

THE BIRTH OF AFRICAN NATIONALISM

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Before his death in October, 1959, Lionel Forman, Editor of 'New Age' and Treason Trialist, was preparing a doctorate thesis on the growth of African political organizations in the Union. The following digest of the opening section, found among his papers, is published as an important contribution to the study of democracy's beginnings in South Africa.

THE full-throated development in South Africa of a single African political consciousness only began in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Until then, the voluntary amalgamation of all the black peoples in a united stand against the white advance had been no more than a dream of the most far-sighted African leaders and the intermittent nightmare of the whites. In the absence of any unity among the African tribes, a handful of Europeans were able to exploit inter-tribal conflicts so skilfully that in many a decisive campaign by far the main burden of fighting, on the European side, was borne by Africans.

But with the commencement of the diamond diggings in 1870, the way was opened for a great change. At Kimberley men were able for the first time to see themselves not only as Zulu, Xhosa or Basotho tribesmen, but also as Africans. Members of the separate tribes came to recognize themselves as drawn into a single fraternity by their common economic interest.

By 1872, according to a contemporary press report, there were already an estimated 20,000 African workers at Kimberley. Probably the only eye-witness record of the scene left by an African writer is that of Gwayi Tyamzashe¹ who was preaching the gospel to the men at the diggings in 1872.

"When they are at work you can hardly distinguish the whites from the Coloureds, for they all resemble the diamondiferous soil they are working," he wrote. "There are Bushmen, Korannas, Hottentots, Griquas . . . Magwata, Mazulu, Maswazi, Matswetswa, Matonga, Matabele, Mabaca, Mampondo, Mampengu, Batembu, Mazosa and more."²

This coming together into a great single black brotherhood was a completely new phenomenon. For many years Africans had worked for the white men on their frontier farms, and since the

¹A Lovedale graduate, he was, in 1873, the first African to complete his whole course of theological studies in South Africa.

²'Kaffir Express'—1-1-1872.

time of Sir George Grey there had been small groups employed in road-making and on the harbours of the Eastern Province.

But Kimberley was something different. Here was the nucleus of a true African proletariat, whose future would be in the cities and whose only way of keeping lawfully alive would be by the sale of its labour. Here was the nucleus of a new class, whose ties with tribal society would become of the very slenderest; whose economic—and inevitably political—weapon would be that of the workers of all lands, the strike.

In 1872, however, the operative word was 'nucleus'. The men who came to Kimberley did not come to make their home in the city; nor did they all come through the pressures of hunger or the white man's laws.

"Those coming from far up in the interior," wrote Tyamzashe, "come with the sole purpose of securing guns. (They stay) no longer here than is necessary to get some £6 or £7 for the guns. Hence you will see hundreds of them leaving the Fields, and as many arriving from the North almost every day".³ These men still had their tribal land and cattle as an economic base; and their journey to Kimberley, though it embodied the quest of young men for new experience, learning and adventure, had as an important motive the desire and the need to protect that land and cattle by obtaining guns, the only weapons which could challenge white military power.

Kimberley set the pattern for the environment in which, during subsequent years, African nationalism was to grow most rapidly; the industrial sites drawing migrant tribesmen, and holding them as urban proletarians for whom tribal affiliation was a matter of secondary, or even minor, importance. It was not, however, at Kimberley that the pioneering work was done in the development of the first theoretical and organizational expression of African nationalism. Political organizations are not founded by migrant labourers, and history did not wait for the growth—rapid as it was—of a settled African urban community at Kimberley.

The diamond discoveries, coupled with the almost simultaneous commencement of the race to carve up Africa among the leading world powers, provoked a British decision to establish control over the whole of Southern Africa.

As one result, the balance of strength and the political rela-

³'The Native at the Diamond Fields'—*Kaffir Express* 1-8-1874.

tions between white and black, on the border separating the Cape and the African territories, were suddenly altered. An African *petit bourgeoisie*—tiny, but the biggest in black Africa—emerged on the frontier. Composed of mission assistants, priests, teachers and clerks, it found itself occupying the centre of the African political stage.

Since the adoption by Britain in the 1850's of a policy of non-interference in the interior, the Cape Colony had enjoyed a long period of peace on the frontier. The knowledge that Britain would not send military aid was a great peace-maker.

The opening of the diamond fields, however, led to an immense increase in the need for African labour on road-making, harbour and railway projects. Shortly after he became the Cape's first prime minister, John Charles Molteno visited Kingwilliamstown and urged upon a deputation of chiefs "the importance of coming into the Colony to see the railway works, and of earning money with which to purchase valuable property such as cattle, sheep and horses."

The small African share in the general prosperity moved the '*Kaffir Express*' to declare in its 1872 New Year editorial, after noting that £240,000 a year was passing directly from the diamond fields through African hands:

"To you, our native friends, we would say . . . nothing but your own unwillingness or your blindness can prevent your rising as a people . . . The government is friendly to you . . . all missionaries are equally your friends . . . all reasonable colonists are also your friends . . . your prosperity can hardly be hindered unless you yourselves hinder it."

There was a measure of tranquillity; the tranquillity of poverty and backwardness and until 1870 of economic stagnation, but tranquillity nevertheless. The new period of British intervention began in 1874; and within three years the tranquillity had given way to war, as Britain sought to gain mastery over Southern Africa by means of the forceful unification of the whole territory into a single British confederation.

Lord Carnarvon, the British Colonial Secretary, with whose name this policy is most closely identified, believed that the prospect of united action in carrying through a common policy of subjugating the Africans—together with all the other obvious advantages of unity—would prove so attractive to the Europeans that they would readily accept confederation.

This was, however, a miscalculation. The Cape was jealous

of its newly-born independence and suspicious of Britain's motives. It feared that confederation might be simply a device to force the Cape to bear the brunt of the expense involved in the subjugation of the Africans in Natal and the Transvaal, and the restoration of the bankrupt economy in Pretoria.

In the face of South African opposition, Britain decided to push ahead with confederation by force. In 1877 Sir Bartle Frere was sent to the Cape as the new governor, and the Transvaal was speedily annexed. In the same year, Frere had the opportunity of demonstrating to the colonists the firm and purposeful "native policy" which (not without reason) he believed would win them confederation.

Following a clash between the 40,000 stray Gcaliba Xhosa, led by Chief Kreli, and the vassal Fingoes, Frere summoned Kreli to his presence. Kreli (with more prudence than his father Hintsá, who had in 1835 obeyed a similar summons and been shot) refused. Frere thereupon "deposed" Kreli, announced that the Gcaleka country would be absorbed by the Europeans, and sent in his troops to smash Kreli's army and seize its weapons.

In the course of the fighting Frere struck another blow for confederation by deposing, in 1878, the fiercely independent Molteno ministry when it sought to establish the right of the Cape to control the troops in its own territory. Molteno was replaced by John Gordon Sprigg, "Sir Bartle Frere's dummy" as P. A. Molteno bitterly describes him. "Responsible government was now replaced by personal rule, through a ministry selected and held in power by Sir Bartle Frere and willing to carry out his behests."⁴

The Sprigg government immediately launched what it called a "vigorous Native policy", aptly described by James Rose Innes as "the pink forerunner of that red-blooded policy of oppression, which since Union has been so influentially and persistently advocated."⁵ The first Sprigg measure making for the ending of tribal differences, the consolidation of the Africans as a single political entity, was the preposterously ill-named Peace Preservation Act (Act 13 of 1878) introduced some six months after the letter from the new British Colonial Secretary, Hicks Beach, to Frere, asking: "Can anything be done to put a stop to the importation and sale of arms to Natives?"

With the hypocrisy which is characteristic of most legislation

⁴The Life and Times of Sir John Charles Molteno', by P. A. Molteno. p. 402.

⁵The Autobiography of James Rose-Innes. p. 128.

affecting Africans, the Act did not say what its real purpose was—the total disarmament of all Africans without exception, and of the Africans only. It simply provided that all private citizens had to hand in their guns and ammunition to the authorities, who would then return them to “proper persons”. Those not in this category would lose their guns and receive monetary compensation.

The essential factor behind the Disarmament Act was that it was no longer necessary to place so great an emphasis on the gaining of tribal allies in the game of divide and rule. The Xhosa as a result of British intervention were crushed, and it was no longer necessary to ‘pamper’ the Fingoes. The British-backed Europeans were strong enough to reduce the Africans to a single level; and the distinction between ‘Fingo’ and ‘Kaffir’ became increasingly fine until it disappeared altogether. The government did not even pretend to distinguish between the Fingo and Tembu allies, whose arms had played so great a part in destroying Krelie and Sandile. All were to be disarmed alike, including the sons of Britain’s staunch African ally, Moshoeshe of Basutoland.

The Africans of the Cape, for whom their guns, next to their cattle, were their dearest possessions, had long been alert for any disarmament threat, and the Cape officials had been at pains to dismiss these fears as groundless. When in 1876 the Orange Free State government had disarmed the Africans of the Witziesthoek Reserve, the rumour had spread to nearby Basutoland that this was part of a concerted plan and that the Cape (of which Basutoland was then a part) intended to pursue a similar course. “I was able,” governor’s agent Colonel Griffiths wrote, “to allay the fears of the Chief Letsie of the Basotho by treating the rumour with contempt and telling them how unlikely and absurd it would be of us first to grant permits at the fields and thus to arm those we intended shortly to disarm.” Two years later the Disarmament Bill was published.

There was nothing the frontier tribes could do about the new law. The Fingoes, completely dependent on the European authorities, handed in their guns, as did the broken remnants of the Xhosa. The Basotho, however, were another matter altogether. First they sent a deputation to Britain to petition the Queen against the law, and then, when they found that it was the Queen’s law, they took up their 18,000 rifles in defence of their right to retain them.

In September, 1880, the Cape police moved in. Neighbouring African tribes rallied to the support of the Basotho. By October, "every tribe, the Griquas included, were against the Government,"⁶ even including a section of the Fingoes. In the face of such determined resistance, the authorities were unable to impose the law; and on April 11, 1881, fighting ended with the withdrawal of the Cape police, their mission unaccomplished.

It was therefore the Basotho who won the first political victory of an African people against an oppressive law imposed upon them as subjects of a white government in South Africa. The Basotho lives lost in repelling Sprigg's police were certainly not sacrificed in vain, as the present constitution of Basutoland testifies. Ironically, the very success of the Basotho revolt made it of small importance in the history of African political organizations in South Africa, for it was so complete that the Basotho of Basutoland were able to break from the mainstream of South African political development.

The Disarmament Law was only one aspect of a deliberate policy to put an end to the privileges enjoyed by the 'satellite' tribes, and to reduce all the Africans to a single level. The pass and vagrant laws operated in exactly the same way. Until 1828 there had been a total prohibition upon the entry of Africans into the Colony, but an ordinance of that year (No. 49 of 1828) enabled the Africans beyond the colonial frontiers, who were all foreigners in terms of the Cape law, to enter the colony in order to obtain employment.

Africans who came into the Colony without a pass were liable to imprisonment. They could be arrested by any landowner and, if their arrest could not be effected without killing them, the law specifically provided that such killing was justified (Ord. 2 of 1837, Section 4ff). By 1857, with the growth of the permanent African population inside the borders of the Colony, it had become necessary to legislate to prevent "Colonial Fingoes and certain other subjects of Her Majesty from being mistaken for Kaffirs, and thereby harassed or aggrieved". To this end a system was evolved for the issue of "certificates of citizenship" to all Fingoes, and to "any Kafir or other native foreigner"⁷ who could prove that he had spent ten consecutive years in employ-

⁶Tylden's 'Rise of the Basuto', Chapter IX.

⁷A "native foreigner" was defined Act 22 of 1857 as "any member of any tribe other than a Fingo of which the principal chief shall live beyond the borders of the colony" as well as "all Kaffirs belonging to any location in the divisions of Kingwilliamstown and East London and the Tambookies of the Tambookie Location of Queenstown".

ment within the Colony. At least 99% of this period had to be in employment other than any served as a hard labour prisoner.

Even certificates of citizenship, however, could not be altogether effective in preventing Fingoes and other black subjects of Her Majesty from being harassed or aggrieved, for there was still no way of distinguishing at sight between a native foreigner and a native native. As a result it was necessary to carry the certificate of citizenship on any journey away from home.

The Vagrancy Act (Sect. 11 of Act 22 of 1867, as amended by Act 23 of 1879) supplemented the pass laws and effectively plugged any loopholes in them. It provided that any person found wandering abroad and having no lawful means of support "could be arrested"; and unless he could give "a good and satisfactory account of himself," he was deemed to be an "idle and disorderly person," liable to imprisonment for up to six months, hard labour, spare diet and solitary confinement.

In the hands of the administrators of the "vigorous Native policy," and with white tempers still hot from the 'war' of 1877-8, these laws became a source of great hardship to all Africans irrespective of tribe. From about 1878, the authorities simply ignored the provisions of the Act favouring the holders of certificates of citizenship, and every African who wished to travel from one place to another was required to take out a pass. Africans who went out in an emergency or without their papers found themselves liable to arrest and detention, to be taken in custody many miles out of their way to the nearest lock-up.

In a letter to G. Rose Innes, Under-Secretary for Native Affairs, the resident Magistrate at Kingwilliamstown wrote in July 1881 that the withdrawal of the rights previously associated with the certificates of citizenship was "one of the sore grievances which the Fingoes have against us . . ." He added that "there is a very bitter feeling on the part of both Kafirs and Fingoes against the government. There is now a warm sympathy between them, which never before existed . . . the Fingoes and loyal Kafirs say that for their loyalty they have simply been punished, and made the laughing-stock of those who have fought and rebelled . . . and that their attachment to the government is now a thing of the past . . . They have at present no faith in our honesty, truth or 'justice' and they openly state that they have been driven to this by our harsh treatment of them."

In October 1889, the '*Christian Express*', which, only eight

years before, had painted so joyous a picture of the new life opening for the Africans, etched out the new scene.

“The natives of this country are at the present time more desponding, hopeless and untractable than they have been for a generation previously. The loyal are puzzled, bewildered and irritated; and those who are disloyal are exasperated and becoming almost dangerous. This is aggravated by want, which is now beginning to make itself felt in numberless villages. The last 3 or 4 years have witnessed a great change for the worse in the relations of the two races.

“There are four Acts—all of which press heavily on the Natives . . . the Disarmament Act, and Vagrant Act, and Branding Act⁸ and the Pass Act. Three of these are new and the fourth has been resuscitated. They are the chief legislative landmarks of the last few years. The native people had no real voice in their enactment, and no means of opposing their becoming law. But they have taken up an attitude of resistance—and they fight where they can, and they say they will rather go to prison than obey some of the mildest of them—the Branding Act.”

The combined effect of the Disarmament, Pass, Vagrancy and Branding Laws was to speed up the political unification of the Africans by withdrawing the “privileges” which were the main source of friction between the Fingoes (and other satellite tribes) and the Xhosa.

The resulting consciousness that all Africans—irrespective of tribe and irrespective of anything they might do to ingratiate themselves with the state—had a common political destiny, was the essential prerequisite for an all-embracing African nationalism.

⁸A measure requiring that all cattle be branded with a distinctive mark (Act 8 of 1878). Its purpose was probably to assist in tracing thefts, but was seen by the people as an introductory step either to the confiscation of their cattle or the imposition of new taxes. The suspicions were strengthened by the fact that in practice the law was applied to Africans only.