

U.N./BRASILIA

For the Record

LESLIE RUBIN

debit: orthodox agenda, old themes, US-UK dissociation

credit: clarification, concrete proposals, South African unity

THE TWENTY-FIRST SESSION of the General Assembly will have before it when the situation in South Africa comes to be considered, the report of the 13-day seminar held in Brazil, which terminated on 4 September. The report is relevant to two items on the agenda, the familiar "Policies of *Apartheid* of the Government of the Republic of South Africa," and the new item "Measures to Implement the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination." The latter relates to the Convention adopted by the General Assembly last year which creates machinery available to the states adhering to the Convention for considering the alleged violation of rights, and for settling disputes over compliance with its provisions.

The seminar was organised by the Secretary-General of the United Nations pursuant to a resolution by the General Assembly requesting him to do so.

There is ample United Nations material on South Africa. Events and processes in the country and their repercussions beyond its borders, are covered in considerable detail by reports which span a period of 20 years. The cynically-inclined, noting that during the same period the lot of the 14 million non-whites has become worse, while the arrogant defiance of international opinion by the South African government remains undiminished, might be forgiven for doubting the value of a seminar which, at this stage of the confrontation between South Africa and the outside world, spends several days discussing such topics as "the effects of apartheid on international relations" and "measures to be taken for the elimination of apartheid." But the discussions at Brasilia if they ranged over the topics encompassed by an orthodox agenda on the subject, did, nevertheless, result in clarification of thinking on many questions, and the formulation of concrete proposals likely to lead to more effective action by the international community.

THE ORGANISERS OF THE SEMINAR succeeded in making it representative of a variety of national interests and ideological beliefs, and ensuring that different shades of opinion among the South African opponents of apartheid were expressed. (An attempt to include the Government of the Republic failed. The invitation extended was declined.) The 73 participants comprised representatives of 29 countries, and a number of inter-governmental organisations, United Nations agencies and non-governmental organisations, together with seven experts on apartheid. The countries represented, drawn from Europe, Asia, Africa and the two Americas, included the United States, the United Kingdom and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; among the organisations were the Organisation of African Unity, League of Arab States, International Commission of Jurists, International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, and World Confederation of Organisations of the Teaching

Profession; the bodies associated with United Nations included, apart from International Labour Organisation and UNESCO, the recently-established United Nations Institute for Training and Research. The material available at the seminar included background documents e.g. basic facts on South Africa, and papers prepared by all the experts and a number of other participants.

Four factors contributed to the success of the seminar. First, the fact that most of the participants lived, for the duration of the seminar, in the hotel where it was held, made association outside the seminar hall easier and more frequent than it might otherwise have been. This meant increased opportunities for discussion between representatives of the United States and Poland, or the United Kingdom and Soviet Russia; but it also made for greater mutual understanding among the South Africans. Perhaps one of the most significant characteristics of the proceedings was the like-minded approach to all important issues which the South Africans displayed. Differences which might have been expected to emerge from such different backgrounds as Liberal Party, African National Congress and Pan-Africanist Congress — and political shadings among these — were never in evidence*.

A second factor was the skill with which the Chairman, Kaj Bjork of Sweden, presided over the proceedings. His combination of impartiality and firmness helped to reconcile the encouragement of full and free discussion with the need to complete a crowded agenda, and ensure that the conclusions and recommendations would reflect all views at the seminar.

Third, the choice of V. A. Adegoro of Nigeria as Rapporteur was fortunate. His report was an admirable summary of wide-ranging discussion, which presented a balanced picture of the different points of view on all the topics discussed.

Fourth, there was efficient administration and direction of the seminar as a whole. This was provided by Marc Schreiber, Director of the Division of Human Rights, who represented the Secretary-General of United Nations, Kamleshwar Das, Chief of the Advisory Services Section of the Division of Human Rights, who acted as Secretary of the Seminar, and their staff.

THE FIRST FIVE meetings were devoted to a general discussion of apartheid. This covered the present situation in South Africa and its ramifications and included: the effect of the system on the civil rights and economic opportunities of the non-white; the concept of separate development; the steps taken by United Nations; the responsibility of South Africa's major trading partners for the perpetuation of apartheid; the possibility of remedial measures; the repercussions of the South African situation on Rhodesia, the Portuguese territories, and South West Africa.

Early in the discussions a divergence appeared between the views of the United Kingdom and the United States (frequently

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* The seven experts originally invited were: Canon L. John Collins, P. K. Leballo, Z. K. Matthews, Alan Paton, Leslie Rubin, Ronald Segal and Oliver Tambo. Matthews, Paton and Tambo being unable to accept, invitations were subsequently extended to Colin Legum, Lewis Nkosi, Peter Raboroko and Robert Resha. Canon Collins' close identification with the anti-apartheid struggle assured his ready recognition as an honorary South African by his co-experts!

The Living Story

PETER MEGO OGBANG

African oral literature
— a Nigerian experience

MANY INTERESTING QUESTIONS were raised in the Transcription Centre discussion on oral literature, of which Mr. Dennis Duerden was chairman. Ama Ata Aidoo's article — "The African Literary Tradition I" (July 1966), more than the opinions of Messrs Nagenda and Nkosi, answers in full the issues raised by Dr. Lienhardt and Mr. Duerden concerning the worth and method of preserving the oral literary tradition. Miss Aidoo states, *inter alia*, "Up to the present day the telling of folktales is a major social activity among many African peoples." This applies to my own Obudu people in Ogoja Province in Nigeria.

For them (and for me) the traditional culture is not a nostalgic or romantic glori-

fication of the past but a living reality, the social focus that gives coherence and significance to their very existence. The oral tradition remains the main, as well as the most important, source for the history and literature of peoples without writing and the tradition itself is preserved by the way it is handed down.

My experiences are similar to those of Aidoo in Ghana and Nagenda in Uganda: it is not the professional story teller (I have never met one myself) who tells these stories; everybody does, except, of course, in the case of stories belonging to the esoteric tradition.

Folktales and other categories of oral literary expression provide a mechanism by means of which the people conceptualise and analyse their social set-up, and if one is sufficiently perceptive, one can glean the social attitudes and values of the people from the tales.

Every tradition evolves from and is preserved within a particular cultural matrix, so that it would be rather presumptuous to generalise on "the African" oral tradition; yet I have found a recurrent pattern of folk tradition in the rural areas, at least in the Ogoja, Efik, Ibibia, Idoma, Ijaw, Bini and Ibo villages that I have been to. Invariably, I have discovered that the oral tradition is not for these village people a special preserve of the "professional" but part of the common cultural heritage which they compete with one another to narrate with lively enthusiasm.

On 6th August 1966, I had a record crowd of 521 villagers in Obudu all eager to narrate one tale or recite an oral poem at my invitation. During the performance, people raised points of correction whenever they felt that the informant distorted the tale or forgot some important episode which has an important bearing on the plot; the informant would accept the correction in good humour and a spirit of healthy competition prevailed throughout the night-long performance. Conversely, credit was lavishly accorded to any informant who used his imagination to invent episodes that vehicled the plot or heightened suspense, or who employed his own symbolism and poetic allusions.

DR. LIENHARDT ARGUES: "There is not one good and convincing account from my reading, of adults sitting together in an African village, telling one another stories for entertainment . . . and I have never seen any group of adults solemnly sitting down to amuse one another with folk tales. They may have done so of course, *fifty years ago*." (*Italics mine*). My experience described above could probably inform Dr. Lienhardt and invite him to come to Obudu in Ogoja Province where he will find adults — indeed a whole village — *cheerfully* sitting down to amuse themselves with folktales and other oral recitations. ●

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supported by Japan, New Zealand and some of the Latin American countries) and the views of the rest, when economic measures against South Africa were called for. This divergence hardened when the discussion turned in subsequent meetings to the question whether apartheid constitutes a threat to international peace. By the time the final meetings were in progress and the seminar was preparing to consider its conclusions and recommendations, it was satisfying that the United States and the United Kingdom had modified their stand on some matters; but it was clear that they remained divided from the rest of the seminar on the question of supporting the imposition of sanctions. Thus while they supported a proposal that "all member states should discourage closer economic and financial relations with South Africa, particularly in investment and trade," they declined to support the conclusion "that apartheid constitutes a threat to international peace and security and that the Security Council should turn urgent attention and give early consideration to the problem."

BUT THE SEMINAR PRODUCED unanimous conclusions on a number of important questions, and unanimous support for new measures. Among the former are the conclusions that: "all states should refrain from cultural and sports relationships with South Africa . . . (and) . . . encourage consumer boycotts of South African goods and products"; "United Nations should take immediate steps to co-operate with the Governments of Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland to guarantee their independence and territorial integrity . . . and invite its Member States to form a consortium of donor countries" to provide economic and technical aid for these territories; the United Nations Trust Fund and Defence and Aid Fund International should be supported by Member States. Among the latter are the proposal for the establishment of an Information Centre "to be financed from the United Nations regular budget," and the recommendation that an "international conference of non-governmental organisations such as trade unions, church, student and youth groups, drawn from countries trading

with South Africa, should be held soon to consider the problem of apartheid and explore ways and means of overcoming it."

The report as a whole deserves careful study as the most recent examination of the South African situation in an international context, with a strong emphasis on the urgent need for reinforcing the universal condemnation of apartheid with the application of concrete measures directed against the present government of South Africa. ●

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