**POL 3013: South African Political Thought**

**Lecture 29: The Political Education of Anton Lembede**

**New Political Horizons of the 1940s:** During the 1930s, the assimilationist politics of the African elite suffered a major setback with the passing of the Hertzog bills in 1936. This led to division within African politics and the decline of the ANC, reduced under Seme’s leadership to “an annual conclave of his own sycophantic personal followers” (Gerhart, *Black Power in South Africa*, p. 46). The ANC was revived under Dr A.B. Xuma, and its “African Claims” of 1943 combined the assimilationism of previous generations with a radical tone and demands, including universal franchise. Xuma was the last of the ANC leaders (until Thabo Mbeki) to have been educated abroad. Developments that reshaped black politics in the 1940s included: the influx to the cities of a new generation of intellectuals from the rural areas (Mandela and Tambo had been expelled from Fort Hare; Lembede came from Natal); the rapid growth of black workers in the cities as industrialization grew (*Black Power*, p. 47, n. 1); the reduced prospects of the assimilated elite (cf. Lutuli, quoted in *Black Power*, p. 52) and the new threat of Afrikaner nationalism.

**University of South Africa as a Centre of Black Education:** Lembede came from a background of extreme poverty. His intellectual brilliance was noticed by a rural teacher, who helped him to gain admission to the prestigious Adams College near Durban. He qualified as a school teacher and then continued his studies as an external student at UNISA (*Black Power*, pp. 51-53). UNISA was initially established in 1916 as a federation of six colleges (including Fort Hare), each of which prepared students for exams set by committees drawn from the relevant departments at these different colleges. In the 1930s UNISA began to enrol “external students” who studied on their own for the common exams. Although Fort Hare is widely known as the major centre of black education in South Africa (and sub-Saharan Africa), there were soon more black external students at UNISA than students at Fort Hare.

**Philosophy at UNISA:** The UNISA Senate Committee for Philosophy was initially dominated by a single philosophical current—that of British idealism—which provided a synthesis of the history of Western philosophy with a broadly “civilizing” thrust. Philosophy also included logic, psychology, ethics and later political science. British idealism came to be challenged in time by two emerging rivals. Analytical philosophy made its way onto the margins of the syllabus through such works as Bertrand Russell’s *Problems of Philosophy*. A far more determined challenge came from currents of Calvinist (more accurately: neo-Calvinist) philosophy, drawing on Dutch conservativism of the time (Kuyper, Dooyeweerd, etc.). This Calvinist philosophy became dominant at several Afrikaans colleges in the 1930s, and was closely linked with the rise of Afrikaner nationalist ideology. Within the UNISA Senate committee, there was generally a balance between the British idealist and the neo-Calvinist currents, with both of them equally represented in the syllabus and exam paper. At the different constituent colleges, students probably had a clear sense of the distinction between them. This may not have been the experience of external students, including Lembede.

**Lembede’s MA thesis:** There are many ways of reading Lembede’s MA thesis on *The Conception of God as expounded by or as it emerges from the Writings of Great Philosophers from Descartes to the Present Day* (1945). In part, it was surely motivated by his wish to prove that, as an African, he could meet the standards for postgraduate work. (It was initially rejected by his examiners.) But it was surely also an attempt to come to grips with the conception whose uncritical acceptance was at the heart of the earlier generation of African intellectual’s acceptance of the ideology of civilization. Is the intellectual who can assess different Western conceptions of God not in a more powerful position than his predecessor, who takes for granted that there is a single, unproblematic conception of God, and that his salvation and social progress depends on Him? Lembede’s God is not such a personal creator, but a “state towards which the whole universe is gradually moving” (p. 50). This is a state of harmony to which almost all religions aspire, as does the philosophy of Hegel (p. 35).

**Lembede and the philosophical stage of African nationalism:** Lembede became the philosopher of African nationalism in South Africa by providing a powerful and original synthesis of the philosophical currents he had encountered at UNISA. From British idealism, with its Hegelian roots, he took a world-historical perspective, which had the capacity not simply to distinguish civilized and uncivilized societies, but to locate all social developments within a larger philosophical framework. From neo-Calvinism, he took a critique of the scientific (or mechanical) conception of the world as inherently divisive, manipulative and lacking in spiritual depth. He made use of this critique to describe “white civilization” as a whole, and to construct against it an image of the African philosophical outlook which seemed to owe little to the West. His conception of African society drew on a missionary educational tradition, dating back to the 1920s at least, which sought to overcome ethnic divisions by creating a common African heritage for the educated elite. It may also have owed something to Lembede’s studies of “Native Law.” This fusion took place at the moment when the ideology of civilization and trusteeship was in crisis, but before the ideology of racial equality—created by decolonization—had taken its place. This was the philosophical stage of African nationalism (as Duma Nokwe described it in an interview with Gerhart) that seemed to be superseded by the ideological claims of decolonization.