



Genealogies of African Nationalism and the Idea of Africa

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Abstract

The historiography of the African nationalist movement in South Africa tends to focus on the struggle for political liberation. What gets marginalised, often, is that early African nationalists envisioned their political mission as not only bringing about inclusive freedom, but also to establish what they called ‘the ‘New Africa’ or ‘the regeneration of Africa’. The purpose of this paper is to discuss critically the idea of Africa—the New Africa—that leading early African nationalist intellectuals such as Pixley ka Isaka Seme, Selope Thema, Selby Msimang, Anton Lembede and

Herbert Dhlomo advocated. This paper explores commonalities and differences in their imaginings and idea of Africa, and demonstrates the significance that political and intellectual currents from the African diaspora had in shaping the notion of the ‘New Africa’ that they advocated. By focusing on this idea at the heart of the African nationalist political tradition, the paper challenges scholarship that often dismisses early African nationalists as conservative, influenced by their experiences in mission communities, or by an eagerness to become loyal subjects of the British Empire.

Introduction

The African nationalist movement emerged in South Africa in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mainly as a response to British colonialism and white minority rule (see, for instance, Walsh, 1970; Odendaal, 2012; and Ngqulunga, 2017). Central to its political aims was a call for the inclusion of black people in the political affairs of the emergent South African state, as well as access to economic opportunities such as land ownership (Ngcukaitobi, 2018). Early African nationalists believed that, critical to achievement of their political goals, was unity of the African people under the banner of African nationalism. This belief was eloquently articulated by Pixley ka Seme in his opening speech to the inaugural conference of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1912, in which he decried the divisions that kept black people apart and prevented them from waging a united political struggle (Ngqulunga, 2017). In the same address, Seme (1906) argued that black people were one and needed to act as such, in order to achieve their political struggle of emancipation and inclusion.

Running parallel to the political struggle for black unity and national liberation were debates and discussions among early African nationalists, regarding the relationship between their political endeavours in South Africa and the rest of the African continent. This aspect of the African nationalist tradition is often overlooked, despite its significance for early African nationalists. The purpose of this paper is therefore to

examine critically the imaginings and idea of Africa that African nationalists, of the first half of the 20th century in particular, advanced. I focus in particular on the writings of major African nationalist thinkers such as Seme, R.V. Selope Thema, H. Selby Msimang, and their younger counterparts in the Congress Youth League such as Anton Lembede, Herbert Dhlomo and A.P. Mda. This paper explores the commonalities in their imaginings and conceptions of Africa, as well as identifying the divergencies in their opinions. While acknowledging the various ways in which their background in mission schools and their attachment to the ideals of the British Empire had an impact on their political outlook, this paper argues against the reductionism that is often found in scholarship on early African nationalism; this scholarship tends to dismiss early African nationalists as either apologists for Empire or as conservative political hacks whose main ambition was to copy lifestyles of white people. Although each of the African nationalists I discuss in this paper articulated their own idea of Africa, one factor that was common across their scholarship was a vision of the continent which was fundamentally different from that espoused by missionaries of old or white politicians such as Jan Smuts or Cecil Joh Rhodes. The Africa they imagined—the New Africa as they called it—was characterised by political equality, receptiveness to modernity brought by science, education and economic development, as well as criticism of political projects that sought to subjugate the peoples of African descent. Numerous scholars of African nationalism in South Africa have noted the influence that black thinkers in the African diaspora had on the development of the African nationalist tradition in the country (see, for instance, Masilela, 2013). In the next section, I sketch out a broad genealogy of African nationalism and the idea of Africa in South Africa.

Genealogies of African Nationalism and the Idea of Africa

In May 1996, Thabo Mbeki, the deputy president of the Republic of South Africa at the time, stood before the two houses of Parliament of South Africa to deliver his now famous speech titled 'I am African' (Mbeki, 1996). In giving a speech that affirmed his African identity and defined his own vision of the African continent

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and its peoples, Mbeki was following in the footsteps of many African nationalists before him, who expended considerable intellectual and political resources in the imagination and definition of the African continent. Ninety years before Mbeki's speech, another South African, Pixley ka Isaka Seme, had delivered another speech on 'The Regeneration of Africa' (Seme, 1906). Like Mbeki after him, Seme began his speech by declaring 'I am an African'. In a tribute to Seme's speech, Kwame Nkrumah, a man who has been described as the father of African nationalism (Birmingham, 1998), gave an opening address to the First International Congress of Africanists held in Accra, Ghana in 1962. Instead of reading his own speech, Nkrumah decided to read Seme's 1906 speech, 'The Regeneration of Africa' because, he contended, its postulates were relevant to the condition that prevailed into the 1960s (Ngqulunga, 2017: 17). By reading Seme's speech, Nkrumah was directly or indirectly drawing a line between his own vision of the African continent to Seme's. By extension, Mbeki's speech in 1996, which evidently drew inspiration from both Seme's 1906 speech and Nkrumah's Pan-Africanism, tied together these different generations of African nationalists and their vision of and for Africa. Reflecting on the significance of Seme's speech, Masilela (2013: xiv) has argued that it (the speech) served as 'an ideological position that gave intellectual authorization to the decolonization process'. Furthermore, he argues that it was a significant moment, which marked a turning point in the development of what he has termed the New African Movement (NAM) in South Africa.

Considering the significance of Seme's 1906 speech to the development of the African nationalist tradition and the imaginings of Africa in South Africa (and perhaps the African continent as a whole), it is important to understand its content, context and the influence it has had on other African nationalists such as Thema, Msimang, Lembede, Dhlomo, Jordan Ngubane and numerous others. With regard to its context, it is worth noting that Seme's speech was influenced and shaped by important intellectual and political currents of the time. Four years before, Henry Sylvester Williams, a Trinidadian barrister with strong links to South Africa and his collaborators including a South African black woman by the name of Alice Kinloch, had organised and convened the first Pan-African Conference that took place in London in July 1900. The major political themes discussed at

the conference are evident in Seme's 1906 speech, especially in W.E.B. Du Bois's concluding rousing address at which he said the following:

Let the nations of the world respect the integrity and independence of the free Negro states of Abyssinia, Liberia, Haiti, and the rest, and let the inhabitants of these states, the independent tribes of Africa, the Negroes of the West Indies and America, and the black subjects of all nations take courage, strive ceaselessly, and fight bravely, that they may prove to the world their incontestable right to be counted among the great brotherhood of mankind. Thus we appeal with boldness and confidence to the Great Powers of the civilized world, trusting in the wide spirit of humanity, and the deep sense of justice and of our age, for a generous recognition of the righteousness of our cause.¹

Although Seme did not refer explicitly to the first Pan-African Conference in his speech, its influence was clearly evident in the speech. Similar to the idea of Africa presented to the world by the conference, Seme's vision of Africa was bold, self-confident, and just. It echoed Du Bois's rousing closing address in which he projected an Africa that claimed its 'incontestable right to be counted among the great brotherhood of mankind'. This positive characterisation of Africa would influence many African nationalists who came after Seme and Du Bois and invigorate the anti-colonial struggles throughout the 20th century.

The emergence of African nationalism and debates over the meaning, status and role of the African continent were thus shaped and influenced by intellectual and political currents, especially coming from other parts of the African diaspora. In the case of Seme's speech in particular, it is clear that it was a contribution to a long running debate and discussion by leading thinkers in the African diaspora, especially those from the West Indies and North America regarding their relationship with the African continent. Among those participating in the debate were Martin Delany, Edward Blyden, and Alexander Crummell, to mention a few. Crummell in particular appears to have influenced Seme's ideas on the African continent

¹See [early beginnings of the Pan-African movement \(umass.edu\)](http://www.umass.edu/earlybeginnings/)

and the fate of peoples of the African diaspora in particular. In fact, Seme's speech in 1906 was in all likelihood mainly a response to Crummell, for its title was the same as the address Crummell gave half a century before also called 'The Regeneration of Africa'. It was another Crummell address, presented in 1861, to which Seme's speech may have been particularly a response to. In that address titled 'The Progress of Civilization along the West Coast of Africa', Crummell (2018) painted a hopeless picture of the African continent. In his view, Africa was a continent without any significant achievement in science, philosophy and art; it was blighted by ignorance and barbarism (Ngqulunga, 2017). Although Crummell's negative opinion of Africa was nothing new, having been quite popular with some missionaries and early European explorers on the continent, Seme appears to have been compelled to present a radically different view.

The idea of Africa that Seme presented was more hopeful. It was of an Africa with significant achievements in the arts, science, statecraft and culture. This positive idea of Africa is evident in the following extract from his 1906 speech:

The brighter day is rising upon Africa. Already I seem to see her chains dissolved, her desert plains red with harvest, her Abyssinia and her Zululand the seats of science and religion, reflecting the glory of the rising sun from the spires of their churches and universities. Her Congo and her Gambia whitened with commerce, her crowded cities sending forth the hum of business and all her sons employed in advancing the victories of peace—greater and more abiding than the spoils of war (Seme, 1906: 408)

Seme's hopeful vision for Africa echoed Edward Wilmot Blyden's one, who, unlike his contemporary Crummell, believed that Africa had made significant contributions to human civilization; he was also committed to the regeneration of the continent (Lynch 1964). Like Seme who wrote several decades after him, Blyden (2010) was convinced that the regeneration of the African continent was imminent and that Africans from the diaspora would play an important role in that regeneration. His campaign for African-Americans in particular to return to the African continent was largely motivated by this belief. Lynch (1964) states that Blyden thought that

Liberia in particular would play a leading role in Africa's regeneration, that the regeneration and redemption of Africa was imminent, and that African Americans would play an important role due to their experience in the Americas. Furthermore, Blyden's concept of African personality and his conviction that African societies were inherently socialistic, became influential among African nationalists particularly amongst those in the Congress Youth League such as Lembede and Mda, who also believed that Africans were unique both in personality and social organization (Frenkel, 1974).

I have dwelled on Seme and the influences that Africa diasporic intellectuals of the 19th and early 20th centuries had on his idea of, and vision for, Africa because of the central role he played in the emergence of the African nationalist movement in South Africa, as well as in shaping debates on the meaning and imagination of Africa. As Masilela (2017) observes, Seme's connections to African diasporic intellectual and political movements were not the only ones that shaped the development of African nationalism in South Africa. The emergence of Ethiopianism and independent churches in South Africa in the second half of the 19th century was connected to interchanges between educated black people in the country and their African-American counterparts (Masilela, 2017). Campbell (1998) points to the American Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church in particular as having been critical to the emergence of the Ethiopian movement in South Africa and in influencing the ideological orientation of early African nationalists such as Charlotte Maxeke, Pambani Mzimba and several others. These African diasporic connections brought about a new race-consciousness and a greater assertiveness in educated Africans about their African identity.

The connections were both organizational and personal. Maxeke, for instance, befriended Nina Gomer Dubois and her husband W.E.B. Du Bois while a student at Wilberforce University. Although Du Bois's influence on Maxeke's ideological outlook is unclear, what cannot be doubted is the impact of the American experience on her political activism upon the return to South Africa. In addition to dedicating her life to the struggles of African peoples, particularly black women, Maxeke established two institutions in South Africa that she had encountered

in the United States: the AME church as well as the Wilberforce educational institution in Evaton, then southern Transvaal. Her establishing the Wilberforce institution was an obvious attempt at recreating an educational institution similar to her alma mater and reflected the influence it had on her. The school's focus on teaching vocational skills, pointed to the influence of another African-American thinker and intellectual, Booker T Washington. Perhaps more than Du Bois or any Africa diasporic thinker and intellectual, Washington had a profound influence in shaping the ideological perspectives of early African nationalists in South Africa. Among those influenced by Washington were leading African nationalist thinkers and leaders such as Dube, Don Davidson T. Jabavu, Albert B. Xuma, Thema and Seme himself. Like Maxeke's Wilberforce institution, Dube's school at Inanda was modelled on Washington's Tuskegee Institute in Alabama (Hughes 2011).

Washington's influence was evident in what can be described as the 'moderate' route to emancipation that most early African nationalists preferred and often advocated. But there was a lot more to it than a moderate political orientation. Washington's insistence on certain values such as hard-work, thrift, restraint, moral and political integrity, and honour came to be cherished by early African nationalists. These values were central to their imaginings and idea of the 'New Africa' that they considered their duty to build. A 'New African' who did not subscribe to those values was not considered worthy of serious attention. The important point to underscore is that the intellectual currents coming from the African diaspora were instrumental in shaping and fortifying the nascent nationalist sentiment among educated Africans in South Africa. By the latter half of the 19th century, educated Africans started to establish civic associations, newspapers, churches, and political organisations. Some of the prominent organisations they formed in the late 19th century include the Native Educational Association (NEA) through which New African intellectuals such as John Tengo Jabavu, Walter Rubusana, Mpambani Mzimba, Paul Xiniwe and William Gqoba, engaged in political and educational matters (Walshe 1970; Odendaal 2012). They also launched numerous newspapers including *Imvo ZabaNtsundu* established by Jabavu in 1884. *Imvo*, as the newspaper became popularly known, paved the way for other newspapers to emerge across the length

and breadth of what became South Africa. The political organisations, civic associations and newspapers became forums through which educated Africans from different parts of the country communicated and debated issues of concern and interest amongst themselves. Through these interactions, a broader nationalist consciousness emerged and took the place of what were largely narrow regional interests (Masilela 2013). By the beginning of the 20th century, educated Africans started to imagine and mobilise a common African identity. They also established political associations that cut across regional and tribal identities. This movement towards a broader and more inclusive African nationalism found expression in the formation of national organisations such as the South African Native Congress (SANNC) in the late 1900s, which was followed by the South African Native Convention established in 1909 (Odendaal 2012; Limb 2010). The formation of the South African National Native Congress (SANNC) in 1912 was the outcome of this broad movement towards black national unity.

What this brief rehashing of the history of African nationalism in South Africa demonstrates is that it was influenced, largely, by experiences and ideas originating from other parts of the African diaspora. These ideas and the political movements to which they gave birth, emerged in response to the condition of racial subjugation and exploitation that darker skinned peoples across the world confronted. Faced with this experience, some Africa diasporic intellectuals started to think about creating their own separate independent republic (Delaney), while others advocated for the return to the African continent (Blyden), and many more sought to change the system of racial oppression from within the countries in which they lived (Du Bois and Washington). In confronting these systems of racial oppression and exclusion, African diasporic intellectuals developed ideas about Africa that either elicited responses from their African counterparts or shaped their thinking. Often, debates about the African continent revolved around the dichotomy of modernity and tradition. As already stated, Africa diasporic thinkers such as Crummell considered Africa a backward continent without any credible contribution to human civilisation, while Blyden and Du Bois, to mention just two, thought Africa had a proud history. The two polar images of Africa—modern or traditional—occupied centre stage in discussions and debates by African

nationalists of the first half of the 20th century. While most were committed to creating what they called the New Africa (Masilela, 2007, 2013, and 2017), they advanced different ideas and imaginings of this New Africa. In the following section, I discuss in detail the ideas of R.V. Selope Thema, one of the leading African nationalist intellectuals of the early 20th century. I contrast Thema's with ideas of other nationalists such as Solomon Plaatje, Seme, Msimang, Mda, Lembede and Dhlomo.

The African Modernity of Selope Thema

In 1929, Clements Kadalie, the founder and leader of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa (commonly known as the ICU), established a newspaper for one of the three splinter groups of the ICU he led called the Independent ICU. He named the newspaper *New Africa*. The decision by Kadalie to name it as such was not surprising for two main reasons. A year before, a Scottish missionary based in present day Malawi by the name of Donald Fraser had published a book titled *The New Africa* in which 'modern' Africans such as Kadalie himself were praised as harbingers of an Africa emerging from backwardness. So pleased was Kadalie by the publication of Fraser's book, and presumably his inclusion in the book, that he mentioned it in his memoirs published several decades after (Kadalie, 1970). There was, however, a larger reason why Kadalie might have found calling his union's newspaper *New Africa* appealing. The idea of creating and forging a 'new' Africa from the ruins of colonial domination was important, as was a step away from what was considered by 'New Africans' themselves to be the backwardness of African traditional societies, which was in vogue intellectually in the first decades of the 20th century. Consistently making a clarion call for reimagining the African continent was Richard Victor Selope Thema, an African nationalist intellectual who gained prominence through his involvement in the early years of the ANC. He took up the position of secretary general in place of Plaatje who was absent in London, and was also as prolific in his output as a newspaper columnist and editor, from the 1920s into the 1950s when he died.

Thema's ideas about Africa were shaped by various influences, including British philosophers and writers such as Thomas Carlyle, African-American thinkers

such as Washington and Du Bois, and black South African intellectuals such as Elijah Makiwane and Seme. His writings in the 1920s in *Umteteli wa Bantu* newspaper in particular, reflected the tumultuous changes and events of that decade. Some of the notable events included the entrenchment of racial segregation in South Africa, which increasingly marginalised black people in general and closed off opportunities for upward mobility for an aspirational black middle class to which Thema belonged. Partly in response to the state-sponsored project of racial subjugation, was an increasing political radicalization of black people, which resulted in numerous industrial protests (Bonner, 1981). The social and political ferment of the 1920s provided fertile ground for the emergence and growth of organisations such as the ICU and the Communist Party of South Africa. Social upheavals enabled ideological influences from outside the country, such as Garveyism, to find resonance and gain traction (Masilela, 2013, and Limb, 2010) within South Africa. Although complex and varied in several respects, Thema's ideas, especially in the 1920s, centred around his fundamental commitment to and belief in black emancipation. Considering Thema's vast intellectual output during a period that spanned over four decades on various subjects, the discussion in this section will focus on four central themes that foregrounded his ideas on the African continent and its peoples: modernity, civilization, tradition and Christianity. In discussing his views on these topics, I will compare and contrast them to ideas and views articulated by other early African nationalists.

Thema's decision to title his unpublished memoirs, *Out of Darkness: From Cattle-herding to the Editor's Chair*, is revelatory about the forces that influenced him and those he held dear. Evidently, the title of his memoirs was influenced by *Up from Slavery*, the autobiography of Booker T. Washington (1963), who was held in high esteem by Thema and his contemporaries. That he chose to style the story of childhood and adult life on Washington's, also indicates the type of politics he espoused and the fundamental beliefs that animated and undergirded it. As the title suggests, Thema did believe that the life he lived in the then northern Transvaal, before his conversion to Christianity and before being enrolled in formal education, was in many respects primitive and backward. In his memoir, he writes of how his life was changed fundamentally when he met two

missionaries from the Cape: Elijah Makiwane and William Stuart, who came to his village to preach. He singles out the prayer that Makiwane made as having been transformational for him. Makiwane, Thema (2018: 63) notes, prayed for boys and girls 'who were still in darkness' to see the so-called light of Christianity. He describes Makiwane's prayer as 'having thrilled [him] and 'stirred' his imagination (ibid). From then on, he abandoned his grandfather's plan of training him to be a traditional diviner and insisted on rather being sent to school and converting to Christianity. The journey that began with his encounter with Makiwane eventually led him on a life trajectory that landed him at Lovedale college in the eastern part of the Cape. Thema describes his experience at Lovedale by using once again the metaphor of the 'veil of darkness' being lifted from his eyes (Thema, 2018: 88). It is important to quote Thema's experience of Lovedale in full because, as he mentions in his memoirs, it changed his life greatly. He (2018: 88) states that his encounter with Lovedale:

... opened my eyes and made me see the suffering of my people which caused pangs of pain in my heart and eventually led to my revolt against tyranny and injustice. This story of how Lovedale opened my eyes and set my mind in motion presents a moving picture in the history of my life. I was a boy of twenty years of age, and as it will be remembered, was just emerging from a barbarous life in the wilds of the Northern Transvaal. And yet when I left Lovedale at the end of 1910 I had ceased to think as a barbarous boy and was already grappling with the problems of civilised life.

Thema's views as articulated in the quotation above were the backbone of his world outlook throughout his eventful and illustrious public career, which saw him become a leading figure in the African nationalist movement, including succeeding Plaatje as secretary general of the ANC. In addition to a life dedicated to politics, Thema was a prominent newspaper man, both serving as a prolific and influential columnist for various black newspapers such as *Abantu-Batho*, *Umteteli wa Bantu*, and *Ilanga lase Natal*. In 1932, he was appointed the founding editor of *The Bantu World* newspaper, a position he held for more than two decades. During this period, he occupied numerous positions in political organisations such as the ANC

and the All-Africa Convention (AAC). He served also as a member of the Native Representative Council (NRC), which was a body established in terms of the Representation of Natives Act of 1936. His participation in the politics of the ANC ended in the early 1950s, when he was expelled after establishing a faction called the National-minded Group in opposition to the influence of communists in the ANC, which he considered a betrayal of its African nationalist origins.

Perhaps more than any other African nationalist of the early 20 century, Thema wrote extensively on the idea of Africa and his understanding of the continent's position in history and in humanity as a whole. The cornerstone of Thema's beliefs, ideas and indeed politics was his unshakeable commitment to Christianity. He believed that religion was critical in building and fortifying character in individuals and in laying a firm foundation upon which the progress of societies is anchored. In an article he published in *Umteteli wa Bantu* newspaper on 11 November 1922, Thema stated his 'firm' conviction that 'no race can make any appreciable progress without religion' in his mind, Christianity 'was the only religion of all the religions of the world, that is capable of pointing the way towards the civilisation and progress whose purpose is the eventual attainment by the human race of a god like state of perfection'.² In the same article, he expressed alarm that fewer black people in South Africa were converting to the Christian religion. He thought that the decline of influence of the Christian faith undermined the progress that he thought black people had made. By progress, Thema meant movement towards education, science and what he and his contemporaries referred to as modernity. One fundamental aspect of the African modernity they imagined and aspired to, included abandoning a life similar to that which he lived in his village of Mafarane, where in his view superstition and what he described as the 'veil of darkness' prevailed.

Thema's faith in Christianity, modernity, civilisation and progress poses important questions regarding his idea of Africa. In other words, if Christianity represents light and progress, what does that mean for his idea of Africa? The first point in addressing this question is to point out that Thema and some

² Thema, R.V. S. 'The Bantu and Christianity', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 11 November 1922, p.3.

of his contemporaries defined themselves as New Africans (Masilela, 2013). By emphasising this identity, they tried to set themselves apart from what they considered the 'old' Africa, which in their view, was organised and anchored on tradition, superstition and backwardness. Although conceding to the veracity of evidence around Africa and Africans being involved in science long before their encounter with Europeans (as he often pointed out by referencing the ruins and civilisation of the Great Zimbabwe³), Thema believed that the encounter of Africans with Europeans represented progress - notwithstanding the plunder and subjugation colonialism had brought to the African continent. Moreover, he believed that the southern African region's long association with what he called Western civilisation positioned it as playing a leading role in 'carrying the torch of Western civilisation and culture to the wilds and jungles of this dark continent'.⁴

The idea and image of Africa that emerges from Thema's writings is in many respects similar to the negative stereotypes propagated by early missionaries and explorers. While such an assessment is true in some respect, Thema's understanding of civilisation and modernity was a lot more nuanced than his general reference to Western civilisation suggests. In the first instance, Thema argued that the foundations of what had come to be known as Western civilisation 'were laid on the soils of Africa and Asia'.⁵ Furthermore, he contended that what was considered Western civilisation was in fact a product of 'the gathering achievement of the human race'.⁶ In arguing for Africans to fully claim and embrace what he considered to be a civilised way of living, he was basing this belief on it being their civilisation too. He opposed the notion that 'Western civilisation is the exclusive achievement of the white race'⁷ and argued that it would be 'a gross injustice to exclude us from the benefits of civilisation to which we have made a distinct contribution'.⁸

A closer look at Thema's writings on the idea of Africa reveals a complex and at times confused and confusing picture. As already mentioned, he believed that Africans had made significant contributions to 'the gathering achievement of the human race' which he called civilisation. As proof of Africa's contribution to human progress, he cited the 'buried civilisations on this continent found in the ruins of Zimbabwe, Timbuktu, Carthage and many other cities that were once the centres of an African culture'.⁹ By pointing this out, Thema disputed the argument made by many white politicians in South Africa at the time, which was that Africans had not contributed to civilisation and were not entitled to or ready for what was often considered its benefits. Moreover, Thema questioned the claim made by certain white politicians in South Africa such as Barry Hertzog and Jan Smuts, who stated that white people were standard bearers of civilisation, and that African 'barbarism' was its death knell. He pointed at the strangeness of the 'civilised' white people, who in South Africa showed the:

superiority of their civilisation to us by kicking and bullying us in public and in private. There seems to be a curious idea that the civilised European should impress the uncivilised African by trampling upon him, treating him with discourtesy and calling him all sort of names.¹⁰

Although a firm believer in Christianity and very appreciative of the role played by missionaries in showing Africans the 'light', Thema sought to expose the dark side of the missionary enterprise. While praising early missionaries whom he argued believed in the equality of man, Thema claimed that their successors bought into schemes of white supremacists whose sole purpose was 'to exploit Africa and her children'.¹¹ By adopting the political project of subjugating Africans, missionaries lost the confidence of black people, who began to perceive them as 'veritable Pharisees' whose sincerity should be doubted.¹²

³ Thema, R. V. S. 'The White Hills of the Rand, Umteteli wa Bantu, 24 November and 3 December 1923.

⁴ Thema, R.V. S. 'Hertzog's Native Policy', Umteteli wa Bantu, 17 May 1924.

⁵ Thema, R. V. S. 'Parallel Institutions, Umteteli wa Bantu, 3 October 1925.

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ Thema, R.V. S. 'To Be Or Not To Be?', Umteteli wa Bantu, 14 June 1924.

⁹ Thema, R.V. S. "'A Common Heritage'", Umteteli wa Bantu, 4 October 1924.

¹⁰ Thema, R.V. S. 'The Superiority of Civilised Man', Umteteli wa Bantu, 13 August 1921.

¹¹ Thema, R.V. S. 'The Bantu and Christianity', Umteteli wa Bantu, 11 November 1922.

¹² *ibid*

“ Having concluded that the presence of ‘European modernity’ on the southern tip of the continent was irreversible, Thema thought that African intellectuals such as himself held a responsibility to mediate, so to speak, its entry and influence in other parts of the continent. ”

Despite his critical stance on the idea of Western civilisation as an exclusively European project for the benefit of white people only, Thema at times saw Western civilisation as an essential force to drive the ‘veil of darkness’ from the African continent, which he considered backward. In this connection, he repeated ideas of some African diasporic intellectuals such as Crummell who believed that the road to Africa’s redemption was through its Christianisation and adoption of European culture. In support of this view, Thema argued:

We cannot as a race hold our own against the conditions of life which the planting of Western civilisation in our midst has created unless we assimilate Western ideas and adopt and learn the white man’s ways of doing things. It was thought some time ago that our contact with European civilisation would be detrimental to our very existence; but it has been discovered that we are a virile race, capable of looking the white man in the face and of living in spite of oppression and enslavement. For through the roll of ages the African has been subjected to one or other form of slavery, but throughout of all this period of unspeakable suffering he has not only survived the debasing influence of this institution but has also attained to a position in the affairs of mankind which is giving thoughtful men restless days and sleepless nights.¹³

¹³ Thema, R.V. S. ‘To Be Or Not To Be? Umteteli wa Bantu, 14 June 1924.

As the statement quoted above demonstrates, Thema believed that it was no longer possible for Africans to revert to the life they lived before, what Masilela (2013: xiii) describes as, the violent entry of ‘European modernity’ into African history ‘through the social formation of capitalism and the political systems of imperialism and colonialism’. Like other New African intellectuals, Thema ‘thought that a more viable alternative was to master the complexity of European modernity with the intent of subverting it into a form of modernity that would emerge from the democratic imperatives of African history’ (Masilela, 2013: xiii-xiv). Thema thought the experience of African Americans held important lessons for their brothers and sisters in South Africa and the rest of the continent. In his view, African Americans were exemplary for their ability to overcome extreme adversity in the form of slavery and other political projects of subjugation. He praised Booker T. Washington in particular, whom he described as ‘the man who founded Negro civilisation and progress’¹⁴ for anchoring their progress on the foundation of education and character building. Demonstrating once again his staunch belief in the significance of religion for individuals and societies, Thema contended that ‘the building up of character without religion is an utter impossibility’.¹⁵ Religion’, he added, ‘is the cornerstone of human progress and civilisation’.¹⁶

Having concluded that the presence of ‘European modernity’ on the southern tip of the continent was irreversible, Thema thought that African intellectuals such as himself held a responsibility to mediate, so to speak, its entry and influence in other parts of the continent.¹⁷ In his view, the future of the African continent depended on the extent to which countries, in which the encounter with ‘European modernity’ was deep such as those in the southern African region, should chart a path towards an African modernity. For Thema, South Africa in particular should shoulder greater responsibilities because it was, according to him, the ‘leading civilised state in Africa’.¹⁸ South Africa’s role, then, would be to carry the torch of the civilisation he thought irreversible to the rest of the

¹⁴ Thema, R.V. Selope ‘Are We Fit?’, Umteteli wa Bantu, 2 February 1924

¹⁵ ibid

¹⁶ ibid

¹⁷ Thema, R.V. Selope ‘The Relations of White and Black’, Umteteli wa Bantu, 12 May 1923.

¹⁸ ibid

continent in order to ensure that Africa contributes more to human progress and civilisation.

Thema's views and ideas about Africa, although controversial at times, capture the broad worldview of early African nationalists. This was a social group that still carried with it the ideological imprint of its origins in Christian missions and the position it occupied under colonialism. As a social group, they saw the disintegration of African social, economic and political life under the onslaught from colonialism, imperialism and capitalism. The fundamental question that they confronted was how Africa and Africans should respond to the changed reality. Thema's answer was that Africans need to adapt by adopting, largely, the fundamental aspects of European modernity, including its education system and Christianity. He argued that if Africans failed to do so, they risked facing irreversible social disintegration. While accepting the permanence of social, economic and political systems introduced violently to Africa by Europeans, other African nationalists did not accept the full extent of Thema's argument. For instance, his close friend and fellow intellectual, Selby Msimang, contended that Africans needed to evolve what he termed a 'better civilisation', which would sustain them under the new conditions.¹⁹ He was concerned that the social habits that Africans were adopting in the name of Western civilisation were those practiced by the worst elements of white society. What Africans needed to learn, he argued, were those habits and traditions that have helped Europe succeed so that they could apply them to the New Africa they sought to build.²⁰ Msimang's position on African spirituality and religion was also slightly different from Thema's. While Thema compared African religions unfavourably to Christianity, Msimang argued that 'For the most part, the religion of the Bantu tallied somewhat with the Christian faith in its fundamental principles.'²¹ For Msimang, it was the arrival of missionaries and the intrusion of Western civilisation that rendered African religions and progress stagnant. He argued that the social disintegration witnessed in African communities did not reflect their inferiority as a people or a backwardness. On the contrary, it was a

consequence of the imposition of Western civilisation upon Africa and her people that insisted on Africans abandoning their religions and customs, destroyed institutions and customs that bound them together, and insisted that they should adopt a way of life foreign to them. The consequence of that was, he contended:

... we have become a race without religion, custom or principle. They see us degenerating, demoralised, and point to these weaknesses as signs of our natural incapacity to cope with the new conditions. In their councils they form resolutions to keep us in our place—a place of imbeciles, irresponsible, who have to be kept in subjection for all time. Character among our people is failing because we discarded that which makes it and upholds it.²²

While Msimang emphasised the imposition on African people of European modernity through a system of 'forced labour', 'the pass laws', 'the poll tax', and 'the Bible', which altogether drove Africans to urban centres, he agreed with Thema that the consequence of all of this was the raising of a new consciousness among Africans. It was a 'new awakening', a 'new light' and a 'new vision' that could no longer be reversed.²³ Having lived together with Europeans for three centuries, Africans had evolved a hybrid civilisation—an African modernity—that combined the elements drawn from their culture and experience, as well as some taken from their encounter with Europeans. The New Africa arising from the imposition of European modernity and the responses of Africans to it, was a permanent reality that Msimang felt defined modern Africa.²⁴

By emphasising the hybrid nature of the civilisation that should be at the heart of the New Africa he advocated for, Msimang echoed the position outlined by Seme in 1906 when he called for the regeneration of Africa. What is distinctive about Seme's vision of Africa, as outlined in that speech and many of his writings, is that it posits an idea of Africa that does not scorn its past but takes pride in it and seeks

¹⁹ Msimang, H. S. 'Our Social Life', Umteteli wa Bantu, 24 June 1922.

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ Msimang, H. S. 'The Religion and Civilisation of the Bantu', Umteteli wa Bantu, 28 August 1922.

²² Msimang, H. S. 'The Religion and Civilisation of the Bantu', Umteteli wa Bantu, 7 October 1922.

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ Msimang, H. S. 'Bantu Destiny', Umteteli wa Bantu, 16 July 1927.

to build from it. Where Thema and Crummell, for instance, saw an African jungle, Seme saw an Africa that would add a 'new and unique civilisation' that is 'thoroughly spiritual and humanistic' (Seme quoted in Ngqulunga, 2017: 29-30). As Masilela (2013) notes, Seme and other African nationalists such as Plaatje saw value in indigenous cultures and institutions. Their idea of Africa was not of a continent disembowelled of its institutions and cultures like Thema thought; rather, they believed Africa's progress lay in its ability to combine its ancient cultures, traditions and institutions with a 'Western' mode of life. This belief was most evident in Seme's idea of the ANC, which in its constitution combined the two traditions: Euro-American and African. As already mentioned, other African nationalists supported Seme's proposition that Africa's prosperity depended on its ability to meld their culture with European culture. Others such as Plaatje were in fact sceptical that the new African civilisation that they so eagerly sought could be anchored and driven by what he called a 'New Native'. For Plaatje the New Natives or New Africans could not be relied on because they were 'insidious and lethargic'. Their fathers and forefathers, the 'old Africans', were, in Plaatje's opinion, wiser.²⁵

If there is one dominant point, in this discussion on the idea of Africa held by early African nationalists, it is how divergent their views were. On the one hand was Thema who accepted, perhaps grudgingly at times, Western culture and religion and believed that Africa's progress depended on it adopting what he often referred to as Western civilisation. At the other end of the spectrum were African thinkers such as Seme and Plaatje, who found great value in African history, culture and institutions and advocated for an African modernity that would combine the best elements from European and African culture. Despite these differences, early African nationalists had one thing in common: their idea of Africa was largely elitist. In other words, there was not much room provided for the role that ordinary Africans should play in the "New Africa" or in bringing it into being. Central to the idea of Africa was the role that African intellectuals or leaders should play. Following on Cape intellectuals such as Elijah Makiwane²⁶, Thema and Msimang believed

²⁵ Plaatje, S.T. "'The Good New Times" and the "New Native"', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 9 November 1929.

²⁶ See, for instance, Makiwane, E. 'Educated Natives', *Imvo ZabaNtsundu*, 26 January 1885.

“ Despite these differences, early African nationalists had one thing in common: their idea of Africa was largely elitist. In other words, there was not much room provided for the role that ordinary Africans should play in the “New Africa” or in bringing it into being. Central to the idea of Africa was the role that African intellectuals or leaders should play. ”

that educated Africans should play a leading role in forging the New Africa.²⁷ Seme, Plaatje, John Dube, and Zacchaeus Mahabane, saw a greater role for chiefs and traditional leaders.²⁸ Although influenced by the founding generation of African nationalism, the next generation of African nationalist thinkers—those who are known for founding the Congress Youth League in 1944—took a different view on the status and role to be played by the African masses. In the next section, I focus briefly on the ideas of three of the leading intellectuals of this generation: Herbert Dhlomo, Anton Lembede, and Ashby Mda.

The African Modernity of Herbert Dhlomo

In his periodisation of black intellectual history in southern Africa, Masilela (2007, 2013, 2014, and 2017) identifies the 1860s as the decade during which what he calls the New African Movement (NAM) emerged. This cultural, intellectual and political movement, at the heart of which was the ideology of African nationalism, would occupy centre stage of black social and political life for a century (1860 to 1960). Among the early founders of this movement were intellectuals such as Tiyo Soga, Elijah Makiwane, Pambani Mzimba, William Wellington Gqoba, John Tengo Jabavu, Samuel E.K. Mqhayi, Charlotte Maxeke, Nontsizi Mgqweto, to mention a few. These New Africans, as they called themselves, were joined by

²⁷ See, for instance, Msimang, H. S. 'Bantu Intellectuals', 12 and 19 September 1925 and 17 October 1925.

²⁸ For a representative view of this perspective, see Mahabane, Z. 'To the Bantu Paramount Chiefs and Chiefs of Southern Africa', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 5 March 1927.

others such as Seme, Plaatje and others that have been mentioned in this essay. Masilela singles out Thema as having been instrumental in linking the early Cape intellectuals with the Natal intellectuals, such as Jordan Ngubane and the two Dhlomo brothers, Rolfes and Herbert. Thema served as a bridge not only between intellectuals from two regions, but by employing several Natal intellectuals to work on *The Bantu World*, a newspaper that he edited. He thereby linked the generation of early founders of the African nationalist movement and the heirs of this tradition in the Congress Youth League.

Herbert Isaac Ezra Dhlomo (commonly known by his initials, H.I.E.) was in many respects a direct descendant of Thema's tutelage. Although quite young in the 1920s, having been born in 1903, Dhlomo started contributing to debates in the *Umteteli wa Bantu* newspaper by the mid-1920s.²⁹ Writing consistently in the newspaper alongside him were two outstanding intellectuals of the founding generation of African nationalism, Thema and Msimang. Their influence on Dhlomo's political and cultural thought is evident in his early writings on the *Umteteli wa Bantu* newspaper. His October 1925 contribution to *Umteteli wa Bantu*, coincidentally appearing on the same page as Thema's, addressed the experience of African Americans with slavery and the role slavery played, in Dhlomo's opinion, in bring about their 'unity and fraternity'.³⁰ Dhlomo took the line of early African nationalist intellectuals such as Thema, Msimang, Plaatje and Dube, who felt that the African-American experience held important lessons for black South Africans. Similar to them, he argued that what was needed were 'men who can and will lead our people wisely—men who are elevated above others in sentiment rather than in situation'.³¹ This view of history, in which great men led their people into salvation or redemption, was popular among early African nationalists. It reflected the influence that Scottish thinker, Thomas Carlyle, and his 'great man' theory of history had on African nationalists of the time (Carlyle, 2017)

Thema's influence on Dhlomo is evident in his early writings on the role played by Christianity and missionaries in particular in transforming the African continent. Like Thema, he moved from the premise that life in Africa was backward and 'dark' before the arrival of Christianity. In an article he published in August 1930, he had the following to say on the subject:

When that greatest of all missionaries, Dr Livingstone, decided to give his life to Africa and its people, the old, dark continent was transformed into the new, glorious Africa of today. No intelligent person can deny the continent's indebtedness to his noble work and that accomplished by other missionaries who sought to bring light among primitive peoples.³²

While Dhlomo made these statements regarding the African past, he was careful to note that the history of Africans was not well known. The little that was known, he observed, was distorted by prejudices held by those who wrote it.³³ Despite making this concession, he, like his intellectual predecessors, appears to have been too impressed by the spirit of 'New Africanism' to the extent that he was too eager to paint the Africa of the past, the old Africa, with a prejudicial brush of backwardness and darkness. This idea of Africa, popular at the time, would not last long in Dhlomo's writings. By the 1940s, his writings evinced a positive disposition towards African history and culture. This was most evident in a series of essays he wrote for the *Ilanga lase Natal* newspaper in the 1940s. His 'Three Essays in Tribal Culture', which were published by the newspaper between October and December 1947 deserve a special mention.³⁴ In the essays, Dhlomo engaged with African history and culture in detail. Although still married to his 'New African' world outlook, what is remarkable about the essays is that the Dhlomo of the 1940s appears to have abandoned the stereotypical view of African history and culture, which paints Africans as having been backward. In his first essay in which he addresses the fascination that Zulus had with beads, and their contribution to what

²⁹ One of Dhlomo's first articles in *Umteteli wa Bantu* appeared in 1924 when he was 21 years old. See Dhlomo, H.I.E. 'Hardship and Progress', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 18 October 1924.

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ *ibid*

³² Dhlomo, H.I.E. 'Bantu and the Church', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 23 August 1930.

³³ Dhlomo, H. I.E. 'The Evolution of the Bantu', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 14, 21 and 28 November 1931.

³⁴ Dhlomo, H. I.E. 'Three Essays In Tribal Culture', *Ilanga lase Natal*, 4 and 11 October and 6 and 13 December 1947.

today would be considered visual culture, he says the following:

Here we have chiefs whom history daubs as savages and war obsessed tyrants talking incessantly and with great enthusiasm about decorative art. This prompt, instinctive and intellectual marriage to beads proves that the Zulu was no mere savage. He had trappings of culture and deep love of the beautiful. It is often said that the Zulu is conservative and does not readily take to new things and practices. Yet here we find him eagerly and instantly adopting bead culture. This raises the old question of who are the Bantu?³⁵

Dhlomo's essays delve into other areas of African culture and history, including the importance of the shield in African social life (11 October 1947), as well as the significance of cattle in African culture (13 December 1947).

There are two other important points to mention about Dhlomo's writings in the 1940s. The first is a marked shift from the perspective he advanced in the 1920s and early 1930s, which appeared to be too enthusiastic about the influence of what was often referred to as European modernity and too sceptical of African culture and history where he advanced the idea of Africa as backward. The second point is that the observable shift in Dhlomo's idea of Africa was not isolated. It reflected a serious re-assessment of African history, culture and institutions by New African intellectuals, which started in the late 1930s and gained momentum in the 1940s. With regard to African nationalist intellectuals based in KwaZulu/Natal, the pivotal moment in this shift happened with the decision to establish what became known as the Zulu Language and Cultural Society, which was launched in 1935 to promote Zulu culture and language (Ngqulunga, 2022). Another well-known African intellectual, Benedict W Vilakazi, was also writing essays in *Ilanga lase Natal* newspaper at the time defending the legacy of Shaka Zulu and projecting him as a great leader, who promoted progress and unity among African people.³⁶

³⁵ Dhlomo, H.I.E. 'Three Essays In Tribal Culture', *Ilanga lase Natal*, 4 October 1947.

³⁶ Vilakazi, B.W. 'Shaka's Plan of Freedom and Reconstruction', *Ilanga lase Natal*, 31 July, and 7, 14 and 21 August 1943.

One of the most significant contributors to debates on the idea of Africa among the Congress Youth League group of African nationalists was Anton Muziwakhe Lembede. While Dhlomo's intellectual lineage can be traced mainly to Thema, Lembede's (and perhaps Mda's to some extent) is traceable to Seme.³⁷ Lembede's association with Seme ran deep. Not only did Lembede served his articles as a candidate attorney with Seme, but they also became partners in a law firm when he qualified. What is not clear is the extent to which Seme's politics influenced Lembede's. Lembede's strong African nationalism was in tune with Seme's long-standing association with the African nationalist tradition. There is a faith in African culture and institutions in Lembede's political philosophy that is very similar to Seme's. This is notwithstanding the differences in their political perspectives, with Lembede's African nationalism being quite radical as opposed to Seme's more moderate (and at times conservative) approach. Lembede's view contrasts with African thinkers such as Thema and Dhlomo, who celebrated African nationalist thinkers in their own right, but tended to take a more African position on 'old Africa'.

A few years before he died unexpectedly in July 1947 at only 33 years old, Lembede wrote numerous articles published principally in the *Ilanga lase Natal* and *Inkundla ya Bantu* newspapers on the subject of African nationalism or Africanism.³⁸ In an article he published in *Inkundla ya Bantu*, Lembede outlined his vision of Africanism/ African nationalism at the heart of which was his idea of Africa. In the paper, he advanced seven propositions about Africa and his idea of Africa. He started the article by making an

³⁷ Incidentally, another Congress Youth League African nationalist and intellectual who claimed intellectual and political descentance to Seme was Jordan Kush Ngubane. Ngubane is known for having been, together with Lembede, the main author of the Congress Youth League manifesto that declared African nationalism as the ideological fulcrum of the League as well as the liberation struggle in southern Africa.

³⁸ *Inkundla Ya Bantu* newspaper was established in the last 1930s. For a time, its editor was Govan Mbeki, but for a long time in the 1940s and early 1950s it was edited by Jordan Ngubane, one of the founders of the Congress Youth League. It came to be known as a mouthpiece, and several leading thinkers of the League generation of African nationalists such as Lembede himself, Ngubane, and A.P. Mda published some of their work there. *Ilanga lase Natal* on the other hand was established by Joh Langalibalele Dube in 1903 and published its first issue on 10 April the same year. It arose as part of the rise of the African nationalist movement in southern Africa in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Like its companion newspapers of the time such as *Imvo ZabaNtsundu*, *Izwi la Bantu*, *Tsala ea Becono* and several others, it became a voice and mouthpiece of the new African nationalist movement. While *Umteteli wa Bantu* became the most influential forum for African nationalist thought in the 1920s despite its foundation having been sponsored by the Chamber of Mines; *Ilanga lase Natal* in the 1940s became the most exciting and influential forum for black political and cultural thought. At the time it was edited by R.R.R. Dhlomo, the elder brother of Herbert's.

argument that 'the history of modern times is the history of nationalism'.³⁹ For him, nationalism was the 'only effective weapon, the only antidote, against foreign rule and modern imperialism'.⁴⁰ Lembede saw the same spirit of nationalism spreading through the African continent. Moving from this premise, he argued that 'Africa is a black man's country'⁴¹, and that Africans were the natives of their country. Africa was their 'Motherland from times immemorial'.⁴² His second proposition was that Africans were one people. Although conceding that they were constituted by 'heterogenous tribes'⁴³, he advocated for one African nation to emerge from those tribes. This would be achieved by the emergence of African nationalistic feelings that should unite Africans. Lembede also believed in the self-determination of Africans by insisting especially that Africans should be led by other Africans. That was his third proposition. Fourthly, his idea of Africa distinguished between Africans and what he called 'other Non-Europeans'. By this he meant people of Asian descent who lived in South Africa and so-called Coloured people. While he supported cooperation between the two categories, Lembede believed that the cooperation should not undermine the unity and singularity of Africans. For Lembede, the destiny of Africa and Africans was national freedom. Failure to achieve it, he contended, would lead to their extermination. The last two propositions concerned the progress and advancement of Africans: he believed they should aim for advancement and that the African character was socialistic.

These principles constituted the backbone and crucible of Lembede's idea of Africa. Because of his influence, they became the ideological fulcrum of the Congress Youth League of which he was the founding president. And through the 1949 Programme of Action, these principles were adopted by the ANC as its ideological perspective. It is important to comment on how Lembede's African nationalism compared to Seme's. Perhaps reflecting the radicalisation of African politics in the 1940s, Lembede's nationalism was less accommodating than Seme's. Although proud of his African identity, Seme's African nationalism was

perhaps more inclusive in the sense that it imagined other social groups such as white people as belonging to the New Africa he advocated. Lembede defined those he considered as not indigenous Africans despite having lived in Africa since time immemorial as not belonging to Africa, or perhaps entitled to certain privileges associated with belonging to Africa. His proposition regarding Africans leading themselves is a case in point. The other difference between his African nationalism and Seme's was their attitude to the masses. Seme's African nationalism and his idea of Africa was distinctly elitist in the sense that he saw leaders, be they chiefs or educated New Africans, as playing a leading role. Lembede on the other hand saw a larger role for the African masses. This position was evident in an article he published in *Ilanga lase Natal* newspaper where he argued 'Nationalism is essentially an ideology of the masses because it stirs the deepest human feelings'.⁴⁴ He added 'The African masses today are becoming imbued with the spirit of nationalism'.⁴⁵ The shift to the masses reflected the turn towards popular mobilisation in African nationalist politics, which was championed by the Congress Youth League.

Notwithstanding differences on certain aspects of their nationalism, Seme and Lembede held an idea of Africa that in many respects affirmed its history, culture and identity. Though slightly divergent from the ideas of other leading intellectuals such as Thema, this faith, if not in the past of Africa but in its present and especially its future, is one of the defining principles of the African nationalist idea of Africa. Thema might have believed the idea advanced by early missionaries and colonists on African past defined by a backwardness and 'darkness', he, however, felt strongly that Africa's future was bright and that the New Africa and New Africans he imagined would contribute significantly to human civilisation and progress.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to discuss various ideas of Africa as articulated and advanced by early African nationalist thinkers. I have argued that the

³⁹ *ibid*

⁴⁰ Lembede, A.M. 'Policy of the Congress Youth League', *Inkundla ya Bantu*, May 1946.

⁴¹ *ibid*

⁴² *ibid*

⁴³ *ibid*

⁴⁴ Lembede, Anton M. 'African nationalism and the new African masses', *Ilanga lase Natal*, 21 June 1947. Lembede wrote this article a few weeks before his untimely death.

⁴⁵ *ibid*

African nationalist tradition in South Africa was influenced largely by debates in the African diaspora. The main conduit of these ideas and debates was Seme, who brought them into South Africa especially through his 1906 speech. The article has also examined various ideas of leading African nationalist thinkers such as Thema and Msimang. Despite certain differences in their political thought, the fundamental idea that tied them together was their belief in what they called the New Africa. It was the same idea that was inherited by the Congress Youth League African nationalists such as Lembede, Mda and Dhlomo. Unlike their predecessors of early African nationalism, the Congress Youth League generation of African nationalists propounded a more radical idea of Africa in which the African masses played a leading role in shaping human history. The African nationalism that won freedom in South Africa towards the end of the 20th century can be traced to the early African nationalism and the ideas of Africa it advocated.

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