

Not Just Another Memoir

A Brief Review of "Are You With Us?" by Mxolisi Mgxashe (Ace)

(Mafube & Tafelberg. 2006)

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On April 6, this book was launched in Cape Town at a well-attended function hosted by Exclusive Books. This was the first of several launches that were held in Gauteng and subsequently in Durban. The two speakers at the Cape Town launch, Pallo Jordan and Dumisa Ntsebeza, both hailed the publication of this work as a welcome addition to the reservoir of historical memory of the struggle for the liberation of South Africa.

Since the publication of the book, several events have occurred that are related to the focus of Ace's book. One was the untimely passing of the Pan-African Congress of South Africa (PAC) stalwart, Mr Vusumzi Linda Make who was eulogized as a dedicated comrade and visionary, whose passing represented a significant loss not only to the PAC, but to the entire country and the African continent as a whole. The other relevant event has been the recent publication of Zarina Maharaj's "Dancing to a Different Rhythm, a Memoir".

While this book shares, to some degree with Mr Mgxashe's account, the "desperation and anguish of exile", the two essentially belong to two different genres. Ace's narrative has no pretensions to being an account of the experiences of "an aristocrat of the struggle", *a la* Zarina's husband Mac. Nor does he claim any ensuing cathartic effect from his creative endeavour. On the contrary, the controversy around the publication of his book reveals, in no uncertain manner, the asymmetrical power dynamics surrounding the entire enterprise of intellectual production.

In our view, what distinguishes Mgxashe's fascinating narrative from the standard autobiography is that the author's life history is cast as a platform through which a myriad of *dramatis personae*, in his own words mainly "the unsung heroes and heroines of the struggle for freedom, democracy and justice", are assembled and profiled from the vantage point of the relevance and implications of their praxis. Through this rather unorthodox and novel methodology, a series of themes and sub-themes are explored or introduced in a preliminary fashion. What are some of these themes?

The overarching major theme is essentially the hitherto unexplained dismal failure of the PAC to realize its enthusiasts' belief that "their organization was going to take over the reigns from the National Party and install an 'African Socialist Democratic' regime. One of the consequences of this failure from a national perspective is the absence of a credible, opposition formation and voice during the critical phase of transition.

Clearly the dynamic and revolutionary thrust in the spirit of the founders of the PAC, projected onto the opposition benches of our young democratic parliament, would have filled a huge gap in our politics of transition in which the locus of significant dynamics has tended to be around the relationships between the alliance partners rather than between the government and opposition. The only expectations since the dawn of democracy in 1994 have been at the provincial and local layers of government in the Western Cape and KwaZulu Natal. The extent of the opportunity cost of this gap, to the country and continent, is by definition immeasurable.

The author's narrative unfolds against the background of the variegated, South African mosaic of dichotomies: black and white; rural and urban; native and settler; rich and poor; traditional and western; oppressor and oppressed; exploiter and exploited. Now, the author's growing-up experiences open up for the reader, a window to the complexity of this socially constructed and largely racially over-determined reality. Through the succinct description of personal encounters and interactions in the context of struggle activism, the author succeeds in portraying the oppressive and dehumanizing nature of inter group relations in mid-twentieth century Cape Town and the rest of the country.

Within this fabric, the reader is treated to fascinating insights into family relationships, peer group cultures, personal dilemmas that testify to the destructive nature of racial oppression and the resoluteness of spirit among the activists, notwithstanding the political naivety and internecine fractiousness. The latter provides a sharp contrast to the impressive spirit of solidarity, which characterized relationships across party allegiances in that extreme of total institutions namely, Robben Island. What holds the narrative together with some degree of coherence through the plethora of perspectives, ideas and actions of the many activists and agents of the regime, is the sense of commitment to the just-cause of national liberation, contraposed to a sense of betrayal and disappointment at the failure of the PAC. This failure in the author's account can be ascribed to a combination of at least three factors:

1. A crisis of leadership that followed the incarceration of Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe;
2. Lack of a revolutionary strategy, and planning based upon the rather naïve belief that a quasi-Blanquist, violent mass insurrection would flush the oppressive settler regime into the sea;
3. The sheer brutality of the regime and its ability to mobilize state resources, as well as its ability to coopt some members of the oppressed groups to serve as agents for their oppressive and criminal agenda.

Understandably the book is punctuated by explosions of passion, anger and disappointment. But all these are mitigated by a rich sense of humour, which runs through the entire work and prevents the disappointment from degenerating into self-pity and cynicism.

Besides the fact that this is only the first volume of the author's story which covers the pre-exile and early exile phase, he owes us the rest of the account. In that future volume, hopefully some of the sub-themes which he raises, but does not develop, will be revisited. Two of these are the question of the role of

traditional belief systems in situations of cataclysmic intergroup conflict. Here, he alludes to comparisons with other anti-colonial rebellions e.g. the Mau Mau in Kenya. Another undeveloped sub-theme is the question of asymmetrical gender relations, particularly the marginalization of women within the PAC, especially given the author's own passion for women's liberation.

Ace's final plea is for national unity in progressing the national democratic revolution, and the sharing of past experiences even by those who betrayed their comrades. He believes that the jury is still out on our transition. He still is hopeful of a future PAC revival albeit under a different label and needless to say different leadership. Yet some of the combatants profiled in his book are still living abroad as they believe that 'It is Not Yet Uhuru'. It may also be the case that President Mbeki's African, continental Renaissance-initiative, which Ace acknowledges with admiration, may have narrowed the space for any possibility of a serious PAC-based revival.

Finally, this is an important book for both young and old because while the former will learn a lot about an important phase of the struggle for liberation, the latter will be treated to a lot of, hitherto little known details, about events and people they used to know. Indeed, one is tempted to follow up this aspect with a motivation for a research piece on - 'Where are they now?'. What is also a certainty is that the title of the next volume will have to be reconsidered, since asking the question, 'Are You With Us?' or 'Are You Still With Us?' in the current context, may itself be problematic.

On a personal note I must say that I enjoyed reading this book not only because of my familiarity with some of the role players, but because it revealed some of the connections between events that happened in the former Transkei during the Matanzima dictatorship and tyranny and events in Cape Town. (Or a minor editorial note, the reference to Gideon Vakalisa and Vakasa on page 172, both of which are incorrect, should be Gideon Vakala.)