

A Historical Purview of the New African Movement

by

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The New African Movement which stretched over a century from about 1862 (Tiyo Soga) to 1960 (Ezekiel Mphahlele) consisted of writers, political and religious leaders, artists, teachers, scientists who called themselves *New Africans*, specifically *New African intellectuals*, to distinguish themselves from the *Old Africans* since they were engaged with creating knowledge of modernity (new ideas, new perspectives, new objectives, new formulations) rather than finding consolation in the old ways of traditional societies. The New African intellectuals did not necessarily reject tradition but attempted to reconcile it to the historical imperatives of the progressive and new ways of formulating and creating political and cultural practices. The historical experience of modernity was triggered in South Africa by the arrival of British imperial capitalism in the early years of the nineteenth century which implanted “European modernity” through colonialism and imperialism in order to effect the simultaneous combined process of exploiting the natural resources of the territory while at the same time undertaking through Christianity and modern education a “civilizing mission” among the indigenous people (consisting initially of San [‘Bushmen’] and Khoe [‘Hottentots’]) and black Africans.

The discovery of gold and diamonds and other raw materials led to the rapid industrialization, modernization and urbanization of the territory. The rapid and the accelerated demographic transformation of the territory was largely realized by means of exploiting and oppressing the original inhabitants by British imperialism while at the same time importing indentured labor from India and enslavement of people from Southeast Asia. Although there was fierce indigenous resistance to British imperial intrusion, the English eventually succeeded in changing the cultural and political mosaic of the territory into a multiplicity of complex cultures. The earlier forms of European imperial intrusion in the form Portuguese and Dutch colonialism(s) in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were of a different order. Despite their differential nature, all these forms of European imperial intrusions instituted various institutional forms of domination and oppression ranging from segregation to apartheid.

It was Pixley ka Isaka Seme (1880-1951) who invented the *idea* and *concept* of New African Movement with his great manifesto of 1906 (“The Regeneration of Africa”, *Journal of African Society*, July) which pronounced the historical necessity of creating and forging of a complex “New African modernity” whose central nature would be liberation and decolonization by challenging, contesting and

decentralizing the hegemonic form of “European modernity” that was occupying the cultural geography and the social topography of the territory that was four years later to be known as the Union of South Africa, as well as colonizing and dominating the historical imagination of all the oppressed and exploited people therein. In another historic document of 1911 (“Proposed Native Congress”, *Imvo Zabantsundu*, December 5), in response to the unholy alliance of British imperialism and Afrikaner segregationist interests that formed the Union of South Africa which excluded the aspirations and legitimate concerns of the oppressed people, Pixley ka Isaka Seme called for the founding of a political organization that would represent the national interests of the African people. On January 8, 1912 African National Congress (until 1925 it was known as the South African Native National Congress) was founded and launched in Bloemfontein. From this moment of 1912 onwards until the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 when Apartheid State banned the African National Congress as well as other political organisations (the Pan Africanist Congress, the Communist Party of South Africa had already been banned in 1951) and strangled the New African Movement, these respective modern institutional instruments of *liberation* and *articulation* were inseparable from each other in that: the African National Congress was the *political practice* of the New African Movement, and likewise, the New African Movement was the *intellectual and cultural expression* of the African National Congress.

Although the African National Congress was the central political force of the New African Movement, there were other New African intellectuals, political leaders and religious leaders who belonged to the latter intellectual movement but aligned themselves with different political organizations such as the Indian Congress, the Communist Party, African People’s Organisation (A. P. O.), All African Convention (AAC). Though hundreds and hundreds of New Africans transacted their cultural alignments through *newspapers* as intellectual forums of expression within the New African Movement, a partial listing of the individuals gives a purview of its complex splay: Abdullah Abdurahman (1872-1940), Peter Abrahams (1918-), Mary Benson (1919-2000), Herman Charles Bosman (1905-1951), Harold Cressy (1889-1916), H. I. E. Dhlomo (1903-1956), Clement Martyn Doke (1893-1980), Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), Gonarathman “Kesaveloo” Goonam (1906-1998), Robert Grendon (1867-1949), Alfred R. D. Hoernlé (1880-1943), John Tengo Jabavu (1859-1921), Mazisi Kunene (1930-2006), Nonstizi Mqgqwetho (?-?), Sophonia Machabe Mofokeng (1923-1957), Thomas Mofolo (1876-1948), S. E. K. Mqhayi (1875-1945), Henry Selby Msimang (1886-1982), Jordan Kush Ngubane (1917-1985), Simon Majakathetha Phamotse (1878-1928), Isaiah Shembe (1867-1935), Robert Sobukwe (1924-1978), and Richard Victor Selope Thema (1886-1955).

There were many ideologies and philosophies of history governing and directing the *historical visions* of these New Africans, particularly regarding their intellectual, political and cultural practices: Ethiopianism, Shembeism, African Nationalism, Christianity, Marxism, Trotskyism, Hinduism, Islamism, Black Nationalism, Taoism and Feminism. Each of these ideologies had its own distinct, complex and multiple permutations. It was the manifestation of these ideological contestations that made the entire force field of the New African Movement a dynamic political and intellectual forum. A plethora of knowledge systems were constructed through the invention of new concepts such as “New African”, “New Africa” and “New South Africa” and also by examining the historical dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity. All of this was part of the process of constructing a new intellectual and cultural history of South Africa from the perspectives of Africans, Indians, Coloureds, not only that of Europeans.

The role of newspapers, which formulated perspectives, ideologies and ideas, in this transformative process of African people from being the *objects of history* to being the *subjects of history*, cannot be overestimated. Some of the newspapers which played a critical role in facilitating this monumental change in historical consciousness and political practice deserve to be mentioned: *Umteteli wa Bantu* (The Mouthpiece of the People), *Abantu-Batho* (The People), *Imvo Zabantsundu* (African Opinion), *Izwi Labantu* (The Voice of the People), *Inkundla ya Bantu* (Bantu Forum), *Ipepa lo Hlanga* (The Paper of the Nation), *Ikwezi Le Afrika* (Morning Star of Africa), *The Bantu World*, *Indian Opinion*, *A. P. O.*, *Ilanga lase Natal* (Natal Sun), *Tsalo ea Batho* (The People’s Friend), *Morumioa* (The Messenger), *The Native Eye*, *South African Spectator*, *Fighting Talk*, *Guardian/New Age/Spark*, and *Inkululeko/Umsebenzi* (Freedom/Work); the editors of newspapers were respectively these towering New African intellectuals of the New African Movement: Marshall Maxeke and Abner Mponya, T. D. Mveli Skota and R. V. Selope Thema, John Tengo Jabavu, Nathaniel Cyril Umhalla and Allan Kirkland Soga, Govan Mbeki and Jordan Kush Ngubane, Mark S. Radebe, Pixley ka Isaka Seme, R. V. Selope Thema and Jacob Mfaniselwa Nhlapo, Mansukhlal Hiralal Nazar and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Abdullah Abdurahman, John Langalibalele Dube/Ngazana Luthuli/R. R. R. Dhlomo, Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, Henry Selby Msimang, Simon Majakathetha Phamotse, F. Z. S. Peregrino, Ruth First, Lionel Forman/Alex La Guma, and Albert Nzula/Edwin Thabo Mofutsanyana.

The importance of newspapers in creating the intellectual and cultural forums in which the New African intellectuals could articulate their epistemic visions was apparent to two books on the cultural history of the New African Movement written in the early years of its trajectory: Isaiah Bud-M’Belle’s *Kafir Scholar’s Companion* (1903) and S. V. H. Mdluli’s *The Development of the African* (1933). Bud-

M'Belle argued that the launching of *Imvo Zabantsundu* in 1884 and *Izwi Labantu* in 1897 were historic moments in the emergence of independent intellectual thought among African people who previously having depended on newspapers owned by missionaries could not freely express themselves about matters fundamental to their lived experience and about their suffering and oppression caused by the violent entrance of European modernity into African history. S. V. H. Mdluli wrote these three powerful sentences in his book: "Among the factors that will lift us from our ignorance is the affair of reading our newspapers . . . These papers besides containing Native views also give us in no uncertain ways what other races in our midst are doing. Everything in these papers contains all the necessary particulars connected with our development" (p.27-28). These two books give one a fundamental clue that the New African Movement can best be understood historically and conceptually and theorized as such by periodizing and dividing its approximately four hundred New African intellectuals into various *intellectual constellations* in accordance to the newspapers, journals and magazines they were associated with. This enables one to construct the cultural logic of the theoretical structure of the Movement throughout its historical trajectory.

Given this, it would seem that so far there have been approximately thirty-one intellectual constellations of the New African Movement. Others may be discovered through further research and permutations of our country's twentieth-century cultural history. Here are these intellectual constellations that make possible the *conceptualization* of historical processes and forms: /Xam Intellectuals, The Era of Tiyo Soga, Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s, Golden Age of Sotho Literature, Ethiopianism, *Izwi Labantu* Pathfinders, Ilanga lase Natal Intellectuals, The Gandhi School, Foreign New Africans, The Kimberley-Thaban Nchu Circle, *Imvo Zabantsundu* Group of the 1920s and 1930s, *Inkulileko/Umsebenzi/The Guardian* Organizers, New African Composers, *Umteteli wa Bantu* Group, *African Political Organisation* Intellectuals, New African Prophets and Revivalists, Afrikaner New Africans, English New Africans, *Voorslag* Writers, African Marxism and the Labour Movement, The Magnificent Generation of the 1930s, *The Bantu World* Intellectuals, Petersburg Art Movement, Zulu Intellectuals of the 1940s, European Friends of the Natives/The Missionaries, African National Congress Youth League Political Leadership, New African Women and Men, New African Scholars, Political and Christian Opposition to Apartheid, and Late Masters of the African Languages.

It needs to be emphasized that each intellectual constellation is organized around a series of *historical problematics*. It should also be equally indicated that although each New African intellectual is centrally identified with a particular intellectual constellation, some of them belonged to two or three others. Here are three instances: although H. I. E. Dhlomo is centrally affiliated with the Zulu

Intellectuals of the 1940s, he could easily have been associated with the *Umteteli wa Bantu* Group which constellated in the 1920s and *The Bantu World* Intellectuals that eventuated in the 1930s; likewise, although S. E. K. Mqhayi is centrally identified with the *Izwi Labantu* Pathfinders which occurred in 1890s, he could also have been located within the *Imvo Zabantsundu* Group of the 1920s and also with *The Bantu World* Intellectuals of the 1930s; lastly, although Richard Victor Selope Thema was the leading light of the *Bantu World* Intellectuals, he could equally have been placed with *Umteteli wa Bantu* Group and with The Magnificent Generation of the 1930s. All three were major New African intellectuals of the New African Movement; perhaps not surprising given that they were its preeminent cultural historians through the century of its duration in modernizing the South African historical imagination.

There was no inbuilt teleological principle governing the successive relationships between these intellectual constellations across a century nor those simultaneous and adjacent to each other within a decade. One may postulate two reasons for this. First, since a reconstruction of intellectual history is only possible through concepts and critical principles in a longitudinal study, there is an inbuilt tendency to establish direct connections between intellectual constellations when none were there at all or very tenuous at the most. Reconstructions are driven by an inbuilt desire for unity, comprehensiveness and completeness, which is the very opposite of the intellectual constellations themselves which are incomplete, discontinuous and in some ways disconnected. Second, politics or political practice is what would seem to forge unity across the different temporalities of different constellations. It was the *political practices* that emanated from the African National Congress that first and foremost established *intellectual bridgeheads* between the various intellectual constellations of the New African Movement. This bespeaks to a paradoxical relationship between culture and politics: though politics may be determinant of culture, culture is invariably superior to, and more durable than, politics.

Although it is not possible within this limited space to characterize the hallmarks of all the thirty-one constellations of the New African Movement, for two of arguably the most important among them, not to be confused with originality, can be telegraphically given here: those of the Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s and those of the Zulu Intellectuals of the 1940s. Concerning the former, the following can be noted: The first hallmark of these intellectuals was that they were the first to launch institutional forms of representation in the context of modernity: newspapers, associations, societies, political and social organizations. A second distinguishing feature of this group of thinkers was that they were first Africans to experience major ideological conflicts among themselves regarding Ethiopianism, with James Mata Dwane supportive while John Tengo Jabavu adamantly opposed to it. Third, they were proselytizers for modernity primarily

through religion rather than through cultural politics. Fourth, they were the first to grapple with modern literary culture and linguistic matters among the African people. William Wellington Gqoba was the first important modern African poet to write poetry about secular matters while his essays attempted to construct an intellectual bridgehead between tradition and modernity. From Gqoba there is a straight line of continuity to the great Xhosa poets in the early part of the twentieth century such as S. E. K. Mqhayi and Nontsizi Mqgwetho.

Fifth, Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s were the first Africans to have premonition of the possible historical relevance of New Negro modernity in United States for the then incipient forms of New African modernity as it was unfolding. Elijah Makiwane, Pambani Jeremiah Mzimba, Walter B. Rubusana and John Tengo Jabavu appropriated the thoughts of New Negro intellectuals such Alexander Crummell and George Washington Williams into their navigation and negotiation in constructing South African modernity. Lastly, Isaac W. Wauchope, the first politically conscious African man of letters, seems to have been the one to be *historically conscious* of the historical divide between forging an African literature in the African languages or in the European languages. Wauchope chose the instrument and medium of the English language as more primary than *isiXhosa*. Although Wellington wrote both in English and in *isiXhosa*, it was Wauchope who affirmed this by making the decisive choice. It may have been Wauchope who provoked S. E. K. Mqhayi into constructing his monumental literary achievement in *isiXhosa*.

Regarding the Zulu Intellectuals of the 1940s: One remarkable characteristic of theirs was the fortitude, a determination and an uncanny ability to transform their ideals into material form or concrete historical practices. Interestingly enough, it was in Johannesburg, rather than in Durban as one might have expected, that the largest contingent of these intellectuals learned their craft of *intellectual practice* in modernity. Second, the journalism of H. I. E. Dhlomo in the pages of *Umteteli wa Bantu* in 1920s and the 1930s, and also those in *Ilanga lase Natal* in the 1940s and the 1950s, and that of Jordan Kush Ngubane in the pages of *Inkudla ya Bantu* in the 1940s and that in *Indian Opinion* in the 1950s, were second to none in the twentieth century. Third, the contentious scholarly and creative debate across the decade of the 1930s from the pages of *Ilanga lase Natal* through *Bantu Studies* to *The South African Outlook* between H. I. E. Dhlomo and Benedict Wallet Bambatha Vilakazi whether African literature should be written in the African languages or in the European languages anticipated by thirty years an issue that was to galvanize the whole continent beginning from the infamous or notorious Kampala Conference of English Expression of 1962 to the present, the second decade of the twenty-first century. Fourth, Mazisi Raymond Fakazi Mngoni Kunene, the youngest member of this constellation, is arguably the most

towering literary figure to emerge from Africa in the twentieth century; this is not an empty extravagant claim.

Even this foreshortened listing of the accomplishments of just these two intellectual constellations clearly indicates that the New African Movement was a political and cultural festival of *ideas* of enormous import in our country.

With the destruction of the New African Movement in 1960 by the Apartheid State, a new era began in the history of the country that lasted until 1994 which has rightfully been designated by Nadine Gordimer as the Interregnum Period. At this moment of new political manifestations and new cultural formations, there emerged a new *major* ideology of Black Consciousness Movement founded by Steve Bantu Biko which facilitated the emergence of many outstanding intellectuals, writers and artists: Mongane Wally Serote, Gcina Mhlope, Njabulo Ndebele, Omar Badsha, Siphso Sepemla, Mothobi Mutloatse, Mafika Gwala, Santu Mofokeng, Zwelethu Mthethwa, Heim Willemse, Mtutulezi Matshoba, Alfred Temba Qabula, Mbulelo Mzamane, Zoë Wicomb, Makhosazana Xaba, Essop Patel and many others. *Staffrider* magazine was the cultural forum for these new expressive voices. With the turbulent changes hurtling the country in new directions at this period, Nadine Gordimer undertook the monumental task of transforming the concept of the New African Intellectual that had been invented in the 1920s in the pages of *Umteteli wa Bantu* by R. V. Selope Thema and Henry Selby Msimang into that of Public Intellectual that has become pertinent in the post 1994 era.

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