

The Early African Press in Natal

Inkanyiso Yase Natal

April 1889 — June 1896

The earliest African newspaper in Natal emanated, not surprisingly, from a mission station. Supported by the Anglican Church in Pietermaritzburg, *Inkanyiso* (The Enlightener) was produced at St Alban's College by a group of African Christians under the editorial guidance of Revd Francis James Green, son of Dean Green. Billed as 'the first native journal in Natal', it started as a monthly newspaper, with articles in English and Zulu. In 1889 it became a fortnightly, then a weekly in 1891 until its demise in 1896. In September 1891 it claimed 2 500 subscribers. In 1891 its name was changed to *Inkanyiso yase Natal*, the Natal Light.

Although its origins were in a religious institution, its orientation was largely social and political. From the very beginning it was largely controlled by African journalists. The first black editor, Solomon Kumalo, came from a prominent mission family from Natal's foremost mission station at Edendale. *Inkanyiso* was principally the mouthpiece of a politically aware, largely Christian, African middle class whose aspirations were for inclusion and acceptance within colonial civil society. During the 1880s and 1890s, as the racial exclusivism of settlers came to influence state policies more and more, so the possibilities for such inclusion became more remote.

Christian, or *Kholwa* communities had separately petitioned the colonial government during the 1870s, voicing dissatisfaction with their inferior status in colonial society. In adopting a Christian life-style, symbolised by their European dress and homes, and by their mission education, the *Kholwa* had turned their backs on their communities of origin. In spite of this, they remained subject to customary law, which in many ways was no longer relevant to the manner in which they conducted their lives. They had been thrown out of their clans, and been refused any of the benefits of communal life because of their adoption of Christianity. The *Kholwa* participated fully in the economic life of the colony. Many of the *Kholwa* were, by the 1890s, substantial landowners. They were grieved that their Christian education and participation in colonial property relations was not recognised by the colonial state.

Government recognition of their separate status had been given by Law 26 of 1865, which provided for exemption from customary law on individual application to the Governor as Supreme Chief. The *Kholwa* were suspicious of the act because of this. They wanted exemption to be granted to all Christians. By 1880 only 27 men, 23 women and 67 children were exempted. In the 1881-2 Native Affairs Commission, the evidence of several leading *Kholwa* went further than the demand for exemption, and expressed also the desire for direct representation in the Legislative Assembly.

In the absence of such representation, exempted Africans were prompted to form their own pressure group. In 1887, two years before *Inkanyiso* was established, a society for the protection of the rights of exempted Africans was founded, *The Funamalungelo Society*. Its aim was to bring exempted Africans together, in order for them to know and understand one another, to learn about the position of exempted Africans, and to improve themselves 'to the highest state of civilisation'.

Inkanyiso was established to express the views of this group. In every edition of *Inkanyiso* the position of exempted Africans was discussed in its editorials or its news columns. The advent of responsible government in 1893 heralded increased control and decreasing opportunity for the *Kholwa* population. All discriminatory legislation applicable to the African population in general, was interpreted as applicable to the exempted Africans. By narrowing the meaning of exemption in this legalistic manner, the state unintentionally provoked the

beginnings of a broader political consciousness which would, in the last year of the century, find expression in the formation of the Natal Native Congress and ultimately embrace all classes of African in Natal.

The three extracts below are chosen from the period of independent African control over *Inkanyiso*. They provide important insights into the mind of the African middle class of the mid-1890s, and their experience of discrimination and subordination. The style of journalism is very similar to that used by the white press of the time, with long articles expressing a distinctive point of view.

In 1895, as the first extract shows, *Inkanyiso yase Natal* became wholly African owned and controlled. Its audience was now explicitly defined as both black and white in the Colony. The paper's objective was to bring progressive African opinion to the notice of government and colonist alike, in the hope that their views would lead to a better understanding and sensible reorientation of policy.

The second extract deals with the position of exempted Africans. It discusses the implications of exemption and the expectations originally attached to it. The reality is instead a galling degradation, where educated people are treated as children, while men of inferior caste are given greater freedom. Tempering their protestations with expressions of loyalty and respect, the article warns that the result will be discontent, and even 'graver consequences'.

The third extract discusses the necessity for 'civilised' Africans to organise to promote their social and political objectives. It complains that the efforts of the *Kholwa* to advance themselves are misconstrued even by 'otherwise enlightened men' who are blinkered by their racial prejudice. Rather than wanting to stir discontent, their demands reflect respect for the benefits of British rule. Participation in government would be the best guarantee 'against disaffection'.

SHEILA MEINTJES

Friday, 4 January, 1895

Inkanyiso Yase Natal

With this issue *Inkanyiso Yase Natal* passes entirely into the hands of the Natives. It has long been their organ and has for several years past given expression, through the English columns set for that purpose, to Native opinion. But much has occurred to show that one thing has been wanting, and that has now been supplied by the Natives taking over *Inkanyiso* as their own property. This, the only Native paper in the colony, has become thoroughly established, has a large circulation, and promises to have an influence for good among our people which we trust will never be weakened. The Proprietors intend to carry on *Inkanyiso* not only in the interests of the Natives but also of the white man — of the colony generally — for, not only do they wish to 'give publicity to the thoughts and opinions of our people in order that, as our English friends become more and more acquainted with the same, a better understanding between us may be established'; but it will be their aim, while protecting the right of their countrymen and forwarding their interests, to be strictly on the side of law and order. They consider it 'desirable to give our people a vent for the loyal and orderly expression of their views and grievances'; But *Inkanyiso* will be 'the mouthpiece of those only who approach us in a calm and reasoning mood, and with due respect to the Government placed over them.' They, therefore, trust that a readiness in the ruling power to *listen*, however feebly they may express their views, will be the means of establishing that sympathy and confidence in the minds of our people which is so desirable. 'Such being our objects,' concludes the circular from which we quote, 'in taking over *Inkanyiso*, we hope to meet with the support of the public that our paper may have an influence for good.' It will be seen then that the intentions of the proprietors are good, and we sincerely trust that nothing will occur to prevent these being carried out. In *Inkanyiso* our people will

possess a medium which we trust they will value more and more, and which will doubtless be of great service to them. May the blessings of a Prosperous new year rest upon the new proprietors of *Inkanyiso yase Natal* and all its readers.

Friday, 21 June, 1895

The Position of Exempted Natives

The question of the position of the exempted Native is a burning one, and sooner or later trouble must come should the present condition of things be persisted in. It used to be understood that exemption from Native law put the individual obtaining it, in the position of the European, subject to the laws and practices ruling the latter, but also conferring all the privileges and freedom which he enjoys. That this was a reasonable view is borne out by the fact that exemption can not be claimed as a right, but is granted as a special privilege after due investigation and enquiry. Hence it must be presumed that the Native obtaining letters of exemption has proved to the satisfaction of the proper Authorities his fitness to be relieved of the child-like submission to the tribal system, and to take his proper place amongst the citizens of the Colony, regardless of the vulgar prejudices attaching to colour and race questions. That such a step is a long one we freely grant, and because it is so, we admit that the greatest care should be taken in giving exemption, and that it would be better to err on the side of excessive caution, than to exercise the power recklessly or carelessly. But we do maintain that once this is done, the right should be a reality and not a sham, and that it is nothing less than a disgrace to the British race, and a violation of all its best traditions, that the latter should be the case.

Under the present system the Native gives up many undoubted advantages, and in all probability severs friendly and even family ties, abandoning customs which have been almost part of his nature. He sacrifices the profit of the Lobola system, and sacrifices also the absolute authority which the traditions of his race confer on the head of the family. He forfeits also that care of his social and public interest which our government gives the unexempted Native to an almost fatherly extent. All this is done because training and study have revealed to him the greater beauty of the manliness and freedom of European life, and he wishes to adopt it, and give his descendants the benefit of being the equals of those for whom their habits laws and customs have done so much. What, however, does he in reality receive? He never can take a part in the Government of the Country which belonged to his race ere the white man ventured across the sea, nor can he have any reasonable hope of his children ever being allowed to do so. He has to submit to the degrading Curfew law, under the penalty of being hunted like a thief, and treated like one if detected in its breach. He sees Asiatics of the lowest type allowed the free use of liquor, but he, who has probably the strength of character to be moderate, may not have even a glass of beer without the risk of being treated like a felon. Teetotallers may indeed say that this latter restriction is beneficial, but it is not on the abstract principles of temperance or indulgence that objection is taken to such a restriction.

It is because it assumes an inferiority in the most galling manner, and brands the Native as one who can have no freedom of thought or action, but

must be coaxed or petted like a child, or coerced like a slave. We could quite understand forbidding the sale of liquor to all classes, be the idea right or wrong. But the exempted Native has cause for complaint when he is specially dealt with while the low class Asiatic, or low class white, can do as he likes. The first named naturally says that obtaining exemption proves him to have power of thought, and of will. Why then, he asks, should his freedom of action be curtailed?

It is by no means our desire to create or foment discontent by these remarks of ours, and we can claim that the efforts of this journal have invariably been directed to promote and strengthen that feeling of loyalty and respect to the authorities which fortunately is the prevailing characteristic of the general bulk of our Native population. All the same there is a plain duty to be performed, and that is to point out clearly that existing methods of dealing with exempted Natives are certain to provoke at least discontent, and perhaps afterwards graver consequences. It is not in human nature to rest content with a system which, promising material benefit for certain action, deliberately denies these benefits when that action is adopted. It is not wise, to say the least of it, to educate a man out of barbarism, and then to show plainly that he must remain an inferior almost chattel all his life, no matter his personal moral character, or his intellectual ability. It is neither wise or christian-like to preach the doctrine that all men are equal before the God of the white man, and then, when the Native has accepted his faith at the sacrifice of feelings handed down to him from generations, to treat him as a moral and a social pariah. Yet it is idle to say all these things are not done, or to deny that these gross inconsistencies do not disgrace the administration of Native law in Natal. It is because they do, that we offer a solemn warning to our rulers of the dangers attendant on the present course. We believe we have many men amongst us who have broad views, and who can take a view of the position wider than that bounded by the narrow limits of race and colour prejudices. We would appeal to such to combat the ideas that retard the true development of the Colony, and work injustice to a considerable section of its residents. We are aware that the task is a wearisome and ungrateful one demanding untiring perseverance, and undaunted resolution. Nevertheless the reward of success would be immense to right thinking men, and however long right and justice may have to struggle against ignorance and prejudice, the final end of the contest can never be in doubt.

Friday, 16 August 1895

Organisation

It should never be forgotten, by those of our race who have had the advantages of civilisation, that organisation is indispensable to any successful attempt for the bettering of their condition. This is all the more necessary because of the disheartening difficulties which surround all who would raise the Native above the position of the hewer of wood and the drawer of water, to which many even otherwise enlightened men would keep him. It is lamentable that those who have a benevolent interest in our race too often express it with a kind of contemptuous pity, and regard our efforts at advancement much as they would a trick learned by a favourite animal, instead of the natural impulse of human beings like themselves. When we

come to others, the openly expressed contempt, and the avowed intention of oppression are positive sources of danger, and the worst of it is that such men exercise a political influence which sometimes dominates the best intentioned statesmen. The Native, as against all this, has no political status or privilege whatsoever, and must be content to take whatever benefits may be grudgingly flung him by churlish benefactors. The only thing to combat all this is steady organisation, and, disheartening as the task is, it must be undertaken by those who have the true welfare of our race at heart. It is quite true that for those who will now bear the heat and burden of the day there is little hope of personal advantage, and like Moses they may only perhaps see the promised land from afar. Still the work must be done, and the reward must be in consciousness of right doing, which it may be some consolation to feel that the mental activity of intellectual struggle is better than the dread sloth, which resigning ourselves to dismal bondage must of necessity engender.

The greatest of all the objects of those who will take part in such a movement is the obtaining of the franchise for our race, and such an object should never be lost sight of for an instant. There are, it is true, other things that may be sought for as instalments of the full privilege of the franchise, and the several grievances arising out of the administration of the exemption law should also receive attention. These however must be regarded as means to an end, and as so many stepping stones whereby the highest pinnacle of political freedom may be reached. Without the franchise the Native must remain a serf no matter to what height of civilisation he may attain. With it he will stand on a level with the European, and it will be his own fault if the statute book of the Colony continues to be disgraced with legislation of which the middle ages would have been ashamed. Of course, as we have said, all this means hard and ungrateful labour, and it may well be that many who enter upon it full of enthusiasm and energy will leave the fight disgusted with the apparent hopelessness of the task. That however only goes to prove the absolute necessity for organisation if the effort is to be made at all. Organisation, we hold, means the banding together of all who have a common interest and object, and the employment of each unit in the particular work to which he may be best suited. First of all a central body is needed composed of those in whom the whole community has trust, but with such provision for changing its composition as the exigencies of the time may demand. To this body should belong the duty of allotting what each individual should do and the formation of committees to attend to particular matters, and to the general welfare of the cause in each district of the Colony. There are some who can explain in homely but forcible language the objects sought for, and their work is not the least important to be done. Others are gifted with the power of expressing their views clearly and forcibly in writing, and they should without ceasing put the case before those who will have in the first instance to hear and decide upon our claims. The efforts of those would not be confined to the Colony alone, but the great British public should be made aware of the position so that the influence of beyond the sea may be enlisted on our side. Others again may have the ear of our politicians and they should use every chance of impressing them with our views. But every single section and every single individual should work upon a settled plan, and must be prepared to sink idiosyncracies and

prejudices and to obey loyally the will of the majority. If only these principles be adopted and adhered to, final success is certain even though the difficulties be so great as to appear at first sight insurmountable.

We are quite aware that the very broaching of this idea will cause a howl of indignation from those who are ruled by ignorant prejudice rather than by the calm voices of reason and of logic. It will be charged that the political and social extinction of the European is threatened, and it will even be said that seditious rebellion is being preached. We shall hear too these blasphemous appeals to the so called intentions of the Almighty to make and keep the coloured races subject to the white. That these will have some effect we do not doubt, for the battle of right and of reason was never yet won without reverse, and without the strenuous opposition of the injustice that saw its extinction in its success. But the very violence of opposition will do good, for it will lead thinking men to enquire for themselves, and once that process has begun the end is not far off. It may not be in our day, but the time will assuredly come when race prejudice will be a thing of the past, and men will wonder how it was ever allowed to have an influence in the administration of affairs. As to the charges which we have indicated, they would hardly want refutation, were it not that such parrot cries are too often taken up in the heat of the moment, and spread, doing mischief, almost before there is time to contradict them. So far from the efforts of the Natives to take part in the affairs of the country being an indication of discontent, it is a clear proof of the contrary. It shows that the African appreciates the benefit of British rule so much that he desires to participate in it to its fullest extent, and to become an active factor in its administration and working. His doing so will be the best guarantee for thorough devotion and loyalty and the best safeguard against disaffection which might endanger the public safety. It can not be denied that, often with the best intentions, the European has sadly bungled in his management of Native affairs. At one time an effusive and mistaken benevolence has sought to thrust habits and customs upon a people before they were fitted to receive them. At another, timorous apprehension made oppressive regulations, which irritated almost to the verge of outbreak. All these things were because those who were principally concerned had no voice, and those who acted for them had no true knowledge of their wants or feelings. To-day, although much remains to be done, there is a strong leaven of advancement amongst the Natives of this Colony. In this leaven is the best aid to the Government of the State if it only be treated in a spirit of broad minded consideration and generosity. That many of our best statesmen wish to do this we freely grant, but they are hampered by the weight of ignorance and prejudice on the one hand and of the apathy of our race on the other. If for no other reason than the latter, therefore, the organisation we have advocated has become imperative, and we urge it upon all who have the true welfare of South Africa at heart.

