

## Obituary

### THE DUALISM OF I B TABATA

In recent months several people who were prominent in resistance politics in South Africa have died. We appear too infrequently and have too little space to record their passing. However, these are some who have, in their own way, spent their lives in pursuit of the ideal of freedom and democracy. Throughout their adult lives they fought against an iniquitous society and they have added to the forces of opposition in the only way they thought fruitful. We cannot pass them by in silence.

Isaac Bongani ('I B') Tabata, who died in exile in Harare in October 1990 was one such person. The editors of this journal had profound differences with the man as politician and differed with him on many issues, but there are aspects of his life that helped build the tradition in which we follow.

I B Tabata was born in Lesseyton, near Queenstown in the eastern Cape in 1909. There are few records available of his early life but it does seem more than a coincidence that he was 12 years old when the Bulhoek massacre (recorded elsewhere in this edition) occurred. There can be little doubt that this event influenced him profoundly and helped shape his perception of the nature of the struggle in South Africa.

Tabata's first entred politics through his activity in the Lorry Drivers Union in the early 1930s. He joined the Cape African Voters Association and was attracted to the Workers Party of South Africa, associated with the International Left Opposition. That party, composed of people repelled by events in the USSR, adopted a set of theses in 1935 that determined its subsequent practice. These comprised a document on the land question that placed the agrarian struggle at the centre of any revolutionary transformation in South Africa; a declaration condemning the war preparations in Europe; and a statement on organization that pointed to underground activity as mandatory for any revolutionary party.

Tabata joined the WP and throughout his life endorsed the principles of that organization. He placed the agrarian struggle at the centre of all his political activities in South Africa, and he would not disclose his socialist commitment until he went into exile in 1963. His open activity was always confined to liberation politics and although he remained secretly loyal to the principles of the WP he discouraged socialists from propagating their views openly.

As a member of the WP (or perhaps at the time he was an associate) he attended the first conferences of the All African Convention (AAC), summoned in 1935 to oppose the new Native Bills introduced in Parliament. It was as a leader of this body that he subsequently made all his public pronouncements and it was in terms of the Convention's programme that he made his mark. Yet among close friends he espoused his views as an orthodox follower of the Fourth International, spoke of communism as his ideal, and expressed his belief in the need for internationalism.

The Convention aimed to establish a large opposition force, comprising representatives of every African community in a federal body, to struggle against legislation that would remove Africans from the voter's roll in the Cape Province; demarcate the area of land that could be occupied by Africans in South Africa, and control the movements of Africans in the urban areas.

The AAC, although it attracted the attention of all the main political bodies of the time (including the ANC and the CPSA) did not get its message to the majority of Africans in the country and failed to provide the leadership to oppose the legislation. The programme (based on non-collaboration with the government) was flawed by compromise and within a few years it declined and was all but forgotten. The ANC, which had been a constituent part of this new federal body, withdrew its support. Although it too was ineffectual, its departure reduced the AAC to a few shadowy committees. The final act of abdication came in 1939 when the AAC, together with the ANC, declared its loyalty to the government in its declaration of war against the axis powers.

The one remaining committee in the AAC during the first years of war was in the western Cape. There, the AAC, with Tabata as its secretary made a number of statements, neither radical, nor even urging any action, but indicating that it still existed. In fact, Tabata, together with others who were to appear as a potential new leadership in 1943, continued to function inside the WP, which seems to have survived as an underground socialist group until some undisclosed date in the early 1950s when it was dissolved. These included Goolam Gool, Janub Gool (Tabata's wife) and Ben Kies. Precisely what the WP did after war was declared has never been disclosed. It issued no statements, printed no documents, and its officials do not even seem to have written any letters. It was the fly inside the bottle that nobody ever saw.

The full story of the calls in 1943 for the reactivation of the AAC and the calling into being of the Anti-Coloured Affairs Commission (later the Anti-Coloured Affairs Department or Anti-CAD) has still to be told. What is central to this short note was the fact that these two bodies acquired some prominence in that year and in December the two bodies met together to launch a Non-European Unity Movement (NEUM). The new organization was bound together in a programme of democratic demands that centred on the call for a universal franchise, and the scrapping of all segregation legislation. Known then as the 10-Point Programme, it was claimed by its proponents to be the most far reaching of liberation programmes in the country.

The NEUM leaders believed that the South African Indian Congress (under the new radical men who aimed to take control of the body) would join the united body and then, together, could campaign for a society based on one-person-one-vote. The nature of the transformed South Africa was left vague to accommodate the many different elements it was hoped to attract to its ranks, but it did call for radical changes in the economy, including the scrapping of existing land legislation. Members of the NEUM even assisted Dr Dadoo (a staunch Stalinist) and Dr Naiker in their campaigns to oust the conservative Indian leadership and take control of the provincial and national Indian Congress. However, once that was achieved, obvious political differences stopped Messrs Dadoo, Naiker, et al, joining with the NEUM.

Looking at the events of 1943–45 retrospectively it is obvious that the political field lay open to the group that could find a way to mobilize the black communities. The NEUM had several advantages. Although its constituent bodies were ethnically exclusive (as were all movements outside the left at the time), the NEUM had no colour bar. It included at its conferences leaders of rural organizations, urban communities, ethnic organizations, trade unions, and representatives of the two small Trotskyist groups. No other liberation movement had ever opened its membership in this way. The NEUM leadership reflected this wide spectrum of interests and included among its ranks some of the older, more conservative personnel (like Prof D D T Jabavu, Dr J S Moroka, and Rev Z R Mahabane) and also the young turks drawn from the WP and associated bodies). It was Tabata and Kies and the Gools who represented the more radical ideas then current. With them they brought the main body of the Cape African Teachers Association and the Teachers League of South Africa (the Coloured teachers association). It was these persons that had a grasp of programmatic problems that exceeded anything previously formulated in the several movements that aimed to rally the Africans, Coloureds or Indians.

There can be little doubt that Tabata played a prominent role in defining the attitudes that became the hallmark of the NEUM: the call for the vote, opposition to the rehabilitation scheme on the land and the use of the boycott weapon against all segregated state institutions. With this came a vocabulary, borrowed from wartime terminology that was distinctive to NEUM members: the ruling class was dubbed *'herrenvolk'*, those that worked in segregatory bodies were called *'quislings'*. It was a language of derision but it lacked analytical content.

Unlike in nursery rhyme, words did hurt, but the sting was always skin-deep. The ridicule thrown at opponents was only an irritant, but members of the NEUM hurled verbal invective as if it was live ammunition. The boycott, a slogan that found a certain resonance among the students at Fort Hare with whom Tabata had contact, was elevated into an absolute principle and only helped isolate the NEUM. Among those attracted and then repelled were the young Congress Youth Leaguers (Nelson Mandela et al) who were attracted to Tabata's ideas and took the boycott tactic into the ANC.

Tabata, in his agitation against the rehabilitation scheme in the Transkei (which earned him one short stay in prison), kindled hope in radical circles that something might be done, but he never translated words into action. There is no record of members of the NEUM being involved in any of the peasant revolts through the 1950s. When challenged on this, Tabata and his co-leaders always spoke of the need for a trained cadre before engaging the state in struggle.

Tabata always derided other movements for only reacting against the latest state regulation and never taking the initiative on its own grounds. There was a certain truth in that, but the NEUM never found the issues on which to challenge the state and ultimately it led to abstentionism. The NEUM never had its trained cadre and was never able to initiate that struggle for the removal of segregatory bodies. Time and again the NEUM remained aloof from the

struggles of the time, and although there was justification for criticising other movements for their many ill-considered campaigns, it became the hallmark of the NEUM that it never entered a political struggle — except verbally.

The leadership spoke, condemned, insulted and threatened, but did not engage in political action, neither in the rural areas nor in the towns. There has been no serious consideration of what went wrong in the NEUM, but obviously the problem went beyond the failure to engage in struggle. In seeking to explain this inaction it seems that the reason can only be found in examining the political philosophy of those who led the NEUM. Tabata and his friends were not nationalists. Their primary outlook was internationalist and their goal was socialism. Appearing as leaders of a democratic national liberatory movement (and always strenuously denying any socialist connections), they were unable to pursue any socialist aims. Yet their hearts were not (at least initially) in following the nationalist trail. Their stress on the land question (which stemmed from their membership of the WP — see *Searchlight South Africa* No 4), and their propagation of democratic demands tied them into a nationalist framework from which they could not break. They were called Trotskyists by their opponents — which they denied — but they never adapted to their position as leaders of a national liberation movement. The failure of this section of the left in South Africa arose from its inability to advance socialist demands while leading a movement that was based on a programme of bourgeois demands.

The deficiencies of the NEUM must be apparent today to all socialists working for a transformed South Africa. What is not often realized is the fact that any attempts at marrying national liberatory and socialist demands within the same organization must fail. In private discussions on Nkrumah and events in Ghana, for example, Tabata saw this clearly, but he could not or would not recognize that he played a similar self-contradictory role in South Africa.

Despite this failure it is necessary to give Tabata his due for some of his statements about the problems facing the African people. He saw the need to raise the issue of education to the forefront and his attack on Bantu education (or as he called it in his 1959 monograph *Education for Barbarism*) played an important part in the mobilization of African teachers in the Cape. Even more notable was his rejection of the use of the boycott weapon in schools, on the ground that political movements had no right to push children into the foreground of the political struggle. Tabata had significant things to say, and they warrant reiteration today. They are part of the history of struggle in South Africa.

Because of the centrality of the land question in the WP, Tabata recognized long before any others that the rehabilitation (or 'betterment') scheme, imposed by the government on the rural areas, would become an issue over which the peasants would fight. Fight they did, but he erred in continuing to believe that this remained the single most important issue facing the African population in South Africa. At no stage did he ever place the workers at the centre of the struggle for a transformed South Africa and this failure stemmed from the thesis to which the WP was tied. This exclusion of the working class, or its relegation to second class status in the struggle, was in keeping with the

abandonment of open socialist demands inside the movement he came to lead. It was a complete negation of everything that Trotsky represented.

Ironically, the NEUM splintered on the proposed land solution in 1958. Tabata and his faction (which was strongest among the African section) proposed that when the land was redivided it should be on the basis of private ownership. Ben Kies and those who opposed Tabata rejected this.

Finally, when it came to the crucial question of how to oppose the government on the land question, Pondo activists who had been affiliated with the AAC and were preparing for revolt, approached members of the NEUM for assistance. Although Tabata's role in the discussions that took place is not known, his followers (in the main) rejected the appeals on the grounds that such a revolt had no chance of succeeding. That was an estimation that was correct, but reluctance to enter into a struggle because it could not succeed, was a recipe for political suicide.

After the Pondo revolt of 1960 the NEUM went into rapid decline. With the police uncomfortably close to detaining the leaders of the NEUM, and with many of its leaders removed from their teaching posts, a large part of the African leadership went into exile. Tabata fled South Africa in 1963 and never returned. In exile, as President of the African Peoples' Democratic Union of South Africa, he formed an alliance with the Pan Africanist Congress — the outcome of two strands of his political philosophy: the elevation of colour over class analysis and the centrality of the demand for land.

He lived out his life believing that he would still return on the tide of the revolution in which he believed. He has now returned to his native soil. His friends and relatives had to secure permission to be in South Africa for a month so that they could bury him in his native Transkei.

This is not the occasion to take issue with many of Tabata's statements but in the light of events over the past year one matter must be aired. In 1956, after the invasion of Hungary by the Soviet Army there was a deadly silence in the 'left' press in South Africa. The first paper to support the invasion was the *Torch*, mouthpiece of the NEUM. It condemned the reforming regime of Imre Nagy. Tabata concurred, claiming against all the evidence, that there was an imperialist conspiracy against the Warsaw Pact countries. Consequently, he said, he gave unconditional support to the Soviet invasion.

To the end Tabata believed that his ideals would be fulfilled. It was a forlorn hope, but for his friends it will stand as his obituary.

Baruch Hirson

Note by author: I do not wish to intrude in this brief survey but some points made above need elucidation. I first met I B Tabata in 1944 and worked in the NEUM during 1944–45 and 1950–57. In 1950 in consultation with Tabata I set up the People's Press in Johannesburg to publish his book, *The All African Convention: The Awakening of a People*. It was a book with which I profoundly disagreed and in 1957 I wrote a rebuttal, under the assumed name R Mettler, entitled 'It is Time to Awake'. My final break with Tabata followed an argument in Cape Town in 1956 over events in Hungary.