

# How Can Man Die Better: Sobukwe and Apartheid

by Benjamin Pogmund

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**A**s apartheid begins to weaken and show signs that it might fall, the differences between those who fought it have begun to show in public. Former allies are turning their fire-power against one another now that the spoils of war might be up for sharing. At one and the same time that all are compromising to defeat the common enemy, they are also contemplating in their individual corners how best to get more out of the peace than their allies.

But perhaps even more important than this aspect of the end of apartheid is the question of asking those who were fighting apartheid what in fact they were fighting for: were they fighting for

the human rights of the Black majority in South Africa, or were they fighting for the equitable distribution of the wealth of the country, for national liberation from the tyranny of the Boers?

It is really in the light of these two issues that books which deal with the detail of the role of individuals and organisations in the struggle against apartheid have begun to appear. Critically speaking, they must be seen as statements of past performances and statements of future possibilities.

Benjamin Pogmund was the former deputy editor of the *Rand Daily Mail* and he knew Robert Sobukwe, the founder of the breakaway

Pan-Africanist Congress (PAC) well not only to write about him but to also write of his own collaboration and imprisonment with Sobukwe.

The book details in the early parts, the birth, education, political education academic success (marked by being appointed Language Assistant at the Witwatersrand University, the highest position at that time available to Blacks and a rare privilege) and marriage. There are also the stories of the Congress Youth League and the victory at the elections of the Afrikaner National Party on May 26, 1948. Over the years, the ANC had to fight on two fronts: against the Nationalist government and its apartheid policy and to upstage the various strands of the expression of African nationalist opposition to apartheid.

One of these strands, the Pan-Africanist one, became virtually synonymous with Robert Sobukwe, who had emerged as its leader and

spokesperson by 1958-59. The PAC under Sobukwe was to carry forward the struggle against the apartheid regime.

The narration of the march towards what became known as the Sharpeville Massacre is gripping. One man decides, carries other men and women with him and history is made, which makes other histories. After that incident of March 21, 1960, Robert Sobukwe and others were imprisoned; and it is in this light that Benjamin Pogmund says: "Many of the developments in South Africa were to pass Sobukwe by because he was now a convicted prisoner." Since this is half way through the book, what therefore is left to narrate?

The rest of the book is taken up with the less known prison regime of Sobukwe and the other PAC prisoners, the arguments as well as information on little known aspects of the struggle. There is the story of Poqo, an off-shoot of the PAC

known in Xhosa as Ama-Africa Poqo, which translates as the real owners of Africa. The activities of Poqo got Robert Sobukwe into more trouble with the South African authorities who believed that he was behind it and that in fact the PAC and Poqo were the same thing.

The narration also includes the move to Robben Island, with a short history of the island and the uses to which it had been put before.

But perhaps more important both in the context of the history of South Africa and the role

of those who write about it - and for this particular book - the second part of this book includes the role of the writer through his involvement with the leader's family, their friendship, their arguments, their disagreements etc. Which makes of the book not some objective record of the life and struggles of Sobukwe but a living record of what happened recently.

While this book is compulsive reading and a must for those who would understand better what is going on in South Africa, it must be

recorded that perhaps books such as the one under review must begin to go beyond the collaboration of individual heroism. While the activities of Robert Sobukwe and others might have helped to raise the civil rights/human rights issues in South Africa, the issue of national liberation and equitable distribution of the resources of the nation are not yet broached. In that case, the recounting of heroism might seem premature ●

Kole Omotoso

Robert Sobukwe Papers

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