

The New Negro Movement and the New African Movement

by

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- 1) United States has had a profound impact on South Africa throughout the twentieth century. This influence hinged on the question of how could black empower themselves into modernity under dire conditions of Jim Crow in this country and racial discrimination and colonial oppression in my country. How could black people align themselves with this European invention and yet at the same time transform it in accordance with their particular historical imperatives!
- 2) African Americans in United States and Africans in South Africa were arguably among the oppressed black people in the world in the late nineteenth century. Perhaps much more important, they were oppressed by societies which were in the forefront of modernity, politically and economically: United States accelerating its construction of modernity and for the first time entering the imperial domain; and Britain, the dominant imperial hegemon, at the height of its imperial domination. Culturally modernity belonged to France throughout the nineteenth century and in the first three decades of the twentieth century.
- 3) As blacks were being transformed and equally transforming themselves in the maelstrom of the making of American modernity those in the middle or forefront of this experience designated themselves as “New Negroes” in distinction from the “Old Negroes” who were still laboring under slavery conditions despite the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. Likewise in South Africa, struggling in the midst of a different historical divide, the Africans who aligned themselves with European modernity with the intent of transforming it called

themselves the “New Africans” in order to distinguish themselves from those they designated as “Old Africans” in traditional societies.

- 4) It was the Christian missionaries who shepherded the New Africans into European modernity through the holy trinity of Christianity, European civilization and European education. I would like to emphasize here, since I will not say much about it any further, it was the missionaries who enabled the New Africans into modernity. It was in the struggle with the European missionaries about transforming European modernity into “New African modernity” or inventing a new variant of it in parallel with it, that the New Africans drew inspiration from “New Negro modernity” then being forged by the New Negroes. As much as the New Negroes constituted a constellation of the New Negro Movement in the process of making or constructing New Negro modernity, likewise the New Africans constructed New African modernity through their own constellation of the New African Movement.

- 5) When Pixley ka Isaka Seme, a Zulu young man of 23 years, then a senior at Columbia University, penned his manifesto in 1904 “The Regeneration of Africa,” which proclaimed the then unfolding twentieth century as the century of modernity in Africa, he was in Harlem, perhaps the epicenter of the New Negro Movement. The title of this essay was not original, since the New Negro Alexander Crummell had used it for his essay that was published in 1863. This same Pixley ka Isaka Seme eight years later in 1912 assembled for the first time the African National Congress (ANC). The manifesto of Pixley ka Isaka Seme launched the New African Movement.

- 6) The influence of the New Negro Movement on the New African Movement began with Alexander Crummell with his impact on the Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s in the 1870s and terminates with Richard Wright’s influence in the 1940s on the young New

African writers who would be known as *Drum* writers of The 1950s, or more properly as the Sophiatown Renaissance. The *Drum* writers were the last constellation of the New African Movement, which was terminated through political repression at the time of the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960. The influence of New Negro modernity on New African modernity was in the intellectual and artistic fields of Politics, Religion, Literature, Philosophy, Film and Music.

- 7) Alexander Crummell, who was a Free Negro, reverend of the Church, spent several decades proselytizing in Sierra Leone, and never personally experienced enslavement, unequivocally argued that Africans must engage and enter modernity because traditional societies were “backward” and characterized by “heathenism,”; to him this explained the necessity of Christianity in Africa. He considered African languages “barbaric” and unsuitable for modernity. He praised the English language and English literary culture as *cultural facilitators* of Africans’ entrance into modernity. Although some of the Xhosa Intellectuals of the 1880s disagreed with his tone but the majority seemed to have agreed with his historical verdict. It was Crummell in effect who brought William Shakespeare to Africa not the European missionaries as one would have expected. Let me add that Crummell despised European missionaries whom he believed incapable of giving a proper interpretation of Christianity to Africans because of their racism and the white supremacy they subscribed to. He seems to have believed in the philosophy of “Africa for the Africans”. Crummell was a proto-Pan-Africanist.
- 8) The utilization of the European languages and European literary heritage as intellectual bridgeheads from tradition into modernity not only transformed African literary culture from orality into written form, it also created a bifurcation in African literary history which has proven intractable throughout the twentieth century to the present. This is the existence of *African*

9) Booker Washington had more influence in the political sphere than any other New Negro intellectual on New African intellectuals. All the founders of the African National Congress in 1912 were beholden to him, be it R. V. Selope Thema, Solomon T. Plaatje, John Langalibalele Dube, Walter Benson Rubusana or Henry Selby Msimang. This influence of Washington is a reminder that the New African Movement was divided into three components: *conservative modernizers*, *progressive modernizers* and *revolutionary modernizers*. The impact of Washington was largely confined to conservative modernizers, but albeit the most powerful politically. Washington imparted to the New Africans the idea of self-empowerment, thus making black people less reliant on white institutions. Observing what the New Negroes had done and achieved, New Africans created their own institutions in the form of newspapers, political parties and organizations, cultural associations. This is the reason at this time that New African newspapers proliferated. These were intellectual

forums in which New African intellectuals published their literary works and articulated their understanding of the nature of modernity. The brilliant culture of the New African Movement manifested itself in many of these newspapers. The achievement of New African modernity in South Africa demands that the evaluation of Booker T. Washington be always done in an international context.

- 10) While New Negro modernity was undertaken through the principle of blackness, New African modernity was realized through the idea of Africanness. The idea of Africanness began developing in the late nineteenth century. It was inclusive of all non-whites, including Indians and Coloureds. In exactly 1900, the ideology of Pan-Africanism which was developed in the African Diaspora, and was brought to South Africa in the same year by a Ghanaian intellectual F. Z. S. Peregrino. He spent the last twenty years of his life in South Africa publishing his newspaper *South Africa Spectator* through which he propagated this ideology. It was in the context of these imported contending ideologies in the 1930s, among them Marxism, that the *philosophy* and *idea* African nationalism emerged. The important figure in the theorization of African nationalism was again Pixley ka Isaka Seme. One of the spectacular events in the 1930s was the outbreak of an ideological warfare between African nationalism and Marxism within the African National Congress (ANC) and within the New African Movement. It was in this context of ideological contestations that *modern* African literature aligned with African nationalism came into being: one component, *African literature in the European languages*, signified by the publication of Solomon T. Plaatje's *Mhudi* (1930), the short stories of R. R. R. Dhlomo, the short stories and the poetry of Peter Abrahams; the other component, *African literature in the African languages*, signified a decade earlier by the publication of *Chaka* (1925) in Sesotho by Thomas Mofolo and in isiXhosa the poetry of S. E. K. Mqhayi and Nontsizi Mqgwetho.

11) As already mentioned, the New African Movement was terminated by state repression following the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960. The African National Congress (ANC), the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC), and the South African Communist Party were banned. Many New African intellectuals and political leaders were arrested charged with treason, and some fled into exile. Nelson Mandela went underground, but was subsequently arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment. Mandela served 27 years before he was released in February 1990. But before this precipitous end happened in 1960 the 1950s have been characterized as “fabulous” by one of the major figures (Lewis Nkosi) of the *Drum* writers or the Sophiatown Renaissance that happened in this decade. Like the New Negro Movement had created the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, so the New African Movement realized the Sophiatown Renaissance in the 1950s. While the Harlem Renaissance is in all probability the highest cultural expression of New Negro modernity, that does not seem to have been the case of the Sophiatown Renaissance regarding New African modernity. This is a major difference that needs to be investigated in detail in another context.

Thank You.