

NATION-BUILDING IN THE NEW AFRICA

# South Africa's heroes in the struggle for emancipation

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FROM ITS INCEPTION in the early fifties, "Our National Heroes Day" (July 31) held out the promise of developing into an important national institution in South Africa. It is part of a determined effort by an enslaved people to rediscover its shrines from the wreckage of history's blood and carnage—a revolt against European ideological suzerainty in culture, politics and historiography.

This commemorative event is the focal point of a manifold nation-building programme which is the theme of this and succeeding articles. Observed only by small patriotic groups in a few centres in 1953, it has since grown with each succeeding year marked by an increasing upsurge of national feeling. By 1959 it had spread throughout the land, and was observed even inside prisons in the post-Sharpeville years.

For many patriots July 31 is only the beginning of a meditative period, a kind of pilgrimage, which often lingers on right through August into September. Thus it was that in 1959 it tailed off with formal ceremonies held on September 8 in all the six regions into which the Pan-Africanist Congress had redivided the country.

Like all occasions with a deep emotional and sentimental content, it is not easy to recapture in writing the mood and describe the theme at these ceremonies. One could sum it up as a period of rededication to the cause of African freedom, with strong undercurrents of national sorrow and moral indignation over heinous crimes of conquest.

At its inception it had pronounced religious undertones and was known as the Lembede Anniversary Service, though its programme consisted mainly of lectures on African Nationalism and Africanism, while amongst its immediate practical aims was the setting up of a Lembede Anniversary Scholarship Fund. This was in memory of a past president of the African National Congress Youth League.

"As time went on, however," says an editorial in the July-August 1959 issue of *The Africanist*, "it was felt more and more that though Anton Muziwakhe Lembede was our immediate source of inspiration, he was not the genesis of African nationalism. He himself was inspired by the noble deeds and utterances of the great African heroes. . . ."

Those heroes included all the African kings in South Africa's history who had taken up arms against the colonists from Europe. These great patriots, together with their brave warriors, had been depicted by White supremacist writers as no more than savage hordes. Indeed, "Our National Heroes Day" was part of a re-orientation programme motivated by what *The Africanist* called "our determination no longer to swallow the white man's propaganda."

In the words of the same editorial, "this move to remember our heroes is in line with the general trend in Africa towards an African orientation, the attempt to recreate a set of values that will give meaning to the lives of our people. . . ." It went on: "In deciding who are our national heroes, we set up our own criteria which needs

must be different from those of the oppressor, so that his scoundrels are our heroes, and his 'heroes' are our renegades."

This presaged a drastic overhaul of standards imposed on a subject people by a rabidly racist oligarchy, a reevaluation of social norms, a reassessment of key historical events and the rewriting of history—a challenge to the whole power structure which had been founded on a mythology of race differentiation.

The racist philosophy had permeated all strata of society, and had its victims among both the rulers and the ruled, a classic example of the truism that "the ruling ideas of any age are the ideas of its ruling class." Through both subtle indoctrination and rigid enforcement, the idea had come to be accepted even by Africans, willy-nilly or unconsciously, that the white man was a superior being with a right conferred from on high to lord it over all others.

However irrational or whatever the origins of this colossal myth, those who believed or half-believed it on either side of the colour line acted their part for most of the time with flawless precision. Three centuries of this phenomenon had bred accommodating attitudes among Africans, leading to the development of what came to be known as a slave mentality.

Elsewhere in the world ideas to the contrary might be commonplace. But in South Africa this evil doctrine had spread to such dimensions that it had become necessary—and still is to some extent—to spare no effort in fighting for its elimination root and branch. If the Africans were to fight effectively for their freedom, they had first to exorcise that slave mentality and attain mental and spiritual emancipation.

ANTON MUZIWARHE LEMBEDE was fully alive to the problem, as an article he wrote in *The Advocate* (July 1947) indicates. Some of the arguments he advances would be taken for granted today in black South Africa, but they are interesting for the light they throw on the struggle for liberation in its historical perspective. Following is a passage from the article:

"Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher, defined man as a 'rational animal'. Man is an animal, but he is distinguished from other animals by his possession of mind, intellect or reason. The most scientific definition of man still stands unchanged today. It is thus evident, that skin pigmentation is not the essence of man. In South Africa, however, more than in any other country in the world, the colour of man's skin is worshipped, idolised and adopted as an essential mark or criterion of human superiority. The philosophy of colour-worship has no scientific foundation whatsoever. It is a nefarious, devilish ideology which at present is unfortunately dominating and holding sway over the minds of most Europeans in this country. Africans are, according to this ideology, regarded as inferior creatures, incapable of higher education, incapable of helping themselves, incapable of governing themselves, and even incapable of knowing what is good for themselves. In short, Africans are looked upon as ape-men, imbeciles, infants, and barbarians. Hence the colour laws of the Union, aiming at colour discrimination against Africans. This is euphemistically called 'trusteeship'. Now this colour ideology is a serious menace to the existence or survival of the African people. According to my estimate the African population of the Union would be wiped off or exterminated in 500 years' time if things went on as at present. Where are the Bushmen? Where are the so-called Hottentots? There are already visible signs of disintegration—physical deterioration, high infantile mortality, social decay, gross illiteracy, dire poverty, desperation and despair. This deadly process of doom must be halted—in time. The remedy is of course obvious. The Africans must achieve political freedom. In order to assure the continued existence of the Africans as a people the colour ideology must be smashed and overthrown. The grim struggle for the overthrow of this ideology will demand of us an unshakeable will power, resolute determination, and an unwavering faith in our divine destiny which is national freedom under the banner of Africanism. Should we fail or falter in this gigantic struggle, future generations will pass a verdict of guilt on us, and we shall be cursed by our children."

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The extent to which African submission to that ideology was considered a serious problem is evident in the contents of *The Africanist* which, 12 years later, said in a commemorative article on Lembede:

"It was the same Anton Muziwakhe Lembede who, in the field of education and study, demonstrated . . . that the African, so far from being an ape-man, was very much human, and that like the other members of the human race, he was capable of scaling the lofty Himalayan heights of achievement. He rose and towered high, and thus exploded once and for all the myth of the Black man's intellectual inferiority. . . ."

It is also evident in a commemorative speech given by Mangaliso Robert Sobukwe, President of the Pan-Africanist Congress, in 1959, on the occasion of Our National Heroes Day. Under the sub-heading MENTAL REVOLUTION, Sobukwe said:

"We have stated in the past, in all our documents, that whatever campaign is launched by any liberatory movement worth the name, must at all times be related to the ultimate objectives and must assist in building the fighting capacity of the masses.

"Now for over 300 years, the white foreign ruling minority has used its power to inculcate in the African a feeling of inferiority. This group has educated the African to accept the *status quo* of white supremacy and Black inferiority as normal.

"It is our task to exorcise this slave mentality, and to impart to the African masses that sense of self-reliance which will make them choose 'to starve in freedom rather than have plenty in bondage'; the self-reliance that will make them prefer self-government to the good government preferred by the ANC's leader." (Chief Luthuli had just made a statement to the effect that it did not matter to him as to who ruled, so long as "we are governed justly".)

Lembede died in July 1947, at the age of 32. He had devoted most of his life to study and teaching, and among his achievements were the degree of Bachelor of Laws and a Master's degree in philosophy. But it is in the realm of politics that he is especially remembered as an African hero. Although only four years in active politics, his ideas made a lasting impact on the South African scene. *The Africanist* has recorded:

"For it was he who first crystallised the ideas and aspirations of Africans as a people struggling for emancipation. . . . He it was who first set forth the nature and basis of our struggle for national freedom . . . holding out the vision of a great Africa passing through the crucible of struggle and reaching out to a new world of Africanist democracy."

The events that followed on the crestwave of a surging nationalism which Lembede set in motion have been breathtaking in their sweep. But these were yet to come, posthumously. What Lembede did, in his brief hectic four years in the political arena, was to lay the foundations of a movement that was to mature after his death.

THE MOVEMENT OWED its initial boost to the ferment of ideas about freedom which accompanied the war years and accelerated in the immediate post-war period. These ideas first found organisational expression when the African National Congress Youth League was formed in 1944, but met with much resistance in the African National Congress itself.

The ANC at this time made very few if any incursions into protest politics, and when it did, as in anti-pass campaigns, its leaders ". . . At a time when the choicest liberal thing for the whites Government nor to impair their image as "responsible Native Leaders". At a time when the choicest liberal thing for the whites to say was "Natives are human beings, too", to be thought of as a responsible Native leader was a temptation few could resist.

The accolades came from certain liberal and communist elements in the white community who saw themselves as "friends of the Native", but as a rule had very little in common except their whiteness and fear of any real African pressure for change. Of them a cynic, in a celebrated taunt, has said: "The liberals will do anything for the Natives except get off their backs."

But in a society ridden through and through with intolerance and hatred of the African, the voice of these few "sympathisers" assumed in the ears of the oppressed an importance out of all pro-

portion to its quality. So when they advised caution and warned Africans not to alienate the sympathies of the whites (meaning *their* sympathies, of course), there was ready response.

The overall effect of these conditions over the years had been to entrench an illusion that Africans could gain their freedom by negotiation with the White supremacists. There had always been a sprinkling of so-called liberals in any party in power in the history of the Cape Colony and later in that of the Union of South Africa, and this had beguiling influence upon the Africans.

At this particular time there was in power as Deputy Prime Minister a man who has been described as South Africa's "most liberal statesman," Jan Hofmeyr, deputising for the globe-trotting Smuts who had a hand in the Atlantic Charter. So however misplaced, the faith of the African leaders in the ultimate dawn of sanity in South Africa was understandable. But it was completely inexcusable for them to desist from organising mass action as a lever for their negotiations.

If that sounds too condemnatory, it is not because of a lack of sympathy for the leaders of that time. It is rather because there is a need for a corrective as the same tendencies have persisted to this day. My main concern, however, is to place the Lembede-inspired movement in its proper perspective, and that means projecting it against the background of the activities of the so-called moderates of his time.

For "moderates" read "renegades" in accordance with *The Africanist* criteria by which those regarded as African heroes are judged. Playing up to white liberal opinion, which had set itself as the arbiter of political sophistication among Africans, these "renegades" thought little of accusing their own people of "extremism", anxious to "prove" that they were not "like the others". But their sweet reasonableness did not earn them a single seat in the House of Assembly or Senate, in both of which some of the self-same "friends of the Natives" sat to perpetuate the fraud of "Native representation".

The African leaders themselves sat on a body called the Native Representative Council, a safety-valve Government-created institution which they refused to boycott when Lembede urged them to do so. One of them, Dr J. S. Moroka, with the benefit of hindsight after the Malan Government had shut down the NRC, was later to say of it: "You sat down there, you came with resolutions, you talked until your mouth was dry and that was the last you heard of it. It was a disgrace; tomfoolery out and out."

But it was not for lack of wiser counsel that they sat down through that tomfoolery. Indeed, one of their numbers, Paul Mosaka, said at the time that it was "a toy telephone", but continued to use it! A motion by Lembede for a boycott of the NRC was defeated at a special conference of the ANC called in 1946 by Dr A. B. Xuma as President-General.

It was at a time of great strife in the country, with police either shooting down or baton-charging striking African miners. In a typical NRC posture, its members were taking pains to deny Government accusations of "extremism and recklessness" in the language they had used about the strike, and ingratiating themselves with the powers-that-be by pointing fingers at "trouble-makers".

Speaking before the "liberal" Hofmeyr at the NRC meeting, and no doubt choosing the words he used partly for effect, R. V. Selope-Thema, a veteran ANC leader, complained: "Do you want us to join the forces that are outside, those forces which are out to destroy? If you drive us to that we shall know what to do; but we don't want to do that."

Outside, the post-war wind was blowing. But the hold of White supremacy on the mind of the African still held the gale back. The indefatigable Lembede, undaunted by what he must have known was no more than a temporary set-back at the 1946 special conference of the ANC, continued full steam ahead, injecting militancy into the liberation movement. He had hardly concluded a series of mass meetings in 1947, appealing directly to the people for a boycott of the "dummy institutions", when he was struck down by an illness from which he never recovered, and died.

There was widespread grief, and even the White press was moved to publish an obituary. It included the following quotation: "In the garden of life a bird sang from the highest tree, and then soared away."

[To be continued