

CHAPTER X

Lembede and Africanism

(1963 or 1964)?

Anton Mziwakhe Lembede, close personal friend with Ngubane dating back to days they were together at Adams College both arriving in 1933, "a fiend for hard work, he studied Afrikaans and Sotho privately at Adams while doing his teacher's course. He left Adams three years later with his teacher's certificate and a diploma in Afrikaans." He wrote again to say that Dr. P. KaSeme who had a law office in Rosenberggrk Johannesburg had agreed to take him on as an articulated clerk. Johannesburg was in the group of ferment which made young men want to do something to win the peace. I was swimming enthusiastically with the tide. Anton joined me and like me he was a Catholic; an ascetic and an uncompromising antic-communist. After a few days he introduced me to one of the most remarkable men in the history of the Congress Youth League -- Ashby Peter Mda. "Ashby was, like Anton, a Roman Catholic. He was unlike both of us in that he had been exposed to the clash of mind on mind along the Reef for a much longer period. As a result he had more clearly-defined views on every aspect of the race problem. The expression on his face had been chiselled by concentrated study and disciplined thinking in a way which made me feel, shortly after I'd met him, that I was in the presence of one of the greatest minds I then had had the privilege to know and be-friend. His knowledge of African political affairs staggered me. Both he and Anton possessed colossal moral courage; neither knew fear of any

sort.

The three of us met as often as we could. Anton had been exposed to the influences which had moulded my own attitude at Adams. He, too, was worried by the question: why are things as they are and not otherwise? The three of us felt very strongly the need for a new ideology with a meaning which would be valid in the day-to-day lives of the African peoples.

We rejected Communism. Anton even branded it a foreign ideology and wanted the Communists expelled from the ANC. I disliked the Communists but my liberal background convinced me that expulsion would be an indication of our moral bankruptcy. Communism was a powerful idea which solved a particular human problem. If we felt it bad, the most convincing way of destroying it was not to expel the Communists but to produce an even more powerful ideal.

Mda, always the wisest among us, came in between us and suggested that we should work for a re-grouping inside the ANC which would be inspired by a militant determination to be free. That would eliminate the need to expel the Communists and it would satisfy my hunger for a dynamic ideology. All three of us accepted this line.

We were still working on a unifying ideology when Lembede came along with AFRICANISM as a new philosophy of struggle which we could project before our people as a new road to freedom. It was from Anton Lembede that I first heard the word used seriously to indicate a way of life. Up to then, some of our friends had used the phrase "Africanization of the civil service" rather loosely, obviously borrowing it from Nigerian writings.

My first reaction to Africanism was that it was too racially angular to make me feel comfortable. It laid too much stress on the African and ran the danger of producing a racially exclusive attitude among the Africans which would be similar to that of the Afrikaner nationalists. If that sort of thing happened we would one day find ourselves involved in civil war or would have to face the prospect of cutting up the country into an African state and a white one. I wanted an ideology which, while unifying the Africans, would at the same time leave room for the European and the Indian to take their places by our side when we were ready to receive them.

Anton took the line that to water down our attitude to the race issue would make the ideology less dynamic and therefore too weak to galvanize African opinion. I was not satisfied with this but accepted the need for something dynamic enough to make a deep impression on the masses of our people.

I got the impressions that Ashby did not exactly like the word Africanism but his own objections were not as strong as mine. Always wise and far-sighted, Ashby felt that we should not bother much about the name; that we should concentrate on building up the new force all of us had in mind inside the ANC.

The idea of a Youth group was not new. In Natal, Manasseh Moirane and I had started the National Union of African Youths (NUAY). We had had in mind the establishment of a virile political pressure group which would challenge and destroy Dubeism and Championism and ultimately bring together the like-minded among young men and women in the other provinces. We laid the foundations carefully and quietly. When we thought

we could come into the open, Manasseh issued a press statement in which he explained the goals of our organization and appealed for support from the side of African youth.

That brought the wrath of the Natal Education Department - he was a teacher in Natal - right on his head. In a very curt letter he was told that he was employed to teach children and not to participate in political activity. I could not come out very openly, employed as I was by Dr. Dube. And with nobody ready to take the plunge at the time the NUAY came to a very inglorious end.

Natal was not the only province which had given serious thought to the idea of organizing a youth movement. Some of the Personalists in the ANC had considered the idea and even persuaded a few young men to come together for purposes of revitalizing the ANC. Dr. Xuma in particular was very keen on seeing a youth group inside the ANC. Willy Nkomo seemed to know ^{more} about what happened in the national conference of the ANC than Lembede or me and he spared no effort to preach the idea of a youth regrouping.

At that time I had grown to know and make friends with a number of men my age who were later to have national names. I cultivated a very strong admiration for Oliver Tambo. I met Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Robert Resha. Robert was very much younger and even at that early age I was struck by only one quality in him: the tremendous amount of physical courage which he had.

We started meeting at first informally. Some of the gatherings were not well attended. Some of the people were not terribly enthusiastic

about taking on a job which they were sure would cost a lot of sacrifice. We had no precedents to guide us and did not know how the community would react to our revolt. Dr. Xuma obviously wanted a tame pressure group which would stand loyally by him against the Old Guard. We had other ideas. We wanted a militant congress; to use his phrase we wanted "to march barefooted" against race oppression. This meant that we would have set ourselves certain ideals and move to these with a minimum of delay. Quite definitely this was not what he wanted.

We wanted to reorganize the ANC; to destroy the hold of the Old Guard; to direct the thinking of our people in the direction of self-confidence and positive action. We wanted to teach them that emancipation would not be brought about by anybody other than themselves. We wanted to prepare them for the great sacrifices that would lie ahead of all of us. We desperately wanted them to feel that they belonged together; to shake off the sense of inferiority infused into their minds over the centuries and to make them feel proud of their achievements. We wanted to interpret our people to themselves.

Once we had done that, we wanted to attack the citadel of white supremacy. About our victory we were not in doubt. We were not so naive as to imagine that victory would come in our time. But we wanted to start the traditional struggle in a different direction. Whether victory came in our time or later did not matter very greatly. We wanted to be sure that we lay the right foundations for a society where our people would be free to determine their lives. We were inspired by our belief that nothing that the racial oppressor could do could destroy our will to be free.

On the type of society we would establish after victory we were not so unanimous. Some wanted a liberal democratic republic. Others

preferred a socialist community. All of us agreed however that these differences would have to be raised after emancipation. Anton in particular felt strongly that we should not bother about these differences while facing a common enemy. While agreeing with Anton on the need for emphasis on national unity as a first prerequisite for emancipation, Mia argued that we had to be clear what social order we intended to set up. It was not enough/merely to say we wanted a democracy. People had to know what to expect after victory. In the circumstances prevailing in Africa at the time he felt that we could not run away from the fact that in order to balance the distribution of wealth serious consideration would have to be given to some forms of planned economies.

On the tactical plane he said/^{that} clarity was needed to ensure that the people did not lose their sense of oppression when the race oppressor hit back. In particular he was keen to emphasize the responsibilities of the African as a majority group in a mixed community. He said that to refuse to define our goal in terms of the society which we wanted would be a weakness which one day could turn our fight and consequent victory into a triumph for Communism - to which he was as hostile as I was.

In the end Mia, Lembede and I were elected to constitute a committee ~~which~~ to draw up the manifesto of the group we would form inside the ANC. We decided to call ourselves the African National Congress Youth League. In the Manifesto we outlined the goals of our struggle. After meeting to approve the Manifesto, an appointment was fixed with Dr. Xuma, the President-General, to discuss our relations with the mother body.

Dr. Willie Nkomo had been elected Chairman of the Provisional Committee of the League. He then had marked Communist sympathies and that

did not endear him to Lembede; Mda or me. When we presented our draft Manifesto he wanted phrases used which in our opinion would have given it a slightly Communist slant. We opposed him with so much vigor that when the League was formally launched he did not get the leadership of the movement. It went to Lembede whom we regarded as more politically reliable.

But before this event we went to Sophiatown where Dr. Xuma lived. Our leader Dr. Nkomo did not seem to get on very well with Dr. Xuma. We sat in Dr. Xuma's sitting room and started telling him what we had done. He seemed pleased with the fact that we had decided to form ourselves into a group which would be amenable to Congress discipline. When we mentioned a Manifesto he exclaimed in alarm; "A Manifesto? I have already drawn up the African People's Claim!" I realized then that the President-General and ourselves were not going in the same direction. We argued with him trying to show precisely why we felt a Manifesto desirable. He disliked the idea of seeing us thinking independently on what we would like the ANC to do. There were no fireworks at the interview; but neither side left in a happy mood.

We noted however that Dr. Xuma could not afford to take up an uncompromising position. If we had distinguished ourselves in the fight against the ADP. He and the Old Guard could quite possibly have been smashed rather badly if we had not rallied to their help. In any case if he antagonized us what could stop us breaking away from the ANC and attacking him in the way the ADP had done? In spite of his position he just could not afford to fight on two fronts. After a long argument in which our attitude became progressively stiffer he agreed with us that we needed to have our Manifesto.

I have already mentioned those who looked forward to a liberal society in the ranks of the African National Congress Youth League. I was one of these. At one stage this led to a minor difference of opinion between me and Lembede. He disliked my friendship with white men and women of liberal persuasion. For my part I was in no mood to see any virtue in lumping as sinners all the white people. I hated the idea of approaching the African from the perspective of the group and I did not wish to judge any human being as a member of a racial group. In any case I felt that the element of liberalism on the race question had always been an important ingredient in the makeup of African nationalism. When the ANC was established our fathers did not set themselves the goal of driving the white man into the sea, On the contrary they worked to extend the area of liberty in South African national life. Any movement which allowed itself to be inspired by race hatred departed from the goals of the creator of the new Africa; it allowed itself to have its view of liberty to be influenced by the race oppressor. To the extent that it did this, it allowed the thinking to be done for it by the race oppressor. The true revolutionary, the true fighter for African liberty set out to create a world after the Africans' design and in working towards this goal he thought along original lines. Our fathers who had welded us into one united people were original thinkers; they had conceived the idea of the new people in history and from there boldly marched forward to translate their ideal into reality. Our task was to move events in the direction of our choice; to establish a new social order where liberty would mean the freedom to make the best possible use of our lives as human beings and not just as members of a particular racial group. We could not do that when we

the white man and knew people and events from the perspective of race.

feared
Lembede said that my attitude might in the end play into the hands of the whites. I saw no reason why we should fear the white man and in that way pick up attitudes which gave him the psychological opportunity he wanted. The entire system of laws had been designed to impress upon us the fact that he was our superior. We were afraid of him and kept away from him and as long as he did that he would be safe to keep himself in the position of our master. We could not alter the position for the good of all concerned if we were merely to aspire to be masters of the white man in turn. I wanted us to be masters of ourselves as individuals so that we and the white man should have that security which would enable us to realize that in the ultimate reckoning our basic interests as South Africans were identical. Lembede has his own reservations but in the end we got ~~it~~ over our difficulties. We agreed to respect each other's approach.