

APARTHEID – OUR PICTURE

By Y.S. Meer and M.D. Mlaba; The Institute of Black Research, Durban, 1982.

Reviewed by Marie Dyer.

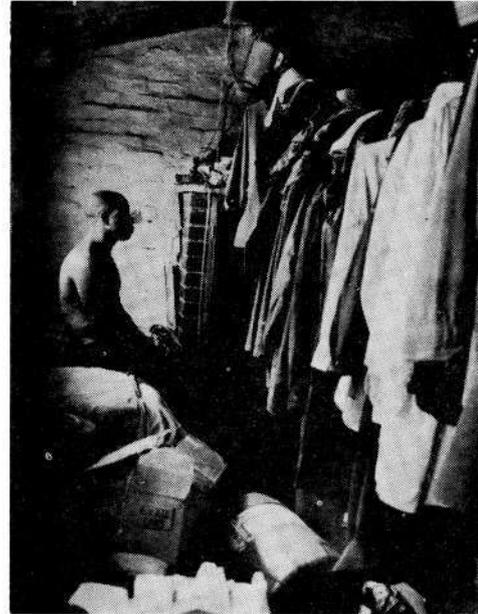
This book sets out to give 'an authentic account of Apartheid as it affects the African people'. The phrase indicates that what is attempted is not a historical or theoretical or statistical survey of Apartheid, but a view of it in practice as a force determining the lives people lead; a definition of it in terms of its human results. There are brief introductory chapters giving details of the 'homeland' policy, but in general 'Apartheid' is seen simply as a kind of totality of the discriminatory and exploitive 'system' in which African people live. The lives described are those of rural people in the 'homeland' areas of Nqutu and Lebombo, migrant workers living singly in Durban hostels, women working in Durban, and inhabitants of Durban townships. A claim for representativeness is made in the preface:

The location of the account is the African ghettos of Natal, but Natal is only one of the four provinces in which Apartheid happens and KwaZulu is one of the two largest 'homelands' in the country. We are thus writing about Apartheid, and we are writing about South Africa.

The question that this approach raises is 'How does one set about describing the lives of thousands of people?' Facts and figures can give accounts which are accurate and comprehensive: 'authentic' in one sense; but they can't convey — sometimes even conceal — the individual 'authentic' humanity of all the people who collectively constitute the thousands being surveyed.

In this book, the authors have attempted both kinds of authenticity. Large numbers of facts and tables of figures are included, but illuminated throughout by case histories, descriptions of daily routines, reconstructions of the experiences of individual people. Thus in a section on health in Nqutu, associated with figures and tables about health and hospital services, malnutrition and infant mortality in KwaZulu, there is a detailed narrative — 'A Child Falls Sick' — of a young mother taking her sick and dehydrated baby first to a herbalist and then — after selling both the household hens for the busfare — to the hospital, leaving the baby there ("Explain to her that the child is very sick and she must leave it with us at the hospital". Ma Gumede had been relieved. What would she have done if the doctor had said "Take your baby home and give her proper food"? Where would she have got such food?) then taking it home again after some weeks happily recovered, leaving the doctor saying to the nurse, 'That one will be back again.' The chapter on migrant workers in hostels includes detailed general statistics and then personal accounts of migrants' situations and daily routine:

..... There are 8 men to a house, 2 to a room. These houses have no toilet facilities or bathing facilities. In John's case 3 toilets and a cold water tap are found up Road 8, about 100 metres from his room. They serve more than 10 houses which means at least 80 people use them. John pays R9.60 for his shed-like room which he shares with another worker who also pays the same rent. They have divided the room with a floral curtain for privacy.....



The sections of the book vary in the amount of research detail presented. The chapter on Nqutu is very full indeed, indicating, for the families studied, information about land-holding, water supply, livestock, family size, schools, medical services, cash remittances from migrants, income from home industries, housing, bedding, food, clothing, taxes, pensions, income. The survey on migrant men deals mainly with figures of income and expenditure but also surveys their contact with their homes. An additional survey of their organisational affiliations, and attitudes to political leaders and Inkatha gives significantly inconclusive results, with a very large — sometimes overwhelming — proportion of 'no comment', 'no response' replies to all questions. The township section includes — as well as a historical and factual general account of the townships — figures drawn from a sample survey of families in Lamontville, Umlazi and Kwa Mashu, dealing with accommodation, education, social and other problems, attitudes to bosses, neighbours and fellow-workers.

These figures are all interesting and illuminating, sometimes startling, often horrifying. Some random examples give an impression of their nature and scope:

In the Nqutu study of 200 families, the average plot size per family was 1 acre, the average cash income per capita R60 per year. 77% lived in huts of grass and cane; virtually all children spent 9 hours a day or more attending or travelling to school. The migrant men (a sample of 200 in 6 hostels) sent on the average 25% of their income (usually between R11 and R22) home to their families. Of the rest, 22% went on food, 21% on transport, 21% on liquor and cigarettes. More than half visited their homes less than 4 times a year, spending on average 3 or 4 days per visit. In the townships — a sample of 195 township residents — more than half the families accommodated 5–6 people in each room of their house; half the men (but only 1/3 of the women) had no education at all; 75% had difficulties with H.P. accounts. An analysis of the accounts of the Port Natal Administration Board revealed that 78% of its income is derived from

the African township residents through beer sales (68%), rents, fines and levies; while 1,4% of its expenditure goes direct to the residents in health services and grants-in-aid and 20% to its staff salaries and wages.

The main value of all the figures in this book, however, seems to be in the authority and substance they give to the 'pictures' of real experience and real life. Many other books and journals present perhaps more rigorous and systematic analyses in figures and tables of social and economic facts; but other surveys don't give, as this one does, a complex impression of the 'feel' of Apartheid from the bottom, an insight into what emerges most vividly as its grinding relentless daily struggle, its discomfort, fatigue, and frustration, as well as its frequent real pain and suffering, degradation and despair.

Here are extracts from an account of a worker's encounter with a trade union:

Hlulwalini went home once a fortnight – the return trip cost him R3.50 in rail and taxi fare. He did not have far to walk. He purchased all household provisions and took these home with him. So he sent no money home. He had four children, a wife and mother at home. He was reasonably happy with the set up there. He was even able to take some interest in the planting and in the care of livestock. They got a fair amount of their maize and vegetables and milk requirements from their domestic produce. Three of his children were at school. He had come to value education since he had joined the Trade Union and all his children would be educated up to matric and even beyond if he could manage it. He had been employed with the warehousing firm for the last 13 years.

All three men qualified to bring their families into the urban area, but Mhlongo alone was positive that he would bring his family to town, if he could. The others thought that they would do so too. But there were no houses to be had and so the right they had earned through long and continuous employment with a single firm was a very dubious right.

All three men had had very little formal education. None had gone beyond Std. II, and none could speak any English when they first came to the city. Their English had improved considerably after they had attended the classes organised by the Trade Union. They were continuing to attend classes.

All three were summarily dismissed a month ago. Sam had taken up the matter to the industrial court twice now for unlawful dismissal, but their case had been dismissed because S.A.A.W.U. as an unregistered trade union, had little if any recognition there. Their problems were confounded because all three were now facing evictions from the hostels and the prospects of being refused permits to work in Durban by the KwaZulu Government.

They were competent and efficient workers, so much so that they had been elected on to the works committee.

Hlulwalini spoke of a big meeting at which they had been told that things would be different, that they would have their own trade union, "but it wouldn't be a union for just the workers. It would be a Union of workers and management. It would be like a happy big family, where we could talk freely about things that worried us. Management was like our fathers and we like sons, and there would be no need for outsiders to come in. They must be kept out, because they only disrupt work, cause mischief, bring in the police, cause arrests, bring in politics. Then people would lose jobs, production would go down and there would be no improvement."

Mzonjani and Mhlongo helped Hlulwalini to recall the excitement of the meeting they had had to elect the works committee.

Management had organized the voting procedure, explained it to the workers and from each department a representative was elected. The works committee elected in turn Hlulwalini as the Chairman.

Hlulwalini continued, "Now we started the committee but we were alone. The boss was not available to speak to us. If management wanted to talk to the workers, they summoned me. I became their messenger boy. Before, when a worker had a complaint, he went to the foreman, and if he worried him sufficiently the foreman took it to the manager. He got some sort of individual attention. Now the worker had to come to me, I took his complaint to the foreman who usually waved me off. He'd say that's not company policy. I didn't know what was company policy. I saw it almost like God – some force like that no one could do anything about. It was only later when I joined the Trade Union that I realised it was whatever management wanted and whatever suited management.

"I would go back from the foreman to the workers. They would be angry and insulting. They'd send me back and say I must speak to the manager, not the foreman. So I would try to force the foreman to take me to the manager, and sometimes it worked. When I got in that office, I got royal treatment – soft chair like the boss, tea in a cup same as the boss, and boss offered me his cigarettes. The boss listened like a father and reasoned like a father. But he also said 'it wasn't policy.' One time he said "Look Mr Hul", he could go no further with my name, "you went to school." I said, "Yes boss". "You can do arithmetic?" I said "Yes boss". Then he did some sums and he put the figures before me and it all came out that if they agreed to the pay rise the workers were asking, the warehouse would have to close down.

"Then I faced my committee members who were just sad, but the workers were very angry. What kind of policy is this that says we must starve and they must grow fat on profits?" "They don't listen in there" I pleaded, "they only talk." "So why are you going there to listen like a woman?" That hurt very much. I was made a fool everywhere. They called me and my committee 'puppets'. We were nothing to them. I didn't know what to do and was thinking of resigning from the works committee when I met Sam. Sam said "when you got the workers with you you can get somewhere. Organise and I'll put my trade union at your disposal. Get them to join SAAWU, that will fix up those buggers." Sam is a strong man. He's afraid of no one.

But the management was also working. It called our committee and we saw our committee was divided now. They had got around to some of the members and we could smell bad blood. Management offered a R2 increase per week. We knew we could settle for R5. But the three of us were alone in holding out. By now victimized by the police and threatened with dismissal, the workers were relieved to take the R2 and return to work. They would fight again they said. When pay day came we got 2 month's wages not one. We were told to get off the factory grounds and never to come again.

The style of these many and varied accounts is one of the strengths of the book – sober, factual and detailed, restrained but sympathetic – perfectly suited to the subject. This is a large achievement for a volume compiled from the work and interviews of so many researchers. The book is handsomely produced – a large paperback with a stiff and glossy dustcover, attractively printed (but with a fairly heavy sprinkling of errors) and very fully illustrated.

It is surely impossible to convey the 'truth' about Apartheid in any single volume – but this book conveys more kinds of 'truths' about it than are usually attempted. □