

# Early ANC leaders and the British world: ambiguities and identities <sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Identities, in their diverse forms – national, social, cultural, political, gender, Diaspora, Imperial, and others – have been the focus of much recent research by sociologists, political scientists and historians, who stress that identities are flexible, socially constructed, and multiple.<sup>2</sup> When considering what constitutes identity, we could list such elements as: the individual components of identity, how

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2. The literature on identities is vast but see, for example: A. STEPAN, "Modern Multinational Democracies: Transcending a Gellnerian Oxymoron" in J. HALL (ed.) *The state of the nation: Ernest Gellner and the theory of nationalism* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998) pp. 219-42.

people view themselves or how others see them; how these elements develop, interact and are negated; and the totality of identification. In short, we are dealing with complex, multiple identities. Historians of Africa agree that pre-colonial Africans moved in and out of multiple identities<sup>3</sup> and that colonial and post-colonial identities were crucial to the nationalist project. The investigation of the complexity of identity helps us frame the history of movements such as nationalism in their widest sense and to see how national and other forms of identities might be viewed from the perspective of the colonial subject or subaltern.<sup>4</sup>

In South Africa, the new political dispensation has encouraged research into the multiple identities of citizens.<sup>5</sup> We still know relatively little, however, about the totality of the identities of leaders of the African National Congress (ANC; known as the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) until 1923), the most significant vehicle of African nationalism in twentieth century South Africa. Nevertheless, historians are starting to probe little-researched aspects of this theme, such as how gender identities of the all-male ANC leadership influenced their politics, or how ethnic or Zulu Royal identities interacted with ANC identities.<sup>6</sup> The complex layering of identities is apparent, for instance, in a recent biography of an ANC leader, A.B. Xuma, who spent many years in the United States. The biographer goes as far as to assign Xuma an American, as well as an African and South African identity.<sup>7</sup>

Such works build upon an earlier historiography that drew out the complex web of connections between early African nationalists and the British (and American) worlds. These writers remarked upon the appeal, in the first decades of the century to Africans not of British origin of belonging to the British Empire, especially in

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3. T. RANGER, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa" in E. HOBBSBAWM and T. RANGER (eds.) *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983), pp. 211-262, p. 248.
  4. R. YOUNG, *White mythologies: writing history and the West* (Routledge, London, 1990) p. 175.
  5. See, for example, the "Social identities South Africa Series" edited by A. ZEGEYE (Kwela Books, Cape Town, 2001-), 5 vols.
  6. N. ERLANK, "Gender and Masculinity in African Nationalist Discourse, 1912-50," paper to the Canadian Association for African Studies annual conference, Quebec, May 2001; P. LA HAUSSE DE LALOUVIÈRE, *Restless identities: signatures of nationalism, Zulu ethnicity and history in the lives of Petros Lamula (c.1881-1948) and Lymon Maling (1889-c.1936)* (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2000), pp. 9, 13. T. REDDY, *Hegemony and resistance: contesting identities in South Africa* (Ashgate, Aldershot, 2000) discusses the influence on identities of the "discourse of rights" in the ANC, but focuses largely on the 1980s.
  7. S. GISH, *Alfred B. Xuma: African, American, South African* (New York University Press, New York, 1999).

terms of the politico-economic opportunities that it offered to an emergent educated black stratum.<sup>8</sup> Identities, if fashionable for study today, were important also in British South Africa. A shared sense of British identity, respect for 'British justice', and cultural sharing, such as common use of the English language, facilitated colonial rule and helped mould the outlook of indigenous political leaders.

Precisely how identification with the British World (and its eventual negation) among ANC figures contributed to the form of African nationalism is still not absolutely clear. It is thus useful to consider what we know about the identities of ANC leaders and their attitudes to things British, and to give their texts another reading to ascertain what 'loyalty', 'Empire' and 'British' really meant to them. What were early African nationalists' thoughts about British traditions and British contradictions, and how did these views modify their national and social identities?

Christopher Saunders discusses African attitudes to Britain and the Empire and explains the apparent paradox of why, in the two decades after the Boer War, they could still view favourably the colonial power that had destroyed their peoples' independence.<sup>9</sup> However, he notes that this broad theme is still under-researched and he does not deal, to any great extent, with the actual attitudes of ANC leaders and still less with the related aspect of identities. Here I want to focus on such views and how they may have affected identities.

The invoking of British values by Africans did not take place without ambiguity or subversive sub-text. To understand African protestations of loyalty, many questions can be posed: what constituted ANC identities and how did they influence ANC attitudes to the British world; how did such attitudes modify identities; and how did they change over time? There is no space here to answer all these questions, rather I sketch salient features and suggest some answers.

## Historical background

Many historians view the early ANC as an essentially middle class elite much enthralled with things British.<sup>10</sup> Yet, the ANC's emphasis on African national unity

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8. See D.M. SCHREUDER, *The scramble for Southern Africa, 1877-95* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980) pp.54-55.

9. C. SAUNDERS, "African Attitudes to Britain and the Empire before and after the South African War" in D. LOWRY (ed.) *The South African War Reappraised* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2000), pp.140-149.

10. P. WALSH, *The rise of African nationalism in South Africa* (Hurst, London, 1970), 243; A. COBLEY, *Class and consciousness: the black petty bourgeoisie in South Africa, 1924 to 1950* (Greenwood, New York, 1990), pp. 170-72; F. MELI, *South Africa belongs to us: a history of the ANC* (J. Currey, London, 1989), pp. 37-44.

drew support from a wide range of black social strata. This inclined its leaders to identify with not only the uplift of the elite but also with the predicament of black subaltern strata in general, making the movement closer to black communities than most writers have assumed.<sup>11</sup> Congress' aim of unifying all Africans at first was possible only under the 'British' South African State. ANC leaders thus tended, not least for political reasons, to identify as loyal subjects of the Crown.

However, the duality of power implicit in settler society created a deeply ambiguous context in which African political culture developed. ANC aspirations for legitimacy confronted rivals in the form of Imperial, State, and ethnic-based authorities, each of which claimed legitimacy and complicated the identities of Africans. ANC leaders for their part developed complex identities that could include national, ethnic, state, social, class, or other aspects. An ANC leader might, simultaneously, for example identify or be identified as South African, British South African, African, black, Black Englishman, colonised, Zulu, male, Christian, middle class, exploited, English-speaking, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-national. These multiple and at times overlapping identities emerge in the writings of ANC leaders who employed irony and metaphor to express their views and who, I argue, gave vent to less loyal feelings, especially in their vernacular writings.

Discussion here is limited to the first two decades of ANC history. I do not mean to suggest by this focus that attitudes of later ANC leaders to Britain are unimportant, for in later decades they harvested British liberal ideas that had been earlier planted lightly in the colonial South African soil. Nelson Mandela's admiration of British democracy is well known. Less widely known is his 1996 speech to the British Houses of Parliament in which he "gently but firmly reminded Britons ... that it was their colonisation ... that sowed the seeds of white supremacy in South Africa." He stated that his presence in Britain

might serve to close a circle which is two hundred years old...[T]he first time this country entered ours as a colonising power was ... [in] 1795. There are some parts of our country which...bear the names of British places and personalities .... Eight decades ago, my predecessors in the leadership of the [ANC] came to these venerable Houses to say to the government ... they ... should come to [our] aid .... [T]hey spoke eloquently and passionately of the need for the colonial power to treat them as human beings....As eloquently and passionately, the British rulers of the day spoke in these Houses to say they could not and would not amend their agenda with

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11. A. ODENDAAL, *Vukani Bantu: the beginning of black protest politics in South Africa to 1912* (Philip, Cape Town, 1984); idem., "Even white boys call us 'boy': Early black organisational politics in Port Elizabeth" *Kronos* 20, 1993, pp. 3-16; P. LIMB, "Representing the laboring classes': African Workers in the African nationalist press, 1900-60" in L. SWITZER and M. ADHIKARI (eds.) *South Africa's resistance press: alternative voices in the last generation under apartheid* (Ohio University Center for International Studies, Athens, Ohio, 2000), pp. 79-127.

regard to South Africa, to address the interests of that section of our population which was not white.<sup>12</sup>

In this paper, I analyse expressions of Empire loyalty together with earlier evidence of such critical approaches.

The early twentieth century saw diverse ideological trends among Africans, ranging from variegated versions of Christianity and Empire loyalism to nascent African proto-nationalism. African leaders began to articulate their Christianity and their 'Britishness', which often took the form of respect for the Cape liberal tradition that developed in the nineteenth century from such factors as the anti-slavery movement, growth of a free press, and the extension of mission education and the franchise to elite Africans. British cultural hegemony had a political dimension and social attributes such as Christianity and "respectability and loyalty" to Britain served as "a guarantor of political advancement"<sup>13</sup> in the Cape. In the northern provinces and in Natal, this acculturation coincided with the first murmuring of a collective African national identity. In this process of identity formation, English became not only a powerful force for Anglicisation but also an important identity marker. Es'kia Mphahlele later wrote that

English which was not our mother tongue, gave us power, power to master the external world which came to us through it.<sup>14</sup>

Westernised African leaders even became known as 'Black Englishmen'. But whilst these accretions of British culture served as identity markers for the nascent elite and British civilisation was held up by them as superior to settler rule, the ironic reality was that British rule also *was* settler rule.

Behind the politics of Empire patriotism were expectations by the black elite of protection and reward for their loyalism. These hopes were apparent in black attitudes to the South African War.<sup>15</sup> However, after the war, constant rebuffs by Pretoria and London to polite black political petitions and disappointment in British administration of the northern provinces served to challenge the notion that Africans simply could adopt a 'British' identity as a solution to their crisis of identity as colonised subalterns.

The challenge to British and settler state hegemony was articulated in the press. The views expressed in the early black press indicate that Imperial loyalty was a crucial policy for black leaders who used various methods to criticise white rule

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12. "Mandela's Day of Majesty" *Cape Times* 12 July 1996; "Address of ... Nelson Mandela to the Joint Houses of Parliament ... 11 July 1996".

13. R. ROSS, *Status and respectability in the Cape Colony 1750-1870* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999), pp. 43, 119.

14. E. MPHAHLELE, *Renewal Time* (Readers International, Columbia, La.), 1988, p. 19.

15. B. NASSON, *Abraham Esau's War: a black South African War in the Cape, 1899-1902* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991), pp. 32-40.

and, with few other publication outlets, often turned to newspapers. As an ‘imagined’ political community emerged, intellectuals, via the press, played a pivotal role in developing nationalism.<sup>16</sup> The first generation of black journalists, influenced by missionary education, respected imperial values but also articulated an ‘ambivalent expression’ with ‘subversive subservience’.<sup>17</sup> By *fin de siècle*, many black newspapers had forged close links to the regional Congresses that were precursors of the ANC. These newspapers were modest in circulation and moderate in tone, but their editors daily confronted a social system that discriminated against Africans and hence they often came to question Imperial and state authority.<sup>18</sup> A new generation of journalist-politicians such as Dube and Plaatje emerged that would later take black protests direct to Imperial authorities. In turn, the rejection of their protests would lead some of them to challenge Imperial identities. In doing so, they would not only demand an inclusive South African national identity but also assert other identities rooted in their African culture. However the influence of Imperial hegemony on African identities persisted, particularly among the black elite, making this a complex and contradictory process.

Political life involved more than just security for the black elite. As a group comprised largely of professionals and middle-income earners in a settler society, this was an elite without power and with close spatial and ‘national’ ties to other black social strata. By 1910, after the failure of initial African delegations to Britain and with the Act of Union writing Africans out of Constitutional rights, the decline of Cape liberalism was becoming apparent.

Nevertheless, the ANC in the first decade after its formation in 1912 was inclined to continue to seek support from Britain. This was because it had few other allies – there was little prospect of cross-racial collaboration with white labour, black labour was still unorganised, and the black middle classes were stunted – and the British Empire did appear to be still powerful. However, the fact that the black elite might challenge, if initially in polite ways, any hegemonic forces blocking its class and national aspirations suggests that African professions of loyalty, of being “your Excellency’s humble and obedient servant”,<sup>19</sup> could mean not blind identification with ruling ideology but an implicit assertion of identity or statement of defiance; that the African is a *better* servant or is literally a servant, trapped.

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16. B. ANDERSON, *Imagined communities* (Verso, London, 1983), pp. 13-15, 137.

17. L. DE KOCK, *Civilising barbarians: missionary narrative and African textual response in nineteenth-century South Africa* (Witwatersrand University Press, Johannesburg, 1996), pp. 106, 110, 140.

18. L. SWITZER, “The beginnings of African protest journalism at the Cape,” in L. SWITZER (ed.), *South Africa’s Alternative Press: Voices of Protest and Resistance, 1880s-1960s* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996), pp. 57-82.

19. This particular obeisance, typical of contemporary correspondence, is in a letter of A.K. Soga to the Orange River Colony Governor 27 Mar. 1909, Free State Archives, Governor’s Office, G113 file 461/6.

Despite a strong American influence on some early ANC leaders (notably Pixley Seme, John Dube and A.B. Xuma), which ran parallel to British influence and was seen especially in education, churches, patronage, and culture, British influences were more pronounced on ANC policies.<sup>20</sup> Most Africans received their basic education in a British context in mission schools and developed a direct stake in the British World, for their schooling opened the way to higher education, civil service office, and private accumulation.

There were many signifiers of Britishness in the ANC, whose very structure reflected the British bicameral system, with an Upper House for chiefs like the House of Lords. ANC protest delegations went to London. ANC leaders in their speeches appealed to a sense of British justice. But the articulation of these signifiers was characteristically ambiguous and, as will be shown, there were limits to the Anglicisation of African nationalism.

African identities were complicated still further by constructions of Imperial identity. Imperial identities were fostered in many ways, from school instruction and African cricket teams to imperial propaganda such as Royal tours. Yet despite apparent African attachments to these Imperial symbols, the assertion of African identities was never far from the surface.

Royal tours were part of the symbolic paraphernalia of Imperial government and on the surface elicited enthusiastic mass responses but African attendance did not necessarily equate to total identification with the British Monarchy.<sup>21</sup> Attendance could be a way of protesting Afrikaner oppression by identifying with Britain, or a form of asserting a kind of national identity otherwise denied under settler rule. There also often were material incentives to attend.<sup>22</sup> Royal visits could bolster rival sources of legitimacy to the ANC, which saw opportunities to exploit such events to send protests about national politics (see below).

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20. A. COBLEY, *Class and consciousness: the black petty bourgeoisie in South Africa, 1924 to 1950*, pp. 82, 87, 117; Saunders, "African Attitudes," p. 147.

21. P. BUCKNER, "The Royal Tour of 1901 and the construction of an Imperial identity in South Africa," *South African Historical Journal*, 41, 1999, pp. 324-48, p.343.

22. For example, a feast in honour of George VI's coronation was given in 1937 in Kentani, Eastern Cape, with labourers paid 5/- each for stamping mealies: Cape Archives (CAD), Kentani District (KNT), 1/KNT 40 1/1/4: Magistrate Kentani to Chief Magistrate Transkeian Territories (CMTT) 15 May 1937, CMTT to Magistrate Kentani, 19 Mar. 1937.

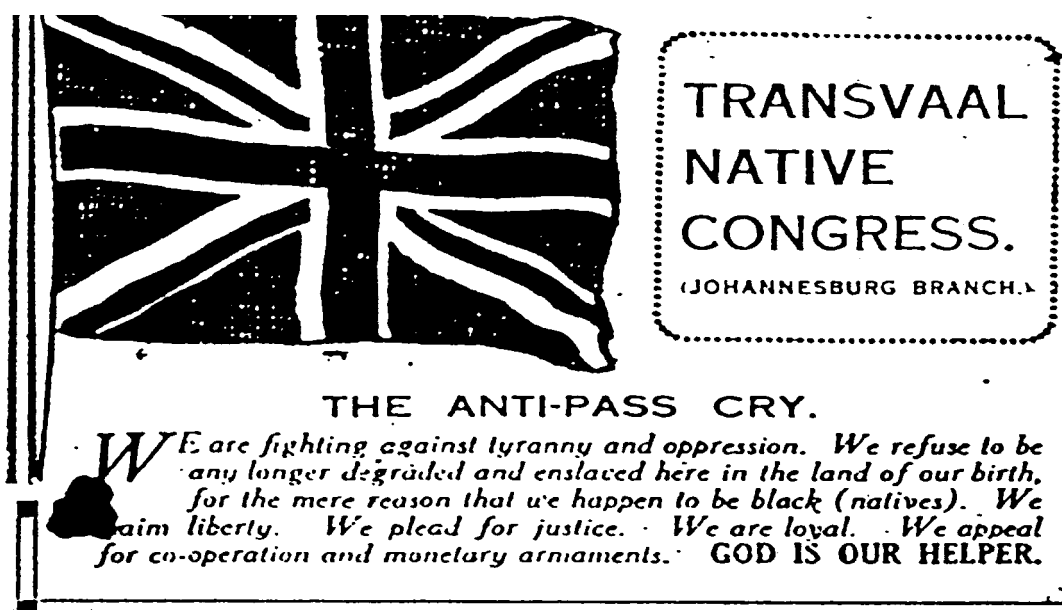


Figure: TNC card (ca. 1917) source: Dept. of Justice files, JUS 3/527/17

Symbols were an important part of the way Africans identified with Empire. Monarchies existed in pre-colonial African polities and Imperial authorities were quick to exploit this. Queen Victoria and the Union Jack were symbols commonly evoked with real affection by ANC leaders. As late as 1925, Cape ANC President Z. R. Mahabane, when defending the African franchise, spoke of the “benign reign of Queen Victoria of revered memory”.<sup>23</sup> Even radical groups drew on these symbols. A protest card of the Transvaal Native Congress (TNC) drew on diverse symbols: a Union Jack; a declaration against oppression; and a plea “for justice. We are loyal” (*See figure*).<sup>24</sup> In general, Africans asserted a ‘national’ identity that was tied to the British Empire, but this was related to the rejection by settler authorities of their right to take up full South African citizenship.

Early ANC leaders, dressed in Western clothes, delivered polite protests written in English, thus negating elements of their own inherited African cultural identities and reflecting the passion for ‘progress’ of the *kholwa* (Christianised) strata from whence they came. Delegations and petitions to Imperial authorities, couched in loyal terms, were their basic tactic in the face of Pretoria’s intransigence. In explaining these tactics, it is important to see firstly that there was still in the minds of Africans a blurring of power centres between Pretoria and London. The King of England still, theoretically, could disallow South African laws. Secondly, there were few viable alternatives. Thirdly, as ANC historian Francis Meli notes,

23. SOUTH AFRICAN ARCHIVES. Dept. of Justice (JUS), file 3/1064/18; Mahabane to *African World* 24 Oct. 1925.

24. TNC anti-pass card, JUS 3/527/17; Police reports 1, 17, and 23 Dec. 1918, JUS 3/527/17.



deputations were part of traditional African political culture, whilst African leaders did not always understand very well the connection between colonialism and imperialism.<sup>25</sup> When deputations failed, Congress tended to blame officials, not the Crown. There was also *realpolitik* at work. When Congress sent delegations to Britain in 1909, 1914 and 1919 to argue against oppressive laws, many of its leaders were aware of their remote chance of success. Thus, John Dube, inaugural ANC President, emphasized to Congress in 1914 the need to “disabuse their people of false hopes”.<sup>26</sup> Hence Congress was “not simply engaged in acts of colonial mimicry” but was “asserting and affirming their identities and rights as British subjects”.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, as Christopher Saunders argues, Africans’ pro-Britishness can be interpreted as “a kind of anti-colonialism”.<sup>28</sup>

### Reaching the limits of loyalty

World War I saw a partial blanketing of African identities beneath pledges of wartime loyalty by the ANC. Yet this was not uniform, with enthusiasm for the War reportedly stronger among the elite and some evidence of anti-Empire sentiment among black workers.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, some ANC activists expressed a qualified ‘loyalty’. In the Natal Congress, Chief Stephen Mini and Josiah Gumede found ways around Empire loyalty to continue to fight for black rights.<sup>30</sup> Congress sought to exploit pronouncements on self-determination by Woodrow Wilson and Lloyd George to pressure Pretoria. During the War, the limits of loyalty were tested and a greater sense of African identity was apparent. In December 1918, the SANNC sent a memorial to King George V professing its loyalty but also reminding Britain that Africans, who had “steadfastly maintained the supply of labour” during the War, still “lived under a veiled form of slavery”.<sup>31</sup>

By the end of World War I, a crisis of identity was apparent. Whites continued to deny the national identity of blacks and Britain refused to countenance

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25. F. MELI, *South Africa belongs to us: a history of the ANC*, pp. 24, 40, 43-48.

26. P. WALSH, *The rise of African nationalism in South Africa*, p. 50.

27. S. DUBOW, *The African National Congress* (Sutton, Thrupp, 2000), p. 7.

28. C. SAUNDERS, “Black South African Attitudes to Britain and the Empire c1895-1921,” paper to the conference on “South Africa 1895-1921: Test of Empire,” Oxford, 1996.

29. PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE. War Office 107/37 “Report of the Work of Labour with the BEF During the War”; A. GRUNDLINGH, *Fighting their own war: South African blacks and the First World War* (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1987), pp. 15-16, 59, 130-131.

30. *Tsala ea Batho*, 29 Aug. 1914; TNC Resolution 11 Dec. 1916, State Archives, Pretoria, Native Affairs (NTS) 7204 17/326; *Tsala*, 17 July 1915; *Natives Land Commission 1916-8* (UG32-18); *International*, 16 June 1916; *Minutes of Evidence before the Select Committee on Native Affairs* (Pretoria, SC6A-17), p. 647.

31. SANNC, “Memorial to ... King George V,” in Molema-Plaatje Papers, File Cc9, University of the Witwatersrand Library; *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 31 Dec. 1918.

intervention. British identity therefore increasingly was of limited value to Africans. What then would take the place of a British identity among Africans? If an African identity were to replace Imperial and Union of South Africa identities, then what form could it take? Fragmented forms of shattered pre-colonial African identities had survived colonisation. Memories of anti-British wars and African victories fought by African polities did not simply fade away, but were passed on via oral tradition. James Stuart was well aware that, by the time of the Bambatha Rebellion of 1906, side by side with ‘native loyalists’ many Africans across the country were musing over the slogan “Africa for the Africans”.<sup>32</sup> However, memories and nostalgia were insufficient to bring together fragments of earlier African identities. Rather, African identity had to be recast anew. White obsession with the ‘disloyalty’ of the colonised inclined Africans constantly to reconsider their identity but a political structure proved necessary for this effectively to be articulated. In the forum of the ANC, African political leaders began to design new symbols of identity and discard old Imperial and settler ones.

By the 1920s, ANC activists increasingly saw contradictions between what the Union Jack was supposed to mean and reality. In 1927, the radical Josiah Gumede argued that, whereas when Britain occupied the country the flag was said to mean “justice, liberty, freedom and fair play,” blacks now found that it “means just the opposite”.<sup>33</sup> His moderate rival in Natal, John Dube, conceded that whilst the African “was wholly loyal to the British ideal of Justice as symbolised in the Union Jack,” the debate over changing the flag was in the last analysis an issue between whites.<sup>34</sup> Whatever their politics, Africans saw an opportunity in such debates to express support for the Empire as a way of criticizing Pretoria and claiming a meaningful national identity. They continued to invoke the Union Jack to protect black rights, but increasingly viewed it, often sarcastically, as an emblem of white rule. In 1926, Natal ANC activist Ray Msimang protested the gaoling, with “the Union Jack floating above his head”, of black labour leader Clements Kadalie, a “British Black subject travelling within British Dominions in which he is supposed to be a citizen, on a British errand of unity amongst his black people”.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Congress sought to manipulate British symbols, to play off Imperial versus settler powers, just as it began to generate its own rival symbols of legitimacy and identity, such as anthems and flags.

To what extent did unrewarded loyalty and the racist attitudes of settlers alter the Victorian Britishness of Africans and drive them to adopt African identities? Here comparative cases may be instructive. There are major differences in the nature of

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32. J. STUART, *A history of the Zulu rebellion 1906* (Macmillan, London, 1913), p. 521.

33. J.T. GUMEDE, “The Congress against Colonial Oppression,” *Ilanga lase Natal*, 25 Mar. 1927.

34. “The Flag Delegation” *Ilanga lase Natal*, 26 Nov. 1926.

35. J. RAY MSIMANG, “The Union Jack Desecrated,” *Ilanga lase Natal*, 5 Nov. 1926.

colonialism in South Africa and colonies such as India and Ireland.<sup>36</sup> Gandhi, like ANC leaders, had great faith in the ideals of the Empire. But his assertion by the 1920s of an Indian national identity, seen in his turn to Indian culture and his support for hand woven *dhoti* against British textiles, had no parallel in the correct dress of ANC leaders; a dress that demonstrated

the aura of respectability which the early SANNC was eager to present to white and British political opinion.<sup>37</sup>

Indian and African nationalists sought models of national identity in Europe in the face of an indigenous past that complicated the nationalist project.<sup>38</sup> Yet, in South Africa, as in India, state violence and nationalist challenge gradually dissolved the legitimacy of British hegemony. The violence of (British) colonial rule, whether seen in the Bulhoek massacre or in the 1919 Amritsar massacre in India, began to dissolve the ‘moral economy’ that cemented African faith in Empire. ANC leaders began to understand or to feel more acutely the inferior status of the subaltern even if at first they did so by blaming settler colonialism and not Britain itself. After 1910, they made the Union government their main enemy, reserving for Britain a favoured place, either out of tactical considerations or cultural loyalty.

Loyalty had its limits. World War I and the period 1918-20, when strikes and mass actions erupted on the Rand, was a time of militancy in ANC history when the Empire began to be criticised. In 1918, ANC chaplain Reverend Ngcayiya, part of an ANC delegation, told the Prime Minister that in the face of severe economic hardship

when people are starving they will stand against the Government. No people can be expected to be loyal under such difficulties.<sup>39</sup>

Earlier, in 1916, ANC founder Pixley Seme was severely cautioned by the government for writing an uncensored press report (in Zulu) on war events. He reported the ‘bravery’ of the German King and army who had driven ‘our people (the English) from all places’. The British had ‘had enough’ of the War. Their government was ‘in a state of chaos’ and Africans should “expect any day that [King] George will ask you to go and assist”, in which case they should be led by

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36. G. VAHED, “‘African Gandhi’: the South African War and the Limits of Imperial identity” *Historia*, 45(1), May 2000, pp. 201-19. Cf. J. MURPHY, *Abject loyalty: nationalism and monarchy in Ireland during the reign of Queen Victoria* (Catholic University of America Press, Washington, 2001) on the limits of Irish Empire loyalism.

37. R. ROSS, *A concise history of South Africa* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999), p. 86.

38. H.V. BRADSTED, “Irish Models and the Indian National Congress 1870-1922” in J. MASSELOS (ed.), *Struggling and ruling: the Indian National Congress 1885-1985* (Sterling, Delhi, 1987), pp. 24-45; P. LIMB, “The ANC and the Indian National Congress: a Comparative History” unpublished paper, 2002.

39. NTS 214, 737/18/F473: “Notes of a Meeting 9th July 1918...”

their chiefs, notably Zulu King Solomon Dinizulu.<sup>40</sup> Seme was reporting the news but he also probably thought that he could more safely speak his mind in the vernacular press. His invocation of the Zulu monarchy can be seen as a way of asserting African identity.

During crises, the mask of loyalty could fall and anti-Empire sentiment could take on African nationalist or class aspects. In 1918, the ANC organ *Abantu-Batho* spoke of how repression had

only succeeded in giving rise to a wave of nationalism unknown before in the history of our race ..... [T]he spirit of nationalism has taken root ... and from this oppression ... will emerge a new nation.<sup>41</sup>

Under the influence of acrimonious strikes and occasional interaction with white socialists, some ANC leaders gave vent to anti-colonial sentiments that took on class dimensions. Patriotism and loyalty certainly have a class dimension,<sup>42</sup> but this is complicated in a colonial situation where, as Marks and Trapido note, “a group’s class position offers no certain guidance to its political affiliation”.<sup>43</sup> The mix of class and race in a settler state brought with it not only a host of powerful ideas of Empire but also white labour aristocracies that found fertile soil in racially stratified South Africa and which were anathema to African nationalists.<sup>44</sup> These themes are evident in the politics and writings of African leaders to which we now turn.

### **Empire enthusiasts and critics: case studies of Imperial and African identities**

The politics of African political leaders indicate the ambiguities of contemporary national and social identities. The examples in this section of both moderates and radicals point to different processes at work. Identification with Empire,

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40. STATE ARCHIVES PRETORIA, Director of Native Labour (GNLB) 192: “Anglo German War: Native Newspapers: *Abantu Batho*”, *Abantu Batho*. 6 Jan. 1916.
  41. “The Bantu Awakening,” *Abantu-Batho*, 2 May 1918; editorial, *Abantu-Batho*, 13 June, 1918: this is one of the earliest assertions of African national identity in the modern nationalist sense in South Africa.
  42. P. WARD, “Socialists and ‘True’ Patriotism in Britain in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries” *National Identities*, 1(2), 1999, pp. 179-94.
  43. S. MARKS and S. TRAPIDO, “The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism” in IDEM. (eds.), *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa* (Longman, London, 1987), pp. 1-70. For this period see especially P. BONNER, “Transvaal Native Congress, 1917-20: the Radicalisation of the Black Petty Bourgeoisie on the Rand” in S. MARKS and R. RATHBONE (eds.), *Industrialisation and social change in South Africa* (Longman, London, 1982), pp.270-313.
  44. E. KATZ, *A trade union aristocracy* (African Studies Institute, Johannesburg, 1976); H. SOUTHALL, “British artisan unions in the New World,” *Journal of Historical Geography*, 15, 1989, pp. 163-82.

encouraged by the acculturation process of colonial society, contrasted with the gradual development of new African identities required to fill the gap left by Africans' exclusion from settler society.

Solomon Plaatje was a central figure in black politics and literature: first ANC Secretary-General, first translator of Shakespeare into an African language, and first South Africa novelist in English. He is widely regarded as a British Empire enthusiast and a moderate 'petit bourgeois'. Yet he criticised the very Empire he upheld and had complex attitudes to nation, class and gender.<sup>45</sup> He combined commitment to African emancipation with belief in the fairness of Cape justice. A devout Empire loyalist, he nevertheless used prevailing discourses and irony to re-create in the coloniser's language a sense of African dignity and African national identity. His apparent simultaneous identification with different 'nations' typified the dilemmas faced by African political leaders in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Plaatje is widely seen as the epitome of the effects of Anglicisation. His diary of the Mafeking Siege vividly records his many small attachments to British culture. He treasured English literature. At Kimberley in 1931, Governor-General Lord Clarendon complimented him on his mastery of the English language.<sup>46</sup> But what was Plaatje really saying? I interpret his use of irony, sarcasm, and allegory as allowing an apparent self-identification with Empire that was quite *distinct* from his solidarity with fellow Africans. His Shakespeare translations were a political act of cultural struggle proving the equality of African culture with that of the colonizing power.<sup>47</sup> This *anti-Imperial* side to Plaatje has led some writers to see him as "one of the harbingers of post-colonial fiction," with his subtle critique of imperialism employing subversive proverbs and songs.<sup>48</sup> Plaatje lauds Shakespeare's non-racialism but loathes British cinematography's depiction of Africans as savages.<sup>49</sup> Part of the paradox – that he appears both pro-Empire and

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45. P. LIMB, "The 'Other' Sol Plaatje: Rethinking Plaatje's Attitudes to Empire, Labor and Gender," paper to the South African Historical Society Conference, Mafikeng, July 2001; L. CHRISMAN, *Rereading the Imperial Romance: British imperialism and South African resistance in Haggard, Schreiner, and Plaatje* (Clarendon, Oxford, 2000).

46. B. WILLAN, *Sol Plaatje: South African nationalist, 1876-1932* (London: Heinemann, 1984), p. 381.

47. D. SCHALKWYK, "Portrait and Proxy: Representing Plaatje and Plaatje Represented" *Scrutiny* 2, 4(2), 1999, pp. 14-29.

48. R. SAMIN, "Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi* and the emergence of black political fiction in South Africa" *Commonwealth*, 22(1), 1999, pp. 37-44; P. MPE, "Orality, Mediation and Subversion in Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*," *African Studies*, 57(1), 1998, pp. 79-89, 82.

49. S. PLAATJE, "A South African's Homage," in I. Gollancz, *A book of homage to Shakespeare* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1916), in *Sol T. Plaatje: selected shorter writings* (ISEA, Grahamstown, 1995), pp.9-11.

anti-colonial<sup>50</sup> – lies in the position of blacks in South African society, treated by the state as an amorphous servile mass.

Plaatje's journalism also reveals complex identities of attachment yet ambiguity to Britain. As editor of *Koranta ea Becoana* (Mafeking, 1901-8) and *Tsala ea Becoana* (later *Tsala ea Batho*, Kimberley, 1910-15) he highlighted issues of concern to Africans. This raised his national profile and in 1912 he became first ANC Secretary-General. In 1914, he joined a Congress protest delegation to Britain and in 1919 led a second delegation. *Koranta ea Becoana* disclaimed "social equality with the white man" in favour of "political recognition as loyal British subjects". It congratulated British Secretary of State for Colonies Joseph Chamberlain on his rejection of proposals by mine capitalists that Africans should work for virtually nothing. On the other hand, it printed an article attacking Chamberlain and "his gold-worshipping confrères"<sup>51</sup> *Tsala ea Becoana* was published in Kimberley, "a supremely British place" where Imperial hegemony permeated all forms of social life.<sup>52</sup> Yet, as a colonial mining town, Kimberley also was replete with race and class contradictions. Plaatje found the racism of the white Labour Party intolerable. Despite his anti-communism and acceptance of aid from the De Beers Company, he often identified with the plight of African workers and remained sceptical about the sincerity of white capitalists.<sup>53</sup> Interviewed by the British *Labour Leader* in 1919 he conceded that

the only people from whom we have any sympathy and support are the International Socialists, and, unfortunately, they are an insignificant minority.<sup>54</sup>

Behind this class ambiguity was his identification of African workers as Africans, and not as workers, and his own conscious identification as an African and not primarily as a member of the middle class.

Plaatje was committed to British liberalism and legalism. However, his writings illustrate attitudes more critical to colonialism. In his unpublished "Black Dreyfus"

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50. This ambiguity may have confused state officials about his loyalty. Police monitored his movements for years: see: letter of South African Police to Secretary of Justice re movements of Plaatje, 1923, JUS J269 3/1064/18 C.2 59/20, 22/12/23.

51. *Koranta ea Becoana*, 20 June, 25 July 1903, 24 Jan. 1903, 18 July 1903.

52. B. WILLAN, "An African in Kimberley, Sol T. Plaatje, 1894-98" in S. MARKS and R. RATHBONE (eds.), *Industrialisation and social change in South Africa*, pp. 238-58, 238, 242.

53. B. WILLAN, "Sol Plaatje, De Beers and an Old Tram Shed: Class Relations and Social Control in a South African Town 1918-9" *Journal of Southern African Studies* 4, 1978, pp. 195-215.

54. "Homeless! Landless! Outlawed!" *Labour Leader* 1919, in Solomon T. Plaatje, 1876-1932. T. edited by T. Couzens and B. Willan (special issue *English in Africa* 3(2), 1976, pp. 59-63.

(1909), he criticises colonial officials such as the High Commissioner for gaoling Chief Sekgoma.<sup>55</sup> Criticism of colonial administration can lead to a questioning of the Imperial centre and this is seen in his book *Native Life in South Africa* (1916),<sup>56</sup> a passionate exposure of the harsh effects of the 1913 Natives' Land Act, which excluded Africans from much of the country. My analysis of 'British' terms in this work gives rather predictable results, given what we know about the author, but it also reinforces the ambiguity of Plaatje's attitudes to Britain: respect mixed with sharp criticism of its Southern African policies. Plaatje wrote *Native Life* to appeal to the British public and government. He clearly identifies with what he sees as the democratic aspects of the Imperial mission, but protests its exploitative and racist aspects. He inserts aspects of other identities important to him: as a South African, as an African, as a MoTswana, and as a member of ANC and Christian Brotherhood communities. A closer look at the book is therefore instructive.

In the prologue to *Native Life*, Plaatje appeals for justice "on behalf of five million loyal British subjects", a loyalty that he sarcastically notes is unrecognised by the Governor General. In chapter one he warns that "the suzerainty of Great Britain" which under Queen Victoria "of blessed memory" was the only bulwark of Africans against settler despotism, has now been withdrawn. In chapter four he recounts an encounter with an Afrikaner policeman who, pointing to the deteriorating position of Transvaal blacks under British administration claimed: "The poor devils must be sorry now ... that they ever sang "God save the Queen". Plaatje here adds a jibe against British South Africa: "This information was superfluous, for personal contact with the Natives of Transvaal had convinced us of the fact." In chapter eleven, he recalls how the history of African loyalty was rewarded with the "ingratitude" of the Land Act. In chapter sixteen, he captures the ambiguity of settler identities. "Our Prime Minister, on the one hand, is a British Privy Councillor and a General in the British Army; and on the other hand, he is a simple Afrikaner Boer, who only speaks Dutch in Parliament." In the next four chapters, Plaatje questions Pretoria's Empire loyalty and its rejection of black wartime support. "Is it not about time that the Empire ... ceased paying so much attention to those whose views are distorted by colour prejudice...?" In the epilogue, he summarises the history of racism and oppression in South Africa. Britain is not exonerated: in 1902 and 1909 it abrogated its responsibility for the rights of "the King's Black subjects." He concludes, pushing the limits of colonial identification to its limits: "we would put it to all concerned for the honour and perpetuity of British dominion in South Africa, can the Empire afford to tamper with and alienate [our] affections?"

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55. S. PLAATJE, "Sekgoma: the black Dreyfus," in S. Plaatje, *Selected writings*, edited by B. WILLAN (Ravan Press, Johannesburg, 1996), pp. 105-19.

56. S. PLAATJE, *Native life in South Africa*. (3rd ed., Tsala ea Batho, Kimberley, 1920: original edition, 1916).

Plaatje thus is loyal but highly critical of British authorities. A moderate, he nevertheless continues to assert an African identity and begins to appreciate wider colonial issues. His 1921 address to the Pan-African Congress in Paris points to the 'inferior position' of all black subjects of all Empires at the hands of 'exploiters'.<sup>57</sup> His experience of the British World was not always rosy. He experienced constant rebuffs from Imperial government officials. He admired many aspects of Western culture but sarcastically denounced the hypocrisy of colonial rule. The product of complex links between literacy, Christianity and colonisation in Southern Africa, Plaatje's outward trappings of late Victorian British Empire culture amount less to a cultural cringe than a studied compromise. He probably saw no contradiction between his multiple identification with Empire and Africa, but increasingly the former gave way to the latter.

Similar ambiguities are apparent in the politics of John Dube, inaugural ANC President. His moderation was influenced by his class position: he was an owner of small sugar plantations. To Dube, blacks, "as citizens of the glorious British Empire", were "just awakening into political life". Hence in 1912 he argued that ANC policy should be one of "treading softly, ploddingly," of "deep and dutiful respect for the rulers God has placed over us."<sup>58</sup> Yet, as Shula Marks argues, such appeals to "England's duty," were "very carefully contrived for maximum effect" on white readers.<sup>59</sup> Dube's commitment to African unity and liberal ideals often clashed with increasingly repressive state policies that he apparently naively thought could be overcome by "a policy of hopeful reliance in that sense of common justice and love of freedom so innate in the British character." Less naively, he wrote in his newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal* in 1913, in response to the plethora of anti-African laws, that Africans should refuse to comply with such bad laws and that

even going to England seems to me hopeless, because there have already been several representations sent over, and they have returned without success.

Dube sought to re-assert African identities submerged under colonialism and to this end fostered Zulu nationalism and maintained ties with the Zulu monarchy. Referring to the probability that ANC delegations would be ignored, he noted that

If in truth the King will not listen to our voice, it would be well for all the Native Chiefs in South Africa to unite.

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57. S. PLAATJE, "Address to Pan-African Congress, Paris, 1921," in Plaatje, *Selected writings*, pp. 264-74.
58. J. DUBE, *The Zulu's Appeal for Light and England's Duty* (London: Unwin Brothers, 1909) p. 6; NAD CNC Natal 214/1912, Dube address to "Chiefs and Gentlemen of the SANC" Phoenix 2 Feb. 1912.
59. S. MARKS, *The ambiguities of dependence in South Africa: class, nationalism, and the state in twentieth-century Natal* (Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1986), pp. 54-55.



He also referred to Britain for tactical purposes. A petition he presented in 1918 on behalf of African workers stated:

No other class of His Majesty's subjects are thus compelled to work for wages which are not adequate remuneration for their services.<sup>60</sup>

Dube often used parable and metaphor. In response to attempts by the authorities to prevent him holding meetings in August 1918, he argued that Africans were being shackled like a buffalo, that "the hunting party is now approaching the thicket which contains the tiger": a phrase that raised the ire of government. Did these idioms merely reflect the African oral tradition or did they perhaps also enable a measure of disloyalty to authority and an assertion of an African identity? Despite his avowed loyalty, the state treated him with suspicion. The view of the settler and the Empire was that "the assembling of large bodies of Natives was undesirable because it was subversive of proper order".<sup>61</sup> By 1931, totally disillusioned by the failure of Imperial intervention, Dube felt that

the thinking and educated Natives have ... been betrayed by the British Government to the Colonists.<sup>62</sup>

African nationalist sentiment became more pronounced during the war years. TNC Secretary Richard Selope Thema had still argued in 1918 that Africans' loyalty "placed an obligation upon the authorities Imperial and colonial to recognise and affirm their rights as citizens of the Empire." But he began to mix African nationalism with appeals to fair play and loyalty. "What we demand," he told a meeting of Congress in Benoni called to support a wage rise for African workers and protest harsh repression of striking workers,

is only a sixpence. Why should we be shot for our demand? .... We are only fighting against the Kaiser .... People who arrest us are against King George.<sup>63</sup>

When General Smuts soon after called for the two white 'races' to unite to secure South Africa for the whites, Selope Thema told another mass meeting that blacks, therefore, "want Africa for the Africans".<sup>64</sup>

The class identity of these and other early African leaders inclined them to moderation but their national identity inclined them to political resistance. The

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60. "A War of Strike" extract from *Ilanga lase Natal* 13 June 1913 in NTS 207, CNC Natal 1032/13 20 June 1913; petition and letter of Dube to Minister of Native Affairs 11 Aug. 1918, NTS 214, 658/18/F473.

61. Translation of "We Are Muzzled" *Ilanga lase Natal*, 23 Aug. 1918, NTS 214, 658/18/F473; *Natal Mercury*, 12 Aug. 1918, NTS 214 658/18/F473; Mayor of Durban to PM 9 Aug. 1918, NTS 214, 658/18/F473.

62. "The South African Natives and British Government," *Ilanga lase Natal*, 17 July 1931.

63. "Native Women's League," report by Sub-Inspector Benoni, 7 July 1918, JUS 3/527/17.

64. R.V. SELOPE THEMA, "General Smuts and the Bantu People," *Abantu-Batho*, 27 June 1918.

career of Saul Msane, however, illustrates how too close an identification with the British World combined with alienation from the subaltern strata could mute African identities. Msane visited England several times: in 1892 as part of a Zulu choir and again in 1914 as part of the Congress delegation. He accumulated several hundred acres of land from his work in the early 1890s as a compound manager and labour recruiter. But he was drawn into politics as co-founder of the Natal Native Congress in 1900. His liberal ideas stressed measured resistance to injustice. In a speech to a SANNC meeting in 1913 protesting the Land Act he began by drawing attention to the Union Jack “floating over them, ... an emblem of liberty”. Africans, he noted, were not consulted on the Act: “What they wanted was fair play.”<sup>65</sup> Msane retained a faith in “British justice.” At the 1914 SANNC conference, he made “unrealistic and pathetic appeals for justice through reliance on the Royal prerogative”.<sup>66</sup> Addressing the 1918 Congress, he urged Africans to be “inflexibly loyal to their Supreme Chief, His Majesty the King”.<sup>67</sup> As more radical African nationalists began to investigate the possibility of alliance with black workers, Msane remained resolutely opposed to militant labour action. Whilst many leaders hesitantly began to explore more stridently Africanist identities, he remained trapped within his Imperial identity

New identities of class and nation were emerging. British models of capitalism mixed with South African industrial colour-bars to bring hardships to African workers on the mines and in offices. Saul Msane’s son, Herbert, was active in the radicalised TNC and the ephemeral but pioneering socialist Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA). He and other activists such as Hamilton Kraai, a warehouse worker, began to challenge Imperial legitimacy in ways that combined class and national identities. In 1918, addressing black workers on the gold industry, Kraai bluntly rejected loyalism:

[w]e are slaves under the Union Jack ... We must not forget to return our Africa [to its rightful place] .... This gold is also ours. It was placed [here] by God for us.<sup>68</sup>

H. Selby Msimang, at the time seeking to establish black labour unions but also active in Congress, called in 1921 for the assertion of a black identity, arguing that “the redemption of Africa will be hastened if the native public will realise what is commensurate with its power”. Yet he still referred to black workers as “Native ... servant[s] of His Majesty”.<sup>69</sup> The following year, in a letter to the ANC’s *Abantu Batho*, he predicted that

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65. *Tsala ea Batho*, 10 May, 18 Oct. 1913

66. P. WALSHE, *The rise of African nationalism in South Africa*, p.50.

67. P. LA HAUSSE DE LALOUVIÈRE, *Restless identities*, p.17; “Address Delivered by Mr. Saul Msane” *Abantu-Batho*, 18 Apr. 1918.

68. Police Report of 27 June 1918, GNLB 281 446/17/D48.

69. H.S. MSIMANG, “Cheap Labour in Natal” *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 31 Dec 1921; translation of letter in *Abantu-Batho*, 29 Dec. 1921, GNLB 101 677/13/160.

[w]hen we have destroyed the colour bar, many Europeans will, through dislike of the native, leave the country for Australia, New Zealand and England. We would then remain behind loudly calling for the restoration of Africa.<sup>70</sup>

Other, more moderate, ANC leaders also had good reasons not to like British South African industrial relations models. For example, Isaiah Budlwana [Bud-] M'belle suffered discrimination from the time of his first appointment to the Cape Civil Service in 1894 when he was refused the normal clerical allowance. When he passed the Civil Service examination in 1906, he did not receive the normal salary increment. In the same year he was assaulted by three English fitters in Kimberley and suffered severe head injuries.<sup>71</sup> In 1916, he wrote that “for more than ten years” he received no wage increase whilst white civil servants received rises. In 1916 he lost his interpreting job, which he had held for twenty years. Such frustration inclined him to accept the post of SANNC Secretary in 1917.<sup>72</sup>

From World War I, African attitudes to Britain gradually but increasingly were influenced by other ideologies, including socialism and Garveyism. Communists and Garveyists spoke disparagingly of British imperialism, a practice likely to have influenced radical ANC leaders.

### **From British world to African world**

Josiah (J.T.) Gumede was less beholden than most ANC leaders to the British World but his disillusionment with the British Empire was a gradual process. As an *induna* or representative of the Zulu monarchy in the 1880s, he witnessed firsthand British subversion of an African state.<sup>73</sup> He had early ties with quite different Britons than did most Congress leaders. In 1907, in Natal he was in touch with Labour Party politician Ralph Tatham and when arrested in 1907 for leaving Natal

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70. GNLB 677/13/110 file citing Msimang letter *Abantu Batho* 12 Jan. 1922.

71. CAD JUS 2 2562/04 “Papers I.B. M'belle”: Magistrate Kimberley to Secretary, Law Dept. 18 Jan. 1908; memo. of Mag. Kimberley 15 May 1908; Leave applications 1904-11; M'Belle to Mag. Kimberley 21 Jan. 1908; Minute of 13 Nov. 1903; letter of M'Belle to Sir John Graham, 23 May 1908; Court record 204 1906, Mag. Kimberley 19 Jan. 1906.

72. “A Bantu Benefactor,” *Imvo Zabuntsundu*, 22, 29 Aug. 1916; “A Short Review of Bud Mbelle’s Life Story” *Imvo* 16, 23 Aug. 1947; “Mr Bud-M'belle Retires,” *Umteteli* 5 July 1930. More research is required into how such irritations influenced African attitudes to the Britain, but see: B. PETERSON, *Monarchs, missionaries, and African intellectuals: African theater and the unmaking of colonial marginality* (Africa World Press, Trenton, 2000).

73. R. VAN SIMMEL, *In Search of Freedom, Fair Play and Justice”: Josiah Tshangana Gumede, 1867-1947: A Biography* (The Author, Cape Town, 2001).

without a pass, he sent a telegram to British socialist leader Keir Hardie.<sup>74</sup> His attitudes were often contradictory. He made occasional protestations of his loyalty but during World War I argued that black rights were more important than Empire loyalty.<sup>75</sup> He at first accumulated considerable land, and at times could be conservative — he testified in 1919 against communist D. I. Jones, perhaps reflecting his equation of communist plans with Afrikaner republicans and a fear that his by then considerable land holdings would be at risk under communism.<sup>76</sup> Yet in 1918, he attended radical meetings and began to more clearly enunciate the need for African freedom. Gumede in 1919 was part of a SANNC delegation to Europe urging Britain to intervene against the “serious injustice and cruel oppression” inflicted upon blacks. He still articulated his vision of freedom in terms of British legalism. In a letter from Britain to the moderate black politician J.T. Jabavu, Gumede stated that: “we ask for freedom, liberty, justice and fair play”. The failure of the deputation, combined with discontent over negligible war service compensation and the volley of anti-black laws and influence of black protests in 1918-20 appear to have ruptured this belief in British ‘fair play’ and shifted his belief in the hegemony of capitalism. In the twenties, influenced by communists and Garveyists, he became a leading radical opponent of the government.<sup>77</sup> His appointment as full-time SANNC Organiser in Natal in 1921 gave him greater insights into mass suffering. Elected ANC President in 1927, he forged close ties with the communists. In 1927, he represented the ANC at an anti-imperialist conference in Brussels, where he met other anti-colonial leaders, such as Nehru, attacked South African rule as ‘slavery’ and began to accept communist critiques of (British) imperialism. He stressed how all land had been taken from Africans “in the name of the crown of Great Britain” and how the British had been turned against the Zulus by settler stories. What was different in his approach from most other ANC leaders was, instead of just blaming settlers, he indicted the

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74. S. MARKS, *Reluctant rebellion: the 1906-1908 disturbances in Natal* (Clarendon, 1970), pp. 359-60; A. COBLEY, *Class and consciousness: the black petty bourgeoisie in South Africa, 1924 to 1950*, p.163; SNA 1/1/369 1907/1420 SNA Natal: “Enquiry as to a Cablegram Having Been Sent by Josiah Gumede to Mr. Keir Hardie Respecting the Formers’ Arrest.”

75. Minutes of Evidence before the Select Committee on Native Affairs (Pretoria, SC6A-17), p. 647.

76. “Worker’s Indaba,” *Abantu-Batho* [4?] July 1918, tr. JUS 3/527/17; *International* 25 Apr., 16, 2 May 1919; Gumede to “Native Riots Commission Minutes of Evidence 1929” NAD 3/DBN 14/5 p. 419 ff.

77. SANNC resolution and Gumede to *Imvo* 14 Oct. 1919. Selby Msimang claims it was in 1919 that Gumede “lost his faith in British justice.”: H.S. Msimang, “Why Mr. Gumede Failed” *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 31 May 1930.

“whole of Europe”, the “Imperialism which is governing the whole of Africa today”.<sup>78</sup>

Gumede’s identities are complex and at times contradictory: African and Zulu, South African and Pan-African, Empire loyalist and anti-imperialist, landowner and radical. Despite his accumulation of capital, he had been a wage earner on the Rand, and this experience may have contributed to his identification with the plight of wage labourers that was apparent in his evidence to the South African Native Affairs Commission in 1904. He told this same committee that he had chosen not to be exempt from Native Law.

I do not wish to separate from my people. I do not wish education to separate me.

He complained that

[t]he Chiefs are no longer Chiefs, but gentlemen. There is only one Chief who rules all of us, and that is His Majesty the King.

He added that he preferred the old law, under Shaka, whereby once a chief submitted to another he ceased to be a chief, and that chiefs should not be treated with differentiation by the state.<sup>79</sup> Like many members of the fragile black elite, his property holdings rapidly dissipated under the onslaught of anti-black legislation. After his defeat as ANC President in 1930, he continued to edit *Abantu-Batho*, publishing articles against British imperialism.<sup>80</sup>

*Abantu-Batho*, the ANC organ, was widely influential among urban Africans of the time.<sup>81</sup> In 1918, its columns were still full of protestations of Empire loyalty and complaints about Boer disloyalty. In response to ‘Republican’ Afrikaner agitation, it swore that “the whole of bantudom will remain loyal to its Supreme Chief His Majesty the King.” In the face of the Land Act of a government “neither Dutch nor English,” the editor was certain that “Cape natives wou’d, if they could, go and raise from the dead Queen Victoria of blessed memory and put her back on the Throne ... And we, who have been under Dutch rule, would likewise raise Paul Kruger.” *Abantu-Batho* applauded the wartime loyalty of chiefs.<sup>82</sup> But the editor also pointed to the insincerity of British policy towards blacks. Commenting on

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78. J.T. GUMEDE, “The Congress against Colonial Oppression,” *Ilanga lase Natal* 25 Mar. 1927.

79. *South African Native Affairs Commission* (1904), v. 3 Colony of Natal, pp. 465-467.

80. *Abantu-Batho* 1, 15 May, 5, 17 June 1930; “Malignant Campaign by Boer-British Imperialists” *ibid.* 17 July 1930.

81. DNL 144/13/D.205: DNL to SNA 9 May 1919: “There is no question that the *Abantu-Batho* has a wide circulation amongst natives.” Editors claimed the (unlikely) circulation of 10,000: C.S. Mabaso to Govt. Printer, 17 Mar. 1922.

82. “White Peril” [editorial] *Abantu-Batho*, 25 April 1918; “A Swazi Aeroplane for the War,” *Abantu-Batho*.

Lloyd George's call for self-determination for the indigenous peoples of German Africa, he reminded readers that similar concern for ill-treatment of indigenous peoples in the Boer Republics had been expressed by the British in 1899. However, the Treaty of Vereeniging, the granting of self-government to northern provinces in 1906, and the acquiescing of Westminster in 1909 to racial discrimination in the Act of Union had taken place without consultation with blacks. The tone was decidedly angry:

There were many books written by Englishmen before the Anglo-Boer war denouncing "Boer treatment of the helpless native peoples" but when peace was concluded at Vereeniging no Englishman bothered his head about the "helpless native." When their agitation against the ill treatment of the natives by the Boers served as means to justify in the eyes of the civilised world the attitude which the British nation took against the Boers in 1899, they now turned their energies in the direction of conciliation between Boer and Briton by sacrificing the rights of the Bantu.... The same thing happened in 1909 when the British Government sanctioned the formation of the Union of South Africa without the knowledge and consent of the native inhabitants and allowed, in spite of its incompatibility with British principles of Justice and Liberty, a Colour bar ....<sup>83</sup>

*Abantu-Batho* strongly endorsed the idea of self-determination and argued that it be applied to South Africa. It hoped Lloyd George's declaration was a "message of hope" and countered anticipated settler objection that the policy did not apply to South Africa with the argument that if so, then neither did the British argument on German colonies. Africans, it added,

although under British rule, have never been given the right to determine the kind of government under which they would like to placed. If in 1909 they were asked to choose between the administration of Downing Street and Menjeskop, and between the legislature of Westminster and Cape Town they would have chosen Downing Street and Westminster. This would be the case even today. Why? Because the government of the Union so far as the natives are concerned is guilty of the spirit of which Prussianism is the present embodiment.<sup>84</sup>

These views are attributable partly to the first flowering of nascent African nationalism. *Abantu-Batho* writers were starting to take up the idea of African nationalism, in 1923 calling for unity of black forces to fight "white domination" and supporting African nationalist struggles in Kenya and Swaziland<sup>85</sup>. *Abantu-Batho* also called on Africans to emulate both Gandhi's passive resistance and the

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83. "The Future of the German Colonies," *Abantu-Batho* 7 Feb. 1918, translation in DNL 144/13/D205.

84. "The Future of the German Colonies," *Abantu-Batho* 7 Feb. 1918, translation in DNL 144/13/D205.

85. *Abantu-Batho* 14 June 1923, in Swaziland Archives, file RCS 486/23. My thanks to Chris Lowe for this reference.

1914 white strikers, concluding that: “under the British Empire you shall never get anything if you do not go on strike”.<sup>86</sup> Such views moved the Director of Native Labour to lament that “the whole tone of the *Abantu-Batho* is very much opposed to constituted authority,” and to blame “teachings disseminated by that paper” for student riots at Lovedale.<sup>87</sup>

The 1920s and 30s were a low ebb in ANC activity but the period saw intensified questioning of British imperialist hegemony by activists associated with the ANC, albeit often in conjunction with communist or Garveyist groups. ANC leaders now faced an intensification of competing loyalties among the African population. Besides state and Imperial structures, a range of movements from Garveyism to liberalism and communism strove to gain African allegiances. In the twenties, the delineation between ANC, Garveyist, and ICU groups was not always clear. For instance, the ANC letterhead carried a Garveyist motto and the practice (so evident in the 1980s) of African leaders wearing many political and industrial ‘caps’ became established. Pan-Africanism began to be debated. Loyalty to Empire, nation, government, union, church, and ethnic group competed with loyalty to Congress. As loyalties broadened and expressions of complex identities were better articulated, the previous simplistic loyalty to the British Empire began to break down.

Western Cape ANC President James Thaele employed a radical rhetoric that combined Garveyism with anti-capitalism. In the pages of his newspaper *The African World* (Cape Town, 1925-26) he rhetorically counter-posed to the British Empire the possibility of a new Garvey-led ‘African Empire’. He enthusiastically joined the ANC boycott of the 1925 Royal Tour, not out of disloyalty he said but due to

the cumulative effect of the grievances under which we labour, and piled on top of them the Bloemfontein tragedy.<sup>88</sup>

More bluntly, he shattered any lingering illusions of monarchy, noting that the British Prince was ‘nothing but a man’. The British Empire, based like all other European imperialisms on brute force and race exploitation, had gone further in its policy of divide and rule to give “autocratic power ... to the Dominions ... for no other purpose but that of racial extinction.” Britons, he argued,

have undoubtedly sold the native population ... We still remember with regret the unfulfilled promises of His Majesty ... to our Native labour Contingents ... when he said that we were fighting for the freedom of small nations, every race irrespective of colour ... Our native proverb says “*Kosha etjoa moshate balata*

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86. *Abantu-Batho* 22 Nov. 1917, 4, 18 July 1918, tr. in SAP report, 29 June 1918, “Contract” *Abantu-Batho* 24 Oct. 1918, tr. in SAP to SJ, 1 Nov. 1918, JUS 3/527/7.

87. DNL to SAN 9 May 1919 in 144/13/D.205, DNL to SNA 30 April 1920.

88. “The African Empire,” and “The Prince and the Boycott” *African World* 23 May 1925. Africans had recently been shot by police in Bloemfontein.

*re ea latela*” -- a song starts from royalty and plebians follow. If the King of any kingdom treats his promises as scraps of paper how much more will the plebians treat theirs?<sup>89</sup>

Thaele also reprinted anti-British statements from the Irish press. Educated in America, he identified less with Britain and in addition sought to build a new Africanist identity. He was eclectic and idiosyncratic but his attitudes to Empire well illustrate the radical winds blowing in the twenties, which combined with the increasing consolidation of the state, made old attitudes to Britain anachronistic.

Thaele and Gumede, both Garveyists, may have been exceptional in their anti-imperialism but they gave voice to thoughts many Africans must have been thinking about Empire and broken promises. They also represented the assertion of an African identity at a time when culturally there appeared little alternative to the dominant white culture.

Such ‘disloyal’ movements reached rural towns. Thaele addressed a 900-strong ANC meeting at Sterkspruit in 1928, urging blacks to “free themselves from the incubus of European control”. Congress, he declared, must interview the Magistrate on burning issues and, “if he proves autocratic ... [it should then] see the High Commissioner [and] if he became [a] dictator they would pass on to Pretoria; if ... [they are] not going to listen, [then the ANC] would proceed to England.” At a meeting in 1929, Thaele denounced Smuts as “controlled by [British] financial interests.”<sup>90</sup> Other maverick activists challenged white hegemony in equally individualistic language. Theodore Mvalo, expelled from the ANC in 1924 but later reinstated, was active in the Herschel region in the 1920s, at times masquerading as an ANC leader. His speech at a meeting in 1929, mixed anti-British, Garveyist, and religious metaphors. The government, he stated, “is Satan...The English nation is a very dirty nation. South Africa is not for Europeans, it is ours...I am not a Christian but I am fighting against these thieves.” Mvalo does not accord with stereotypes of Congressmen. Police viewed him as an “active agitator,” not only of the ANC but also the League Against Imperialism; a troublemaker “particularly vituperative towards those in authority”, with twenty-one convictions for stock theft and other felonies.<sup>91</sup> Radical activists perhaps felt

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89. “Impending Crisis,” “The Policy of Divide and Rule,” “African Congress and the Prince” in *African World*, 30 May 1925.

90. “Native Meeting Held at Sterkspruit” 17/11/1928, 27/10/1928; “...27/4/1929”: CAD 2/SPT 16, N1/9/3.

91. T.D. Mveli SKOTA, “ANC. Secretary General’s Report” [1925], in Carter Karis Collection microfilm 2:DA14:30/65 30/8; Rev. Tantsi to Chief Magistrate Transkeian Territories (CMTT) 22 Apr. 1925, CMTT to Tantsi Apr. 1925, CAD CMT 3/1471 42/C pt.1; NC Herschel to CNC Kingwilliamstown 17 Aug. 1929; “Meeting Held by...Agitator T. Mvalo” 12 Aug. 1929; flyer signed Jabane, ANC Sterkspruit, 7 July 1929: 2/SPT 16 N1/9/3; District Commissioner to Magistrate Queenstown 27 Aug. 1930, 1/KNT 40/12.



safer criticizing British Imperialism in the seclusion of rural areas but how the mighty British Empire had fallen in the esteem of some Africans!

Despite the occasional onslaughts on Albion, notions of Empire loyalty persisted into the thirties and the British connection lingered among Africans. Criticisms of Britain aimed more at exploitative or racist aspects of Empire than British hegemony as such. Development of a distinct Africanist identity had to await the 1940s and 50s, when some ANC leaders were to come under fire from radical African nationalists and socialists who accused it of losing touch with its roots.

Given the limited extant sources, it is difficult to estimate the precise effects of all these interactions with the British World on the identity of Africans. Apart from detailed insights into the lives of a handful of people such as Abraham Esau and Sol Plaatje, relatively little is still known for instance about the psychological effects of Imperial hegemony on black South Africans. If we follow Fanon, then perhaps the 'white masks' or over-identification with Britain linked to the rejection of their 'Black English' identity, by both whites and fellow blacks, may have created a crisis of identity for some Africans. Yet equally, the comfort of British culture or the faith in British justice may have cushioned the tensions felt by other Africans.

## **Conclusion**

The British World had a strong influence on Africans. In general, African attitudes to Britain itself and to its Imperial ideals remained rather uniformly favourable. Britain was held up by African leaders as a better model than the unbridled rule of settlers. British South Africa was always seen a safer bet than Afrikaner rule (though British occupation of the Transvaal did lead to mutterings about the 'good old days' of Kruger). Yet behind expressions of Empire loyalty were less 'loyal' and less 'British' attitudes and a questioning of the application of Imperial rule. In times of crisis and after the consolidation of a settler rule that denied Africans a place in South African nationalism, British authority came under stronger criticism. Either for tactical reasons or due to deep-felt cultural influences, the ANC always was careful to declare its 'loyalty'. But as the decades passed, it more directly and more insistently protested the contradictions and hypocrisy of Britain's policy to South Africa and actions of British South Africans.

The attraction of British liberalism persisted, even in the face of rejection by British authorities of African petitions (often rationalised by the duplicitous nature of colonial officials). British influences remained strong among the plethora of identities of ANC leaders, moderate or radical, until at least the twenties. By then, changes in the South African state and in ideologies, as well as growth of settler nationalism in South Africa and anti-colonial nationalism elsewhere, and growing

class stratification, required modification of ANC faith in Imperial delegations. Change also required the elaboration of *African* identities and in this regard enduring British influences retarded the emergence of a distinct African national identity. Yet, even after Africans' claims<sup>92</sup> were asserted more directly, a hankering after things British persisted in ANC circles for many years, a tribute to the appeal of British political traditions, but also to the effectiveness of acculturation and the depth of British economic penetration.

These various identities lingered and contributed to the mix of social and national identities that influence contemporary South Africa. Today many identities comprise the totality of South African society. Ben Magubane, in exploring the "savage injustice" of a (partly-British) settler colonialism, notes that today the ANC

is engaged in a mammoth task of creating, out of the various ethnic identities, a truly South African national identity.<sup>93</sup>

To do this, it is taking cognisance of many identities, as seen in the 1996 Constitution. By better charting the history of these identities, historians can help illuminate this path.

## **Opsomming**

### **Vroeë ANC leier en die Britse wêreld: dubbelsinnighede en identiteite**

In die artikel ondersoek die skrywer aspekte van die lewens van vroeë swart politieke leiers in die twintigste eeu om aan te dui dat hulle ingesteldheid teenoor dit wat Brits was, baie meer kompleks is as wat daar tot op die hede deur historici aanvaar is. Britse liberalisme en kultuur het die vroeë leiers van die ANC bepaald beïnvloed. Nadat swartmense in 1910 die reg geweier is om volwaardige Suid-Afrikaanse burgers te wees, en nadat diskriminerende wetgewing deurgevoer is, het hulle leiers 'n beroep op Brittanje gedoen om die 'Britse sin vir geregtigheid' te laat seëvier op grond van hulle uitgesproke imperiale lojaliteit. 'Britse' temas het deel van die magdom identiteite gebly wat die leiers tot minstens in die twintigerjare openbaar het. Dit het egter

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92. See especially *Africans' Claims in South Africa* (Johannesburg: ANC, [1944]).

93. B. MAGUBANE, "The Social Construction of Race and Citizenship in South Africa" paper, UNRISD Conference on Racism and Public Policy September 2001, Durban, <http://www.unrisd.org/racism/a-magubane.htm>

manifestasies van Afrika-identiteite bemoelik. Daar was baie dubbelsinnigheid in swart houdings teenoor die Britse wêreld. Dit het gewissel van steun vir die 'glorieryke Britse Ryk', tot meer ironiese of selfs neerhalende verwysings na 'slawerny onder die Union Jack'. Onderliggend aan die sterk selferkende pro-Britse sentimente van ANC leiers was daar minder 'lojale' houdings en meer komplekse identiteite. Hierdie identiteite het gebly en bygedra tot die mengsel van sosiale en nasionale eienskappe wat houdings en opvattinge in die teenswoordige Suid-Afrika beïnvloed.