



## The Significance of the New African Movement

Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela at ANC Youth League meeting.

One day in the near future it will be necessary to retrospectively reconfigure South Africa's political and intellectual history of the first half of the 20th Century decade by decade to understand the significance of the epistemic field of the New African Movement that was being constructed by New African intellectuals. A large part of these efforts informed the contours of the African National Congress Youth League.

By Ntongela Masilela

The political and cultural formation of the New African Movement is largely traceable to the Xhosa intellectuals of the 1880s such as William Wellington Gqoba, Gwayi Tymzashe, James Dwane, Pambani Jeremiah Mzimba, Elijah Makiwane, Isaac W Wauchope, John Tengo Jabavu, Walter B Rubusana and John Knox Bokwe. These individuals began

to articulate their particular African interests, both political and cultural, by founding their own newspapers like *Imvo Zabantsundu (African Opinion)*, associations (Native Educational Association) and societies in opposition to those of European missionaries who brought a particular form of educational and political hegemony to the continent. However, it was Pixley

ka Isaka Seme in the seminal essay of 1906, "The Regeneration of Africa," who germinated the *idea and concept* of the New African Movement by unequivocally declaring the outlines of the project. Seme proposed three components: (1) the recognition that Egyptian civilisation belonged to the genealogy of African history, (2) the making of modernity in Africa, and (3)

the significance of the initiation of the decolonisation process.

Having formulated such a momentous and monumental undertaking, it is not surprising that Seme, on the advice of traditional Chiefs, launched the convocation in 1912 that founded the African National Congress (ANC) as a *national* organisation seeking to unify the national will and sentiments of all the African national groups in South Africa. From 1912 onwards the ANC and the New African Movement were inseparable from each other until their combined traumatic and momentary defeat at the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960 by the Apartheid state. They

were hostile to this emergent form of proto-nationalism. Ethiopianism, the formation of Independent African Christian Churches in contestation to the white supremacist ideology of European Christian Churches, was launched by Mangane Maake Mokone in a manifesto of 1892. This movement was most likely inspired by the formation of the Independent Black Churches by African Americans in the late 18th Century, one of the earliest indications of the political proximity of the historical experiences between black Americans and black South Africans that was to bring about stronger affinities in later years between the New Negro Movement in

social responsibilities that would accrue for such a historic venture to both New African intellectuals and to New African political leadership. In effect, they were arguing for the secularisation and modernisation of the political imagination of the ANC because, from its inception, the regulative principles of religious leaders and traditional Chiefs had predominated over those of the emergent New Africans.

Though they disagreed with each other on the importance and relevance of Christianity in the modernisation process in Africa, with Thema valorising its role and Msimang dissenting, they were in agreement on the necessity of certain philosophical, political and

## “ From the moment of the founding of the ANC and the New African Movement in the first half of the 20th Century, culture and politics have been intertwined in fascinating and complicated ways. ”

were intricately linked with each other because the ANC expressed the political will or *political practice* of the New African Movement, and the latter was the cultural expression or *cultural creativity* of the former.

While 1994 represented the resurrection of the ANC on the global scale and its absolute triumph nationally, it has proven much more daunting to reconstitute the New African Movement because the cultural logic of our historical moment has moved from modernity to postmodernity. The present crisis of the ANC – be its expression at Polokwane in December 2007 or at the Third National General Council in September 2010 – is the expression of the unhinging of political practice or *ideological struggle* from *intellectual productivity* or cultural expression.

From the moment of the founding of the ANC and the New African Movement in the first half of the 20th Century, culture and politics have been intertwined in fascinating and complicated ways. When the great Xhosa poet SEK Mqhayi along with Allan Kirkland Soga, Walter B Rubusana and Nathaniel Cyril Umhalla launched *Izwi Labantu (The Voice of the People)* newspaper in 1897 it was because of their sympathy for Ethiopianism. This was in opposition to the Xhosa intellectuals of the 1880s who, through their *Imvo Zabantsundu* newspaper,

the United States and the New African Movement in South Africa.

In matters of cultural politics, Mqhayi opposed his intellectual Xhosa predecessors who believed that the European languages (mainly English) were the primary available cultural instruments for entrance into modernity. Mqhayi rebelled by writing in isiXhosa to prove, beyond a doubt, that African languages were as amenable as any other language in the world for representing this new experience. Among other things, the historical example of Mqhayi was to indicate two things in the early history of the New African Movement: that it was divided against itself between the *progressive modernisers* and the *conservative modernisers*; and that the matter of African languages was as important as any political ideology in possibly fracturing its unity.

The contentious issue of revolutionary modernisers was to emerge in the 1930s when a protracted struggle within this camp unexpectedly occurred between Marxism and African Nationalism. However, in later years the ANC, SACP alliance grew from strength to strength.

In their weekly columns in the pages of *Umteteli wa Bantu (The Mouthpiece of the People)* throughout the 1920s, RV Selope Thema and Henry Selby Msimang argued about the necessity for a *modern intellectual culture* and the

epistemological principles. Among their many contributions, Thema and Msimang agreed on effecting the eventuation of modern intellectual culture and they strongly criticised the segregationist white State for thwarting any possibilities for the emergence of intellectuals and intellectual culture among the dispossessed people, especially among Africans. They also challenged and deflected President General Smuts' patronising dismissal, in 1923, of the ANC as a body of "no-good intellectuals." They highlighted instead that the historical role of intellectuals is to uplift the culture of its masses; facilitate constructive dialogue between different races, ethnicities, and religious dominations; and to articulate political philosophies of patriotism, unity, progress, justice, ethics and democracy.

Both Thema and Msimang defined the social responsibility of African intellectuals as primarily bringing about the spiritual awakening of the African nation through organisations, lectures, debates, reading, writing and, most importantly, by organising the people through institutional forms of representation. They facilitated the emergence of *self-criticism* among African people by showing the failure of the *political leadership* of Pixley ka Isaka Seme, who was then President of the ANC, as opposed to his *visionary qualities*. Together, they saluted



Anton Muziwakhe Lembede, widely regarded as the architect of the ANC's 1949 Programme of Action.

what they took to be the inherent nature of progress in modernity while lamenting the moral degeneracy of the urban environment. And lastly, they repeatedly emphasised the importance of education and intellectual culture in modernity.

The profound political crises of the late 1920s and the decade of 1930s that followed, in this so-called "fusion decade," necessitated the differentiation of these modes into their singular logic, thereby facilitating their disengagement from each other into their own particularity or specificity. Examples include the spectacular collapse of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU); the swift change of presidential leadership of the ANC from Josiah Tshangana Gumede to Pixley ka Isaka Seme; the struggle against the Hertzog Bills of 1936; and lastly, the formation of the

All African Convention challenging the historical legitimacy of the ANC.

These destabilising political contestations had the effect of shifting the intellectual and epistemological gravity within the New African Movement from politics, philosophy and religion in the direction of aesthetics, arts and literature. It was at this time that literary criticism, literary appreciation and theorising of literature as a construct emerged in the pages of *Ilanga lase Natal* (*Natal Sun*) newspaper, and likewise art criticism and reportages on artists began appearing in *The Bantu World* newspaper.

Equally seminal in this decade was the launching of the aforementioned *The Bantu World* in 1932 under the editorship of RV Selope Thema with a supporting cast of brilliant young New African intellectuals: Guybon Bundlwana Sinxo, Peter Segale, Peter

Abrahams, HIE Dhlomo, Jordan Kush Ngubane, Henry Nxumalo, Todd Matshikiza, Godfrey Kuzwayo, Stanley Silwana and HD Tyamzashe.

Thema had several tasks he sought to realise through the newspaper. A primary goal was the destruction of all forms of African traditions in favour of a teleologically articulated modernity and, through the emulation of New Negro Movement in US, encouraging the transformation of European modernity in South Africa into a New African modernity. As an unreconstructed conservative moderniser, he had a visceral hatred of Communism and fought for the triumph of African Nationalism over Marxism within modern South African intellectual culture.

Arguably the lasting achievement of Thema was to foster in his young acolytes a belief that modern intellectual culture was a vortex of unending ideological contestations. There are a number of examples. Dhlomo, for instance, moved in the direction of the constellation of the Zulu intellectuals of the 1940s to assume in 1943 the editorial responsibility of *Ilanga lase Natal* with his brother RRR Dhlomo. Jordan Kush Magubane also moved in the direction of the Zulu intellectuals of the 1940s and then assumed editorial responsibility of *Inklundla ya Bantu* in 1943 as well as being instrumental in launching the African National Congress Youth League (ANCYL) in 1944. Henry Nxumalo moved on to the collective of *Drum* writers and journalist of the 1950s (known as the Sophiatown Renaissance). They all proved intellectually formidable and practically unmatchable at their particular historical moment because of what Thema had instilled in them.

The victory of the ideology of African nationalism articulated by conservative modernisers such as RV Selope Thema, John Langalibalele Dube, Pixley ka Isaka Seme and Henry Selby Msimang in the 1930s over the philosophy of Marxism espoused by revolutionary modernisers like Moses M Kotane, ET Mofutsanyana, James La Guma and Albert Nzula had a profound impact on the political orientation of the ANCYL when it emerged in 1944. Its membership at the time consisted of Anton Lembede, AP Mda, Nelson

Mandela, Peter Nkutsou Raboroko, Jordan Kush Ngubane, William Nkomo, Bettina Sisulu, Oliver Tambo, and Walter Sisulu.

Seme seems to have had more influence politically on the formation of the ANCYL than any other member of the older generation of New African intellectuals. It was in the 1930s, when the parent organisation was dysfunctional, that he sought to strengthen it ideologically. By writing articles and essays in *Umteteli wa Bantu* advocating the unity of all the African national groups Seme was essentially proposing what retrospectively could be seen as the prefiguration of a nationalist ideology.

This advocacy for the ideology of nationalism seems to have electrified Peter Raboroko, AP Mda, Jordan Ngubane and Anton Lembede. Lembede and Ngubane took the legacy

*Dictionary (Who's Who) of Black Folks in Africa* (1932). Dhlomo wrote a long laudatory review of it on its publication in *Umteteli wa Bantu*, a book that alludes to the historical connection between New Negro Movement and New African Movement.

The most important political figure who strongly influenced this latter contingent of young New African intellectuals who went on to form the ANCYL was Sefako Mapogo Makgatho. Though he is largely forgotten today, Nelson Mandela wrote these salutary words in his autobiography *Long Walk To Freedom* (1994):

"He [Nelson Mandela's second son] was named for Sefako Mapogo Makgatho, the second President of the ANC, from 1917 until 1924... Makgatho, the son of a Pedi Chief, had led volunteers to defy the colour bar that did not permit

Movement, was immeasurably affected by the practical results of the political action of the ANCYL from the time of the Defiance Campaign of 1952 through the forging of the Congress Alliance to the promulgation of the *Freedom Charter* of 1955. His admiration was so profound that he shifted his own intellectual practice from cultural production to political analysis. It was in the context of his own changing intellectual allegiances that Dhlomo, co-editor of *Ilanga lase Natal*, made a secret agreement with Jordan Ngubane, editor of *Inkundla ya Bantu*, that enhanced the victory of Albert Luthuli over AWG Champion in the 1951 provincial presidential elections for the ANC leadership in Natal. This unexpectedly led directly to the victory of Luthuli the following year in the national elections for the presidency of the organisation under the sponsorship

**“ Arguably the lasting achievement of Thema was to foster in his young acolytes a belief that modern intellectual culture was a vortex of unending ideological contestations. ”**

of Seme very seriously, as evidenced by their important essays in *Inkundla ya Bantu* on the nature and necessity of African nationalism. It was not surprising that they co-authored the ANCYL Manifesto of 1944, given their strong nationalist inclinations. Some of their nationalist sensibilities were also no doubt nurtured by the good education they received at Adams College where both Albert Luthuli and ZK Matthews taught in the 1930s.

While Anton Lembede, Jordan Ngubane, Peter Raboroko and AP Mda were under the strong ideological persuasion of the older New African generation of conservative modernisers, Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo, William Nkomo and Walter Sisulu modelled themselves on the exemplary leadership of progressive modernisers like Levi Thomas Mvabaza, founding member of the ANC and at one time editor of the party newspaper *Abantu-Batho*, and TD Mweliso Skota, who gravitated between conservatism and progressivism. Skota presciently incubated, edited and published the book that was a great intellectual portrait of the New African Movement: *African Yearly Register: An Illustrated National Biographical*

Africans to walk on the sidewalks of Pretoria, and his name for me was an emblem of indomitability and courage."

Indeed, the qualities of fearlessness and determination displayed by the ANCYL as a whole in formulating the Programme of Action of 1949 and the *progressive nationalism* of Nelson Mandela, Oliver Tambo and Walter Sisulu, were imparted to them by the visionary qualities Makgatho had displayed as President of the national organisation and as a leader of the Transvaal Congress in the 1930s. This progressive nationalism opened up the path to working with the Transvaal and Natal Indian Congress, the Defiance Campaign of 1952 and the formation of the Congress Alliance in the 1950s.

Later Alfred Bitini Xuma completely modernised the political imagination and the organisational structure of the national body during his presidency between 1940 and 1949. By these undertakings these two great men empowered the ANCYL to strive for the outstanding achievements it was subsequently to realise.

Dhlomo, arguably the finest intellectual and cultural moderniser in the history of the New African

of the ANCYL. Dhlomo, Lembede, Luthuli and Ngubane were members of the constellation of Zulu intellectuals of the 1940s that worked in tandem and in collaboration with the ANCYL in this extraordinary decade.

The history of the ANC from the Programme of Action in 1949 throughout the 30-year banning and Exile Period from 1960 to 1990 to the national democratic elections of 1999 was guided and governed by the political ethos of the ANCYL. The greatest moment in the historical lineage of the ANCYL was, when on the occasion of the ANC winning the first national democratic elections of 1994, Nelson Mandela went to the grave of Albert Luthuli in KwaDuzuka, not far from where the great Shaka is buried, and uttered the immortal words that electrified the nation and made many weep with absolute joy: "Mr President, I'm here to deliver the nation to you." Indeed, the political ethos of the ANCYL influenced by the writings and cultural activities of the New African Movement had eventually delivered the nation and democracy to the oppressed and dispossessed people of South Africa. An extraordinary achievement by any measure! ■