

How Congress Began

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Pixley Ka Izaka Seme, the founder of the African National Congress, was born in Natal of a Christian family. But like any African boy of the nineteenth century he grew up in an environment which was neither African nor European: at home he was under the influence of his Christian parents and the guidance of American missionaries, hut outside on the hills, in the valleys and on the banks of the rivers of his beautiful country, he came into contact with the ancient life of his people and learnt about the brave deeds of his warrior kings, such men as Dingiswavo, Tshaka and Cetyewayo.

And that is the reason why perhaps he remained a Zulu to the core in spite of his high educational attainments. After receiving his university training at Columbia (New York) and Oxford (England) and being called to the bar at the Middle Temple, London, Seme did not forget that he belonged to the Zulu nation — a nation founded and built by Tshaka, the Black Napoleon. Undoubtedly he must have entertained hopes of rebuilding this nation which had been reduced, after the Zulu War of 1879, to such a state of poverty and helplessness that the descendants of the heroes of Isandlwana were compelled to work in the kitchens of the whites, cooking their food and washing their dishes, scrubbing and polishing the floors of their homes.

After finishing his studies in America and England, this ambitious young African thought of returning to South Africa, his fatherland. The free life of the United States and Great Britain, with its pleasures and happiness could not hold him. He realised that the knowledge that he acquired was not only for his self-aggrandisement and enrichment, but also for the upliftment and the emancipation of his down-trodden people.

His return to this country was preceded by that of the late Alfred Mangena who also studied law in London, and was called to the bar at Lincoln's Inn. Mangena's arrival in South Africa paved the way for Pixley Seme and made it possible for him to be admitted as an attorney of the Supreme Court of South Africa without having to fight for this right.

Travelled in Trucks

Pixley Seme returned to this country in 1910 and established himself in Johannesburg. The conditions under which Africans lived and worked, particularly in the Northern Provinces, shocked him and stirred his mind to action. In those days the black man was treated as a beast of burden. He was knocked and kicked about with impunity. In the magistrate's courts his voice was hardly heard and his evidence hardly believed. He was stopped at street corners by

policemen demanding the production of his pass and his tax receipt. He was not allowed to walk on the pavements and had to dodge motor cars in the streets. He was not allowed to travel first, second or third class on the trains. He travelled in trucks almost similar to those used for cattle and horses. His education in the primary schools, which were few, did not go beyond Standard III, and not beyond Standard VI in the training school, which were only two in the Transvaal and none in the Orange Free State. Politically he had no voice in the making and administration of the laws. Economically he was kept in a state of abject poverty.

These, briefly, were the conditions under which the African people in the Northern provinces lived and laboured when Alfred Mangena, Pixley ka I. Seme, D. Montsioa and R. W. Msimang — a group of African lawyers — returned to South Africa from overseas. But among them, the man who was deeply shocked by these appalling conditions was Pixley Seme whose Zulu blood boiled as he saw the injustices and humiliation to which the African people were subjected. And his patriotism made him see a vision of a united African people working together for their salvation.

Unity of Tribes

When he was studying at Columbia and Oxford universities and eating his dinners at the Middle Temple, Pixley Seme's mind was wholly occupied with the idea of how to rebuild the broken Zulu nation. But when he saw what was happening to all Africans of all tribes, he changed his mind. Probably he remembered that the ultimate object of Tshaka in building the Zulu nation was to bring all the tribes under Zulu sway so as to eventually create a powerful nation of all the Africans.

'Why should he not undertake this idea of Tshaka to fruition?' he asked himself as he paced to and fro in his office at the corner of Rissik and Marshall Streets. He turned over the idea in his mind and finally came to the conclusion that the scheme was worth while attempting.

So one day he called his colleagues together for consultation.

All his friends agreed that the idea was excellent and that the unity of the tribes was an absolute necessity. So, the four lawyers, at the suggestion of Pixley ka I. Seme, decided to call a conference of all the Chiefs and prominent educated Africans to meet in Bloemfontein on January 8, 1912, two years after the establishment of the Union of South Africa.

It was a gathering of tribes that had never met before except on the battlefields. It was a gathering of Chiefs who had never seen each other before. And they had come from the four provinces and the High Commission territories. It was a gathering of educated Africans who had never exchanged views before, It was a gathering, if I may say so, of the departed spirits of the

African race, among whom were such men as Sandile, Tshaka, Moshoeshoe, Cetyewayo, Moroka, Khama, Sekhukhune, Sotshangana and Ramapulana.

Formation of Congress

Pixley Seme explained the purpose of the conference in these words: 'Chiefs of royal blood and gentlemen of our race, we have gathered here to consider and discuss a scheme which my colleagues and I have decided to place before you. We have discovered that in the land of their birth, Africans are treated as hewers of wood and drawers of water. The white people of this country have formed what is known as the Union of South Africa — a union in which we have no voice in the making of laws and no part in their administration. We have called you, therefore, to this conference, so that we can together devise ways and means of forming our national union for the purpose of creating national unity and defending our rights and privileges.'

The conference finally approved of the plan to form an organisation for the unification of the various tribes along national lines. That is how the African National Congress, which at the time was named the South African Native National Congress, came into existence.

No sooner was the Congress established than Pixley Seme conceived the idea of establishing a newspaper which could be used as a mouthpiece of the national organisation. There were two newspapers printed and published in Johannesburg at the time. They were *Morumioa*, founded and edited by D. S. Letanka, and *Molomo Oa Batho* founded and edited by L. T. Mvabaze. Pixley Seme approached these men with a view to forming a company which could launch a strong national newspaper. The scheme appealed to D.S. Letanka who agreed to merge his newspaper with the proposed company which was formed in due course, through Pixley Seme's enthusiasm and indefatigable energy. The promoters of the company were Pixley ka I. Seme, D. S. Letanka and the old Queen of Swaziland. The newspaper *Abantu-Batho* was launched with C. Kunene as English and Zulu Editor and D. S. Letanka as Sotho Editor.

Another enterprise undertaken by this man of vision was the establishment of an African Farmers' Association, and an African settlement at Daggakraal in the Eastern Transvaal. The association gave impetus to the purchasing of land by Africans in the Transvaal. The Daggakraal settlement caused consternation among neighbouring farmers, who declared that unless the buying of land by Natives was restricted South Africa would never be a white man's country. Indeed it was no exaggeration that it was the Daggakraal settlement which precipitated the enactment of the Natives Land Act in 1913.

Restless and Impatient

That Pixley ka I. Seme was a man of action and a patriot no sane man can deny. But his weakness, and that perhaps is the weakness of every brilliant man, was that he believed in his mind only, and therefore could not listen to the advices of other men. Had he wisely curbed his youthful ambition, restlessness and ambition he would not have lost interest in Congress, *Ahantu-Batho* and the Farmers' Association simply because other men did not always agree with his point of view. Had he understood the value of compromise and co-operation he would have achieved greater things for the African race. But his plans were 'wrecked,' to use Lord Rosebery's

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