

A Passing Miracle?

Miracle in Natal: Revolution by Ballot-box.

by Alan Thorold

Cambridge: Prickly Pear Press¹⁰, 1995, 59 pp

Prickly Pear Pamphlet No 7

ISSN 1351-7961

Reviewed by David Hemson
Department of Sociology
University of Durban-Westville

For most South Africans participating in the first democratic election was sufficient to itself; but for some the line drawn in political power, in psychology and in mood was the time for recording the subtle moods, fervent hopes and confusions of the occasion. This pamphlet, a collection of interviews and personal reflections, is the product of a novel intervention by anthropologists and students participating in the events and recording their own feelings and the views of others in Natal.

The title attempts to capture the peculiarities of the conjuncture of a province in a stage of civil war attempting at the last moment a way out of inescapable violence as part of a watershed national election. Certainly the lack of violence on the election days was a surprise but unfortunately the miracle was a post-modern one; a very temporary respite from violence and the engineering of an outcome which had little to do with the precise counting of votes. Unfortunately also there was no revolution; social, political, economic, or of the spirit in Natal but rather the further consolidation of an uncontrolled and destructive political leadership incapable of taking the region back from the abyss.

But let us leave the quibbles about the title and turn to the content of the exercise.

¹⁰ The Prickly Pear Press is a non-profit-making organization that was set up in Cambridge to publish anthropological material that moves beyond the confines of the discipline. The series of Prickly Pear Pamphlets aim to be provocative, entertaining, pocket-sized and cheap. They include contributions from leading figures in anthropology such as Marilyn Strathern and Marshall Sahlins. *Miracle in Natal* is available in South Africa from Adams (UND) and the Department of Anthropology at UDW at the price of R 15,00 each.

Elections are the measurement of opinions; of certain attitudes based on the bedrock of historical experience, or of whims and fancies of the moment. This pamphlet marvellously presents the many nuances of mood by the capture of the precise statement. The landmark quality of the election is marked by African participants:

... deep down I knew that day would be the end of our misery, but I knew it will never take away the hate that lies deep down in me

When I heard that the black man has won I thought there will be a war like Blood River .

To me the election day was just like a judgment day because only an individual knew the truth I also felt that it was up to each individual to liberate or betray the nation

Those more used to the cynicism and boredom of elections in established democratic countries would find it hard to understand the psychology of this moment:

my heart beat started to strike hard as if I had done something wrong and my hands were trembling . I felt like collapsing and I was perspiring a lot .

In a pre-election atmosphere of rising tension there are testimonies of chiefs' instructing their subjects to vote for the IFP. Elsewhere there is a record of the apprehensions of the simple act of voting; some thought there would be a process of voting for three days, others record:

We were told of just putting a cross next to the party of your choice but it was not clear to us

Participants express great care in describing the party voted for: 'I thought of an old man who once came to our area ...'.

In a nice vignette the complex attitude of an African servant towards an Indian employer supporting the ANC is captured; going together to the voting station 'made me feel very happy because we are going together and united for one party which we support'. There is the moment of prayer and the African woman singing 'Nkosi Sikelel' i-Afrika'.

The authenticity of testimony and the complicated relationship of political opinion to voting is shown in the case of a woman whose son was hacked and left for dead by IFP supporters, wanting to contribute her vote to 'be a hangman's noose for apartheid' and voting nationally for the ANC, but also concerned it would be 'unfair to totally ignore Buthelezi and whatever he had done' and voting regionally for IFP. Another participant expresses

strong fear and distrust of police but also the same feelings towards militant children who could necklance somebody they don't like.

On the one hand, there is the simple experience of voters who could say 'I had survived', at another there is the absurdities of enumeration which counts for nothing. Evie Plaice records the election results being announced while at the massive Expo 'we were barely a third of the way through our count'.

There were the multiple confusions of procedures and spoilt votes, the starting and stopping of counting, nervous breakdowns among leading officials and mix-ups of all kinds. The whole process was governed by yuppies conducting the election like a business transaction while the chaos multiplied: young men disconnecting the essential fax machines, the impossibility of reconciliating ballot and statements of ballots used, enumerators dismissed and then officials asked to keep counting stations open. All form part of the reflection of fact and feeling by anthropologists trying to be the dispassionate enumerators of the marks of hundreds of thousands. There is nothing to convince the sceptic that there was not massive fraud and that there was a juggling of numbers to arrive at a convenient result.

At the end there is a simple statement:

I still do not understand why in this province of Natal we experienced so many problems that other regions did not have.

This is precisely the question which is still occupying those concerned for peace bemused by a miracle unfortunately temporary and in the past.
