that socialism is next to communism is next to devil worship. And that the A.N.C. is a myth, possibly propagated by the S.B. to confound the good deeds and pure thoughts of the P.A.C.

Who would think that, at the time that this issue of *The New African* was published, the Rivonia trial was drawing to a close.

A radical review? I'd rather read *Forum* or the *Financial Mail*.

JAMES BRYCE.

Johannesburg.

[The *New African* is committed to radical social, political and economic change in South Africa. It is also non-racialist, non-communist, devoted to the cause of African freedom and unity, and unaligned in the Cold War both abroad and at home. Perhaps it is the last-mentioned position that has upset Mr. Bryce. — EDITOR.]

The New
African

AGENTS WANTED

- 33½% Discount
- We pay postage
- All returns accepted up to one month

WRITE:-

BUSINESS MANAGER,
P.O. BOX 2068,
CAPE TOWN.