

Book-review

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I was not reading), when suddenly the front door burst open. Hassan! He came forward into the room und without a word took from his pocket a bundle of notes and some coins. He counted the money in front of me. There were the five-hundred lire intact, all but a few piastres. He was wearing the old blue nylon shirt, I noticed. And he kept his eyes averted, would not look at me. I could see that he was in great distress, and trembling. «Hassan,» I said, softly, «look at me!»

He raised his eyes, in which tears glistened, and suddenly he knelt before me, buried his head on my knee and sobbed. I let him cry for a while, stroking the dark head. Then I lifted him in my arms like a child, and in a little while he was quieter. My relief was so great that I could hardly speak. «Hassan?» I questioned at last. «I had to see you, I had to come back,» he whispered. «Will you send me away, Effendi? If you say so, I will go...» Oh Hassan, Hassan!

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Yes, yes, I'm coming to bed, just let me finish... no, don't do that! (It is Hassan standing by me, wearing nothing but a wrist watch, and nibbling at my ear) — well, just one, then. There! No, don't bite my cheek... all right then, I give up, you win!

M.M.W.

Book-Review

BLANKET BOY; by Peter Lanham and A. S. Mopeli-Paulus; Crowell, N.Y., 1953

Blanket Boy is a richly detailed novel by an Englishman in collaboration with a Basuto chieftain. It has lots of plot, many characters, moves all over South Africa. It has some of the qualities of a picaresque novel. It is also a propaganda novel — and by that I do not mean that it is dishonest but only that it has a social message and purpose. It is the story of a South African Negro — «a comely young man in his middle twenties of strong build and graceful carriage» — with one foot in the primitive culture of his own people and the other in the white man's world, unable to shake free of the old or to assimilate the new, and subjected as all his fellow Negroes are, to appalling injustices, brutalities and stupidities by the ruthless white rulers of his homeland. *Blanket Boy* gives a far more detailed picture of the life of the South African Negro than Alan Paton's celebrated *Cry the Beloved Country*. And although it is filled with terrible events and ends tragically, it is a colorful, singing, high-hearted book.

So grave, so many and so interlocked are the problems with which this novel deals that it seems scarcely decent to isolate its homosexual content and to dwell exclusively upon that aspect of it. I believe that *Blanket Boy* is of special interest to our readers, however, because its hero is actively bisexual and the novel provides considerable insight into the social conditions which make him so, as well as insight into the way he thinks and feels about his sexual relations.

This book appeared four years ago, and since it seems a little late in the day to be reviewing it, I shall attempt to give the reader some idea of how Monare, the Blanket Boy, happened to do his loving the way he did.

«Monare was born in a little village situated directly beneath the foothills of the Maluti Mountains in Basutoland... High above the village, flocks of sheep and goats graze slowly and peacefully on the green hills and kloofs; and steadily following them, to protect the weak and the young, come the hardy herd-boys... these young boys, clad in their tribal clothes of well-trimmed, round-cut goatskins, play about on the grassy banks of the stream and in the crystal waters... From these hills, year in and year out, young men travel the road which leads to the City of Gold (Johannesburg), there to work in the mines. Nine months is the shortest period of contract, and the men of the valley take it in turns to accept these contracts — while one team is away, the other team stays at home.

«The simple people of Lomontsa enjoy their lives — and why not? Have they not the annual circumcision ceremonies to look forward to? Have they not their many wives to help them with their work? For these Basotho are still polygamists, and the wealthier men can afford from six to ten wives each; and it is not unusual to count the chief's wives from one to twenty!»

We are given no details of our hero, Monare's, initiation into manhood but later in the book when his own son, Libe, approaches manhood Monare wishes him to attend the Mountain School of circumcision. «Monare was one who believed in the old customs... He did not consider the six months which Libe must spend at the mountain school a waste of time; he could catch up on his studies and his return. Of course the boys returned from their initiation puffed up with self-importance — but this soon wore off.» But the native Christian preacher, the Moruti, comes to Monare to dissuade him from his decision. The Moruti says, «Christians should not be circumcised.»

«Tell me why not, O Moruti Lefa.»

«Monare, think back on your own circumcisonal rites.»

«Father, I was taught to be strong, to fight, to work, to be a man.»

«What else were you taught, Monare?»

«I was taught how to take a woman, Moruti.»

«Nature and love should teach Christians such things. It should not be for the hand of man to caress the manhood of another to make it flower. That is why Christians should not attend the Mountain School.»

«But my father and my grandfather —»

«And your son Libe — what of him? Does not the thought of a stranger's hands wandering over your son's slim body cause you shame?»

«But, Moruti, they are the hands of the lawfully-appointed Teacher.»

«Teacher or not, Monare, he is but human like yourself, and has the same weaknesses. This is a great sin for a Christian.»

«Monare's thoughts were troubled; he recalled his own months at the circumcisonal school; he felt again the first touch of another's hands on him. He said to himself;

«But this hand had no lasting effect on me. I have proved myself a man, I am a husband and a father... Yes, I have given away to mad desires when I was young, and later in the City of Gold. But what was the harm? Better that surely than the greedy, perhaps unclean und sick body of the prostitute... My Libe ist surely the same — a man, strong, well built, male. It can soon be put to the proof when he returns, by getting him to talk on marriage.»

«Thus Monare on the things that trouble all men — some more, some less.»

It is necessary to see Monare's love-life whole. We learn that his own father had gone into the British army and had been killed just before his son had attended circumcision school. Upon returning to his village, «Monare lived in his father's shoes, and took to himself a wife.

«This woman was carefully chosen for him by his mother, and she proved to be a fine worker in the home and in the fields. A new hut was built, and the freshly married couple started their life together.

«And Monare was happy.»

But: «When some years had passed, a man-child was born to Florinah and Monare; although this circumstance was a great blessing, yet it brought about a great change in the good behavior of Monare . . . who would too often now arrive at his home drunk, and beat on the door, and accuse his wife of flirting with other men when she went to draw water at the well . . . During this sad time Monare also came near to destroying his old mother's fondest hopes, for he spoke of traveling away into strange lands and seeking a second rich wife, who must be the daughter of wealthy parents.»

At this point the Moruti, the Preacher, has a talk with him — for both his mother and his wife are Christians — a talk which gives us an idea of the practical drawbacks of polygamy. He tells Monare; «. . . Strange things may happen when one man marries many wives. I was the son of my father's first wife, and when I attained manhood my father married his seventh wife, who was a young and beautiful girl . . . I was young and lusty then, and I fell in love with my father's youngest wife, and thus brought dishonor on the house . . . but I have atoned for my sins . . . today I am very happy — my wife and I grow old together . . . Now I shall never be an old man craving for young girls, and, perhaps, being unable to satisfy them . . . You will see, Monare, that where the children are the fruit of the loins of one man, and the womb of one woman, there is less jealousy and more loyalty, and the family stands against the world as one.»

Monare relinquishes his desire for a second wife, he and Florinah — now called Ma-Libe, Mother of Libe — are reunited and happy together once more. But in time Monare decides to go to Johannesburg, the «City of Gold,» to improve his fortunes. Once he gets there and is established in a job he is very lonely. He meets a decent and attractive young woman, Mary, and contemplates marrying her. «Forced to live a celibate life on the mines, Monare's thoughts did not turn in the direction of the prostitutes in the locations, but rather to contracting another marriage. But thoughts of Mary were driven right out of his mind for a long time by an unexpected encounter with an old friend.» This is Koto, a young native who has become a prosperous tailor in Johannesburg.

«These two had been boyhood friends in far-off Lesotho; close friends such as there are among boys of all nations — a David-and-Jonathan pair. The love between them had endured until the time of Monare's marriage — then they had slowly drifted apart. But they looked at each other with joy and happiness at their reunion — both far from home their intimacy could be renewed.»

Koto offers to teach Monare — who has been working for a mining company — the trade of tailor and promises to take him into partnership. Koto also gives him a fine new suit, for he «loved Monare more than a brother. He was unconsciously jealous of Ma-Libe and Libe and even of old Ntoane (a

mine worker who had befriended Monare in Johannesburg) for he did not know how far Monare's friendship with him had gone. He was delighted at finding Monare again, for he felt lonely, and looked forward to getting on the old footing of intimacy with him again.» And as for Monare himself, «In spite of his delight in his new clothes Monare did not visit Orlando (where Mary lived), for he and Koto renewed the games of their youth to their mutual satisfaction.»

By and by Ma-Libe wishes to come to Johannesburg to join her husband, but the old man Ntoane advises strongly against allowing this. Life in the city is squalid and degrading for a Negro, there is much drunkenness, women leave their husbands for men they believe are making more money and men are always on the prowl, looking for wives they can seduce when their husbands have gone to work. «No, Monare, you leave Ma-Libe at home and continue to send her clothes, blankets and money to buy cattle,» the old man urges. And, «This advice was so welcome to Monare's own inclinations, that he said nothing.» «Before many months had passed, Monare entered into full partnership with Koto, and their affairs prospered greatly. Had he listened to his heart-friend Koto's advice — that handsome Mosotho who was almost his second self — he would have avoided the period of terror which he had to endure.»

A combination of naivete and greed leads Monare to prison. There he is thrown into a cell with a murderer, a hard-boiled type but sympathetic. Almost at once, apparently, the comfort he offers Monare includes the physical. His cell-mate says to him, «Little have I had to do with Morutis . . . Man, talk to me rather of beer drinks and women, or even — if your fancy lies that way — of handsome boys.

«A flush of shame mounted within Monare's heart, for, in truth, he had found much comfort in the ministrations of his companion's hand. And in his eagerness to relate his story he had not rebuffed those hands when they strayed . . . Monare then said, somewhat diffidently: 'Yes, boys, or the friendship of the hand — these are what many of us Africans are reduced to. Yet the truth is that the friendship of boys leads one to a lonely path at the end. There is little chance of living in such a manner in the homeland.' His cell-mate laughed again. 'Women, boys — I have tried them all . . . But this companionship of boys is against the white man's law. Should you see your Moruti again ask him how the white man can condemn us for a crime which they themselves have forced upon us by separating us from our families.'»

There is, of course, much truth in the criminal's arguments, yet one remembers that Monare was first introduced to «friendship of the hand» during his six months' initiation training and that, furthermore, when his older friend Ntoane advised him against bringing his wife to Johannesburg this advice corresponded with Monare's inclinations. It seems clear that for a man like Monare homosexual relations are made familiar and receive strong sanction from tribal authority when he is at an impressionable age.

But after he became used to prison life, «Monare's eyes were opened to much that was wicked and sordid, for there were all sorts of men in the prison. Monare had heard of, and indeed, to some extent known, that friendship of men for men which is born of a great love, much as marriage springs from a great love of woman, but what he saw here filled him with disgust and dismay. Older vicious prisoners took the younger, innocent ones to their own uses,

and here there was no thought of affection or love — bestial lust dictated their actions. Such men, he felt, could not blame prison for their depravity, for they would obviously behave with the same wickedness outside of jail.»

After his release from prison Monare returns to his home village for a period. It is at this time that his son Libe attends the Mountain School of circumcision. We learn that among the Basuto the young girls are also circumcised, although circumcision seems hardly the word for it. «The girls are cut with a blade in their outer sexual organs and a flap of flesh is drawn down to cover that mischievous 'monkey' which can be the source of so much pleasure to uncircumcised girls. The performance of this rite tends to encourage chastity among the women, for a circumcised girl can know little of the joys and passions of physical love . . . It can perhaps be said that the circumcision of women not only denies the girl great pleasure and joy in the sexual act, but must in consequence lessen the happiness and exaltation of the man, and thus shut out any upliftment of the spirit — lying with a woman, then, becomes a selfish rather than a mutual pleasure. Here in the very homeland, in this circumcision of women, lies the seeds of the physical love of man for man, which is brought to flower by living conditions imposed on African mine workers by the white man.»

All these excerpts from *Blanket Boy* are taken from the first quarter of the book and while they display very clearly the social conditions which lead many South African tribesmen into an overtly bisexual, or homosexual, way of life — and that has been the purpose of these quotations — Monare goes on to many adventures and all of them are moving and enlightening. If you would like to know how it comes about that Monare is involved in a ritual murder, of which his beloved Koto is the victim, you must read the book. If you would like to know of Monare's idealistic pact of brotherhood with the young Moslem, Gulam Hussain, you must read the book. And there is so much else besides. For all its naivete, there is much wisdom in it. For all its awkwardnesses of style, it is full of poetry.

Luther Allen

Malayan Poetry

Introduction

The most popular vehicle for the expression of poetic feeling amongst Malays is a versicle which is called in their tongue a pantun — pronounced pun-tone.

Each pantun is an entity which stands alone and is without recognised authorship, being the impromptu production of some forgotten individual under the stress of a passing emotion.

They appear as insets in Malay literature, and are in vogue as emotional assets in the composition of love letters. Whilst they replace song, they have the merit that any verse may be applied to any suitable tune.

The first two lines contain a poetic statement of fact, expressed either as a whole or as two unconnected or very slightly related images and chosen usually at random for the sake of the impending rhyme, or because of some relevancy to the meaning of the final lines.

The subject matter of this introductory couplet may be a natural phenomenon, or a historical or everyday event but, whatever its form, it is no more