**POL 3013: South African Political Thought**

**Lecture 30: The Formation of the ANC Youth League**

**The Significance of the ANC Youth League:** It is possible to lose sight of the significance of the formation of the ANC Youth League in 1944, because the Africanist ideological basis of the ANC Youth League made way in less than a decade for ANC policies of non-racialism, enshrined in the opening clause of the Freedom Charter in 1955. But Africanism was only one part of a renewal of black politics. Its component parts include:

**1. Rejection of trusteeship:** Belief in the idea of trusteeship made it possible for the black elite to appeal to the good faith of the trustees and demonstrate to them that they were ready for political rights. The Youth League manifesto argued that trusteeship was an instrument not of liberation, but of oppression. Trusteeship was intended to “mislead the world that the Whiteman in South Africa is helping the African on the road to civilised life.” In reality, however, trusteeship means “the consolidation by the Whiteman of his position at the expense of the African people” (*Freedom in Our Lifetime*, p. 60). Trusteeship “blocked their way to Civilization” through such barriers as the Colour Bar Act (p. 61), and was “eyewash for the civilized world and an empty platitude to soothe Africans into believing that after all oppression is a pleasant experience under Christian democratic rule” (p. 62).

**2. Rejection of the politics of petitioning authority:** The strategy which followed from the ANC’s belief in trusteeship was that of petitioning authority, essentially arguing that their loyalty should be rewarded in order to create a more stable system. The Youth League manifesto argued that this strategy could not lead to the liberation of the oppressed but strengthened their oppressors instead. The “privileged few” who dominated the ANC were “forced to play the dual role of being unconscious police to check the assertion of the popular will on the one hand and, on the other, of constantly warning the authorities that further curtailment of the privileges of the few would compel them, the privileged few, to yield to pressure from the avalanche of popular opinion which was tired of appeasing the authorities while life became more intolerable” (p. 64). ANC political strategy required that they *speak* of yielding to mass pressure, but never actually to do so.

**3. Proposal of a new agent of change:** Instead of arguing that the most “advanced” in Western terms should lead the rest on the path to assimilation, the Youth League identified a different agent of change. They describe the ANC not as a parliament of the African people, but as a “national liberation movement” (p. 67). Within the ANC, they hold that leadership roles should be given to “capable men, whatever their status in society” (p. 68). But perhaps the major innovation is the Youth League’s conception—surely the initiative of Lembede—of the ANC as a movement of the people of the whole African continent. Thus: “We believe in the unity of all Africans from the Mediterranean Sea in the North to the Indian and Atlantic Oceans in the South . . . and that Africans must speak with one voice” (p. 68).

**4. Africanism as a philosophical basis for ANC politics:** In some measure Lembede’s Africanism reflects the peculiar amalgam of Hegelian and neo-Calvinist philosophies at UNISA. But he puts those ideas to work in response to the conception of civilization that was central to the earlier politics of the ANC. Lembede’s conception of a distinctive African philosophy does not, however, resolve the problem of its relation to the civilization of the West, in relation to which “the two major races are on different planes of achievement” (p. 59). At the same time as suggesting the existence of a rival African civilization, Lembede claims the civilization of the West as “a heritage of the whole human race” (p. 97, not included in the reader; tutorial 5).

**5. Reconstruction of the African past:** Instead of beginning the history of African progress with the coming of the missionaries (cf. Dube’s speech, *From Protest to Challenge*, vol. 1, pp. 68-69), Lembede praises the achievements of precolonial Africa, or “ancient Bantu society” (*Freedom in Our Lifetime*, pp. 85-86). He treats it as a model to be emulated in an Africa liberated from colonial or racial rule. This is intended to demonstrate the distinctive character of African civilization and its part in world history. This idealized image of the precolonial past was later revived by Mandela (cf. Nash, “Mandela’s Democracy”).

**6. A model of leadership based on self-sacrifice:** The Youth League manifesto speaks of combating “moral disintegration among Africans by maintaining and upholding high ethical standards ourselves” (p. 68). The model of ethical conduct which dominates Lembede’s texts is that of self-sacrifice rather than self-advancement. In the period of state repression that followed after his death, this model of leadership legitimated by self-sacrifice and even asceticism became central to the ANC and to other traditions of political resistance. Luthuli and especially Mandela upheld this model by precept and example.