Book Review

Kally Forrest (2024) *Lydia: An Anthem to the Unity of Women*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media. ISBN 9781431434800. 230 pp. ZAR300.00 (paperback); US$ 19.55 (kindle)

Reviewed by
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In *Lydia: Anthem to the Unity of Women*, Kally Forrest documents the extraordinary life of the late Lydia Komape (Kompe), affectionately known as "Mam' Lydia". The biography chronicles her journey from her rural childhood, to her life as a trade unionist and a rural land restitution activist, to a member of South Africa's first democratic parliament. Forrest draws on interviews with Mam' Lydia, her family and fellow comrades, to provide an insightful window into a life deeply entwined with South African struggles for equality and justice. Mam' Lydia's story unfolds against the backdrop of the pervasive and oppressive apartheid system, which legally enforced racial discrimination and political, social and economic exclusion.

Forrest begins by portraying Mam' Lydia's proud inauguration as a member of South Africa's first democratic parliament in 1994. Decades later, Forrest met Mam' Lydia, aged 87, in her childhood village in Limpopo Province, where she spent her final years. As they wandered through the semi-barren countryside, Mam' Lydia reminisced about her childhood, her family's struggles and her pivotal life phases.

Born in 1935 as one of seven siblings, Mam' Lydia grew up in a sharecropping family. Living in a rural village, she attended a local Lutheran church mission school. Her early years were steeped in a mix of religious Christianity and traditional cultural practices. While this environment provided a sense of community, it was patriarchal, curtailing girls and women's roles.

In Forrest's account, Mam' Lydia bitterly recalled the apartheid government's land policies devasting her family in 1949. Dispossessed of most of their land and livestock, her family was driven into poverty, forcing her mother into migrant labour as a domestic worker in Johannesburg. Mam' Lydia's schooling came to an abrupt end in Grade 9, when she remained behind in her village, caring for her younger siblings.

At age 19, she left her village, to find work as an auxiliary nurse in Potgietersrus. She married her first husband in 1958 in Johannesburg. She endured years of physical and emotional abuse during her marriage, attributing her husband's behaviour to a sense of entitlement resulting from the cultural practice of a bridegroom paying *lobola* ("bride wealth") to his bride's family, saying: "I was the woman he had paid for…" (p. 24). After leaving her husband intermittently, she made a definitive break from him in 1973, pursuing an independent life with her three children.

Mam' Lydia's childhood and early adulthood experiences profoundly influenced the rest of her life's trajectory. From the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, her involvement in a trade union organisation laid the groundwork for her endeavours for socio-economic and political change. Leaving her children in her childhood village, she moved to Johannesburg. While working at the Heinemann Electric factory, she joined the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU), a

predominantly black, independent trade union, in 1974. At this time the apartheid state, supported by most employers, brutally repressed the growing independent trade union movement through intimidation, violence, arrests, and detentions or bannings of union leaders. After being dismissed from her job because of union activities, she became a MAWU organiser. Her interactions with white organisers in MAWU challenged her earlier uniformly negative views of white people. She said: "I didn't know there were [any] whites on our side… I [had previously] just lumped all white people together" (p. 31). Her belief in a non-racial struggle recurs throughout her story.

In 1978, Mam' Lydia left MAWU to become the Transvaal Branch Secretary of a fellow independent trade union, the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU). She and her fellow women organisers prevailed in successfully organising male drivers in the goods and passenger transport industry's sexist environment. Passionate about organising women workers, she keenly recalled negotiations to have dismissed women members reinstated at a major cleaning company. Strong organisation, coupled with Mam' Lydia strategically leveraging the company's liberal image, achieved TGWU recognition.

Her union work deepened her political engagement. She participated in secret discussion groups on Marxism, socialism, and the history of the African National Congress (ANC). She remained religiously devout throughout life and, while critical of the capitalist system, her political views reflected an eclectic form of socialism, defined by a flexible and a strategic approach.

A distinctive feature of Mam' Lydia's style in worker organisation was her ability to struggle *with* rather than *for* workers. Her belief in the power of collective organisation and accountability to members or a constituency remained characteristics of her organising style in her later work.

A central theme in Forrest's biography is Mam' Lydia's dedication to challenging oppressive gender norms, particularly experienced by black women in marginalised and subordinate social and economic positions. Having personally faced the limitations of gender-based social and work roles and male dominance, she fought sexism relentlessly. For example, while organizing in MAWU, she embraced its participatory democracy, but pushed back against sexism. When, as the only woman organiser, she was expected to serve tea and clean, she insisted on task rotation, stating, "I am not here to become a tea girl" (p. 46). Mam' Lydia recognised that male partners' patriarchal attitudes impinged on women workers' union participation and leadership. She established separate women members' forums, aiming to build women's confidence for participation. She used these same principles in her later work with rural organisations. She strongly opposed cultural traditions being used to confine women to subordinate roles. Although she did not label herself a feminist, her beliefs and actions reflected feminist ideals (p. 94).

After the 1985 formation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions, Mam' Lydia left trade union work and in 1986 she became a rural field worker for the Transvaal Rural Action Committee (TRAC). Established by a South African organisation, the Black Sash (Burton, 2015, p. 93), TRAC provided legal and organisational backing to communities resisting forced removals. She viewed focusing on rural women and community struggles as returning to her roots. Her work with TRAC coincided with intensified resistance to apartheid policies in the 1980s, particularly the incorporation of rural areas into Bantustans (Phillips, 2017). In her rural work, she strategically organised women and elders to camp near land they had been removed from. By telling police they were cleaning ancestral graves, they gradually moved back and reclaimed their land (pp.77-78). She played a key role in establishing the Rural Women's Movement (RWM) in 1990.

In 1994, Mam' Lydia began a new life phase as an ANC representative in South Africa's democratic national parliament. Forrest recalls her looking back on her early parliamentary years with optimism, having participated in drafting the Restitution of Land Rights Act and used parliamentary recesses to consult with constituents, so that their voices influenced policy discussions. However, some senior ANC representatives' arrogance riled her, and over time she

grew disillusioned by a widening gap between the country's progressive laws and their implementation, and increasing corruption and poor service delivery. The ANC's HIV/AIDS denialism during Mbeki's presidency, which opposed providing anti-retroviral HIV treatment, affected her personally when her son died of an AIDS-related illness in 2005.

In 2009, aged 74, Mam' Lydia returned to Limpopo as a representative in the provincial legislature. There, she reconnected with her earlier activism, focusing on practical issues like water access and childcare. However, after retiring from all parliamentary roles in 2019, she expressed frustration with bureaucratic political structures: "I was a union organiser, so if there is an issue you confront it immediately… before people lose hope…Same with TRAC…[Here] people have been waiting for months and nothing happens" (p. 187).

Forrest portrays Mam' Lydia as combining political astuteness with compassion and pragmatism. Her former comrades described her as consultative but decisive, serious yet humorous. She connected with people across generations and ideologies. Forrest shows several personal contradictions: She opposed *lobola* as oppressive but felt compelled to pay it when her daughters married. She was gentle and empathetic yet strict in her children's upbringing, sometimes using corporal punishment.

The final chapter is a tribute to Mam' Lydia's legacy, as an important women's leader in the struggle against apartheid, exploitation and oppression. Forrest comments: "She belonged to a group of activists internal to South Africa… steeped in a mode of consultation and democracy, and a deep desire for progress and change within a socialist mould" (p.191).

Forrest has written a number of important books on Trade Unions in South Africa (Forrest, 1994; 2005; 2011). The book is written in a clear, engaging style for a wide audience. Though Forrest's narrative may appear somewhat idealistic, her efforts are noteworthy, given the challenges of capturing a person's life journey. Mam' Lydia's story is a powerful example of survival and resilience during immense personal and political struggle. It acts as a valuable lens through which to view the significant role women like her played in the country's grassroots movements for freedom, democracy, and women's and workers' rights.

References

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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