

JACOBUS AND THE BARRICADES

ARNOLD BENJAMIN

Staff of the Argus Africa News Service

Early this year a reporter was sent to Johannesburg's Non-European General Hospital to check on Kangweni Singwo, a seven-year-old African boy who had caused a little to-do in the British press. In a photograph captioned "The Picture that Shocked South Africa", the child's inert form was shown lying on the road where he had been run over by a car—while an unruffled policeman, instead of getting him to hospital, proceeded with his official task of taking measurements.

In the rumpus that resulted, the authorities claimed at first that the boy was dead when the picture was taken. The reporter was sent to the hospital to produce the evidence that Kangweni Singwo was still very much alive. And while he was there he stumbled across a story that shocked South Africa much more.

Another young African boy, in the same ward for a tonsillectomy, had a regular visitor each day—an elderly white man who brought him sweets and presents and kissed him goodbye after each visit. It turned out that the boy was his "adopted son". The old man and his wife, a wealthy Afrikaner couple, were bringing him up as their own on their fruit farm outside Johannesburg. The boy, Jacobus, slept in their bedroom, ate at their table, even went visiting with them. Unable to adopt him legally, they had left him £2,000 in their will; planned to send him, after he had finished school, to train as a missionary in the Dutch Reformed Church.

It was an amazing story, and "Oom Thys" and "Tant Johanna" Heyneke were persuaded with not too much difficulty to reveal it. Both simple and devout church-people, there was nothing cranky about them. They said they had similarly godfathered the education of several other African youths for the church. But for nine-year-old Jacobus, "given" to them seven years ago by one of their farm servants, they had developed a special fondness. "The little fellow is shy with strangers," they said, "but we have taught him not to be embarrassed by his colour." What reaction did all this have on their fellow-whites? "We have lost some friends," the Heynekes said.

After this they nearly lost Jacobus as well. The unheard-of story, with pictures to prove it all, made a nine-days' talking

point in Johannesburg. Behaviour like that from a white man *and* an Afrikaner! Inevitably the Heynekes began to get abusive letters and 'phone-calls. It seemed that the Group Areas and a fistful of other Acts could be invoked to put paid to such non-conformity. Then gradually the furore settled down, and the curtain closed on this curiosity of South African life.

A freak, certainly—but also a convenient jumping-off point for some interesting questions. Is colour prejudice always going to remain the implacable force in South Africa we suppose it to be? Liberals have always assumed that it would take a revolution in white thinking, more than any other kind, to establish a harmonious multi-racial society here; some impossible brain-washing of an entire nation. "The Afrikaners would rather die than accept social integration," we have always told each other. How true is this? Is it not just conceivable that prejudice may be growing weaker and not stronger, as events in South Africa move to their 20th-century climax?

These are questions, not assertions. The continent is in such a state of flux today that it is hard to be certain about anything. What *is* certain is that the Union is not remaining immune to these changes. On the political surface, yes: we remain static in the face of the great African face-lift. But other forms of change have been affecting the Union as surely as anywhere else.

Today's South Africa can boast what is perhaps the most elaborate legal machinery ever devised for keeping two sections of a single community apart. It is not remarkably efficient, as machines go. Inexorable social, economic and human laws keep clogging up the works.

At one end of the scale, apartheid is made a monkey of every day by the Coloured who "plays white", by the African who takes a drink, by the man who beats the pass laws through remaining illegally in a white area. At the other end, the most sacred colour taboo of all is flouted persistently despite heavy criminal sanctions.

Sex relations are reputed to be the last sticking-point of colour prejudice. White liberals, otherwise sanguine about full integration, sometimes confess to a shamefaced doubt whether *they*, personally, would care to go to bed with an African. But the whites who regularly come before the courts on Immorality Act and "black rape" charges seem troubled by no such inhibitions. Mostly, from the names, they are Afrikaners.

Immorality prosecutions have become so frequent that the Dutch Reformed Church in the Cape has appointed special committees "to fight this evil." (The contraventions, not the Act).

There ought to be even more alarm and despondency over the ones that get away. In parts of white Johannesburg, elegantly groomed black prostitutes ply their trade more or less openly for whites. And just over the Mozambique border—where immorality is just immoral, not illegal—there are more examples. Once you have seen ordinary white South Africans in the dives of Lourenço Marques, fraternising with the mulatto hostesses and enjoying a holiday from the Union in every sense of the word, you are bound to change your ideas on Africa a little.

White and black may travel in their segregated trains from their segregated living areas, pass through their separate station entrances. But after that, they are walking the same streets, working in the same factories and offices, spending the same money in the same shops. All the time this means contact—a rubbing together which may lead to friction, but also to an inevitable exploration and discovery. No whites and few Africans can avoid it today.

All the time the African is becoming more like those he serves, acquiring Western tastes and interests, gaining new knowledge and confidence. Not even the blindest of whites can fail to notice these changes, and how spectacular they have been over the last decade in particular. Outwardly they make him irritable and uneasy. Deep down, he may be learning and changing as well.

Certainly once profits get directly involved, the white boss is suddenly stung out of his torpor. The last two or three years, years of boycott and strikes, have seen his first uneasy awakening. Chambers of Commerce and Industries have paid their first serious attention to the voice of the A.N.C.; they are spurring their members to pay better wages, to *talk* to their workers and find out their views. The white employer who, after ten years, calls his tea-boy in to ask him how he feels about the 'stay-at-home' is unlikely to get a straight answer; but at least it is an attempt, a start.

#

So much for the long-term war of attrition on the frontiers of white exclusiveness. In one or two fields there has already

been something of a spectacular frontal assault. One is jazz music—the same point at which Negroes made their first big break into the white man's world in America.

Quite suddenly, the best jazz in South Africa today is played by Africans. "King Kong", the first African jazz opera, played for many months this year to some 80,000 Europeans in four principal cities of the Union. With music by an African, and starring the cream of local non-white entertainers, it created a sensation wherever it went. The critics raved, in both English and Afrikaans; the tunes headed the record hit parade for many weeks; the queues for seats were the longest in memory.

This impact is worth analysing a little. Part of it was the novelty of seeking black faces on a hitherto all-white stage; there were the heavily patronising ("Aren't they sweet?") and the sentimental ("Let's give them a jolly good hand.") But the real acclaim, it is clear, came from those who sat up suddenly with surprise to enjoy the show on its merits—notably the astonishing vigour and drive with which it was performed. A straight human contact was established across the footlights, a gap opened in the cultural colour bar.

All of which may sound pretty tenuous, but if you were in a "King Kong" audience you could not miss it—a deep warmth, an excitement and sense of discovery. It was a unique and historic thing to happen on such a mass scale in the Union.

Sport was another break-through point for the Negroes in America; and here, too, things are starting to move in South Africa. I remember the shock only seven or eight years ago when the news leaked out that Vic Toweel, South Africa's world bantam-weight champion, had been knocked out in training by an African, "Slumber David" Gogotya. Discovering that the idol boxed with blacks seemed to cause as much public alarm as the fact that he had been toppled. Today it is an open secret that every white boxer of note in Johannesburg uses non-white sparring partners; the sessions are still supposed to be held behind closed doors, but nobody troubles much to enforce this.

The peculiar absurdities of sports apartheid have long been manifest. Official white teams compete against all and sundry outside the Union, but a champion like Jake Tuli has to do all his fighting overseas. Now, with half-a-dozen international bodies threatening boycott of the Union, white sportsmen are becoming resigned fairly quickly to impending changes in the

old order. Rather multi-racial sport—to a nation that loves sport even more than it loves politics—than no international sport at all. If not for the special toughness of Government policy on this point, probably a start would already have been made in the Union by now.

#

To return for a moment to jazz. It is interesting to note that African capabilities were first discovered, a good few years before “King Kong”, by a rather unlikely bunch—Johannesburg’s lower-class white teenagers and ducktails (the local brand of juvenile delinquent.) It was they who brought the word ‘*kwela*’ into English usage—together with other bits of African argot—long before it became a popular dance craze. It is they who are the most appreciative audience at any jazz concert that happens to be given for whites. Jazz-happy, hand-clapping, stomping, yelling encouragement, they appear troubled least of all by the colour of the performers. Much the same thing happens whenever black and white jazzmen get together in a “session”. For the time being the common absorption overrides all barriers.

Crowds of long-haired, long-jacketed youths would turn up at the “King Kong” stage door, wanting autographs and a word with the performers. Others would sometimes have to be cleared from the orchestra pit, where they had infiltrated for a chat about jazz and perhaps a spot of quick improvisation with the players.

The remarkable thing, of course, is that these are teenagers of the lowest white classes, the group we have always supposed to be the most prejudiced and vicious of all. There is certainly none of the liberal’s fuzzy sentiment involved here, probably little conscious thought at all; they come simply to hear the best jazz going, and it leads in the most natural way to social intercourse with those who make it.

The strolling penny-whistle bands that play in Johannesburg’s white suburbs invariably collect a small crowd of Africans and often set an impromptu *kwela* session going in the street. White suburbanites watch from a tolerant distance. But the “duckies” are apt to be right in the middle, and occasionally—jazz being a sociable religion—carried away by the rhythm, and with no white “sheila” handy, they have been known to seize any African girl who happens to be around and dance with her.

There is a bunch of such youths that goes out on Sundays to the huge Government township of Meadowlands, complete with motor-bikes and molls and leather jackets, for a multi-racial kwela session and party. And the most liberated society I have ever heard of in South Africa is the crowd that used to meet regularly at a house in Bertha Street, Sophiatown (since demolished) for an all-week-end party. It consisted of white ducktails, black *tsothis*—who had commandeered the place in the first instance—and some Indian and Coloured equivalents. The whites used to supply the liquor, the non-whites the dagga, and there was some loose mutual arrangement about girls.

This instance, of course, takes us well into the underworld, where there has always been a notable absence of race barriers. A common disregard for the law and a common way of life transcend them easily.

When it comes to the less disreputable white teenagers, one can find various explanations. They are attracted by the vitality and gaiety of African city culture, the casual way it merges with the underworld. They are in rebellion against the other restraints of society, so why not the racial one too? And of course there is the great unifying influence of hot jazz.

But it is still a most remarkable phenomenon, this instinctive belonging across the colour-bar. How did those jazz-happy teenage fans talk to the African players? I asked one of the white liberals who staged "King Kong." Did they seem to get on and feel at home with them? "More so than us," he answered.

#

I think the truth we may discover at some not-too-distant day is that Afrikaner and African have a lot more in common than we might think; that the relationship between them even now is a curious two-faced one alternating between hate—I say this with all due circumspection—and a kind of love. Often there is a strange rough companionship between them—in the way they can talk and joke with each other, in a similar way of thought. Certainly the unsophisticated majority of Afrikaners share this understanding. There are the Afrikaners who go to witch-doctors for cures, and those who wait in the country surgery of Dr. J. S. Moroka for consultations. Even in the police force the bond persists. A recent newsreel showed a senior officer actually *shaking hands* with the non-white police to whom he was presenting medals.

The two races have roughly similar backgrounds, after all. Both are vigorous pastoral peoples still coming to grips with the rawness of city life, still not far removed from the soil. Each has been going through the throes of its own crude nationalism. They talk the same sort of language.

Writers like Sampson and Van der Post have remarked on this strange bond between oppressor and oppressed. It is a relationship which usually excludes the English South African; partly because he feels himself less native to the country, partly I would suggest because of his lingering Englishness. Though his political attitudes may tend to mild humanitarianism, his social ones are still overlaid with some ideas of class and breeding and cultural attainment. He may be harder than anyone to assimilate in the new South Africa.

You might find straight antagonism among the Afrikaners, but little snobbery. The leaders of Afrikanerdom remember that social segregation has not always been part of the local scenery; a million Coloureds are sufficient reminder of that. This after all is the driving fear behind apartheid, the fear of contact. Hence the severity of the laws to prevent it. Not even laws can make a good job of it; hence the final desperate goal of total separation and the Bantustan dream. The leaders can see no middle way, and they are probably right.

As one more pointer to the future, we ought not to forget the Nationalist "liberal revolt"—still for the most part a painfully guarded semantic rebellion, but slowly assuming significance. Afrikaner professors and some of their students are talking openly about the "human rights" of Africans. So is the Government, as part of the "new thinking" about Bantustans. How much *this* means is, of course, another matter; sufficient that it at least has the rank-and-file of the *volk* a little confused.

Meanwhile we must reckon as decided progress even such amount of multi-racial tea-drinking—whether of the drawing-room or round-table variety—as has been done lately by Afrikaner intellectuals in their "consultations" with non-white leaders. Ten years ago—or even two or three—it would have been unthinkable.

Let us remember too the increasing discomfort being caused by the pressure of events elsewhere in Africa. These are political and economic pressures principally, but also social ones. On one memorable occasion at least we have officially accom-

modated a visiting Ghanaian dignitary in the best hotels of Johannesburg and Cape Town. This V.I.P. treatment was on Government instructions—and complete with “white” liquor.

In any event I believe there still remains in the Union today, all things considered, a miraculous amount of goodwill between the races. You can see it in a hundred small ways in the Cape, where the old easy-going traditions still cling, and even in the rough-and-tumble of the Rand. For most of this tolerance—not all—we have to thank the almost indecently good spirits which the average African seems to preserve. If they can keep it up a while longer, further miracles may not be impossible.

The curious and touching case of Oom Thys Heyneke and his African “son” can be written off as an isolated eccentricity. It is still notable as a cross-current in the highly fluid sub-surface of life in South Africa in 1959. Dying on the barricades may sound all very fine in the abstract, as a rallying-call to threatened white mastery. When it comes to the push, living on is surely a better idea; how much more preferable to extinction, simply to let the barricades fall.

