

**AB Xuma and the politics of racial accommodation  
versus equal citizenship and its implications for  
nation building and power sharing in South Africa**

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**Introduction**

Having presented an eloquent and moving address at a public meeting of the Bantu Studies Club of the University of the Witwatersrand on 30 May 1932, Alfred Bitini Xuma closed with the following words, quoted from the writings of Booker T. Washington, which summarised his dream for race relations in South Africa:

The slave's chain and the master's alike broken;  
The one curse of the race held both in tether;  
They are rising, all are rising –  
The black and the white together (in Xuma 1932:23).

It is from statements such as this that the vision of Alfred Bitini Xuma who, eight years later, would be elected president of the African National Congress (ANC), was distilled. In this article I intend to make a contextual analysis of the work of this great leader in his crusade to overcome racism and the deprivation of black people of their basic rights to live as equal citizens of South Africa. Embodied in the poetic words above is a passion for a better South Africa, which at the time seemed unattainable, and the hope that a time would come when white people would no longer be prisoners of a false sense of superiority and black people would no longer experience oppression and the perception that they are inferior to their white counterparts. It is now almost sixteen years since the dismantling of apartheid and the restoration of democracy and human rights in South Africa, but the problem of the perception of the racial superiority of whites and inferiority of blacks remains. The chains binding both master and slave are sadly still in place in the minds of the people, and the vision of a nation rising together encapsulated in the words quoted above remains unrealised, for, as Thabo Mbeki (1998:71) observed, South Africa remains two nations in one state. In general terms one is black and poor, while the other is white and rich.

In 1946, at the general assembly of the United Nations (UN) in the United States of America, a relatively unknown Dr. AB Xuma (as he was affectionately known amongst his colleagues and comrades), president of the ANC, medical doctor and African of Xhosa descent, made a passionate plea to the UN Council to assist black people in their struggle not just for human and political rights, but for equal citizenship in South Africa. His plea was different from that made by earlier African nationalist leaders, who had called for the gradual assimilation of Africans into the European way of life and the extension to them of the rights enjoyed by white people in South Africa. Others were calling for the liberation of African countries in the hope that whites would leave or that they would be driven into the sea, as Marcus Garvey's radical African nationalism had suggested (in Karis & Carter 1973:328). Xuma's call was different in that he identified the need to give black people citizenship status equal to that of whites. He believed that all races could live side by side, being committed to common nationhood. His vision was not for a South Africa that accommodated African people by fitting them into white power structures and privileges; instead, he called for acknowledgment of the equal dignity of black and white people, which would allow black people to be elevated to the same status as white people in the country so that together they could build a new nation. Embedded in Xuma's call was the recognition of the dignity of black people and their full integration into South African society, with all the privileges and responsibilities available to white people, including the right to participate in the political processes of the country.

At the time that was a radical call, since whites understood themselves to be superior to and therefore different from black people, and the majority of black people believed themselves to be inferior to their white counterparts; calling for equal citizenship was therefore tantamount to calling for the impossible, and differed from the sentiments of African nationalists in other African countries. When Xuma became president general of the ANC one

of his contributions was to change the focus from fighting for rights to that of fighting for full citizenship. South Africa owes its liberation to many organisations, but predominantly to the ANC; the ANC in turn owes its revival to a powerful resistance movement under Dr Xuma. Chief Albert Luthuli (2006:100) testified to this when he said:

When Dr Xuma took over the national leadership, he was at the spearhead, and the contribution which he made to the organisation of the movement (ANC) should not be forgotten.

But who was Dr AB Xuma, and what makes him important in the struggle for nation building and power sharing in contemporary South Africa? Can we learn anything from his legacy? These are the two fundamental questions to which I will be seeking answers here.

An attempt to write about Xuma must be welcomed, because despite the brilliance of his career and enormous contribution to the struggle, he has received very little scholarly attention, a fact pointed out by Steven Gish in his doctoral thesis (Gish 1994:6). Other than Gish's extensive work, only a single article, written by Richard Ralston and published in the *Journal of African Historical Studies*, and an autobiographical essay that Xuma wrote for *Drum Magazine* in 1954, reveal anything substantial about him. His name is mentioned in passing in a number of historical documents, and appears on the papers and speeches that he delivered, yet, as Gish (1994:7) notes, the fleeting references to him in papers and journals exclude Xuma's formative years in the 1930s and 1940s, and thus present an incomplete picture of his work and, ultimately, his political contribution.

Xuma's legacy has been marginalised for two reasons. The first is the perception of some within the ANC that he was too elitist and lacked understanding of the aspirations of the African masses whose foundation was African nationalism. The second is Xuma's challenge to black people to go beyond the struggle for racial inclusion to racial equality, sometimes coupled with sharply worded exhortations to black people to live up to the expectations of being equal to other races. This essay seeks to make a contribution to the nation building and power sharing debate by drawing insights from Xuma's legacy. It argues that the current debate on the two issues identified above is embedded in what Xuma was proposing when he made his call for equal citizenship for all the races of South Africa.

In an endeavour to contribute to this debate, the essay gives an account of Xuma's life and work and his understanding of the idea of equal citizenship, and from it draws insights for nation building and power sharing for a multi-racial, multi-ethnic and democratic South Africa. The discussion investigates how issues of citizenship, equality and power sharing connect in nation building. However, it presents not only Xuma's ideas on the subject, but also a critical assessment of a complex issue, namely whether the manner in which Xuma drew his understanding of citizenship has not reinforced the loss of individuality in citizenship and consequently undermined his quest for a free, post-colonial South African nation where people are equal and proud of who they are. The essay is divided into four parts. *Part one* provides a short biography of AB Xuma, the purpose of which is to illustrate the role of the religious community (especially the church) in the making of this great leader, thus revealing the important role that religion can play in nation building in the new South Africa. *Part two* examines Xuma's notion of equal citizenship and nation building. *Part three* draws lessons and insights from his legacy by describing, analysing and evaluating themes in his understanding of the notion of citizenship in a multi-ethnic and multiracial society such as South Africa. *Part four* concludes the paper with a summary of the essay.

### **Biographical notes: Alfred Bitini Xuma, the man**

To understand Xuma's ideological stance on racial equality and citizenship and his passion for realising these ideals, it is best to start by tracing his development from a rural boy, to a student in mission institutions, and finally to a politician in the ANC. Alfred Bitini Xuma was born in 1893 at Manzana in the Engcobo district of the Transkei in South Africa.<sup>1</sup> He was born of devout Christian parents who were leaders in the local Wesleyan Church (Gish 2000:10). He received his primary education at the local primary school, from where he proceeded to

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Ralston makes the mistake of saying that the Transkei is in the Transvaal, which is not correct; it was never part of the Transvaal. Ralston might have been confused by the fact that Xuma lived most of his life in the Transvaal. See Richard Ralston, American episodes in the making of an African leader: the case study of Alfred Bitini Xuma (1893-1962). *Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 1, 74 (1973). However Ralston must be commended for his groundbreaking article, the first to document the life of Dr Xuma.

Healdtown Institution, where he received his secondary education and obtained his teaching qualifications. After teaching for a few years, he left South Africa for America in 1914 to further his education (Xuma 1930:22). With the help of the church he was admitted first to Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute, where he completed a degree in agriculture. It was whilst at Tuskegee that he was influenced by the thinking of Booker T. Washington, who was a prominent advocate of racial accommodation and empowerment of the disenfranchised African Americans in the United States of America.<sup>2</sup> After completing his studies at Tuskegee he enrolled at the University of Minnesota and North-western University, where he qualified as a medical doctor, one of the first ten black South Africans to do so.<sup>3</sup>

Like most educated black people, on his return from studying overseas Xuma was drawn into the leadership of African nationalist organisations such as the ANC to advance the aspirations of his people. There was a need to draw educated black people into the leadership of progressive movements such as the ANC so that they could articulate the aspirations of the black masses, the majority of whom were not educated and could not speak, write or read English, which was the language of both politics and the economy at the time. It is not surprising, therefore, that in 1940 the depressed ANC approached and nominated him as its president,<sup>4</sup> an office he held from 1940 to 1949. He lost the presidential elections to Dr James Sebe Moroka in 1949 in a move orchestrated by the ANC Youth League (ANCYL). Xuma then resigned from the ANC to concentrate on his medical practice. He also directed his focus to and found resources in the Methodist Church, where he was a lay leader and preacher, and became involved in the leadership of the Wilberforce Institution in Sharpeville, an educational institution affiliated to the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. His involvement at Wilberforce was motivated by the fact that it was the second of the only two educational institutions founded by black people in South Africa at the time. Wilberforce Institution had been established by Mrs Charlotte Maxeke, who, like Xuma, was a graduate of Tuskegee and an intellectual protégé of both Booker T. Washington and W.E. du Bois. It was founded subsequent to John Dube's Ohlange Institute in Natal, and the two schools were viewed as symbols of the ability of black people to establish their own institutions when given the chance.

Xuma died in Johannesburg in 1962. A school and post office in Jabavu, Soweto was named after him by the community. The democratic government has named one of the major roads in Durban after him.

We now turn to a discussion of his understanding of equal citizenship.

### **Xuma's understanding, development and articulation of the notion of equal citizenship**

In 1910 the formation of the Union of South Africa excluded black people, who were therefore not regarded as citizens of the newly established state. A number of representations to the British government had been made by black people, but these had not yielded any positive results. The founding of the ANC in 1912 was an attempt by black people to claim a stake and a place in South African society. However, this was done with the intention of asking for the accommodation of black people and their rights in what was almost accepted as a white people's government and institution. African nationalists such as Pixley ka Isaka Seme were of the opinion that black people needed to separate themselves from the white structures and have their own autonomous communities. Integration was not their primary concern; some, such as John Dube, tolerated the segregationist laws as long as they guaranteed resources for black people, which they could access in order to develop themselves and their communities. Seme was in favour of the separation of black and white people as a way of permitting black people to try to rebuild their own society. Underlying this thinking was the temptation to accept the inferior citizenship status of black people compared with that of whites and even Indians; hence the consideration of a separate and parallel society with its own government. For instance, when the ANC was formed, it was structured according to the parliamentary model, having different houses in anticipation of an independent and separate government for black people.

Whilst in the United States of America Xuma also came under the influence of the teaching of W.E. du Bois, who was at that time making a similar call for the elevation of black

<sup>2</sup> For more on Booker T. Washington, see Washington, T. 1967. *Up from slavery*. New York: Airmont.

<sup>3</sup> For a list of the first African doctors see Ncayiyana, D. From Edinburgh to Thaba Nchu – the stories of early doctors in South Africa. *South African Medical Journal*, 97, 4 (April 2007), 437-447.

<sup>4</sup> He was encouraged by the Rev. James Calata, then treasurer general, to stand for the elections as president general of the ANC. He competed with the president, the Rev. ZR Mahabene, whom he defeated by a single vote.

people to full citizenship of the country (Campbell 1998:257). Du Bois called for the total integration of African Americans as full citizens of America, but his call was different from Booker T. Washington's accommodationist approach, which did not include issues of racial equality and citizenship (Harlan 1982:2). Xuma's thinking was also shaped by other political dynamics, such as experience gained through membership of the ANC; debates on the subject of the Second World War, which was raging at the time, and how it affected black people; the signing of the Atlantic Charter and the International Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>5</sup> Pallo Jordan has noted that Xuma also raised the aspirations of the ANC to the international level by adapting the aims of the Atlantic Charter to its work and vision. Jordan (2009:13) notes:

After Franklin D Roosevelt and Winston Churchill set out the allied war claims in the Atlantic Charter, including the principles of government by the consent of the governed, the ANC leadership felt vindicated in its decision to support the war effort. Xuma hurriedly convened the blue ribbon committee that drew up the African Claims, interpreting the Atlantic Charter from an African perspective.

These and other factors enabled him to place the South African struggle in a broader context than previous leaders of the movement had done. For Xuma the struggle was part of the struggle of African people on the continent to be decolonised, to be recognised for the contribution they had made in taking part in the Second World War, and to claim their share in the Universal Charter for Human Rights, which had just been accepted by the UN. Having observed that in other countries, such as America and Britain, black people were treated far better than they were in South Africa, his view of the struggle was not limited to gaining rights from the South African government; instead, he saw it as a quest for black people to take their place as participants and contributors equal to any other citizen in the development of a democratic society in South Africa.

Xuma argued that Africans had to fight for equality and not be intimidated by other races. He considered African nationalism to have failed because of an incorrect point of departure; it had begun with political rights instead of the recognition of full citizenship and human equality, which was God-given. This does not mean that Xuma denigrated the importance of rights for Africans; however, he saw them not as the point of departure for this debate, but rather as an outcome of the struggle for equality. Like Seme, Xuma saw black people as equal to whites, and argued that they had the same capability to read, write, create and be scientific. Like Seme, he believed that Africans were capable of all that other races were capable of. The only thing that kept them back was the fact that they were deprived of opportunities to learn and display their potential; otherwise, like all other races, they were naturally capable of high-level intelligence, so there was no reason for them to be regarded as inferior (in Dunton 2003:563). He stated that "the African's brain is as good as the best among other races" (in Karis & Carter 1973:164), and went on to say:

There is much evidence to show that even with the limited opportunities or with no special training the African has a valuable natural native mental endowment as shown by achievement of Africans with or without training.

He asserted that the enormous achievement of Africans in spite of the limitations placed on them demonstrated that, given a chance, "Africans will measure up and take their rightful and God-given place among the members of the human family" (in Karis & Carter 1973:164). By invoking God he appealed to the religious beliefs of the majority of black people, using political and religious language to conscientise them and make them aware that their struggle was much more than political, and had to do with higher ideals such as human dignity and human rights. He also appealed to their religious convictions and passion, hoping that they would view their struggle not just as an ideological endeavour but also as a journey of faith. This does not mean that Xuma was not an Africanist and did not respect the notion of African nationalism: rather it reveals that he regarded the struggle for African nationalism as part of the struggle for equal citizenship. For Xuma African nationalism was not about black people only, but about all who identified with the continent of Africa, its dreams and aspirations. All such people needed to be treated equally, and there should be "no segregation, inferior treatment and lack of rights" (in Gerhart 2001:515). Although Xuma's notion of African

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<sup>5</sup> Gerhart, G. Alfred Xuma's contribution to the ANC. *Journal of African History*, v 42, 3 (2001), 514-515. The decline was as a result of the bad leadership of one of its founders, Dr Pixley Seme, from 1930 to 1937.

nationalism was inclusive of other groups, he nevertheless remained an Africanist with an Africanist agenda, believing that black people needed to speak for themselves and fight their own battles without whites acting on their behalf. This conviction was demonstrated when he rallied black people under the banner of the ANC to join the Second World War to fight for their country, despite the fact that Jan Smuts refused to allow African soldiers to bear arms. In Xuma's opinion, black people needed to play a role in defending their own country like other citizens, even if that meant going to war. This conviction formed the foundation for the Freedom Charter, drafted six years later at Kliptown, which openly declared South Africa to belong to all who dwell in it (both black and white), and called for all its citizens to benefit from its resources (Suttner & Cronin 2006:22).

Let us now turn to the lessons that can be drawn from Xuma's legacy as we seek to contribute to the building of a nation in which all may enjoy equal citizenship.

### **AB Xuma's legacy: lessons for nation building and equal citizenship for a democratic South Africa**

#### *Revitalisation of the ANC as a movement representing the aspirations of all citizens*

As mentioned already, Xuma became president of the ANC in 1940 and remained in office until 1949. Reflecting on the state of the movement when he took office he observed: "At the time the ANC was at the verge of collapse, having allowed branches to collapse and finances to dry up through infighting and dictatorship that had taken the better part of the previous decade."<sup>6</sup> As Gish (2000: 12) puts it:

He breathed new life into the organisation by streamlining the central command and reviving the regional structures and membership, bringing it back from the verge of collapse following ten years of decline that had left the organization with only 1000 members and an overdraft with the bank as a result of bad leadership. At the time he left office membership had grown to 5000, and the organization had a healthy bank balance, a clearly drafted constitution and a focused programme of action.

During Xuma's period of office the constitution was revised and given more focus,<sup>7</sup> and the ANC evolved from an ineffective talk-shop into a vibrant campaigning organisation.<sup>7</sup> Another significant development during that time was the formation of the Youth League by firebrands such as Anton Lembede, Nelson Mandela, AP Mda and Oliver Tambo. Under Xuma's leadership, the ANC drew up and accepted an African Charter (precursor to the Freedom Charter of 1955) in 1943, which introduced the idea of equality between racial groups in South Africa. Albert Luthuli (2006:89) noted the good work done by Xuma in rebuilding the ANC and commented:

Under Dr Xuma's leadership, Congress at last got down to the task of equipping itself for the fray, and of facing up to the realities of the South African situation ... in the Xuma era (1940-1949), Congress gradually began to take on a new character. It began to formulate its aims and policy far more clearly than hitherto.

By the time he left its leadership the ANC had become a viable mass movement or 'broad church', as it is usually referred to. Steven Gish (1994:26) asserts that "without Xuma's success in resuscitating, unifying and financing the venerable but fragile association he inherited in 1940, the ANC might well have collapsed permanently". Nation building and power sharing mean recognising the rights of citizens to influence the policy and the direction their country is taking. Xuma's openness to alliances is another demonstration of his commitment to the involvement of citizens from different organisations in political processes. For example, he facilitated the signing of the collaboration agreement between himself, Dr Monty Naicker and Dr Yusuf Dadoo, who represented the Indians; this agreement came to be known as the Doctors' Pact. When members of the ANC opposed his decision to sign the pact and collaborate with the Indians, arguing that Indians were 'shrewd' and might dominate the black people in the ANC, Xuma responded by saying:

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<sup>6</sup> The decline was as a result of the bad leadership of one of its founders Dr Pixley Seme from 1930-1937.

<sup>7</sup> Xuma excerpts from autobiography, *Africa*, Dec. 1954.

If you cannot meet the next man [sic] on an equal footing without fearing him, there is something wrong with you. You are accepting a position of inferiority to him (Gish 1994:28).

The result of this pact was close cooperation between Africans and Indians. This demonstrates Xuma's vision that the ANC was there to fulfil the needs not only of a particular group of disgruntled citizens, but rather of *all* who needed a platform to fight for their freedom. Reflecting on the work of the founders of the ANC he said:

They proclaimed through the organization they set up and efforts they made that only through unity and concerted action of *all*, can justice and freedom be achieved (in Meli 1988:48).

Xuma understood the ANC to be a movement that would promote all citizens who aspired to assume their place in African society. It was not necessarily to represent the black masses alone, as the term is narrowly understood, but was to incorporate all groups: women, the youth, Indians and coloureds who joined it to fight for their right to be treated as respected citizens. It was through this work that the ANC became the 'broad church' that we know it to be today. When we look back today and see what Xuma's revitalisation of the ANC achieved for the nation, we are reminded of the importance of citizens' movements or organised civil society in nation building. These enable citizens to participate in a democracy; they must not be viewed with suspicion, and labelled and attacked by the ruling party, as we have seen the Congress of the People (COPE) and the Democratic Alliance (DA) attacked by the ANC. Good leaders are found not only in the ruling party; they are encountered in all organisations, including civil society structures. Citizens have to organise themselves and define their aspirations properly, and engage with governments through parliamentary avenues when these are available, but also use extra-parliamentary strategies, if necessary, to improve their democracy. The complacency that we see following elections, when the nature of democracy shifts from being participatory to representative, is dangerous for democracy and a threat to the bill of rights and the institutions that protect democracy.

Being the party currently in power, the ANC has the responsibility to build the South African nation, and to allow all citizens, even those who belong to minority groups, to feel that they are equal. It has to learn from Xuma and go the extra mile, inviting the leaders of other political parties to collaborate with it in government. By doing this, the ANC would be demonstrating its magnanimity; if it can appoint to cabinet positions members of these parties, it will demonstrate how it has learnt from its leaders. This is also crucial for power sharing, which is a cornerstone of democracy and good governance.

### *Being a South African citizen: setting the example*

When Xuma returned to South Africa in 1928, unlike a number of black doctors who went back to the rural areas and opened practices there, he settled in Johannesburg. By choosing to situate his medical practice in the middle of the city of Johannesburg, Xuma claimed his position as a citizen like all others. In the words of Anne Digby (2005:441):

[S]hrewdly he located his surgery opposite the Johannesburg Magistrate's Court and later opened consulting rooms in another two parts of the city

He bought a house in Sophiatown, a racially integrated suburb, and opened a medical practice in Pritchard Street in the centre of Johannesburg. It was the envy of young black people growing up in Sophiatown, most of whom dreamt of becoming doctors and having a beautiful home like Xuma's (Modisane 1994:127). This can be interpreted as claiming his position on the integration of all citizens of South Africa as equal and having the right to live and work where they wanted to. This was a culmination of the exposure he had had in his student days in racially mixed institutions such as Healdtown and in the United States of America.

Based on his conviction that citizens have a right to good education to enable them to play a part in building their nation, he contributed to the shaping of public health and the establishment of medical institutions to train black students in medicine in South Africa. In 1951, for instance, he played a prominent role in advocating the opening of the Natal Medical School, aimed at training black medical students. However, he argued:

[T]he school should not [be a] substitute for medical training abroad, and insisted that this foreign training did not deracialize Africans (as some critics had challenged) in the sense that they would wish to treat white patients on their return (Digby 2005: 427).

His success as a black medical practitioner was rare in South Africa, and he became one of the role models looked up to for guidance and inspiration by young black students aspiring to be doctors. He also campaigned against the countless obstacles introduced by the government to discourage black people from pursuing medicine as a career. For instance, the government was opposed to the idea of black medical practitioners treating white patients; Xuma argued that it was the right of black doctors to treat all patients, including whites. From the above we discern Xuma's conviction that citizens must contribute their knowledge and skills to the building of their nation. Underlying this conviction is the belief that all citizens are both providers and recipients of services, and that this gives them power and ownership of the nation.

### *Shift from narrow nationalism to equal citizenship*

The biggest challenge for South Africa today is the threat of ethnicity, which replaces racism. This has been evident in the elections of 2009, when the ethnic card was used to canvass support for president Jacob Zuma, whose followers coined the slogan "100% Zulu boy", thus helping him to prevent the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) from dominating KwaZulu-Natal. Ethnicity was also evident when Mvume Dandala's nomination by COPE as their presidential candidate, rather than Mosiuoa Lekota, a Sotho, or Mbhazima Shilowa, a Shangaan, was attributed to his being Xhosa. The challenge when faced with the task of nation building is to identify the place of ethnic identity. However, Xuma's proposal of equal citizenship did not undermine the importance of ethnic identities. Xuma was concerned with the national project of building one nation for the country; he was aware of the importance of individual identities at the local level, but considered that this should not take priority over nation building. Ethnic identities become building blocks for common nationhood. He did not entertain narrow ethnic identities, but instead focused on the mobilisation of all people belonging to different ethnic groups to work together for their freedom through the ANC and other forums.

### *Religion as an asset for nation building*

The task of nation building is not for politicians and secular organisations only, but also for religious ones. When we examine the role played by the church in the making of Xuma, we

realise the importance of including other sectors of society, including the religious sector. For instance, with regard to Xuma's becoming a national leader, it was the church that educated him when the government had no interest in the education of black people, who were regarded as less than human and incapable of receiving tertiary education, let alone tertiary education in science and medicine. The church provided the schools at which he was educated in his village, as there was no government school. He subsequently attended Healdtown, a church-owned institution, and in the United States he studied at church-allied institutions such as Northwestern Methodist University. In the fourteen years that he was overseas he benefitted from the financial, material, spiritual and emotional support of the church. On his return to South Africa, the church gave him a platform as a lay leader in both the Sophiatown and Sharpeville communities, thus elevating him to important leadership positions and giving him a voice in the affairs of the people. He was a member and a lay leader of the Sophiatown Methodist Church in Gold Street. Mrs Lydia Mathews remembers that Xuma dedicated a considerable sum of his own money to the struggle and that he used to introduce the comrades to Methodist leaders and ministers prior to ANC meetings. In his view both the ANC and the church were working towards the same goal, namely building the nation (interview with Mathews, 2009). In spite of the weaknesses of institutionalised religion, it has a vital contribution to make in the building of equal citizens, as is illustrated by Xuma's story. In South Africa no institution is as accessible to the people as their religious institutions, be they mosques, temples or churches. Even in the most remote communities, where there is not even a government office, there are sacred places and texts that nurture and sustain those communities, cushioning them against despair in the midst of poverty, violence and oppression whilst waiting for the delivery of basic services by government. Religious communities sustain and maintain people's hope and aspirations through concern for their well-being. Martin Luther King once said of religion:

A religion true to nature must also be concerned about man's [sic] social conditions. Religion deals with both the earth and heaven, both time and eternity. Religion operates not only on the vertical plane but also on the horizontal. It seeks not only to integrate me with God, but also to integrate men with men, men and each man with himself (in Davis 2003:36).

Statistics have proven that in South Africa, in spite of all its mistakes, the church is still the most trusted institution (Hendricks & Erasmus 2001:88). It is part of the roots of South African society that we can no longer relegate to the private at the expense of the public domain. It was part of the nation during colonisation, helping to entrench it. It was also part of the nation during the struggle against apartheid, helping to bring the apartheid government to its knees through liberation theology. In the process of rebuilding this nation we cannot deny its presence as either an asset that must be employed effectively or as a liability that needs to be dealt with carefully lest it explode in our hands. The point is that religion is a reality that we cannot afford to ignore. Lamin Sanneh (2003:7) notes the importance of religion in the African society:

Religion is already so entangled with our roots that it would be flying in the face of reality to try to deny it or claim it for one side only, or to reduce it to personal whim merely. The worldwide Christian resurgence is proof of the religion transcending ethnic, national, and cultural barriers.

I do not think we can ignore these facts if we are serious about promoting equal citizenship and building the nation. Xuma (1930:28) allowed his faith to influence his political practice, and in one of his addresses enquired, "Would Christ, whose followers and messengers we profess to be, approve of our Native Policy in practice?"

Associated with this is the fact that South Africans are incurably religious. Over 90% of the country's citizens profess to be religious (Hendricks & Erasmus 2005:89). The challenge for the government is to harness the strength and resources of the religious assumptions, beliefs, symbols and sacred texts and use them as building blocks in the process of nation building. In spite of all its weaknesses religion and the church in particular, through its messages, texts, songs and uplifting spirit have the potential to inspire people to rebuild their societies. These same sentiments were expressed by American president Barack Obama in reflecting on his attendance of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright's Trinity United Church for the first time, which ultimately led him to join the church and ask for baptism. He observed:



People began to shout, to rise from their seats and clap and cry out, a forceful wind carrying the reverend's voice up into the rafters ... And in that single note – hope – I heard something else; at the foot of that cross, inside the thousands of churches across the city, I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians inside the lion's den, Ezekiel's field of dry bones. Those stories – of survival, and freedom, and hope – became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears ours; until this black church, on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into future generations and into a larger world. Our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, black and more than black; in chronicling our journey, the stories and songs gave us a means to reclaim memories that we didn't need to feel shame about ... memories that all people might study and cherish – and with which we could start and rebuild (Obama 1995:294).

Xuma's views on religion help us to recognise religion as an asset rather than a liability in nation building. He himself is a perfect example of what religious organisations can do to assist government in maximising opportunities for citizens to reach their potential and contribute to the country's development. When we consider his achievements, there is no doubt that they were the result of his involvement *in, with* and *through* the church. Reviewing Xuma's story is important because it reminds us of the role of the church in shaping the thinking, knowledge and making of African intellectuals and leaders of the struggle for the liberation of the African masses, so that we can be reminded of the potential such institutions have for nation building. Therefore, in an attempt to move the nation forward, the current government must take the religious community as its partner.

#### *In nation building each struggle matters*

Although Xuma had been regarded a radical by the older generation of the ANC, ANCYL regarded him as elitist and too moderate. This was exacerbated by the removal of people from Sophiatown to Soweto and the development of the shanty town settlement (Emasakeni) in Orlando under the leadership of Mpanza, a situation to which people such as Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo felt that the ANC should respond. However, when they raised these issues Dr Xuma showed no interest. He was concerned about the bigger issues of freedom, equal citizenship and nation building, forgetting that each struggle, no matter how small, is important to its proponents, and thus needs to be taken seriously as part of the bigger struggle. Although he had supported the founding of ANCYL, when he did not recognise the importance of the struggle, which they thought was important; ANCYL plotted his downfall (Mandela 1994:130). During the conference of 1949, in a well-orchestrated move, the Youth League voted for Dr James Sebe Moroka as president of the ANC and deposed Dr Xuma. This was a mistake: Dr Moroka proved a less than satisfactory leader, more interested in his businesses than in the ANC, but the Youth League was frustrated by Xuma's lack of interest in the other struggles faced by black people.<sup>8</sup>

Dr Xuma's fall from the leadership of the ANC and political leadership in general demonstrates that leadership has to be in touch with the masses. If you ignore citizens, they will use their rights to rise against you and choose leaders who take them seriously, even if those leaders are not as good as you are. Leaders should never think that they have unlimited power over the masses and begin disrespecting their rights as citizens to speak out and be responded to as quickly as possible. Citizens, no matter what social class they belong to, have the same right to participate in directing the country as those who are in positions of leadership. In a way, when we decide to ignore what people say we dehumanise them: we treat them as if they are not equal to us, thus treating their citizenship as if it is not equal to ours. This flies in the face, not only of the basic principles of democracy, but also of the Freedom Charter, which declared "The people shall govern". It denies them the right to govern, and when people respond to this denial, they do it unwisely and the outcome is chaos.

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<sup>8</sup> His lack of commitment to the struggle reached a climax when he abandoned his comrades and decided to denounce them and choose his own representation when they were charged with acts of resistance.

### *Dialogue as the basis for nation building*

Xuma engaged in dialogue with different people, especially those who disagreed with him in the white community. He addressed meetings of white organisations, and contributed to the conventions and presentations during the Hertzog bill hearings. Most of the time he was forced to deal with whites who did not want to listen; he spoke to them nonetheless, and even when people within the ANC were not happy with him for talking to uninterested parties, he insisted on the importance of verbal communication. He even wrote letters appealing to white leaders who were interested in the welfare of African people to help. In response to one of the letters he had written to Alfred Hornle, president of the South African Institute of Race Relations, Hornle thanked Xuma for his willingness to cooperate with them and pledged his support. He wrote:

I am glad to infer from your memorandum that you are willing to co-operate and I can assure you that I shall do what I can to re-establish friendly relations between you and the Institute. There are so few of us trying to co-operate from both sides of the colour line in the interests of the Africans, and in general the non-European people of South Africa that we ought not to diminish our usefulness by personal friction (Hornle (1939:1).

Although Xuma was not radical, neither was he conservative in his political outlook. His approach to both blacks and whites was non-partisan, as he had a clear view of how the two must communicate and find each other. He believed that black people must be self-reliant, act responsibly and respectfully, and that white people needed to be won over through rational dialogue. Through his openness to dialogue Xuma teaches us that talking to one another is important, especially when we seek to build a nation. All the stakeholders of the nation, even those we disagree with, must be involved in a process of dialogue.

One of the significant challenges created and faced by the Mbeki regime in South Africa was that it did not encourage dialogue and open debate. For instance, when black intellectuals such as Siphosiso Mkhondo and Xolela Mangcu raised their voices on a number of issues they disagreed with, they were labelled unpatriotic and marginalised. When white citizens raised issues against the government, even if their struggle credentials were impeccable, they were seen to be undermining a black-led government. The paranoia of the previous ANC government discouraged critical dialogue and planted a culture of fear and silence. When that happens, the citizens' ability to contribute is stifled and they are deprived of an opportunity to participate in the building of their nation, which is fundamental to any democracy. In his *Pedagogy of the oppressed* the Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, reminds us that true liberation arises from a dialogical approach between the oppressor and the oppressed and also amongst the oppressed themselves.

### *An inclusive approach*

Another of Xuma's contributions was his adoption of an inclusive approach to the struggle by opening the ANC to collaboration with other racial groups with the aim of achieving a common purpose. It must be recalled that when Xuma took the helm of the ANC, the organisation was at its lowest point and was not interested in working with other organisations. Through Seme's uncompromising Christian stance it had rejected Gumede's proposal that it work with the Communist Party of South Africa. One of Xuma's outstanding contributions is therefore his promotion of the idea of working with other organisations.

A number of people within the ANC were opposed to collaboration with Indians. These included the young Nelson Mandela, although he later appreciated Xuma's endeavours in this regard.

At the time Mandela opposed closer co-operation with Indians. He was convinced that only separate Congresses could effectively mobilize their masses, and was worried that the Indians or Communist Party would take over, or dominate, the ANC for their own purposes, watering down the concept of African nationalism (Suttner & Cronin 2005:26).

A number of leaders in the ANC held and expressed similar concerns that the Indians would dominate them. Xuma's willingness to embrace others with similar purposes can be attributed

to the fact that through the Wesleyan Church, which was run by white people, he had been introduced to people of other races. In spite of the hypocrisy of the Methodist Church, he had experienced warmth and support through his connections with fellow church members, who responded to his friendship by financing his studies and supported him until he returned. This enabled him to see the other side of breaking the racial barriers. He realised that if blacks and whites joined hands in friendship, they could achieve more. Gerhart (2001:515) observes:

He could be classified as neither a radical nor a conservative politically; he believed deeply in African self-reliance while also holding to a faith that whites could be won over through rational dialogue and the earnest efforts of blacks to act responsibly and respectably.

His commitment to the building of an inclusive society was further demonstrated by his criticism of the popular claim that Africa belonged to the Africans, to the exclusion of other groups living on the continent. When Anton Mziwakhe Lembede and other Youth League members asked for permission to form ANCYL, emphasising that it needed to fight for Africans because Africa was for the Africans, he told the youth leaguers to think carefully about making that particular statement (Ditshego 2006:12).

Inclusiveness does not imply simple tolerance or accommodation of poor ordinary citizens, but involves them; they become important participants in the building of democracy, not merely recipients of declared policy.

*Accountability: all citizens as imperative in the process of nation building*

One of Xuma's weaknesses was that he did not understand the change of dynamics from the grassroots.<sup>9</sup> He seemed set on approaching the struggle on his own, and refused to take advice from those who were able to see that the organisation needed to adopt a different approach. He refused to listen to those who were connected with the masses, and instead continued to sustain the illusion that he was still in control. Had Xuma listened to the advice of Mda, Mandela, Sisulu and Tambo on the fateful night when they visited his home and begged him to accept that the time had come to change tactics, he would not have suffered defeat at the ensuing conference.

By the same token Xuma did not know how to deal with the contradictions of being a black person, part of the marginalised and oppressed people, whilst at the same time being part of the educated elite, who had made friends among white liberals. Mandela even described him as having adopted English culture (1994:133). It is necessary to hold the two groups in creative tension if you belong to both the leadership class and the ordinary people. He had allowed the friendships he had developed with whites to create a distance between himself and the thinking of the masses of his constituency. It is said that in his surgery he spoke English, even to black patients, and used an interpreter to communicate with people who spoke his own mother tongue. This also manifested itself in his relationship with the church: he remained in the white-led Methodist Church, perhaps not wanting to lose the prestige associated with membership of this powerful, English-oriented church, whilst at the same time spending most of his energy and money assisting the African Methodist Episcopal Church, of which his wife was a member, to run Wilberforce Institute. Xuma was deposed by ANCYL in a manner similar to the way former president Thabo Mbeki was deposed as president of both the ANC and of the country. This resulted not from his inability to do the job, but rather from his failure to remain connected to all citizens as important stakeholders in the development processes of the country. From the experiences of these two leaders we learn that African leaders need to balance their positions as leaders in a multiracial and multi-ethnic society. This requires constant contact with and feedback from the people. In this way the constituency remains informed, and leaders remain accountable. In 2008 South Africa again found itself facing the deposition of a good, nay brilliant leader in a bloodless coup by his own party six months before the end of his term of office simply because, like Xuma, he did not remain in contact with the masses. This is a clear demonstration that in democracy, development and nation building all citizens are important and cannot be disregarded, otherwise they have the capacity to stall the process – no matter how good it is – even to their own detriment.

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<sup>9</sup> He made the same mistake as Thabo Mbeki on the journey towards Polokwane, continuing to believe that he was in control, when he had in fact lost the support of the masses.

## Conclusion

In this essay I have discussed Dr AB Xuma's approach to equal citizenship and nation building with the aim of extrapolating insights that could be of value for contemporary South Africa, which is confronting the same issues as were faced in the 20th century. From the discussion we can distill a number of insights into Xuma's journey that are pivotal for present-day South Africa.

First, we have seen that nation building requires government to collaborate with all sectors, including the religious sector, to maximise opportunities for people. Xuma's story reveals his emergence in a South Africa that offered few or no opportunities for him as a black person from a rural area. However, his career was dramatically changed by a mission education and religion. This influenced not only his spiritual life but also his political career and his rise to prominent leadership. It also informed his thinking on matters of race and citizenship in South Africa, which culminated in a far more inclusive and dialogical approach. Thus religion is a significant factor in the work of nation building and must be acknowledged as such, provided we consider its strengths and avoid the negative impact it may have on society. Second, we realised that collaboration with all other organisations, and sharing power with them, helps to build a nation. Third, we have taken cognisance of the fact that leaders have to be kept accountable by their constituents, and that this is another form of power sharing. Fourth, AB Xuma's legacy, comprising both weaknesses and achievements, leaves us with important lessons for nation building and power sharing as we strive to build a democratic South Africa.

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