

BOOK REVIEWS

Askari... Defined by their choices

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When faced with the real choice between life and death, Sedibe chose life...He would have remained a hero if he had chosen death (p. 225).

In *Askari: A story of Collaboration and Betrayal in the Anti-Apartheid Struggle* Jacob Dlamini offers us a fresh insightful perspective on an otherwise murky past which disrupts the neat and narrow teleological national narrative of our history. In the introduction Dlamini states that the book is about Mr X1 (Glory Sedibe *noms de guerre* Comrade September) and his conversion from freedom fighter to apartheid agent (p. 1). Moreover, the book attempts to understand; what is an *askari*? What makes one an askari and further, attempts to understand comrade September's choices and the conditions under which he made his choices (p. 2). Quintessentially the book is about agency and context, as comrade September "morphed" from insurgent to counterinsurgent.

In laying out the introduction and setting up the scaffolding for the readers, Dlamini issues out a number of disclaimers in his introductory pages, "As an author, I cannot be considered a reliable narrator because I was not 'there', nor have I achieved the balance between explaining and understanding that these events require. I have known about Mr X1 for more than half my life, and researched the topic extensively, but I am not sure that I understand it all. Furthermore, I cannot say I have not judged him. Nor can the primary source materials on which the book relies be trusted" (p. 2). After reading these scores of disclaimers, the reader is left perplexed as to the authors expected intimacy towards the book, and his confidence in crafting a solid account and

his own agency in wading through the material.

I first read Askari five months ago and when I re-read it for this review, it reminded me of Yann Martel's 2010 novel, "Beatrice and Virgil" as it too touches on a lot of topics and many of which are hard to describe. It is centred on a former Nazi official who then becomes a taxidermist and this non-fictional character enunciates that; "Taxidermists do not create a demand. They merely preserve a result. We are no different from historians, who parse through the material evidence of the past in an attempt to reconstruct it and then understand it... I am a historian, dealing with an animal's past; the zookeeper is a Politician, dealing with an animal's present; and everyone else is a citizen who must decide on the animals future" (Martel, 2010, pp. 96-97).

Dlamini just like Yann Martel (although allegorical) is trying to describe the indescribable and in Dlamini's book it is – collaboration and betrayal. Unfortunately he applies far too much critical distance between himself and the subject matter, dare I say - taking on the above mentioned Taxidermists "distance"; with scores of disclaimers in the introduction. One then initially (although this quickly dissipates) questions the authors agency; the overarching topic of this significant book. Fortunately his critical distance and self-conscious balancing act doesn't take away from what we've expected from Dlamini, which is; thought provoking simplicity, how he tactfully inserts himself in history and, his literary panache.

Dlamini posits that, "...to see Mr X1 as only a 'victim' is to hide from historical view his agency and to diminish his capacity to act, regardless of his circumstances. Being a victim of torture might help explain Mr X1's choices. It does not absolve him of moral responsibility for his subsequent actions" (p. 15). Context cannot be used as an excuse, nor can counterinsurgents say, "Blame me of history". Perhaps a lengthy introduction but it sediments the complexity of the topic and evokes thought as Dlamini argues that, "Collaborators upset our belief about who we are, as they do not display the 'political understanding' of apartheid we assumed all black people shared" (p. 12). Dlamini places Sedibe's story in the context of other askari stories, and other truths so as to try understand his choices.

Dlamini provides us with skeletal biographical detail of Sedibe, but of course the book is not a biography of Sedibe but an examination of his choices and circumstances which led to those choices. At 24, Sedibe joined the outlawed ANC and illegally crossed the border into Swaziland in 1977, and was soon sent for specialised intelligence training in East Germany. By age 30 (1983)

he was sent to the Soviet Union for additional intelligence training, and by age 31 the ANC appointed him head of Military Intelligence in the Transvaal. He then defected in August 1986 (p. 20). He was abducted whilst in a Swazi police station in 1986 “The Security Branch wanted Sedibe alive, but his value to them was only in the information he could provide about his comrades and the ANC. His life was something to the SAP only if he talked. They let him know. And he talked. By talking under torture, Sedibe underwent changes that marked him profoundly for the rest of his life: from resister to collaborator, revolutionary to counter-revolutionary and, in the eyes of the ANC, hero to traitor” (p. 71).

Under torture at Vlakplaas, Sedibe eventually provided information and crossed the Rubicon, choosing to become a collaborator. One needed to have been a trained insurgent before one could become a counterinsurgent (p. 41). But, once the choice (under torture) was made, the askaris found themselves in a precarious situation as they felt that the ANC would kill them for treachery (if they returned), and De Kock and his men would kill them for desertion (if they left), they felt they were stuck in a catch-22 situation.

Dlamini elaborates and further complicates the act of collaboration lading it with significant consequence, adding that, “... from the very beginning askaris always did more than track their comrades. They served as agents provocateurs, assassins, bounty hunters, double agents, informers, intelligence analysts, spies and, of course, state witnesses” (p. 39). The act of collaboration weighted more than a single act of cooperation, as being a collaborator elongated the choices made to betray one’s own.

The next chapters grapple with court transcripts during the 1980’s court cases where Sedibe as Mr. X1 took the stand as a state witness to testify against his former comrades. The chapters further challenge the TRC Amnesty Committee for failing to interrogate and complicate the ‘problem of agency’ (p. 188). Dlamini argues that, “each of the collaborators examined in this chapter tried to put his choices down to circumstance. That is not enough. Human beings never stop being moral agents” (p. 221).

Chapter 12 provides an interesting juxtaposition between Phila Ndwandwe and implicitly Glory Sedibe. Ndwandwe had joined the ANC and abducted by police, interrogated and tortured, and she eventually cooperated with her abductors but refused to be an informer. Dlamini writes that, “We could say that, by refusing to become an informer, Ndwandwe chose death. We could say that in contrast to Sedibe, she took the honourable option. But

that would be a dubious assertion” (p. 227). Dlamini then argues that Phila Ndwandwe did make the honourable choice. “She responded to her torture the best way she could, telling her captors some of what they needed to know. But she would not, and did not, take that final step and become a traitor. She collaborated but refused to become a collaborator. Therein lies the difference between her and Sedibe” (p. 228). Dlamini then firmly states that, “We cannot accept Sedibe’s claim that he had no choice” (p. 236).

In the conclusion Dlamini paraphrases two scholars in postulating that, “Knowledge does not equal power, but power cannot be exercised without it... How, then, can South Africans exercise power as citizens if they have little knowledge of this part of their past?... Life is messy. But does the messiness of life mean that we should let apartheid’s secrets go to the grave?” (p. 250).

Dlamini’s book performs a painful vivisection on our still fresh history, upsetting the almost accepted teleological national narrative purported by the ruling party. Dlamini as a gifted historian does more than what the taxidermist claims historians do – “preserving a result... only dealing with an animal’s past.” Dlamini takes into account Sedibe’s past, his then present, and the future implications of his choice to become a counterinsurgent. These events and choices are grappled with and conveyed in a considered manner in this significant book.

A school of struggle: Durban’s Medical School and the education of black doctors in South Africa

(University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2013, 385 pp. ISBN 978-1-86914-252-0)

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A school of struggle: Durban’s Medical School and the education of black doctors in South Africa is an excellent authorized history of the struggles of black students at the Medical School of the then University of Natal. The author aims to understand and describe the challenges medical students enrolled at the Durban Medical School experienced during the apartheid era, and reveal

how these students contested and resisted *apartheid*-state policies.

The book consists of nine chapters throughout which the author draws from earlier research, international literature and work done by renowned South African scholars. She references 30 qualitative, in-depth oral interviews conducted between 1990 and 2000 and also a substantial number of archival sources. The first chapter provides an overview of medical education for black students in South Africa during the pre-apartheid era (prior to 1948). It also discusses the unequal and inferior education provided to black medical students, as informed by different legislative acts of parliament.

Chapter two looks at the establishment of the University of Natal Medical School in Durban. In it, Noble engages with the influence of the National Party government's racial policies on the operations of the Medical School. It is of particular interest to note that Noble elucidates that, through its 'financial strings' with the government, the school was forced to accept 'the principles of apartheid'. She also, however, reflects on how students in the Medical School undermined apartheid policies.

In her third chapter, Noble provides an insightful and comprehensive narration of the personal path of a student into a medical career. This path was characterised by racial, gender, financial and personal educational background challenges.

Chapters four and five offer an extensive and opulent account of the prevalent problems experienced by the students who gained admission to the Medical School. These challenges ranged from issues around skewed admission quotas, culture, and the differentiation of student residential facilities on the basis of race and staff-student relationships. The author exposes the substandard conditions of the hospitals in which student doctors and interns did their practicals. Chapter five further illuminates how white doctors humiliated and intimidated black students and doctors in the teaching wards. In addition, the author touches on women graduation and dropout rates, and the particular frustrations they experienced on a daily basis.

In Chapter six, Noble gives an account of and why students at the Durban Medical School were involved in anti-apartheid organisations. She also highlights what it was that mobilised students to get involved in anti-apartheid politics.

Chapter seven further explores the medical students' political activism and the consequences thereof between 1970 and 1980. The author focuses on the involvement of medical students in the politics of the South African Students Organisation (SASO) and the African National Congress (ANC). The chapter shows the ways in which students protested against apartheid policies.

The penultimate chapter focuses on the legacies of medical-education struggles in the post-apartheid education arena. Additional challenges, such as the HIV and AIDS pandemic facing the health sector, and their impact on the province of KwaZulu-Natal, are discussed.

The author concludes with a short, reflective chapter. In it, Noble (2013:336) summarises many of her thoughts as follows:

Over nearly half a century, segregated medical education in Durban developed as a site of great struggle against apartheid and a setting of deep contradictions. The provision of medical education in South Africa was always political in nature.

The book is a well-researched, well-argued, clear discussion of the topic and is presented in an engaging manner. As such, it contributes new knowledge to the history of education in the medical sector. The author has succeeded in offering a holistic, detailed historical exposition of problems prevalent in South Africa's medical education system. *A school of struggle: Durban's Medical School and the education of black doctors in South Africa* enhances our understanding of the deeply rooted historical challenges a medical student faced in South Africa, as well as the painful consequences and impact of apartheid on medical education.

Op die spoor van die Groot Trek

**(Voortrekkerleiers en trekroetes, Die Erfenisstigting, Pretoria, 2014, 132 pp.
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Die Groot Trek as landsverhuising in die dekade 1835 tot 1845 is een van die epiese gebeurtenisse in die Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis. Die oorsake, verloop

en impak van hierdie uittog uit die destydse Kaapkolonie is al voorheen deeglik nagevors deur historici, maar die detail oor spesifieke trekroetes van die verskillende geselskappe het agterweë gebly of is nooit volledig geboekstaaf nie.

Die historikus Jan Visagie het nou vir die Erfenisstigting 'n produk gelewer wat die verskillende trekroetes noukeurig identifiseer. Sy werk is meer as 'n blote padkaart met roete-aanduidings. Dit verskaf noodsaaklike inligting oor 30 bekende en minder bekende trekleiers (tabel pp 18 en 19). Hulle herkoms, vertrekdatums en onderskeie getal volgelinge word duidelik aangedui.

Die groot aanwinst van hierdie publikasie is vyf volkleur oopvou-kaarte met eietydse plekname en huidige benamings wat die Oos-Kaapse, Wes-Kaapse, Noordoos-Kaapse, Transgariëp en Natalse Voortrekkerroetes uitbeeld. Die skrywer het talle geografiese hindernisse en ander vereistes probeer vasstel deur argivale navorsing en veldwerk ter plaatse. Dit is duidelik dat die destydse trekgeselskappe slegs na vooraf verkenning van die terrein en beplanning van roetes die Kolonie in verskillende periodes verlaat het.

Visagie se werk sal belangstellendes in staat stel om op die voetspoor van die Voortrekkers hulle pionierstrekke na te volg. Sulke waarnemers sal nou 'n realistiese blik kan kry op die soms onherbergsame terrein (berge en riviere) wat die trekkers met hulle swaargelaaide ossewaens en veetroppe moes oorsteek. Die spesifieke roetes is andersyds ook bepaal deur die ervaring van jagters en trekboere wat die beskikbaarheid van weiveld en oop ruimtes aan hulle kon mededeel.

Toepaslike foto's, verklarende voetnote, 'n stewige bronnelys en handige register is 'n aanwinst in hierdie publikasie. Dit dien ook as belangrike aanvulling by Visagie se bekroonde werk oor Voortrekkerstamouers wat deur Protea-uitgewers bemark word. Voornemende toeriste en omgewingskundiges sal hierdie studie onontbeerlik vind in hulle soeke na 'n volledige en noukeurige uitbeelding van die Groot Trek.