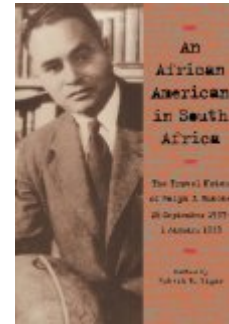


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ralph J. Bunche. *An African American in South Africa: The Travel Notes of Ralph J Bunche, 28 September 1937-1 January 1938.* Edited by Robert R Edgar. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2001. xv + 398 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-1394-4.

Reviewed by Sibongiseni Mkhize (Durban Local History Museums, South Africa)
Published on H-SAfrica (September, 2001)



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This book is an edited version of Ralph Bunche's notes which he wrote while on a three month tour of South Africa. The book was first published in hardback in 1992 and it has been re-issued in paperback in 2001.

Ralph Bunche was born in Detroit in 1904 and grew up in Los Angeles. He began his tertiary studies at the University of California in Los Angeles in 1927, and later moved on to Harvard University in 1928. After graduating with an MA degree at Harvard, Bunche was offered a teaching post at Howard University where he established the Department of Political Science. In 1932 he went back to Harvard, where he began studying for his doctorate—his topic was French Administration in Togoland and Dahomey—which he obtained in 1934. His initial interest was to compare mixed-race experiences in Brazil and America. Bunche became the first African American to earn a PhD in Political Science. He returned to Howard University in 1933-34 and later resumed his chairmanship of the Department of Political Science. To many African Americans, Howard University represented a capstone of 'Negro' Education and was an apogee of black university life. In 1936, Bunche received funding from the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) for field training to acquaint himself with anthropological research skills in Africa. Bunche later entered government service and wore an official mask. Much of his official correspondence and notes were not written

with an audience in mind. However, he made restrained and dispassionate comments about race. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950.

Robert Edgar has done a phenomenal task by putting together the scattered notes and compiling them into a readable book. The first forty-nine pages of the book orient the reader by explaining the context in which Bunche's original notes were written and the way in which Edgar went about compiling and editing them. Furthermore, the first part of the book provides a brief biography of Bunche and the socio-economic and political contexts of South Africa. Providing Bunche's biography helps in reading the travels notes, such that his views can be read against his own particular philosophical background.

Bunche's South African notes represent an outsider's account and are a rich repository of black life in South Africa during the 1930s. Before coming to South Africa, Bunche was unfamiliar with the country's socio-economic and political conditions. He claimed to have used his research skills and to have relied on his 'Negro' ancestry to navigate through the country. His research was open-ended and he focussed on a wide range of issues such as race relations, black living conditions in the reserves, mines, townships, African political and labour leaders and organizations, education, health and mental care, journalism, sports and culture, social life, business, religion and the legal system. His primary focus was the impact of segregation on black life, so he con-

centrated most of his attention on the Indian, Coloured and African communities; whites played an interesting, but secondary, role. One can, however, not generalise on the basis of his notes because he only had access to professionals, liberals and the black middle class. Bunche was not the first African American to visit South Africa. Other African American groups and individuals had preceded him. African Americans represented a potent political symbol for black South Africans, many of whom were conversant with the philosophical thinking of Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey.

During the period of the Great Depression in the 1930s, Bunche and his colleagues at Howard formed a discussion group which acted as a forum to exchange ideas and sharpen their analytical skills of global economic developments. Bunche's thesis was that problems of the black community in America were a result of class exploitation, not uniquely racial (p. 7). He argued that racism was being used to pit black and white workers against each other. He enunciated that there were race and class problems in the black leadership and race provided a potentially dangerous and divisive tool for mobilisation (p. 7). Bunche disparaged Du Bois on the issue of black self-determination and had serious misgivings about the idea of black economic development which did not take into account the complex dynamics of the economic situation. He also despised the reliance on the support of liberals by many African American organisations. The reading of his notes on South Africa should, therefore be read against his ideological position regarding race, class and politics in America.

Bunche was the only African American funded by a private foundation to go out to Africa for research until the 1950s, when the Ford Foundation began funding African fieldwork. In February 1937, he and his family sailed for London. While in London he made contact with South Africans at the London School of Economics who gave him extensive but conflicting advice about who to see and associate with in South Africa (p. 14). While in London he mixed with pan-Africanists but was not sympathetic to their ideas as pan-Africanism clashed with his class analysis and he saw it as another form of race chauvinism. Bunche hated the penchant for romanticizing Africa's pre-colonial past. However, he got a taste of what to expect from his contacts with South African officials in London. He experienced difficulty applying for a landing document. He was also harassed by South African Embassy officials—solely on the basis of his skin colour. He continued to experience racial

innuendos aboard the ship en route to South Africa. In South Africa he stayed with black families. Connections with a combination of moderates, professionals and radicals eased his entry into black communities. He visited Cape Town, Lesotho, Alice, Thaba Nchu, Bloemfontein, Mafeking, Johannesburg, Benoni, Pretoria and Durban. Bunche could afford first class accommodation on trains, which in most cases was offered amid confusion and reluctance by railway officials due to his skin colour. Many people were unsure whether he was white or Coloured. He was often escorted by white liberals who were regarded as acceptable escorts for 'outsiders' entering the black community. He was a subject of curiosity to many black South Africans who had transformed the African American into a metaphor of racial progress and success in a white-dominated society.

Bunche remarked that two developments in the black community sustained white domination: the lack of racial solidarity among Coloureds, Indians, and Africans, and inert political leadership by the educated elite. Over and above the unhealthy intra-black competition, he observed hostility between Coloureds and Africans which played into the hands of the absurd South African racial structure. He also noticed an interesting phenomenon of 'passing for white'—a strategy applied by Coloured individuals and families in South Africa thus ridiculing the South African race policy. Throughout his journey and encounters with prominent political figures, Bunche was not impressed by the calibre of black political leadership.

Bunche's point of entry into South Africa was Cape Town and pages 53 to 103 consist of his observations in that city. He stayed with the Gool family and had contact with academics and liberal whites, although most of his time was spent with the leadership of the Coloured community. He met with members of the Communist Party of South Africa and had an interview with Moses Kotane, which offered him information about the African National Congress and the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (ICU). He spent more than a month in Cape Town and observed the complex nature of race relations, not just the problems between the black and white racial groups but also animosity between the Coloureds and Africans. This proved to be an interesting observation, since even today the politics of Cape Town still plays on those racial 'differences'. He also came into contact with some Coloured families who related to him the ways in which they grappled with day-to-day racial discrimination. His encounter with some white people in the Cape was of little interest to him as he was interested in the experiences of the black, Indian and Coloured

people. He was only interested in the views of the white people in so far as they related to the plight of the black people. This section therefore provides an objective observation of the political activities of Coloured leadership in the Cape and how their activities related to those of the Africans.

Bunche's next visit was Basutoland (present-day Lesotho) and it took only four days (pp. 104-124). However, his notes act as a lens through which to view some aspects of life in the then-British protectorate of Basutoland. The notes also tell about the socio-economic links between South Africa and Basutoland in the form of the migrant labour system. There are also stories of the day-to-day activities of ordinary people in the villages which he visited. After Basutoland he visited the Eastern Cape (pp. 125-142) where he met with prominent African educationalists and political figures in the African National Congress such as Dr D. D. T. Jabavu, Professor Z. K. Matthews and Dr R. T. Bokwe. He visited Fort Hare and attended meetings of the Teacher's Association. He also had an opportunity to listen to the 'natives' representatives', Mrs Margaret Ballinger and Senator Malcomess. Apart from those meetings, Bunche did not have time to visit people in the rural areas of the Eastern Cape. Having spent only four days in the Eastern Cape he moved on to visit Thaba Nchu and Mafeking (pp. 143-157) in the then province of Orange Free State. At Thaba Nchu he was hosted by Dr J. Moroka and at Mafeking he lived with Dr S. Molema. In both these areas he made observations regarding advancement by the two doctors, the nature of tribal land ownership and the relations between the educated Africans and 'tribal leadership' structures.

After spending four days in the Orange Free State, he moved on to Johannesburg (pp. 159-228). Bunche spent eighteen days in Johannesburg and associated with, inter alia, William Ballinger, J. D. Rheinallt-Jones, Dr Wulf Sachs, Vil-Nkomo, Peter Dabula, Jack Philips, Jack Simons and many other prominent and ordinary people of Johannesburg. He also had an opportunity to communicate with prominent people in the South African Communist Party, the African National Congress and trade unions. Bunche observed the socio-economic conditions of the African, Coloured and Indian people in Johannesburg. He frequented the Bantu Men's Social Centre and also visited mine compounds, hostels and many African settlements, many of which were being destroyed by the government or had been earmarked for removal. In his visits he also observed the cultural vibrancy of Johannesburg as well as the devastating effects of the pass laws and the migrant labour system.

>From Johannesburg he visited Pretoria for two days where he attended the session of the Native Representatives Council in December 1937 (pp. 229-242). His notes provide a glimpse of the proceedings of the session of this useless and ill-fated body. Bunche was overtly critical of the NRC for its condescension and as a structure representative of African aspirations. He also lambasted the African councillors for their ineffectiveness and incompetence. Their apologetic attitude and inferiority complex convinced Bunche that the NRC was just one of a myriad of instruments designed to foster black people's dependence on whites. After the conclusion of the meeting he returned to Johannesburg where he spent a further four days, during which time he met activists of different trade unions and discussed a wide range of issues relating to African, Indian and Coloured workers.

After Johannesburg, Bunche proceeded to Bloemfontein where he attended the third session of the All African Convention (AAC) and later the Silver Anniversary meeting of the African National Congress (pp. 256-286). The AAC had been formed in 1935 as a response by African leaders to the Hertzog Bills, one of which was the Natives' Representatives Act, which disenfranchised those few Africans who had the right to vote. Apart from the issue of the franchise, the AAC was formed in the context of the ANC's docility along with its failure to fight against a barrage of laws and policies which were meant to confine black people to a life of servitude. Bunche was critical of both the AAC and the ANC leadership at their meetings for 'leaning heavily on advice of Europeans' and saw the presence of the liberal white native representatives as a ploy to weaken the struggle by using moderation and splitting tactics.

The last leg of Bunche's travels to South Africa was his visit to Durban and the surrounding areas towards the end of December 1937 (pp. 287-312). He spent thirteen days in Durban and was interested in the lives of the Indian people. He spent some time with leaders of the Natal Indian Congress such as A. I. Kajee, Seth Govindas, Albert Christopher and Monilal Gandhi. Bunche also had an interview with A. W. G. Champion of the ICU and ANC, who spoke with him about the rise and eventual demise of the ICU. While in Durban Bunche toured hostels, beer-halls and a brewery and also had an opportunity to talk with an official of the Native Administration Department. Apart from contacts with Rev. Abner M'timkulu and his son Don M'timkulu (modern spelling in KwaZulu-Natal is Mthimkhulu), who took him to Adams College at Umbumbulu and a short visit to Lamontville township, he spent most of his time with

the leadership of the Indian community in Durban. He went to Pietermaritzburg briefly for one day, and later that day Bunche, accompanied by Don M'timkulu, visited an African religious group founded by the prophet Isaiah Shembe at Inanda near Durban. Having spent Christmas and New Years Eve in Durban, Bunche wrapped up his three months of eventful travels in South Africa and departed for East Africa on 1 January 1938.

The Travel Notes of Ralph Bunche are an interesting and an informative piece of work. Edgar's adept editing has made them readable and it is easy to follow Bunche as he meanders through South Africa. I was initially reluctant to read the book because I thought the notes would be boring, but on reading the book I realised that Edgar, and to a certain extent Bunche himself, went out of their way to contextualise events so as to orient the reader. The notes thus read smoothly and different pieces of information are interconnected. Pages 25-27 and 30-33 provide a socio-economic context to South African race problems and are vital to understanding Bunche's notes. The end-notes, although I would have preferred footnotes, also provide detailed information and complement the text nicely. The brief biographical data of the persons mentioned in the book helps to further enrich the book as a historical source. The Epilogue gives the reader a significant piece of information about Bunche's subsequent activities and what he intended to do with his travel notes.

All the chapters are exciting but the most interesting are his observations of the Natives Representative Council (NRC) meeting in Pretoria and the AAC and ANC meetings in Bloemfontein. Furthermore, his observation about Coloured identity provides an indication of the ambiguities of South Africa's racial classification, from which the country is still struggling to extricate itself. The fact that Bunche himself could pass for white in most instances attests to the absurdity of South Africa's obsession with race. The most interesting aspect of the notes is Bunche's interaction with many ordinary African people. The way they viewed him and the way he interpreted their attitudes towards him makes one believe that Bunche and those people were talking past one another. Wherever he went he was hailed as a 'an American Negro who has come to save Africans'. He was always un-

comfortable with this image and argued that although Africans admire African Americans they do not understand America. Although Bunche saw himself as a researcher and an observer, many Africans viewed him as a political missionary. Bunche regarded his South African research tour as a great success and this is attested to by his report in which he wrote: 'All in all, I consider my visit to South Africa to have been an exceptionally profitable if not always pleasant one It is a land terribly ridden with race prejudice, but I found this to be no great handicap to my work, even in tackling the scores of officials with whom I had to have contact. I have had no really unpleasant experiences, though some might be described as humorous or ludicrous.' A conclusion very few, if any, South African black researchers would have arrived at.

A few points on some errors: On p.77 Dr Xuma's house should be Empilweni not Emphiweni; p. 309 should be Ekuphakameni not Ekupakemeni; p. 304 Illovo (not Ilbowo); p.369 should be Umbilo not Umlilo. A spelling error occurs on page 24 where (extrolling) should be extolling.

Bunche's notes provide more than just a record of his observations over a three month period, but some interesting insights into broader South African politics at a time when both the state and the liberation organisations were going through internal crises of their own. Overall, I can say that the book *An African American in South Africa* is an excellent work and the editor has performed an excellent job in compiling the notes and doing further research in order to supplement Bunche's notes. I recommend it to anyone who is interested in the history of South Africa (and African American history as well) as it covers issues across the broader socio-economic and political spectrum. Many of the problems identified by Bunche during the 1930s are still plaguing South Africa today. This book is not only relevant to academics and researchers studying early twentieth South African history, but also to those studying contemporary South African socio-economic and political issues. It is a fascinating and intellectually enriching book which is an outcome of meticulous and well-informed editing.

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Citation: Sibongiseni Mkhize. Review of Bunche, Ralph J., *An African American in South Africa: The Travel Notes of Ralph J Bunche, 28 September 1937-1 January 1938*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. September, 2001.

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