

RALPH BUNCHE IN SOUTH AFRICA IN THE 1930s

by

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It is more than appropriate in reflecting on Ralph Bunche's sojourn to South Africa, my country, from September 28, 1937 to January 1, 1938, to begin by expressing gratitude to Professor Robert Edgar who assembled a superb book in 1992 called **An African American in South Africa**. The book consists of superbly edited travel notes jotted down by Ralph Bunche during his three-month stay studying the methodology used by anthropologists studying the interaction between Western and so called non-Western societies. In other words, Ralph Bunche wanted to understand the nature of racial domination in my country with the intent of possibly comparing it with the equally tragic experience of African Americans here in United States. What is truly impressive about the book are the scholarly protocols that Professor Robert Edgar has assembled that are a veritable treasure trove of South African political and intellectual history in the first half of the twentieth century.

There are several acute observations that Ralph Bunche noted down concerning the political practices undertaken or not appropriately undertaken by Africans concerning their domination by Europeans in this decade of the 1930s. These observations profoundly disturbed him. I would like to note two of them today and attempt to give a historical contextualization and explanation to them. These two observations preoccupy themselves with *politics* and *modernity*. *The first one was that Africans seemed to have fully acquiesced to their political and racial domination by Europeans*. There is some plausible truth to this observation because the African National Congress, the only hegemonic political organization among African people, was in complete disarray under the incompetent and partly corrupt leadership of Pixley ka Isaka Seme who paradoxically had founded the political organization decades earlier in 1912. This paradox may perhaps be explained by the fact that Pixley ka Isaka Seme was a *political visionary* who just lacked the qualities of *political leadership*. This is a problem I think haunted African national liberation movements in second half of the twentieth century. Think for instance of Kwame Nkrumah and Sekou Toure and perhaps Ahmed Ben Bella, who were political visionaries whose skills of political leadership left much to be desired. Concerning Nkrumah, I have in mind C. L. R. James simultaneous praise and uncompromising critique of him in his book **Kwame Nkrumah and the Ghanaian Revolution**. Amilcar Cabral and Eduardo Mondlane were killed by Portuguese imperialism before they could exemplify the quality of their political leadership in running a political state

rather than in only leading a national liberation struggle. Mwalimu Julius Nyerere exemplified the unity of a political visionary and political leadership which has been equaled by a few. Concerning Madiba, known to the international community as Nelson Mandela, I think the jury is still out. I think the supreme qualities of his political leadership by far superseded his vision. I think this is the nature of the critique implicit in Govan Mbeki's relationship to Nelson Mandela.

But it is necessary to return to the interaction between Pixley ka Isaka Seme and Ralph Bunche from the perspective of the African American. Bunche wholeheartedly despised Seme. But since Ralph Bunche seems not to have read any writings by African intellectuals before coming to South Africa, which he could have obtained at the Schomburg Library or at Yale University Library, and seems not have read any writings and newspapers edited by Africans before coming to South Africa, such as *Umteteli wa Bantu*, *Ilanga lase Natal* or *Bantu World*, regarding *intellectual and political matters* rather than seeking only data as his notes indicate, he had no historical comprehension or contextualization of the political limitations apparent in the political leadership of such figures as Seme or R. V. Selope Thema, whom he also despised. Had Ralph Bunche deeply read these newspapers, he would have seen African intellectual traditions that were beginning to emerge or take formation. It is here that Robert Edgar's observation in the Prologue to the book that Ralph Bunche came to South Africa not to do research but merely to observe the situation there, takes on really importance. Had the intent been research at the center of his enterprise, he would have been aware that a discourse through correspondence across the Atlantic had already begun in 1890s between Mangane Maake Mokone, a representative of Ethiopianism, and Bishop Henry M. Turner in the latter's *The Voice of Missions*, that Allan Kirkland Soga in the 1900s was contributing major essays to *The Colored American Magazine*, that in 1920s Clements Kadalie, the Malawian who was the real founder of labor unionism among Africans in South Africa, was contributing essays to A Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen's *The Messenger*, and that Solomon T. Plaatje, for many the real intellectual force within the African National Congress at this time, in the 1920s not only spoke with Marcus Garvey in Harlem in the 1920s but also contributed to the latter's *The Negro World*.

Had Ralph Bunche not limited himself to reading only American and South African anthropologists such as Melville Herskovits and Isaac Schapera but extended his intellectual horizon to reading also the New African intellectuals of the New African Movement, he would in all probability have noted that these intellectuals were grappling with the complex nature of modernity, and he would not have been surprised when informed by D. D. T. Jabavu, then Professor of Bantu Languages at Fort Hare, and Rosebery Bokwe, a medical doctor and son of the important Xhosa intellectual John Knox Bokwe, that black American culture

had deep influence in South Africa, especially in the form of Garveyism in the 1930s. I would venture to say that Ralph Bunche was closer during his South African sojourn to D. D. T. Jabavu, Rosebery Bokwe, and Alfred Xuma, another medical doctor who was to revolutionize the African National Congress in the 1940s, rather to Pixley ka Isaka Seme, lawyer and founder of the ANC newspaper *Abantu-Batho* , and R. V. Selope Thema, editor of *The Bantu World* , because he confused the professional position of the former three with their intellectual endowment and capacity, which in no way measured to that of the latter two. This by no means invalidates his cogent political criticism of Pixley ka Isaka Seme and R. V. Selope Thema and John Langalibalele Dube, founder of the *Ilanga lase Natal* newspaper in 1903, founder of Ohlange Institute in 1901 which was modeled on Tuskegee Institute, and first President of African National Congress. This role call of names indicates how deeply and profoundly Ralph Bunche inserted himself into New African modern culture which was in the process of formation when he was there. I think the absence of preparatory research before his insertion is an issue. Thus Ralph Bunche giving a lecture informing South Africans that they should learn from African Americans was somewhat bizarre because he was not aware of the preexisting nature of this influence.

It should be mentioned here that Ralph Bunche was rightly incensed by the passive and submissive role of R. V. Selope Thema and John Langalibalele Dube and other New African intellectuals who were members of the Native Representative Council. The Native Representative Council was formed by the white minority government as an organ that would give advice to it about the grievances of oppressed and dominated Africans. What totally outraged Ralph Bunche is that in the few meetings of the Council he attended as an observer, the European members treated its African members with total intellectual disrespect bordering on contempt. The harsh things he writes about R. V. Selope Thema and others subjecting themselves to such horrendous treatment is instructive. It is not clear whether Ralph Bunche was fully aware that the idea of the joint Native Representative Council was brought to South Africa by Aggrey of Africa, the Ghanaian, as reflecting the true spirit of the ideas of Booker T. Washington regarding political compromise between blacks and whites. Since many New African members of the New African Movement, who had leadership position in the African National Congress, saw themselves as descendants of Booker T. Washington, it was a forgone conclusion that they would embrace this suggestion of Aggrey of Africa, who was himself a disciple of the African American master. Although this was inarguably a by-product of the negative influence of Booker T. Washington, his massive influence on the early history of the African National Congress is a complicated matter. It needs to be emphasized here that Booker T. Washington demands to be viewed internationally, not nationally, within a Pan African perspective in order to understand the full complexity of his dimension.

Washington installed a regime of an astonishing sense of empowerment within the early history of the African National Congress which was inseparable from its other aspect of being a reactionary and conservative political modernity.

It was mentioned earlier that the political crisis of the African National Congress in the 1930s that Ralph Bunche felt so acutely was not largely due to the political incompetence of Pixley ka Isaka Seme. But this explanation through subjectivity is not the complete story. There were structural and intellectual blockages which accounted for the crisis. One obvious structural blockage is that the African National Congress was not founded in 1912 as a national organization on a *tabula rasa* but rather as a combination, rather than as a synthesis, or pre-existing regional organizations. For nearly three decades there was a constant conflict between the national center of the organization and its regional peripheries. An organic and harmonic structure was only realized in the 1940s when Alfred Xuma modernized the organization. The other factor accounting for the crisis was the beginning and the end of the undeclared war between the early leadership of the organization that had had a religiously grounded political education and the next generation that was largely secular in political orientation. The outcome this war was the political victory of the African National Congress Youth League, led by Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela and others, signaled by the adaptation of the Programme Action in 1949. The third factor precipitating the crisis, which would have been apparent to Ralph Bunche had he been seriously reading the aforementioned newspapers while in South Africa rather than merely glancing at them for data, was that when Pixley ka Isaka Seme was attempting to systematize in the pages of *Umteteli wa Bantu* the ideology of African nationalism for the organization, this ideology was immediately challenged by the emergent ideology of Marxism articulated by other members of the New African Movement. This ideological warfare was to express itself intensely in the 1950s. The ideological struggle was to announce itself in peculiar ways around the center and regional dialectic in the 1940s and in the 1950s: while the young Xhosa intellectuals such as Sisulu, Mandela and Tambo, holding the *political reigns* of the organization at the national center in Johannesburg, were fellow traveling towards Marxism, the seasoned Zulu intellectuals such as H. I. E. Dhlomo, Jordan Kush Ngubane and Benedict Wallet Vilakazi, holding the *intellectual reigns* of the organization from the symbolically regional periphery of Durban, steadfastly aligned themselves with African nationalism. The Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 pulled the curtain down on this unresolved drama. I think this unfinished drama of decades ago has more to do with the triumph of African nationalism today in South Africa than with the collapse of socialism in 1989.

But there is a need to indicate, however briefly, the intellectual contributions of Pixley ka Isaka Seme and R. V. Selope Thema, despite their political limitations

that were so apparent in the 1930s. Having studied at Mount Hermon School in Massachusetts in the years 1898-1902, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two, and also having studied at Columbia University in the years 1902-1906, between the ages of twenty-two to twenty-six, Seme was very much historical conscious of the formation of New Negro modernity in the late nineteenth-century and in the early twentieth-century. This is evident from the senior class commencement speech which he gave on his graduation day. The speech was entitled "The Regeneration of Africa", a title taken verbatim from Alexander Crummell's essay of 1865, that is from forty years earlier. The fundamental theme of Seme's address was that Africans had to grapple with and bring about modernity in Africa . In fact, he articulated it as the central political and cultural project for Africans in the unfolding twentieth-century. There is no doubt that the political practices that this speech unleashed led directly to 1994. The impact of this speech on Kwame Nkrumah during his student days here in United States in the 1930s cannot be overestimated. This is made clear by Nkrumah quoting it verbatim in his opening address at the launching of the International African Studies Association in 1963. While a student at Oxford University in 1908 studying law, Seme met Alain Locke who was the first African American Rhodes scholar. A great friendship ensued as it can be attested to by the correspondence they maintained for over a decade when each of them returned to their respective countries. The correspondence is at Howard University Library. The last point I would like to raise concerning Pixley ka Isaka Seme, which has already been indicated, is that he was the first among the New African intellectuals to theorize the preliminary forms of African nationalism in the 1930s. These articles had pronounced effect on two young New African intellectuals who were to play a major in the African National Congress in the 1940s and in the 1950s: Anton Lembede and Jordan Ngubane. Jordan Ngubane has turned out to be a major intellectual in his own right. So, concerning Pixley ka Isaka Seme, one can make the conclusion that although he had abysmal skills of political leadership, he was no intellectual slouch by any means. He was central to both the African National Congress and the New African Movement in the twentieth-century.

Although R. V. Selope Thema was a political reactionary, fanatical in his uncritical commitment to African nationalism, proud of the conservative political modernity he represented that was directly appropriated from Booker T. Washington, he was a major figure of the New African Movement who contributed much that was excellent within it. Since I have written much about him in the essay "New Negro Modernity and New African Modernity", presented in 2003 at the University of Zurich , I will not say much about him here except to make a few quick observations. First, he was more historically conscious than any other New African intellectual that the New African Movement in South African had much to learn from the New Negro Movement in United States . Second, he facilitated and encouraged the influence of the New Negro literary

modernism of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s on the New African literary modernism that was to eventuate and culminate in the Sophiatown Renaissance of the 1950s. Third, he was a great journalist whose editorials concerning intellectual content in *The Bantu World* from 1932 to 1952 have been matched by a few, if any, in the whole history of South African journalism. This particular legacy continues up to the present. Lastly, as the modern apostle of African nationalism, he has influenced many generations from Anton Lembede through Jordan Ngubane to Matthew Nkoana. So, here too, one is dealing with a major intellectual force.

The second acute observation Ralph Bunche makes in the travel notes is his concern that the New Africans in their embrace of modernity had forsaken African values so characteristic of traditional societies . Although there was absolute merit in this brilliant observation, matters were much more complicated. An intellectual like R. V. Selope Thema had absolute hatred and contempt for African traditional societies. He called his auto biographical essay “Up From Barbarism” in emulation of his master's **Up From Slavery** . He named his autobiographical manuscript *Out of Darkness* , as though in agreement with Joseph Conrad that Africa produces only ugly things or ugly experiences: in other words, no beautiful things can emerge from our continent. R. V. Selope Thema was an exception to the rule since the majority of New African intellectuals sought to find a point of equilibrium between tradition and modernity. Ethiopianism, the independent church movement of the late nineteenth-century and the early part of the twentieth-century, was an attempt to find a dialectical equivalence between tradition and modernity from the perspective of tradition. Traditional intellectuals such as Isaiah Shembe and Credo Mutwa valiantly attempted to retain African values within modernity through particular religious practices and philosophical beliefs. Some brilliant African writers such as Benedict Wallet Vilakazi and Thomas Mofolo made a historical choice of writing African literature in the Africal languages, thereby having a sense of proximity to the aesthetics of oral literary forms even though they were very much conscious of modernistic practices.

A particular intellectual like H. I. E. Dhlomo is a good indicator of *how* many New African intellectuals attempted to engage the conundrum of modernity and tradition. Here is a quotation from his essay of 1939 called “Why Study Tribal Dramatic Forms?”: “Some will complain that they do not want static, museum-like drama based on primitive tradition and culture. They will point out, rightly, that, today, to many Africans, the school, the train, the police, the automobile, the cinema, the ballroom dance, tennis, economic problems of housing, and even international fiscal policies etc., are as much part of their life as anything else. Indeed they may go further and state that tribal social sanctions and behaviour patterns have gone by the board, that the African has been detribalized and

modernized, and that it is of his new life and problems and surroundings the African dramatist should write. This is true; African drama should show life as it is today. But this does not in any way defeat our contention that the Past should be the chief basis of *our literary* drama. The Past should be preserved in a living, dynamic form, not by going back to it, but by recreating it into new and lovelier forms. However, the claims of African drama based on modern themes cannot be dismissed. The development of modern African drama cannot purely be from African roots. It must be grafted into Western drama. It must borrow from, be inspired by, and shoot from European dramatic art forms, be tainted by exotic influences. But the African dramatists should produce his plays as he feels. His work should be marked by his own soul and individuality---and that is originality. For innovation is the recreation of imitation. An artist does not mirror life; he paints it. . . The African cannot delve into the Past unless he has grasped the Present.” (italics in the original). Dhlomo is theorizing the complex process through cultural expression of synthesizing art forms that represent different and perhaps even incompatible historical temporalities.

But modernity meant different historical projects or undertakings to different intellectuals of the New African Movement located at different historical times within South African history: for Elijah Makiwane, representing his generation, it meant the synthesis of Christianity, modern education and European civilization; for Allan Kirkland Soga and R. V. Selope Thema it meant the integration of the New Negroism and New Africanism and the transformation of the "Old African" into the "New African"; for S. E. K. Mqhayi, Benedict Wallet Vilakazi and Guybon Sinxo it meant writing African literature in the African languages, not in the European languages; for Clement Martyn Doke and A. C. Jordan it meant the application of modern linguistics to African languages; for Isaiah Shembe and Credo Mutwa it meant the retainment of African values at all costs within modernity; for Pixley ka Isaka Seme, Robert Sobukwe, Henry Selby Msimang, Anton Lembede and Jordan Ngubane it meant the construction of African nationalism; for Charlotte Manye Maxeke, Helen Joseph and Lilian Ngoyi it meant absolute priority in the representation of women's rights and concerns; for H. I. E. Dhlomo and Lewis Nkosi it meant the theorization and philosophical postulation of all literary forms; for Albert Nzula, Yusuf Dadoo and Michael Harmel meant the appropriation of Marxism into African history, thereby making possible the transcendence of the proletariat over the bourgeois class; for Peter Abrahams and Ezekiel Mphahlele it meant the construction of literary forms in South Africa that approximated the achievement of the Harlem Renaissance; for Solomon T. Plaatje and Can Themba it meant the infusion of the imagination of William Shakespeare in South Africa; for Mahatma Gandhi, through the concept of *satyagraha* (passive resistance), making the Indian experience fundamental to South Africa; and so on. Consequently, the splay of understanding of modernity within the New African Movement was a complicated matter.

Despite my seemingly critical reflections on Ralph Bunche's sojourn to South Africa for four months in late 1937, I think his "Travel Notes", which Robert Edgar has assembled as **An African American in South Africa** , are an intellectual milestone in the transatlantic relations between United States and South Africa, since they preoccupied themselves with two central issues of that time: the political relations between black South Africans and white South Africans, and the intractable question of modernity in Africa. The political and intellectual focus on these two issues is not a small or insignificant achievement by any measure.