Askari: A story of collaboration and betrayal in the anti-apartheid struggle

Jacob Dlamini

Wendell Moore
University of South Africa
moorewendell@gmail.com / moorewc@unisa.com

This has to be the most ambitious book I have read in a long time. Rebecca Davis of the Daily Maverick (24 May 2016) described the book as “the most intriguing, provocative book you’ll read all year – but its account of betrayal and collaboration under Apartheid is also deeply discomfiting”. Jacob Dlamín’s Askari: A story of collaboration and betrayal in the anti-apartheid struggle is a testament to the need to broaden our views of apartheid history and incorporate those parts we consciously tend to shy away from. The book highlights just how far a coercive state can go to protect its system but, more importantly, what individuals will do in order to survive it.

Askari is the story of a former apartheid activist turned “traitor” in the mid-1980s. The term Askari means “police” in Swahili, but “traitor” according to the notorious police agent Eugene de Kock. Glory Lefoshie Sedibe is the main protagonist in this chronicle of friend turned foe. The book challenges established notions of South Africa’s past, for which Dlamini must be applauded. In both his previous book Native Nostalgia and this latest installment, Dlamini points out the importance of appreciating the everyday contradictions people faced by people during the late apartheid period, regardless of their role in the struggle. Dlamini goes one step further in Askari by entering, not only the world of the ANC underground and the state security branch, but also the world of those considered to be most despised, the Askari.

Perhaps only Xolela Mangcu’s recent book, Biko: A Biography, comes closest to capturing as succinctly the soul of the person it describes. Mangcu’s analysis of Biko draws parallels to Dlamini’s work in that both bring to life the ordinary person behind the turbulence. Although nothing like Biko, because Sedibe is regarded as a ‘sell out’ a, turncoat, or a counter revolutionary, his life story nonetheless highlights the complexity of living under apartheid and the difficult choices people had to make. It is the story of those who could fight only so much – whether on the side of the police, comrades or ordinary
citizens – and, when push came to shove, had to ultimately acquiesce to state pressure in order to survive.

Sedibe went into exile in 1977 and became an ANC and MK comrade. He operated mainly out of Swaziland and Mozambique until he was captured in 1986. By the time of his death in 1994 at the age of 40, he had been working for the apartheid security branch and military intelligence for nearly eight years. He had participated, by then, as a state witness against former comrades he had helped capture and had also actively perpetrated acts of violence against other activists.

Sedibe was what the state would call a “rehabilitated terrorist” and worked out of the South African Police Counterinsurgency headquarters at Vlakplas farm situated just outside of Pretoria. Dlamini moves back and forth in time to try and explain why a former ‘terrorist’ joined the ranks of those they had previously fought against. All the while the author gives an uneasy humanity to the Askari who confronted violence, death, murder and mayhem every day.

To be sure, captured activists were tortured and forced to decide between life and death. When confronted with these two choices it was not easy to take the path of martyrdom (death), the idealized symbolic gesture associated with political activism. Dlamini subtly points out that simple survival strategies or rational choices were not only the preserve of ordinary citizens living under apartheid but also of activists, even those trained to withstand torture.

However, torture was not the only motivation and other activists turned because the incentives of a good life and financial reward were alluring. Moni, for example, states in 1986 when giving evidence for the state against his former comrades, that he got “tamed” [turned against his former comrades] when he “…thought about [his] conditions, conditions of life on earth, conditions at home” (Dlamini, 2014: 168). It must be remembered that South Africa in the mid-1980s, despite its internal political turmoil, was slowly creating a black \textit{petite} bourgeoisie class backed by the new COSATU union. Money had become another component of the struggle in this decade and should also be considered when explaining the many ways in which it was possible for activists to be tempted by state machinery. I would further argue that material satisfaction had become an actual way of activism for many ordinary South Africans in addition to the armed struggle.
Dlamini importantly also questions if, when switching sides, Askaris actually adopted “the value system of the ‘other side’”. A suitable analogy in post-apartheid South Africa would be the example of Cyril Ramaphosa who was an active trade unionist in the mid-1980s and one of the negotiators for South Africa’s transition to democracy, who subsequently turned to the private sector in the mid-1990s, becoming a multi-millionaire. Has Ramaphosa adopted the value systems of capitalism that he opposed ideologically in the 1980s or is activism and African National Congress (ANC) politics not at odds with monetary gain? Many have questioned if South Africa’s first two decades of democracy under the ANC have sidelined the masses in its pursuit of control over the economy. In the same vein, did Sedibe give up his aspirations for a free and aspirant South Africa, even while working for the state?

Dlamini quotes Adam Michnik to explain the ending of apartheid, “We have entered freedom with the luggage of unsettled accounts about our history”. Surely apartheid did not end with elections in 1994 and there remain stories that still need to surface, and others that may never see the light of day. Sedibe’s story thus “…complicates how we think about apartheid and its legacies, and reminds us of the stories that still refuse to be told. As a nation we would do well to examine the taboos, the secrets and the disavowals at the core of our collective memories” (p. 260).

Yet, in looking back are we not unsettling our future? Dlamini has shown that we can look into apartheid to understand our past so that we can understand our present realities and future. He has shown that history offers us lessons about what we choose to remember and choose to forget. He reminds us that the South African story was not/is not simply a black and white one; it is far more nuanced.

Zambia, the freedom struggle and the aftermath: The personal story of freedom fighter and leader Sylvester Mwamba Chisembele


Sophena Chisembele

Ackson M Kanduza

Zambian Open University, New Foundland Campus

kanduzama@yahoo.com