Erasing the Nation
The Historiography of African Nationalism in Conqueror South Africa

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Abstract: The story of conqueror South African historiography relies on the ebbs and flows of narrative clichés and tropes. The main narrative arcs relate to historiographies that frame the understanding and analysis of conqueror South Africa. These historiographies interpret history as forming part of an epistemological paradigm of conqueror South Africa: a historiography that does not question the ethical right to conquest. This article focuses on the interpretations of African Nationalism by proponents of the liberal and Marxist historiographic traditions and critiques the way in which these historiographies depict and characterise African Nationalism. This historical characterisation bears an influence in current political and social discourse in conqueror South Africa: African Nationalism is relegated to a misguided moment in history, something to be reflected upon from a distance, an irrelevant phase in the long walk to a multiracial and cosmopolitan South Africa.

Keywords: African Nationalism, conqueror, conquered, historiography, liberation, South African history

The story of conqueror South African historiography relies on the ebbs and flows of narrative clichés and tropes. The main contending narrative arcs relate to specific social theories that frame the understanding and analysis of conqueror South Africa and its historiography. What these historiographies have in common is their interpretation of history forming part of an epistemological...
paradigm of conqueror South Africa: a historiography that does not explicitly question the ethical right to conquest.

In this article, we will specifically focus on the interpretations of African Nationalism by select proponents of the liberal and Marxist historiographic traditions. We will critique the way in which these historiographies depict and characterise African Nationalism. We will focus on the work of Perter Walshe and Tom Lodge as representatives of the liberal historiographic tradition and the Marxist, or radical, historiographic tradition. Following from our discussion of Walshe and Lodge, we will consider two contemporary studies of African Nationalism, by Cristopher Saunders and Raymond Suttner, that continue to place African Nationalism within the narrative of conqueror South Africa. This historical characterisation bears an influence on current political and social discourse in conqueror South Africa: African Nationalism is relegated to a misguided moment in history, something to be reflected upon from an academic distance, an irrelevant phase in the long walk to a multiracial and cosmopolitan South Africa. Contrary to the foregoing view, it will be shown that African Nationalism is more than a marginal theory of resistance that can be reduced to a psychological theory of self-actualisation. In order to counter this narrative, we will consider the writings and work of Anton Muziwakhe Lembede and the events surrounding the May Day protests of 1950.

The main argument of this article is that the predominant articulation of African Nationalism by historians of conqueror South Africa is not able to capture the inherent liberatory element within African Nationalism. There is an overt reliance on themes of psychological liberation at the expense of political self-determination and ethical action. The narrative on African Nationalism is shifted from the sphere of the ethical and the political to the psychological. This acts to obfuscate claims towards political self-determination by reducing the political to the psychological. One of the reasons for this is the fact that the name ‘South Africa’ and the historiography that supports it is can no longer be considered an ethical given. The contestation over the name ‘South Africa’ is, however, not merely a question of symbolic significance but underlies a specific ethical position regarding the legitimacy of the country known as South Africa.
Conqueror South Africa

The establishment of the country known as South Africa is one that is based on the ethically unjustifiable right of conquest (Ramoše 2001). This right of conquest is something that has been, and continues to be, built and strengthened by a specific legal and historical edifice. It is for this reason that we will make use of the terms ‘conqueror historiography’ and ‘conqueror South Africa’. This is to make a distinction between conqueror and conquered as conceptual categories that contain within them a certain schematic used to understand how the idea of South Africa came into existence (Delport 2016). We will reserve the term ‘conqueror South Africa’ to denote what is commonly referred to as ‘South Africa’.

Following this heuristic characterisation, conqueror South Africa, and the historiography that supports it, is one in which the fact of conquest and title to territory is obfuscated. This fact of conquest is based on the ethically unjustifiable ‘right of conquest’. The name South Africa is thus one that is associated with this right of conquest and the continuation of its epistemological heritage through historiography. Any historiography or political analysis of South Africa must take an ethical position, whether consciously or not, with regard to this fact of conquest. By choosing the designation ‘conqueror South Africa’, we are thus taking an ethical position with regard the epistemological foundation of the territory conquered as South Africa.

Ndumiso Dladla captures this epistemologically fidelity to conquest when he provides several arguments from which to articulate an Azanian Critical Philosophy (ACP). As formulated by Ndumiso Dladla (2018: 418), ‘by Azanian Critical Philosophy . . . we mean to describe contemporary theoretical and practical activity that has its foundation on the historical activities and thinking of the [Africanist] political movements and the thinker-actors they produced’. Dladla provides a schematic of an epistemological paradigm that is built on the ethical unjustifiability of conquest. Consequently, Dladla emphasises the centrality of conquest and the position of conquered peoples in the four main tenets he provides for an Azanian Critical Philosophy:

1. The insistence by Azanians that the objective of the liberation struggle was the recovery of sovereign title to territory (rather than the mere attainment of civil and political rights).
2. The insistence that the title to territory itself belongs exclusively to the indigenous people conquered in the unjust wars of colonisation.

3. The rejection of multiracialism. This includes incredulity to the tenability of non-racialism as a means and upholding it only as an end achievable only once the title to territory had been restored to the indigenous conquered people.

4. The recognition of ‘South Africa’ as a polity and idea inextricably bound to the will of the conqueror and requiring state succession by a liberated polity with a restored relationship and continuity with the rest of the African continent (Dladla 2018: 418).

It is from the perspective of an Azanian Critical Philosophy that we will investigate the writing on, and depiction of, African Nationalism within a conqueror historiographical epistemology. What we aim to show is that African Nationalism cannot be incorporated into a conqueror South African epistemology. Writing on African Nationalism by conqueror historians – those who do not question the ethical justifiability of the right of conquest – attempts to force the ideas and principles of African Nationalism into an already existing valuation on the legitimacy of conqueror South Africa. This is because they are not able to see African Nationalism as anything other than a particular historical moment on the way to the current instantiation of conqueror South Africa: post-apartheid South Africa. African Nationalism as a political end ethical paradigm is anathema to a historiography of conquest.

If we are to consider African Nationalism to be more than just a historical moment, we must be able to identify and extrapolate the specific factors that makes it a historical praxis. As an example of African Nationalism as historical and social practice, Delport interrogates the work of Sobukwe and shows how he can be considered an Africanist social theorist and not merely a historical figure. Writing about African Nationalism as a theory of liberation, Delport expresses a view that accords with Dladla’s definition of an Azanian Critical Philosophy. Accordingly, Delport (2016: 45) writes:

The formulation of what is needed to bring about liberation for the African people is deeply rooted in a theory of the present social order
as well as the historical situation that gave rise to it. Successive colonial regimes attempted to erase any type of historical memory of the conquered people and subject them to the caprices and want of colonial rule and European history. African Nationalism as a theory of liberation consequently has to engage with this history.\(^2\)

African Nationalism as a theory of history must therefore entail a rejection of the right of conquest and an acknowledgement of the existence of South Africa as a conquered territory.

### Reactionary

Peter Walshe, in his books *Black Nationalism in South Africa: A Short History* and *The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa*, writes that the development of African Nationalism in South Africa can be traced back to the second half of the nineteenth century with the influence of three main political and cultural movements (Walshe 1973, 1987). The movements identified by Walshe are the Cape liberal tradition, Christian missionary education, and the influence of fight for the extension of civil liberties by African-Americans like Booker T Washington (Walshe 1973: 5–9; 1983: 2–10). The fact that twelve thousand Africans were on the voter’s role in the Cape Colony by 1880 and in 1886 Africans held 46% of the vote can, according to Walshe, be described as one of the pivotal influences on the African leaders of the nineteenth century (Walshe 1973). Walshe sees the turning point in political mobilisation around 1911, following several pieces of legislation that was becoming more repressive and the formation of the South African National Native Congress (SANNC) in 1912. For Walshe, the SANNC is a reaction to the growing repression of the newly elected Union government, particularly the segregation of land and the prohibition of African membership in the Dutch Reformed Church (Walshe 1987).

For Walshe, the early politics of African Nationalism gets realised in the formation of the SANNC and the acceptance of the Cape liberal tradition as a political programmatic. The fermentation of African political praxis, consequently, can be traced to the influence that this British model of liberal politics and colonial philosophy had on the African people. Walshe argues that ‘Africans sought
their political self-expression, sought justice and dignity’ through becoming involved in a ‘reactive process, a process of rejecting the steady flow of discriminatory legislation’ (Walshe 1973: 10). African Nationalism is here viewed as a reactionary political programme that comes into existence only when the African population is discriminated against or comes into contact with the European conqueror. Furthermore, this African Nationalist political programme is basically an addendum to Cape liberalism in Walshe’s view. The conclusion of this argument is that there is no such thing as an African political praxis that is not influenced by, and comes as a reaction to, Western colonial models of government. Through this argumentation, Walshe places African Nationalism within the paradigm of Western colonial historiography.

Walshe attempts to place African Nationalism within an already existing epistemological paradigm of a conqueror South Africa. Understanding African Nationalism within this epistemological paradigm places Walshe squarely within the realm of conqueror historiography. Walshe’s fidelity to an epistemology of conqueror South Africa is also discernible in the titles of his two texts: The Rise of African Nationalism in South Africa and Black Nationalism in South Africa: A Short History. Walshe uses the terms ‘black’ and ‘African’ interchangeably while noting that the terms ‘native, non-white, Negro, Bantu’ were used to denote the peoples conquered in the unjust wars of colonisation in different texts (Walshe 1973: 4).

Walshe’s equivalence would suggest that there is a continuation between the use of native and African to designate the people indigenous to conqueror South Africa. Yet, when considering Walshe’s writing on African Nationalism, the idea of being native to a territory is not incorporated into his analysis. Instead, he uses African merely as an identity designation without bearing in mind the ethical and political claim that is contained within the self-designation of African. Consider the following extract:

Associated with this more assertive reliance on the latent power of the African majority, was the Leagues’ emphasis on the need for psychological emancipation: black self-confidence, the eradication of self-pity and any sense of inferiority, and the search for some continuity with traditional value in the cauldron of modernity. (Walshe 1973: 33)
The term *native* is considered to be merely an identifier on par with *African* and *black*; native does not contain a claim to title of territory in Walshe’s formulation. The effect of Walshe’s formulation is that the inherent ethical and political claim to territory in the term *native* is replaced by a form of psychological association: *African, black, native, bantu*. Combined with this shift from an ethical principle to a psychological association is the recasting of political claims to justice and restitution to that of emotional wellbeing and ‘continuity with traditional value’.

The ethical and political claims of African Nationalism is thus hollowed out and reformulated as a series of assertions on psychological emancipation. In the writings of Tom Lodge, these assertions to psychological emancipation reflects a conservative and backward-looking mode of politics. Writing about Anton Musi-wakhe Lembede’s articulation of African Nationalism in the 1940s, Lodge makes the following claim: ‘What was required to channel the latent energy of working-class African in the direction of Congress was an appeal that would overcome the psychological inhibitions produced by racial oppression. This appeal, Lembede believed, should consist of a racially assertive nationalism which would serve to foster sentiments which were part of the ‘natural’ psychological make-up of all Africans’ (1983: 21).

In *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (Lodge 1983), Lodge considers the radical element in the early struggle for liberation to be the influence that the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union (ICU) and the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) had on the “newly” formed African National Congress (ANC). Considering our previous observations on the terms African and native, this change in name is itself significant. The SANNC was renamed to the ANC in 1923, and this renaming coincides with a change of political programmatic from the Cape liberal tradition to one based on a Marxist class-based perspective. For Lodge it is the emphasis of a class-based struggle that ‘radicalises’ the ANC into some sort of action in the 1920s, counter to the petty-bourgeois liberal direction taken by the early leaders of the SANNC (Lodge 1983: 5). Furthermore, the early SANNC leader’s emphasis on nativity and right to territory was to be replace by the idea of oppression as a universal feature under capitalism.
The CPSA is considered as having a progressive influence on the ANC through the former’s emphasis on the universal idea of oppression as class-based. Referring to the CPSA, Lodge states that the CPSA ‘was a political party, prepared because conditions was not yet ripe for revolution in South Africa, to work within and take advantage of existing political institutions. . . . Though it could, on occasion, be accused of opportunistic expediency over the race issue, in general the CPSA adhered to the doctrine that working class-unity transcended racial divisions’ (Lodge 1983: 7).

This radicalisation through class-based mobilisation has to do with the possibility for class allegiance to transcend race.

It is the emphasis on a class-based mobilisation that, according to Lodge, changes with the election of Pixley kaIsaka Seme into ANC leadership in 1930. For Lodge, Seme’s election coincides with a shift ‘several degrees rightwards into almost total moribundancy’ by the ANC (Lodge 1983: 9). Seme is branded a conservative because of his emphasis on the need for African reconstruction and the assertion of African history and subjectivity in the face of white supremacy (Seme 1906, Dunton 2003). This classification by Lodge of Seme as conservative sets the tone for Lodge’s reading of the nationalist element within African politics from the 1930s onward.

Writing about the formation of the PAC in 1959, Lodge puts forward their basic tenets as ethnic nationalism and an emotional claim to populism that reads the South African situation as firstly a situation based on racial domination (Lodge 1983: 84). The African Nationalism identified by Lodge is also one that attempts to return and reinvoke a collective and shared past of all Africans and ‘a political leadership which played upon violent emotions and identified oppressors in racial terms’ (Lodge 1983: 82). The nationalist approach is apparently opposed to that of other ANC leaders that ‘by virtue of their social background and moral beliefs, had not cared to exploit this [violent emotions and the identification of oppressors in racial terms]’ (ibid.). The possibility for progressive politics is thus for Lodge found in the ability to “transcend” national and race-based political solidarity for a more universal class-based solidarity.
Radically Literate

While Walshe can be considered a representative of a liberal historiographic tradition, Tom Lodge is one of the figures associated with the Marxist or radical historiographic tradition. We are not claiming that Walshe directly influenced Lodge, or vice versa, but rather that the same ideas on African Nationalism are present, albeit in different forms, in both their writings. While there were debates between the liberal and Marxist historians, and debates within the two approaches themselves, there was a thread still holding them together: their approach to African Nationalism. It is our contention that the similarities between the two can be attributed to the overall epistemological bias exhibited in the form of a white, Western, theoretical approach to Africa: Africa brings the data and the theory comes from the West. The will to dominance and ignorance on the part of these conqueror historians is the continuation of the injustice of epistemicide and is an argument that has been made by several authors.

In Lodge, as in Walshe, we can discern the same hollowing-out process of African Nationalism. Ethical and political claims are recast as psychological and emotive issues. For Lodge, the reference to sovereignty and title to territory was a way to mobilise the masses around ‘violent emotion’. The claim that these African Nationalists ‘identified oppressors in racial terms’ also shows Lodge’s allegiance to an epistemological paradigm of conqueror South Africa: the ethical and historical construction of race and its relationship to conquest is not considered as a significant political concern. The fact of conquest is thereby obfuscated through a dismissal of race and nationality as modes of political resistance. This characterisation by Walshe goes against the African Nationalist consideration of race and its ethical and historical development as a central element of any attempt at political resistance to conqueror South Africa.

The readings presented by Walshe and Lodge on African Nationalism and Black politics in conqueror South Africa see a reactive and conservative politics emerge in response to a growing disenfranchisement. These politics can at best beg for inclusion or present a class-based analysis of prevailing political problems. If, and when, a form of politics emerges that attempts to theorise black
solidarity or an assertion of African history and praxis, it is classified as conservative. For Walshe, the biggest influence on Africanist politics – the Cape liberal tradition, Garveyism, and the Churches – is all to be found post-European contact; Lodge, likewise, sees progressive politics only emerging through the ability of African leaders to articulate a ‘post’-nationalist and racial politics found in a class-based mobilisation.

André Du Toit characterises the position of historians like Lodge, and to a lesser degree Suttner, as ‘radical’ in that they tended to present the history of African resistance not merely in opposition to that of dominant Afrikaner nationalist histories but also against liberal historical approaches (Du Toit 2010). For Du Toit, the writings of these brand of historians can be seen as a ‘paradigm shift’ in that:

they substituted class for race as a basic explanatory category; they sought the origins of apartheid not in racial attitudes inherited from the era of premodern frontier conflict but in the exploitation of migrant labor (sic) in the diamond and gold mines, on commercial farms, and in industries of modern South Africa; they argued that apartheid was not an ‘irrational’ and ‘dysfunctional’ anomaly obstructing the course of capitalist progress, as liberal historians assumed and maintained, but that it actually amounted to a highly functional form of racial capitalism. (Du Toit 2010: 271)

Du Toit argues that this type of radical historiography was the dominant narrative in the development of conqueror South African history and politics.

While Du Toit focuses on the radical historians and their substitution of race with class, Dladla shows how both the liberals and Marxists are complicit in the same historical reading of African Nationalism. Dladla focuses on both the radicals and liberals and identifies the historiographical trends of Marxism and liberalism as ignoring both the question of conquest and title to territory in their interpretation of conqueror South African history. Referring specifically to liberal historiography, Dladla observes the following:

Among the most important objects of [the liberal] critique was that of the widely held assumption that apartheid was anti-capitalist or at least systemically incompatible with capitalism. Their doctrine held that the development of capitalism in South Africa would destroy apartheid in several ways, for example through growth and the demand of skilled
labour at a rate that the racist policies of apartheid could not afford. (Dladla 2018)

Regarding the Marxist historians, Dladla writes the following:

The radicals instead showed that apartheid was thriving precisely as a result of capitalism and that the two systems made up the highly compatible couple of ‘racial capitalism’. Other criticisms were levelled against the liberals’ attempts to suggest that the Boers, in the famous frontier-thesis tradition, introduced racism; instead, the radicals argued that British imperialism was the bedrock of racism. (Dladla 2018)

What is clear is that while readings like those of Walshe and Lodge focus on the history of African political movements and activities in response to both Afrikaner nationalist and liberal orthodox positions, they still marginalise the Africanist position. This is done through the employment mainly of pre-existing historical categories to read and understand the history of conqueror South Africa. An example of this is the dominance of a class-based approach to analyse conqueror South African history and politics from the 1960s. Walshe follows a liberal approach in his appraisal of African Nationalism while Lodge wholly subscribes to the analysis of class as a determining factor in his historical account of conqueror South African politics. Whether liberal or Marxist, the main problem with these approaches is that they skirt the ethical question of race in favour of the question of class. They also disregard the fundamental question of conquest in the unjust wars of colonisation. This is not done merely on a descriptive level but also on a substantive level with regard the methodologies employed. A class-based approach needs to adduce categories of labour, distribution, and value, in the tradition of Marxist social historiography. This does not allow its adepts to be responsive to the geopolitical area in which they work; instead, they tend to force certain events into pre-existing theoretical categories.5

**Contemporary Contexts**

In the interpretation previously outlined, African Nationalism is always already relegated to a moment in history, something to
be reflected upon from an academic distance. At best, African Nationalism is a phase in the dialectic leading towards a supposed multiracial and cosmopolitan conqueror South Africa. This can be understood as a specific from of conqueror epistemology that reduces African Nationalism to a secondary and derivative mode of discourse. This then manifests as a malicious ignorance of the theoretical and conceptual indicators of African Nationalism and reduces this movement to merely a historical and political occurrence with no theoretical possibilities. This conqueror epistemology is thus unable to consider African Nationalism as a form of Azanian Critical Philosophy. While Walshe’s and Lodge’s writings can be classified as being part of a specific historical era, the epistemological allegiance to a conqueror South Africa is still a trait in contemporary historiographical writing.

In a recent survey of the conqueror South African historical landscape published by Christopher Saunders in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, there is a section entitled ‘Afrocentric and Revisionist History’ (Saunders 2018). Saunders refers to conqueror South African historians beginning to adopt an Afrocentric approach to history around the time of decolonisation movements coming to prominence on the rest of the Continent. Except for a reference to Sol T. Plaatje and Jordan Kush Ngubane, it is not completely clear what exactly Saunders understands as an ‘Afrocentric approach to the past’ (Saunders 2018: 4). He does mention that these so-called new Afrocentric historians ‘did not draw upon earlier Afrocentric writing by a few black Africans who, without formal historical training, had written brief accounts of their own people’ (ibid.). Saunders tries to identify an Afrocentric historiography in South Africa with a specific form of social history that emphasises the lived experience of African people.

What makes Saunders’s 2018 article relevant to our argument is that he identifies Afrocentric historiography as the adaption of a British model of historical writing, social history, to South African history. While Saunders presents a survey of the writing of ‘professional historians’, it is understandable that he does not attempt to distil a specific theory of history from a particular set of events or sources. Saunders does, however, find an unlikely source for an ‘Afrocentric approach to the past’ in his formulation of a social history in Africa.
In Saunders’s reading, African Nationalism does not even appear as a moment in the development of a South African Afrocentric historical paradigm. Saunders identifies the influence on his brand of Afrocentric history as originating from ‘tropical Africa’ and the liberation movements in this ecologically identified area. We can thus see that Saunders still subscribes to the view of a conqueror South African history that relegates African Nationalism to not even a footnote in the discussion of an ‘Afrocentric approach to the past’.

**Ethno-Reasoning**

Saunders’s approach underlines our main argument of attempting to read African Nationalism in conqueror South Africa within a conqueror epistemology.

In a recent article by Raymond Suttner on African Nationalism as an intellectual tradition in South Africa (Suttner 2014), this same attempt to read African Nationalism within a conqueror epistemology is again evident. Suttner shares several interpretations with the authors already discussed, the most pertinent one being his conceptualisation of African Nationalism as the creation of a political subjectivity. Suttner follows Walshe and Lodge in this case by hollowing-out African Nationalism of any of its ethical claims based on conquest and recasts these claims as psychological needs and wants. Suttner states his aim in the beginning of his article as follows:

> The character of African Nationalism as a political and intellectual tradition relates to the emergence of political subjectivity. My understanding of such subjectivity connotes both African *subjection* under colonialism and apartheid, and African subject formation, *subjectivity*, in the sense of self-assertion and agency, emerging in distinct and often contested ways... This inquiry examines how and under what forms of self-representation and with what content African political subjectivity has been claimed under colonialism, apartheid and representative democracy achieved after 1994. (Suttner 2014: 121)

From the foregoing, it is evident Suttner makes a distinction between colonialism, apartheid, and post-1994 democracy. Making these qualitative distinctions between different eras in conqueror
South Africa obfuscates the ethical question of conquest. This latter fact shows that Suttner does not consider African Nationalism as the rejection of the ethical unjustifiability of conquest but rather as a process of subject-formation under different regimes. The foregoing extract also illustrates Suttner’s ideas regarding African Nationalism as merely a psychological response to different forms of oppression. This argument by Suttner is repeated in a section entitled ‘To Whom Does South Africa Belong?’ In this section, Suttner states that: ‘Africanism is understood here as meaning pride in culture and history and other elements of African achievement that have been trampled on under apartheid’ (2014: 123). Suttner’s emphasis on the psychological goals of African Nationalism is also discernible in his overall analysis as to the origin of African Nationalism in conqueror South Africa.

Suttner considers African Nationalism as developing with figures like Tiyo Soga or Tengu Jabavu, individuals who helped establish journalism and an active print press among the African urban working class. According to Suttner, ‘John Tengu Jabavu was central to this journalism and the major political figure for most of nineteenth-century Cape African politics. The establishment of newspapers provided fora where African voices were raised with regard to many pressing issues and it helped form a broad consensus on common grievances’ (2014: 124). This idea of African Nationalism utilised by Suttner understands the idea of the nation as arising at the same time as mass circulation of print publications, in turn enabling the creation of an intellectual class that can assist in formulating ‘common grievances’. This idea of the nation resembles theories of nation formation and nationalism mostly associated with European leftist historians and academics (Hobsbawn 1996; Anderson 1991). Accordingly, the ability to disseminate information through media gives rise to the ability to create ideas of history to legitimise a specific contemporary method of approaching the question of the nation. The rise of the modern European state in the seventeenth century and the establishment of the nation-state in the European Continent is the historical model for this argument. Suttner thus does not consider African Nationalism as a movement and form of resistance that predates the rise of an urban class of African workers who were able to ‘transcend’ tribal and ethnic differences and articulate a mode of resistance against exploitation.
Suttner’s misunderstandings of African Nationalism are all discernible in his attempted analysis of Anton Muziwakhe Lembede. Suttner refers to Lembede’s position as ‘a discourse similar to current essentialist thinking found in South Africa on African customs and cultures – what Paulin J. Hountondji calls ‘ethnophilosophy’, which is based on an ‘imaginary consensus’ that is claimed to have prevailed in Africa prior to conquest’ (Suttner 2014: 136–137). Suttner’s previous assessment fails on the ground that it adopts a narrow and outdated definition of ethnophilosophy. Suttner’s viti- ated understanding of the term ‘ethnophilosophy’ is used in merely a derogatory sense. Suttner cites Hountondji and his theorisation on ethnophilosophy as the only source on the topic. Hountondji’s use of the term ‘ethnophilosophy’ first appeared in ‘Comments on Contemporary African Philosophy’ in 1970. Hountondji was responding to a specific debate within African philosophy regarding, amongst other points, Placide Frans Tempels’s La Philosophie Bantou. The goal of Tempels’s work was ‘to detect a coherent philosophical system among the Bantu-speaking Africans, based on a distinct ontology which conceives of being as dynamic. This, according to Tempels, sets it apart from a Western ontology, which considers being as static’ (Dübgen and Skupien 2019: 14).

Tempels’s work was important in the 1970s for African philosophers since, as Franziska Dübgen and Stefan Skupien argue, ‘at this period of time, such a reversal of ontology fascinated a European readership, because it alluded to a radical difference between Western and African civilization’ (2019: 15). Hountondji’s criticism of African philosophy thus needs to be understood as engaging in a debate on the nature of African philosophy in liberated countries on the Continent. Hountondji reserves the term ‘eth- nophilosophy’ for the type of thought that parades anthropology or ethnology as philosophy. Hallen sums up Hountondji’s position on ethnophilosophy as: (1) a philosophy that presents itself as a characteristic of a people instead of an individual; (2) a philosophy that only finds its sources in the pre-colonial African past; (3) that methodologically this type of philosophy works with changeless and timeless images and concepts from the past (Hallen 2010). For Suttner, ethnophilosophy merely refers to a mode of thinking that invokes a past in the form of an ethnic identity and not to a
mode of philosophising that treats ethnography and anthropology as guiding resources for developing a methodological and conceptual apparatus.

The concept ethnophilosophy thus has its own philosophical history and debates that are not taken into account by Suttner. Instead, ethnophilosophy is decontextualised and used as a classifier to denote ‘essentialist thinking’. Suttner’s use of ethnophilosophy as a derogatory term is meant to objectively disqualify Lembede’s work from serious theoretical engagement. This is done without taking into account contemporary discourses on, for example, border gnosis (Mignolo 2000), post-ethnophilosophy (Osha 2011), and philosophy of liberation (Dussel 2003); all of which make the point of situational thinking. Suttner’s classification of Lembede as an ethnosopher has an implicit assumption that there exists a philosophy that is not politically and culturally situated. As Pathé Diagne argues, ‘all thought is thought from somewhere. There is no such thing as a thought in itself. Every explicit thought is contingent, dated, and produced in the context of a possible culture, with its data, concepts, and theoretical frameworks’ (Diagne in Joseph 1993: 95). What has presented itself until very recently as philosophy, history, and social theory ‘proper’ is proving to be no more than a conqueror epistemology: an ethnophilosophy of conquest.

Suttner thus works with the underlying assumption that there are philosophies and theories that do not derive from some place. This would be one of the ways to understand his narrow interpretation of ethnophilosophy. Suttner therefore joins Walshe, Lodge, and Saunders, in attempting to analyse African Nationalism within an epistemology of conqueror South Africa. Lembede’s assertion of an African history as integral to an anti-imperial struggle invokes an idea of nationalism and the nation prior to the mere formation of a nation-state. The classification of this as mere ‘ethnophilosophy’ then has to accord with the view that Lembede was precisely opposing that Africa had no history and no politics before the conqueror came and that any type of reference to such a history is but a nostalgic imagination of a past. Suttner does not attempt to read Lembede as a theoretician nor does he attempt to understand African Nationalism on its own terms.
Lembede and an Africanist Paradigm of History

Since Suttner’s discussion was specifically on Lembede, we will investigate Lembede’s life and work to see how he can be read contrapuntally to Suttner’s own interpretation. Consequently, we will show how Lembede’s theorisation of African Nationalism concurs with an Azanian Critical Philosophy.

Anton Muziwakhe Lembede was a schoolteacher and lawyer born in Kwazulu-Natal in 1914. After obtaining his Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Law degrees from the University of South Africa, he moved to Johannesburg in 1943 (Edgar and Msumza 1996: 11; Gerhart 1978: 45). It was Lembede and Ashby Peter Mda who would be instrumental in the forming of the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) in 1944. Several of the leading thinkers, and ideas, of the earlier Africanist movement could be found in the Youth League, specifically regarding issues of national liberation, self-determination, and Africa for the Africans. The ideas developed by Lembede and Mda, and being brought to action through the Youth League, were able to operationalise a possible mode of politics that is based on an Africanist idea of history.

Lembede was elected as ANCYL president in 1944 and along with Mda had a significant influence in the drafting of the ANC Youth League Manifesto in 1944 (ANC 1944). The main concerns of the document were African self-determination and the idea of African unity. The manifesto opens by asserting that the problem of conqueror South Africa is ‘the contact of the White race with the Black race [that] has resulted in the emergence of a set of conflicting living conditions and outlooks on life which seriously hamper South Africa’s progress to nationhood’ (ibid.). The manifesto also identifies race as the locus for oppression. In Lembede we can thus discern a formulation of race as the motivating factor for theorising African liberation.

In an article written in Ilanga Lase Natal in 24 February 1945 – ‘Some Basic Principles of African Nationalism’ – Lembede lays out the philosophical basis of African Nationalism as a rejection of the purely materialistic and biological interpretation of the human being, something that is echoed in the Africanist Manifesto (Lembede 1945/1996: 85). Lembede asserts that the human consists of ‘body, mind and spirit with needs, desires and aspirations in all
three elements of his nature. History is a record of humanity’s striving for complete self-realisation’ (ibid.). Later in the same article, when dealing with the historical basis for African Nationalism Lembede quotes Paul Kruger to the effect that ‘one who wants to create the future must not forget the past’ and goes on elaborating about the great African leaders ‘Shaka, Moshoeshoe, Hintsa, Sikhukhuni (sic), Khama, Sobhuza, Mozilikazi (sic) etc’ (ibid.: 52–53). As Lembede goes through the different sections on the economy, democracy, and ethics, it becomes clear that history plays a central role in relation to African Nationalism and an Africanist social theory.

In articles such as ‘Know Thyself’ (1945), ‘National Unity among Africans’ (1946), ‘In Defence of Nationalism’ (1947), Lembede highlights the theme of self-assertion of an African history. Referencing the dictum by Socrates – ‘Know Thyself’ – Lembede (132) writes the following:

> Each nation has its own unique character which no other nation in the world possesses or can possess. Each nation has thus its own peculiar talents and potentialities to develop and to realise. Each nation has its own peculiar contribution to make toward the general progress, welfare and happiness of mankind.

This theme of self-assertion is a central theme in Lembede’s argument regarding African Nationalism. In ‘National Unity among Africans’, Lembede (135) writes that ‘the fact that Unity among African tribes is a sine qua non and a prerequisite condition to National Liberation and progress cannot be gainsaid’.

As mentioned, Delport has pointed out that Sobukwe’s thought exemplifies an Africanism that is both a social theory and a historical praxis. Sobukwe was greatly influenced by Lembede and, as Delport argues:

> This form of being governed [outlined by Lembede above] is the reference to a mode of politics that existed prior to its disruption by colonial conquest. Sobukwe sees Africanism as at once a historical praxis invoking a way of living differently as well as a political movement of anti-imperialism; a form of political consciousness as well as an actionable political programmatic. The political argument of restoration and restitution was not seen as separate or in fact qualitatively different from the struggle against epistemicide and a new conception of the social. (Delport 2016: 57)
Sobukwe’s invocation of Lembede when referring to Africanism is a reference to a way of understanding and reading the history of conqueror South Africa and the need for Africanism to be both a historical praxis and a mode of resistance and struggle; historical praxis as resistance and struggle. Lembede himself attempted to draw a formulation of Africanism from the historical struggles against colonisation and conquest. Lembede’s invocation of African leaders involved in these struggles and the battles they fought also shows what Sobukwe later articulates as the ‘historical fact’ of a nationalist struggle: the fact that the point of articulation of the struggle should not be against apartheid only but against a history of colonial dispossession and conquest.

**May Day to Today**

Because of the marginal position afforded to African history and politics due to the successive white supremacist regimes of southern Africa, the assertion of an African identity and African mode of political organisation becomes by its very nature a combative position. This also meant, contra to the formulation of the radical historians, that African resistance to apartheid was not a resistance against an unfair system of capital accumulation only but against an unfair system of capital accumulation brought about by successive regimes of white supremacy. This position can be clearly discerned from the Africanist’s response to the May Day strikes of 1950. After the National Party (NP) government came into power in 1948, the position taken by the Africanists were to differ from that taken by the ANC as a whole. The Programme of Action authored by the ANC Youth League included decisive inputs from Lembede and Mda, and its programme was a wholesale refusal of trusteeship or white leadership in the struggle as well as a sustained process of positive action. The adoption of the Programme of Action officially in 1949 at an ANC conference was only achieved after the ousting of incumbent president Dr A.B. Xuma. Xuma showed resistance to the new Programme of Action and was replaced by an old All African Convention (AAC) member Dr J.S. Moroka (Nkoane 1967: 28). Although Moroka was elected to push the Programme of Action within the ANC, Matthew Nkoane notes that ‘had [he]...
deliberately set out to sabotage the programme, in the next three years he could not have done it better’ (ibid.).

The first attempt at an implementation of the Programme of Action was a call for a mass stoppage of work and a day of prayer on 26 June 1950. Although this mass stay away was supposed to act in accordance with the Programme of Action, it was a clear ignoring of the Youth League position in favour of a programme of passive resistance influenced by Mahatma Ghandi, ‘one of the most avidly read of the leaders of the colonial world’ (ibid.: 29). Before the ANC could implement their passive resistance, the CPSA pre-empted the stay-away by calling a one-day general strike for May Day in 1950.

What specifically angered the young Africanists was that the CPSA did not attempt to organise the white workers but focused their action on black workers. Of the fourteen people who died on 1 May 1950, not one was a white worker. It further emphasised the Africanist position on non-collaboration and ‘the Youth Leaguers argued that a workers’ day was, in the South African context, only of secondary importance, since the workers were oppressed not so much because they were workers as because they were African. It was as Africans that the people suffered oppression in South Africa, as a nation rather than as workers, they maintained’ (ibid.). The insistence by the Africanists on an African answer to African problems was highlighted by the activities of the May Day strikes. The point of critique launched by the Africanists was that being oppressed as a nation, the African people must organise as a nation, not as a class.

The objective of this example is to show how an Africanist reading of a particular historical event may differ from a conqueror South African historiographical one. The response by the Africans to the May Day protests show how a political programme of questioning the ethical justifiability of conquest may look. The insistence to organise as a nation indicates that the locus of the struggle was not to be found in the injustices of apartheid but rather the ethical justifiability of conquest. The example of the May Day protests and the Africanist’s response to these protests can also be understood within the four conditions established by Dladla for an Azanian Critical Philosophy: the insistence that Africans were not oppressed as workers and the acknowledgement that collaboration is not an
immediately desirable or feasible prospective. These objections were not based on regressive ideas of psychological wholeness and historical myths but on a practical understanding of the theoretical arguments at hand. The Africanists’ response to the May Day protest and their actions leading up to and during the protests exemplify a form of African Nationalism that is able to provide critical commentary and a plan of action.

Towards the End

We have attempted to show in this article how a historical paradigm that considers African Nationalism as ethnophilosophical, regressive, and reactionary cannot conceptualise history within the framework of an Azanian Critical Philosophy. We have shown how a conqueror South African historiography can be classified as one that does not acknowledge the ethical question of conquest. This is a historiographical framework that is at odds with the basic acknowledgment of African sovereignty and the ethical unjustifiability of conquest that is central to African Nationalism’s political philosophy. We have used the schematic of an Azanian Critical Philosophy to characterise the basic tenets of a liberatory South African historiography; that is, one that identifies the ethical unjustifiability of conquest as the philosophical grounding of its investigation. We have shown how African Nationalism has been interpreted as forming part of a conqueror South African historiography instead of African Nationalism as being a counter to such a historiography.

These attempts to place African Nationalism within a conqueror epistemological paradigm fails since it cannot account for the critique contained within African Nationalism as a historical paradigm. Consequently, the basic fact of conquest is obfuscated and its ethical claims hollowed out. We would perhaps be prudent to observe Amos Wilson’s (1993: 25) reminder:

European historiography lies in many ways. It even lies when ostensibly telling the truth. . . . We have to recognise that European history-writing is an institution the way any other discipline is an institution. And the function of institutions in any oppressive society is to maintain the status quo.
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Notes

1. See the introduction to this journal by N. Dladla for a comprehensive account of Azania and its ethical and political significance.
2. In this article, the author makes an argument for considering African Nationalism as a social theory by analysing the work of Sobukwe. The current article’s goal is to show how African Nationalism has been marginalised in the historiographic traditions of South Africa. In the current article, the focus of an Africanist historiography will be on Lembede’s writings.
3. Although there where debates in the 1970s and 1980s between Marxist intellectuals about the specificities of a national democratic revolution and a seizure of state power, it was within the confines set by an already existing theoretical framework. See the 1986 edition of Transformation with contributions by Jeremy Cronin, Peter Hudson, and Neville Alexander, for an example of this debate.
6. All texts by Lembede are available in Edgar and Msumza, Freedom in Our Lifetime.

References


