

‘Enemy of the African Workers’: General Agent SM Bennett Ncwana

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Many South Africans actively undermined ‘the struggle’, not least of all because it could be lucrative business. One notable ‘progressive’ sell-out in the 1920s was the propagandist Samuel Michael ‘SM’ Bennet Ncwana, who wrote for a prolific number of South African newspapers.¹ He also promoted an unprecedented number of political causes, moving from Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and South Africa’s first major black trade union, the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union (ICU), to work for the African National Congress (ANC), the Cape Native Voters’ Association, the Ex-Serviceman’s League and the African Progressive Party, amongst others.² Ncwana faced vehement criticism from his rivals for his political volatility. As a mercenary ‘general agent’, however, he consistently, across the 1920s and early 1930s, supported one cause: Jan Smut’s South Africa Party (SAP) - a pro-British parliamentary coalition which, similar to Ncwana, struggled to define itself in the wake of repeated political defeats. During a period when the ‘native question’ dominated South African politics, the SAP were ridiculed as “the only political party in this House who, as a party, dare not say anything about the native question... The Cape men have to cringe to the native, and the Natal men have to slander him, and that is the party that wants to get back to power” and govern a “country in which the greatest problem is the native problem.”³ Having acted as an election agent in the SAP’s failed 1924 campaign, Ncwana continued to support the SAP’s agenda during the ‘Flag Bill’ controversy of 1926, and colluded closely with the rabidly “anti-Semitic, anti-Dutch, anti-Labour” and “anti-black” SAP member of parliament JS Marwick in the late 1920s.⁴

In the course of my research into the life and times of Clements Kadalie, a leader of the ICU, Ncwana has repeatedly re-appeared as a figure who tussled extensively with the famous Malawian. As far as Kadalie was concerned, Ncwana was in the employment of “bosses who desire to destory the ICU.”⁵ Bennet Ncwana, however, has largely confounded most historians’ understandings - enjoying labels such as ‘mercurial’, ‘strange’, ‘devious’ and ‘notorious’ - not least of all because he frustrated the relatively stable imagined trajectories of black nationalists, liberals, socialists and conservatives alike.⁶ Police described him as “a most plausible character” who “lives by his wits.”⁷ Having worked as an anti-immigrant and anti-‘Bolshevist’ SAP attack-dog for much of the interwar period, Ncwana certainly has a notably ignoble political legacy. Yet, he is also far from the only black South African leader to become embroiled in the murky mix of money and power that constituted white parliamentary politics before 1994. In his role as a ‘sell-out’, journalist and political hack, Ncwana helps us explore the uncomfortable and contradictory political milieu of the segregationist period, when many black South Africans endorsed segregation and hoped that key organisations like the ANC and ICU would fail. A few, like Ncwana himself, would also go on to promote the cause of apartheid in the late 1940s. Divisive, but as much a part of

political debate as his more ‘exemplary’ contemporaries, many of Ncwana’s more caustic, SAP-backed arguments continue to reappear in South African politics today.

Ncwana’s early rise to prominence

Born in 1890, and having lost his father in the South African War, Bennet Ncwana first came to the attention of the authorities when he petitioned the queen of England to fund his education in 1913 in order to become a lawyer.⁸ Working as a Rand mine policeman, he had little money to support his mother and siblings, but already closely identified himself with British imperialism and participated in the Bantu Debating Union.⁹ On the outbreak of WWI, he raised “War Funds, touring the Eastern Transvaal including Delgoa Bay and Durban”, and in 1916 went on to sign up for the South African Native Labour Contingent. Having acted as an “efficient” interpreter and taught fellow Africans in night classes, upon discharge his conduct was noted as “very good”.¹⁰ After his return to Cape Town, he approached the Native Affairs Department, this time with a book proposal and again petitioned the English queen. He did “not claim any compensation from the state”, but appealed to her “spontaneous sense of sympathy”. Clearly affected by his wartime experiences and the drowning of many black soldiers in the 1917 Mendi disaster, in November 1920 he founded the Mendi Memorial Club (becoming president) alongside its secretary-general – IWA organiser and fellow ex-sergeant, Impey Ben Nyombolo.¹¹ For the rest of his life Ncwana remained heavily involved in the Cape Town-based committee, and closely aligned with Nyombolo.¹²



SM Bennet Ncwana, from *Souvenir of the SS Mendi*

On his return to Johannesburg in 1918, Ncwana established an “agency business”, and resumed his early acquaintances with the elite of black society.¹³ Working in the same court chambers as the black advocates Pixley P Ka Seme and RW Msimang, he returned to Johannesburg’s exclusive African Club and soon found himself embroiled in controversy. During the commission of inquiry into the 1918 ‘Rand disturbances’, the general secretary of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), fellow member of the African Club and Native Affairs Department clerk-interpreter Isiah Bud M'belle asserted that he was opposed to workers’ demand for a one shilling increase in wages. Damning M’Belle’s statement, the other members of the African Club resolved to rescind his membership, and the young opportunistic Ncwana put himself forward as the man to notify the SANNC general secretary. Bud M’belle, in response, “threatened to blow [Ncwana] to smithereens”.¹⁴

At the same time, however, a more dubious side to Ncwana’s “agency business” was already emerging. On 9th May 1919, he was charged in Johannesburg with “Conversion and sentenced to 2 months imprisonment”, for “conducting an Agency for the sale of Native products” which “defrauded several natives”.¹⁵ It is not clear whether any of these charges had connection to Bud M’Belle’s machinations. Having ‘absconded’ to Cape Town, he was forcefully returned to the Rand and imprisoned for 11 months. At the same time, he was also implicated in the theft of a bar of gold from the National Bank by his room-mate in Cape Town – a man called ‘Oliphant’ - in February 1919, though Ncwana was never charged.¹⁶

On his release, Ncwana returned to Cape Town to study at Zonnebloem College, and quickly became close friends with a young man from colonial Nyasaland (modern day Malawi) called Clements Kadalie. Swept up in the transatlantic enthusiasm and race-pride of Garveyism, Ncwana joined the UNIA and, together with Kadalie, started the Marcus Garvey-inspired Black Man Company with a publishing outfit, *The Black Man* newspaper. Through this paper, “the first radical Native newspaper in South Africa”, Ncwana penned some of the country’s first, and most evocative, Garveyite tracts.¹⁷ In these heady early days, Kadalie had enthusiastically written to Ncwana that his “essential object is to be a great African Marcus Garvey”, and into 1922 Ncwana continued to have meetings “nearly every day” with Professor James Thaele, who “captivated my interests immensely with his enthusiasm on what he usually described as the Garvey Socratic Philosophy”.¹⁸

Ncwana also became heavily involved in a new expanding black trade union, the ICU (which Clements Kadalie was the general secretary of). Ncwana soon found himself sitting on its executive committee as the “Chairman of Propaganda” and promoting the cause of black workers (and the South African Party) through *The Black Man*. As a foretaste of Ncwana’s later alliances, on the eve of the 1921 general election, the paper declared: “Down to earth with the Nationalists! Up to the tropical sky with the South African Party!”¹⁹ When Bud M’Belle heard that he was prominently involved in the ICU, however, the “arch-enemy” of Ncwana “at once took a special train journey to Cape Town on his important mission of

having [Ncwana] abdicated".²⁰ Telling the ICU's officials that Ncwana "was a very dangerous character", M'Belle insisted that "there was only one thing left for them to do namely to get [Ncwana] fired from the organisation", terminating what had been a successful partnership.²¹ It is probable that Ncwana had not told his comrades of his previous convictions, which M'Belle as a clerk of the Native Affairs Department was more than aware of.

After the ICU

Kicked out of the ICU, Ncwana gravitated towards a rival black trade union, the Industrial and Commercial (Amalgamated) Workers' Union (or ICWU) - a federation led by Henry Selby Msimang and Impey Ben Nyombolo which had emerged out of a 'disastrous' ANC-backed National Labour conference in mid-1920.²² *The Black Man* became the official organ of the ICWU, and "on one or two occasions the local Communist Party used the columns of this journal for propaganda work."²³ In 1922, the ICWU was "a recognised body by the Chiefs" and was seen by the Cape Province Native National Congress as "the only body of workers in this country, for its President [Msimang] is the minister of Mines and Industries to the Congress."²⁴ In comparison, the Congress believed that "there is no likelihood of that the ICU will spread to the country", because officials were "not conversant with the country nor could they speak any of the existing Native languages" and "would receive the strongest opposition from us for endeavouring to divide the workers".²⁵ In the press, it was "openly reported that the ICWU would flourish."²⁶ In reality, the ICU - led by a men from colonial Nyasaland, West Africa and the Caribbean - expanded rapidly after 1922, while the ICWU of Msimang, Nyombolo and Ncwana proved to be a failure and faced ridicule as "a non-existing Organisation".²⁷

Already in January 1922, Ncwana was exploring other avenues of employment, and together with Professor James Thaele and Nyombolo, formed the African Land Settlement Association. By March they had about 120 members. Based at 107 Loop Street, Ncwana was named as president, Thaele as general secretary and Nyombolo as organiser. Police noted that Ncwana's *Black Man* had "not been published since December 1921, as Ncwana has been busy forming the above Association and has not had the time to attend to the paper."²⁸ After failing to get a passport to promote the Land Scheme around Britain in March 1922, Ncwana soon "severed his association with the 'African Land Settlement Association', and handed all the correspondence to Professor Thaele; membership consisted of about 140 Natives."²⁹ Police still believed in April 1922 that Ncwana was a "strong supporter of Garvey", but - like his former Nyasa business partner, Kadalie - Ncwana appears to have abandoned the cause of Garveyism before or around the arrest of Marcus Garvey in 1923 on charges of fraud.

With publication of *The Black Man* having ceased, Ncwana started to work at another pro-ICWU paper, *The African Voice*, run by the general secretary of the trade union and fellow Mendi-activist IB Nyombolo. There he wrote a number of articles "violently" attacking

Kadalie.³⁰ Following a general anti-Kadalie editorial line, the ICU asserted in October 1923 “that a fat cheque was handed to IB Nyombolo that induced him to write in his last issue all such piffles and lies.”³¹ With few members and less money, Ncwana appears to have reduced his commitment to the Msimang-led ICWU in 1923 (though he claimed in 1925 to have been instated as general secretary).³² Instead, he moved on to become secretary of the Cape Native Voter's Association (CNVA) - an organisation that was subsequently attacked by ICWU president Msimang for its uncritical adherence to the SAP.³³ It is through this role that we have the first definite evidence of his connections with the SAP machine.

As “the organiser of the native voters in the Cape Province for the South African Party” during the 1924 general election campaign, Ncwana was employed to tour throughout the Cape speaking on behalf of SAP candidates.³⁴ Already in August 1923, Ncwana was organising a branch of the CNVA in De Aar, telling audiences that it “seemed to him that the programme of the South African Party provides a large scope for Native development.”³⁵ In Herschel he told meetings during September 1923 that 14 had been removed from the voters’ role “through the activities of the Nationalist Party.”³⁶ During October and November 1923 he went on to address meetings in Kimberley, Molteno, Queenstown, King William’s Town, East London and Port Elizabeth, amongst others.³⁷ The campaign-proper started in with the dissolution of parliament in April 1924, after the SAP lost a crucial by-election. And just as SAP hopeful Major Ballantine employed anti-immigrant rhetoric to assure black audiences the SAP “were all opposed to labour from outside”, Ncwana caused controversy when he wrote that “the natives are not at all satisfied with Indians in South Africa”.³⁸ Complaining that ‘the Indian’ was “coming into South Africa to satisfy his own selfish desire and fly[ing] back to India with all the fortunes he has made”, Ncwana asserted that black South Africans “would shed no tear if the Asiatics were to be cleared out of the country tomorrow.” Together with Sam Masabala, Kadalie and Ncwana came back together to organise the first All African Convention in order to discuss how the Cape’s black electorate should vote.³⁹ But on the opposite side of the two-party political divide, Kadalie and the ICU, in turn, slip-streamed off the pro-Afrikaner, pro-segregationist but also anti-imperial campaign of Hertzog's National Party (NP), with travel expenses and extensive print-runs of the ICU's newspaper paid for by the NP. The ICU’s first branch in Johannesburg was established in the midst of the campaign.⁴⁰

Marginalised from both the ICU and ICWU after the election, Ncwana nevertheless hovered around the fringe of the black trade union movement, at the same time as upholding the cause of the black Cape voter. From 1924, he wrote regular pieces – often commenting on labour issues - for *Imvo Zababundu*, and ran the CNVA out of the ‘Imvo Buildings’ in King Williams Town.⁴¹ The famous Eastern Cape paper was edited by the ICU's moderate vice-president Alex ‘Mac’ Jabavu, and the two appear to have struck up a lasting friendship as fellow ‘moderate progressives’, co-operating in a number of organisations (most notably the Cape Native Voters’ Convention) into the 1930s. In *Imvo*, Ncwana produced an eclectic mix of articles, refusing to conform to the more ideologically coherent frameworks of socialism or Garveyism - projecting instead his own idea of South African nationalism. Lamenting the decline of ‘British’ democracy in South Africa, dismissing the Russian revolution, and

calling for the instalment of only black mine recruiting agents, in April 1926 he told readers: “When I was young I believed in the brotherhood of man, but the experience of the world has shaken this belief, and today, though I still see the beauty of the ideal, I hold it to be utterly impracticable. I believe, as I never did before, that the salvation of the black race, the world over, lies in passive resistance”.⁴²

Scheming in Natal

Ncwana’s enthusiasm for passive resistance does not seem to have lasted long, and by early 1927, Ncwana was working as a ‘General Commission Agent’ in Durban. He nevertheless felt confident enough with his burgeoning portfolio to flex his political muscles and attempt to re-accommodate himself within the rapidly expanding ICU - no doubt with the aim of landing a potentially lucrative secretarial position. Having come to “Natal and denounced the ICU as a communist organisation” in *The Natal Advertiser* on 18th April 1927, the ICU’s newspaper reported that only “a few days after making this gross misstatement, the very same Ncwana wrote to [Kadalie] asking, in a disguised manner, FOR A JOB!”⁴³ Kadalie was having none of it, and his right-hand-man Henry Daniel Tyamzashe smugly observed that at the ICU’s annual conference the same month, “delegates were obviously disgusted with Ncwana, and one or two pointed remarks were made”.⁴⁴ This however proved to be hubris on the part of the ICU officials.

With their party connections, Ncwana and Nyombolo had already started touring South Africa under the guise of the ‘Natives’ General Vigilance Executive’ in November 1926, arguing the SAP’s case for keeping the British Union Jack and combatting ‘Bolshevism’ amongst black South Africans. Critics dismissed the ‘executive’ simply as “an anti-Kadalie movement”, an assertion was supported by the fact that Ncwana was also rattling off a vast series of often damning, explicitly anti-Kadalie articles in *The Friend*, *The Natal Advertiser*, the Chamber of Mines-owned *Umteteli wa Bantu* and the vehemently anti-ICU Catholic mission-run newspaper, *Izindaba Zabantu*.⁴⁵ In mass meetings, Nyombolo publicly warned audiences in Durban that, “the first menace he had seen here was the activities of Bolsheviks, and he could not understand how people like the Zulus could support movements which aimed at affiliating with the white Bolsheviks of Amsterdam and undermining the authority of their own Paramount Chief, Solomon ka Dinzulu.” Ncwana, in turn, echoed the assertion that “Natal had capable leaders in Mr Gumede and the Rev John L Dube, and there was no need for the Natives to import leaders from elsewhere who were now selling them to Amsterdam Bolsheviks.”⁴⁶ Together with the ex-president of the ICWU, Henry Selby Msimang, Ncwana attacked Kadalie’s manoeuvre to align with white labour movement, and the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), which was more commonly known as the Amsterdam International. Both men drew on anti-immigrant and anti-internationalist sentiments that had already coloured their earlier ideas.⁴⁷

During April 1927, at the same time as he was being denounced at the ICU’s annual conference, Ncwana repeatedly met with Kadalie’s arch-critic in parliament - a man closely

connected with Natal's sugar-owning white elite - John Sydney Marwick. Contemporary white commentators noted that Marwick was "not an attractive speaker as far as style goes", but nevertheless "his matter is far better than his manner". In particular, the "quantity of information he accumulates on any case he takes up, is wonderful. The documents on his desk in the House over-flow in all directions, and flood the neighbouring seats with the letters, papers, cuttings and Blue books from which he draws up his formidable indictments. He is a British and Imperialist South African of a type indigenous to Natal".⁴⁸ More succinctly, *Imvo* believed that of "all members of the South African Party, the Natives have no greater enemy in Parliament than Mr JS Marwick", and characterised him as a man who "urges people to fight the ICU tooth and nail".⁴⁹

Having withdrawn a deportation order against Kadalie in 1920, with the view of shoring up their black vote ahead of the 1921 general election, the SAP were facing considerable criticism for creating the 'Kadalie problem'. The legal implication of this withdrawal was that no deportation order could be placed against Kadalie again, unless he committed a criminal offence. Through one of Kadalie's "so-called European friends", Marwick acquired a 1921 letter from Hertzog to Kadalie, endorsing him as a 'fellow Africander', and through Marwick "the famous 'Hertzog letter to Kadalie' became publicly known."⁵⁰ Used in conjunction with Ncwana's 1920 letter from Kadalie (in which he stated that his "essential object is to be a great African Marcus Garvey"), these pieces of paper provided a means for splitting the Labour and National Party's 'Pact' coalition government in two, and regaining anti-'Bolshevist' credibility in public. In a set-piece parliamentary speech on 2nd May 1927, Ncwana's evidence crucially helped Marwick assert that Kadalie was a dangerous black disciple of Garvey. Not only that, he was a Garveyite who had personally corresponded with Hertzog. Dealing "very briefly with a good deal of misunderstanding that there is as to the real aims of the Industrial and Commercial Union [*sic*]", Marwick spoke at length on Kadalie's global links with the New Negro movement in Harlem and the Russian revolution, with the UNIA providing "the model upon which Mr Kadalie has framed his conduct".⁵¹ He went on to assert that after WWI, "the flame of the new ideas worked strongly on the minds of the negroes. The Irish rebellion, the Russian revolution, and Nationalist movement in India, the Islamic and Polish revival added to those fires. The same sort of propaganda is constantly used by Clements Kadalie to inflame his readers." In short, the "example[s] of Russia and China communicated to the native mind means only one thing, the overthrowing of white authority in this country."

John L Dube and Ncwana's friend, the Garveyite Professor James Thaele, similarly met Marwick and fed him with information to damage the ICU.⁵² John L Dube in particular was bitterly opposed to the ICU's "international socialistic inclinations", telling JS Marwick that "the doctrines so assiduously preached by Kadalie and his lieutenants in the ICU are directly contrary to the spirit and traditions of the Bantu race".⁵³ Thaele never publicly denounced the ICU, but he stopped editing the ICU's newspaper in 1925 and had been severely criticised by Kadalie for his enduring, pro-segregation, Garvey-inspired speeches. Thaele told Marwick he had left the trade union entirely by September 1926. After he and Kadalie-critic IB Nyombolo founded a branch of the Bantu Women's League in Queenstown, the secretary

Kate Xanti told a friend of Marwick's that "after a most mischievous propaganda had been launched by the ICU...Native leaders began to create a certain opposition to [the] ICU movement...Half hearted opposition to the ICU can not be tolerated, and a bold programme is required for getting Natal rid of a dangerous foe...my League is laying out big plans for a decisive campaign which will, through its tactics, finally bring the ICU to its knees."⁵⁴ As a result Marwick could confidently tell parliament that both the "well-born Zulu would despise the man who makes use of [the] language" employed by Kadalie, and that from "within the association itself...we have testimony that Kadalie's communistic tendencies were the reason why the Government put a ban on his movements in the Transvaal. His one-time colleague, 'Professor' Thaele, has issued printed leaflets against Kadalie making this statement in definite terms."⁵⁵

Labour MP Arthur Barlow rebuked the well-researched jibes of Marwick, asserting that the "old days when the native could be bluffed by the South African party are passing over. A new man is arising and that man is Kadalie. There is one thing I will respect Kadalie for - the South African party cannot buy him...when he has organized [the black workers] they will not vote for the South African party, because their policy is the direct opposite and anti-thesis of that of the men who are following Kadalie."⁵⁶ Barlow, however, had not counted on the likes of Ncwana, Dube and Thaele.

Marwick's antics in parliament were complimented by a four month long anti-Kadalie expose from June 1927, written by Ncwana and serialised in *Izindaba Zabantu*, entitled 'Kadalie's 'Political Renegade': Or How I Left the ICU'. At the same time as Kadalie was abroad in Europe, meeting with the Amsterdam International amongst others, Ncwana attacked "the infallible Idol of the ICU" as a vain lackey of Bud M'Belle who had no knowledge of book-keeping and owed his early ICU successes to "the brain work of his 'political renegade'". Ncwana's subsequent efforts to organise South West African workers and black Cape voters, who "were diametrically disorganised on important political issues", had unjustifiably been thwarted "through the sinister influence of the ICU clique".⁵⁷ Many, even amongst the black intellectual elite, clearly thought little of Ncwana and *Izindaba's* combined political agenda. RRR Dhlomo regretted that the "Political News' Editor of 'Izindaba zaBantu' seems to be suffering - most lamentably - from some peculiar complaint, which seeks to distort his political faculties to such a deplorable and pitiful extent, that he has allowed his paper - to be used as an offensive weapon for those political muddlers, who are the avowed enemies of the ICU." He called on the paper "to publicly acknowledge their erroneous views and to admit that although Kadalie may be a live wire, he is, nevertheless, a live wire like all of its kind - harmless except to those who maliciously and ignorantly touch it".⁵⁸

Ncwana and his backers were not finished, however, and his onslaught of anti-Kadalie propaganda peaked in early 1928 after Kadalie's return to South Africa. As recognised by RRR Dhlomo, upon his return Kadalie was already vulnerable and faced "a dilemma as his overtures to affiliate with the white Trades Union Congress are not likely to be acceptable; and his elimination of the anti-white propaganda in his programme, will cause widespread disappointment to the rank and file of the ICU who have been fed on that stuff."⁵⁹ Kadalie

also faced mounting criticisms of corruption, with Ncwana and Nyombolo aiding the publication of a pamphlet by ex-ICU secretary George Lenono, which pointed to endemic misappropriation within the ICU.⁶⁰ The final touch of the campaign was a publication by Ncwana himself, *The Activities of the ICU: An Exhaustive Enquiry into the Affairs and Policy of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa, both to Trades, Squatters, Farm Labourers and the Manipulation of the People's Funds*, a 17-page pamphlet in which Kadalie was singled out for criticism.⁶¹ Opening with a foreword from ex-ICWU president Henry Selby Msimang, the pamphlet criticised the mis-management of funds and called for the wholesale reorganisation of the ICU along sectional lines. It closed with the assertion that: "The only solution of the problem as far as I am concern[ed] is the deportation of the Nyasaland leader as the Union leaders are quite capable of solving the problem confronting the workers of the Union."⁶²

In many ways Ncwana's *Exhaustive Enquiry* was right - the ICU, now by far the biggest black organisation in South African history, was riddled with corruption, in some cases centring directly around Kadalie. And his ideas seem to have gained at least some traction within the trade union. Aware that "Ncwana was attempting to publish a paper dealing with the affairs of the ICU and that this Bennet Ncwana was actually being financed by the Chamber of Mines", Kadalie alleged that "there were officials of the ICU interested in the publication of [Ncwana's] paper", and that there were some "men within the ranks of the ICU who had introduced tribal differences and had stated that because he, Kadalie, came from Nyasaland he should not be given the opportunity to lead South African Natives".⁶³ Kadalie saw growing dissent as part of "a sinister campaign among higher officials of the ICU", and had it "on good authority, [that] it was suggested that I should not be allowed to return to South Africa. I was a Nyasalander and I had no right to lead the South African Native Workers. A list of new leaders was made secretly and it included some who dance to the tune that MONEY POWER PLAYS."⁶⁴ Clearly someone was listening to the ideas of Msimang, Nyombolo and Ncwana.

Whilst Kadalie was abroad in Europe, John L Dube had published a number of Ncwana's articles in *Ilanga lase Natal*. Yet, more damningly, at the same time Ncwana was also in correspondence with AWG Champion, the ICU Provincial Secretary for Natal, and wrote at least one article attacking John L Dube for Champion's own (largely lost) newspaper *Udibi lwase Afrika*.⁶⁵ Having engaged with Ncwana extensively, a clearly embattled AWG Champion wrote to Ncwana in October 1927, admitting that "whether you and Mr Dube are trying to surround the ICU I do not know."⁶⁶ When Champion and the Natal branch broke away from the main ICU to form the ICU yase Natal in May 1928, secessionists echoed Ncwana's criticisms of Kadalie, attacking ICU leaders who were "foreigners".⁶⁷ An anti-Kadalie 'Clean Administration Group' also emerged amongst remaining ICU officials, led by AP Maduna. Their manifesto was "drafted by two political renegades" - surely 'political renegade' Ncwana, and Nyombolo.⁶⁸ After his arrival in the midst of considerable confusion in July 1928, the Scottish adviser to the ICU, WG Ballinger, dismissed Kadalie's claims of intrigue as having "no proof" behind them, and took up Ncwana's call for a reorganisation of the ICU - a move that was supported by Ncwana's associate, AM Jabavu. By January 1929,

Ballinger and Jabavu had manoeuvred to oust Kadalie from the ICU, soon bringing Henry Selby Msimang - but not Ncwana - back within the fold.

Conclusion

Between 1928 and 1929, the ICU failed on its own terms. It was inevitable that the trade union would have to face the 'iron heel' of capitalism as it expanded, and when faced with slander and criticism it collapsed. As corruption within the ICU became publicly known, crushing disillusionment rapidly spread amongst members. In exacting his own revenge, Ncwana added a personalised validity to allegations. Over the subsequent decades, Kadalie and Ncwana continued to lead unusually intertwined lives. In 1931, when Kadalie's Independent ICU had no newspaper man, Ncwana's *Izwe Lama Afrika* filled the gap. Together the two men toured the Eastern Cape unsuccessfully trying to emulate their earlier triumphs in the ICU.⁶⁹ Suspended from the ANC in September 1942, by the late 1940s, Ncwana was an election agent for the reconstituted National Party, just as his some-time friend, some-time nemesis Clements Kadalie had done in 1924. This time, however, the Afrikaner nationalists were arguing for apartheid.⁷⁰

Many historians have quoted the 1920 Kadalie-Ncwana letter, and it has become the key piece of evidence demonstrating the influence of Garveyism on the ICU. None however have explored the letter's provenance - not least of all by questioning what it is doing among the Marwick papers at the Killie Campbell archive in Durban. By 1927, Ncwana had long abandoned Garveyism, and any previous association with the UNIA had become a poisoned chalice for Kadalie - linking him with the imprisoned Marcus Garvey abroad and the 'notorious' James Thaele at home. Clearly it was of considerable value to Marwick, and must have been worth a fair amount of money. Not enough attention has been paid to the role that such 'dirty' money played in South African politics during the first half of the 20th century, not least of all because it is intrinsically difficult to account for. By the late 1920s, however, with rural South Africa on the apparent edge of revolt, both the promotion and condemnation of the ICU had clearly become big business: it did not go unnoticed that Ncwana was a man who "the SAP press gives extraordinary publicity".⁷¹ Sol Plaatje's anti-socialist connections with De Beers are well known, and this article has shown how other 'collaborators' with complicated agendas include John L Dube, Impey Ben Nyombolo and James Thaele.⁷² If the history of capitalism in South Africa is inescapably linked to the history of sell-outs, then Ncwana uncomfortably reflects far wider ambivalences, complications and self-interests. Many black political activists underwent huge economic and political hardship in pursuit of their ambitions. TD Mveli Skota, for example, faced considerable difficulties at the same time as organising the ANC and writing his invaluable *African Yearly Register*.⁷³ Ncwana abandoned high ideals and avoided such self-sacrifice, where possible, much like his nemesis I Bud M'bele. By pursuing his own lucrative agenda of personal revenge, and profit, he instead offered himself up to the highest bidder, the SAP, as a pen for hire.

¹ At the very least Ncwana wrote articles for *Abantu-Batho*, *The African Voice*, *The Black Man*, *The Diamond Field Advertiser*, *Ilanga lase Natal*, *Imvo Zabantsundu*, *Izindaba Zabantu*, *Izwe Lama Afrika*, *The Natal Advertiser*, *South African Outlook*, *Udibi lwase Afrik*, *UmAfrika Omtsha* and *Umteteli wa Bantu*. His main rival as a relentless political commentator in the black press over the course of the 1920s was Henry Daniel Tyamzashe, the sub-editor of the ICU's *Workers' Herald* between 1925 and 1929. For Ncwana's links to *Abantu-Batho* see P. Limb, *The People's Paper: A Centenary History & Anthology of Abantu-Batho* (Johannesburg, 2012); his writing in *South African Outlook* see L. Switzer & D. Switzer, *The Black Press in South African and Lesotho* (Boston, 1979); and his role as editor of *UmAfrika Omtsha* see B. Kinkead-Weakes, *Africans in Cape Town: State Policy and Popular Resistance, 1936-1973*, (PhD, Uni. of Cape Town, 1992). Other connections are discussed below.

² Cleopas Mabaso alleged that Ncwana was also involved in the Bantu Union, the African Bond, the African Political Organisation, the Native Ministers' Interdenominational Association, Zulu Sebenzela Ekaya, Izibuko Lama Koloni and Iziko Lenyembezi. C.S. Mabaso, 'Impendulo ku Mr S.M. Bennet Ncwana', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 12/08/1927. For Ncwana's African Progressive Party connections see 'African Progressive Party', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 01/05/1937; 'Reviewing the Political Situation in Cape Town', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 15/05/1937; 'African Progressive Party', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 23/07/1938.

³ Arthur Barlow on 02/05/1927, in *Debates of the House of Assembly: Fourth Session, Fifth Parliament, 28th January to 29th June, 1927: Volume 9*, (Cape Town, 1927).

⁴ Arthur Barlow on 02/05/1927, in *Debates of the House of Assembly*.

⁵ University of Cape Town Special Collection (UCT), BC 347 (Ballinger Papers) A5.II, C. Kadalie, 'Manifesto'.

⁶ J.T. Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa*, (Oxford, 1995), p. 301; L. van der Walt, *Anarchism and Syndicalism in South Africa, 1904-1921: Rethinking the History of Labour and the Left*, (PhD, Uni. of Witwatersrand, 2007), p.488; A. Grundlingh, 'Mutating Memories and the Making of a Myth: Remembering the SS Mendi Disaster, 1917-2017', *South African Historical Journal*, 63:1 (2011), p.21.

⁷ South African National Archives, Pretoria (SANA), NTS 7599 2/328 SMB Ncwana: The National Helping Hand Society (1931-1944), 'Re Native Agitator: SM Bennet Ncwana', 09/08/1926.

⁸ SANA GG 1140 25/153 SMB Ncwana requests permission to address Her Majesty the Queen (1913); GG 1141 25/167 SMB Ncwana's petition to Her Majesty Queen Alexandra on His Subject (1913).

⁹ This article draws at length on Ncwana's 1927 serialised attack on Kadalie. S.M.B. Ncwana, 'Kadalie's 'Political Renegade': Or How I Left the ICU', *Izindaba Zabantu*, 17/06/1927 to 02/09/1927; P. Limb, 'An African Newspaper in Central Johannesburg', in Limb, *The People's Paper*.

¹⁰ SANA NTS 7599 2/328 SMB Ncwana, 'Re Native Agitator: SM Bennet Ncwana', 09/08/1926.

¹¹ 'Mendi Memorial Club', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 20/11/1920.

¹² Grundlingh, 'Mutating Memories'; SANA NTS 9111 36/363 South African Native Labour Corps: Mendi Memorial (1917-1945); NTS 9112 36/363 South African Native Labour Corps: Mendi Memorial (1951-1963); GG 1549 50/771 Mendi Memorial Club: Formation of: Appeal for subscriptions (1919); GG 2238 1/220 Prince Arthur: Mendi Memorial Club, Cape Town (1921). For Ncwana's views on WWI, see also S.M.B. Ncwana, 'Salam British Democracy', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 04/08/1925; and S.M.B. Ncwana, *Souvenir of the SS Mendi*, (Cape Town, c.1940s) found in NTS 7246 200/326 African Ex-Servicemen's League (1940).

¹³ The following is from Ncwana, 'Kadalie's 'Political Renegade''.

¹⁴ Ncwana, 'Kadalie's 'Political Renegade''.

¹⁵ SANA NTS 7599 2/328 SMB Ncwana, 'Re Native Agitator: SM Bennet Ncwana', 09/08/1926.

¹⁶ SANA NTS 7599 2/328 SMB Ncwana, 'Re Native Agitator: SM Bennet Ncwana', 09/08/1926. Their "room was searched, but nothing incriminating found".

¹⁷ Ncwana, 'Kadalie's 'Political Renegade''; for a good discussion of Ncwana's transatlantic race politics in *The Black Man* see V. Collis-Buthelezi, *Anxious Records: Race, Imperial Belonging, and the Black Literary Imagination, 1900-1946*, (PhD, Uni. of Columbia, 2013).

¹⁸ Killie Campbell Archive (KCA), Marwick Papers (MP), File 74, C. Kadalie to S.M.B. Ncwana, 20/05/1920.

¹⁹ 'The General Election', *The Black Man*, December 1920.

²⁰ Ncwana, 'Kadalie's 'Political Renegade''.

²¹ Ncwana, 'Kadalie's 'Political Renegade''.

²² Ncwana also undercut the ICU in Namibia, forming a rival South West African National Congress (SWANC) in 1922. Ncwana, 'Kadalie's 'Political Renegade''; L. van der Walt, 'The Industrial and Commercial Workers Union in South West Africa: Syndicalism, Garveyism and Resistance in South African-ruled Namibia, 1920-1925', paper presented at the European Social Science History Conference, Valencia, Spain, March-April 2016, p.21.

²³ SANA NTS 7599 2/328 SMB Ncwana, 'Re Native Agitator: SM Bennet Ncwana', 09/08/1926.

²⁴ E.B. Mkwatela, 'ICU or ICWU', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 24/06/1922.

²⁵ Of all South Africa's languages, both Kadalie and ICU president James Gulam Gumbs (from St Vincent in the Caribbean) could only speak English.

²⁶ Kadalie, 'Manifesto'.

²⁷ 'ICU Manifesto', *Ilanga lase Natal*, 12/10/1923; see also 'ICU Challenged: 'Who are the Bolsheviks?''', *The Workers' Herald*, 22/10/1923.

²⁸ SANA NTS 7599 2/328 SMB Ncwana, 'Re Native Agitator: SM Bennet Ncwana', 09/08/1926.

²⁹ SANA NTS 7599 2/328 SMB Ncwana, 'Re Native Agitator: SM Bennet Ncwana', 09/08/1926.

³⁰ C. Kadalie, *My Life and the ICU: The Autobiography of a Black Trade Unionist in South Africa*, (London, 1980), pp.55-56.

³¹ 'ICU Challenged: 'Who are the Bolsheviks?''', *The Workers' Herald*, 22/10/1923.

³² 'ICWU Activities', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 08/12/1925; 'ICWU Head Quarters', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 15/12/1925. Msimang was certainly still president in 1923, see H.S. Msimang, 'Conference of the ICWU', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 07/04/1923. From 1922, Henry Selby Msimang was also a 'general agent', like Ncwana, working with RV Selope Thema in Johannesburg, *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 27/01/1923. For an overview of Msimang's life (which repeats Msimang's untrue claim he resigned from the ICU in 1921, and doesn't cover his involvement in the ICWU) see S.M. Mkhize, *Class Consciousness, Non-racialism and Political Pragmatism: A Political Biography of Henry Selby Msimang, 1886-1982*, (PhD, Uni. of Witwatersrand, 2015).

³³ P. Wickins, *The Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union of Africa*, (PhD, Uni. of Cape Town, 1973), p.228. Some historians, notably Wickins, note that Ncwana and Nyombolo slipped into insignificance after this – this is wrong.

³⁴ 'Major Ballantine's Reply', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 10/06/1924; D.S.L. [D.S. Letanka], '(A Letter to the Editor): Indians Our Brothers', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 17/06/1924.

³⁵ 'Cape Native Voters' Association', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 04/08/1923; 'Cape Native Voters' Association', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 11/08/1923; G. Mafunda, 'CNVA', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 03/11/1924; 'Cape Native Voters' Association', 11/08/1923

³⁶ 'Herschel Chiefs and Voters', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 01/09/1923.

³⁷ 'Cape Native Voters' Association', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 06/10/1923.

³⁸ 'Major Ballantine's Reply', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 10/06/1924; D.S.L. [D.S. Letanka], '(A Letter to the Editor): Indians Our Brothers', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 17/06/1924.

³⁹ Ncwana, 'Kadalie's 'Political Renegade''.

⁴⁰ *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 07/06/1924.

⁴¹ Letter from the President of the CNVC, *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 22/12/1925; SANA NTS 7599 2/328 SMB Ncwana, 'Re Native Agitator: SM Bennet Ncwana', 09/08/1926.

⁴² S.M.B. Ncwana, 'Boycotting Native Labour', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 10/03/1925 and 17/03/1925; S.M.B. Ncwana, 'Recruiting of Native Labour', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 28/04/1925; S.M.B. Ncwana, 'Homicidal Public Opinion', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 12/05/1925; S.M.B. Ncwana, 'Open Letter: To HRH The Prince of Wales', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 19/05/1925; S.M.B. Ncwana, 'Correspondence', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 30/06/1925; S.M.B. Ncwana, 'Salam British Democracy', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 04/08/1925; S.M.B. Ncwana, 'Rand Native Mine Labour', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 22/09/1925; S.M.B. Ncwana, 'Open Letter to Race Leaders', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 17/11/1925; S.M.B. Ncwana, 'Black Labour and Wages', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 15/12/1925; S.M.B. Ncwana, 'Native Passive Resistance', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 06/04/1926.

⁴³ 'Matter of Urgency', *The Workers' Herald*, 17/05/1927.

⁴⁴ 'Matter of Urgency', *The Workers' Herald*, 17/05/1927.

⁴⁵ 'Anti-Kadalie Movement', *The Workers' Herald*, 15/02/1927.

⁴⁶ 'Fighting Bolshevism: The Moderate Party', *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 20/11/1926

⁴⁷ For more on the anti-immigrant agendas of Msimang and Ncwana, see H. Mitchell, 'We Have Nothing in Common with Blantyre Natives': Immigration, Internationalism and the Nation in South Africa', first published on the Edinburgh University Centre of African Studies (CAS) blog, at:

<https://centrefafricanstudies.wordpress.com/2017/03/15/we-have-nothing-in-common-with-blantyre-natives-immigration-internationalism-and-the-nation-in-south-africa-in-the-1920s-and-today/> Kadalie claimed that

"After this Ncwana joined forces with Gumede (a Native communist) but Gumede left him in queer street and sailed to the communist conferences in Berlin together with your ex-General Secretary, James La Guma." As a result Gumede, in turn, faced Ncwana-authored attacks. During a meeting of chiefs in April 1928, Chief Moshesh of Mataiele quoted Ncwana's articles to object to Gumede. 'Matter of Urgency', *The Workers' Herald*, 17/05/1927; H.J. Simons & R.E. Simons, *Class and Colour in South Africa, 1850-1950*, (Aylesbury, 1969), p.402, referencing *The Friend*, 07/04/1928 and 10/04/1928.

⁴⁸ L.E. Neame, *Some South African Politicians*, (Cape Town, n.d.)

⁴⁹ 'Mr J.S. Marwick and Natives', *Imvo Zabantsundu*, 24/06/1927.

⁵⁰ Kadalie, *My Life and the ICU*, pp.59; 62.

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- ⁵¹ John Marwick on 02/05/1927, in *Debates of the House of Assembly*.
- ⁵² KCA MP 73, J.H. Tandy to J.S. Marwick, 13/04/1927; J.S. Marwick to Carlisle, 16/04/1927, "...Professor James Thaele (of 115 Waterkant St (Cape Town)) who broke from the ICU in Aug. or Sept. 1926 tells me that a balance sheet is prepared for every annual conference, and that it is audited by European auditors - but this balance sheet is not widely distributed and is not published in the Press. Thaele says the books, originally kept at Cape Town, will show that Kadalie had to refund certain shortages by monthly instalments... Bennet Ncwana a former prominent member of the ICU says he knows of no member who has had a copy of the Annual balance sheet"; J.S. Marwick to Carlisle, 17/04/1927, "...Thaele states that one Sidzumo, an ICU official at Port Elizabeth used a considerable sum of ICU money for the purchase of land which was transferred to his own name... Bennet Ncwana may be able to hear of members of the ICU (or of persons who were members in Sept. 1926) who can support the allegation that they had no information as to how the funds were utilised. Ncwana is to see me again tomorrow."
- ⁵³ KCA MP 73, J.L. Dube to J.S. Marwick, 24/02/1928.
- ⁵⁴ SANA, JUS 918 1/18/26 Native Agitation Reports On (1927-1928) Report of Meeting on 07/08/1927 led by Thaele; JUS 918 1/18/26 Native Agitation Reports On (1927-1928) Report of Meeting on 14/08/1927 led by Nyombolo and Thaele; KCA MP 73, K. Xanti to G.S. Smith, 11/01/1928; in *Umteteli wa Bantu*, 03/09/1927 an advert is posted by Xanti of 'Queenstown & District Native Women's League'.
- ⁵⁵ John Marwick on 02/05/1927, in *Debates of the House of Assembly*.
- ⁵⁶ Arthur Barlow on 02/05/1927, in *Debates of the House of Assembly*.
- ⁵⁷ Ncwana, 'Kadalie's 'Political Renegade''.
- ⁵⁸ R.R.R. Dhlomo, 'Preposterous Hallucinations', *Ilanga lase Natal*, 24/06/1927; R.R.R. Dhlomo, 'Kadalie & Communism', *Ilanga lase Natal*, 18/02/1927.
- ⁵⁹ R.R.R. Dhlomo, 'Is Kadalie Converted?', *Ilanga lase Natal*, 25/11/1927.
- ⁶⁰ Wickins, *The ICU*, p.331. Quoting Kadalie's letter to Lenono c.December 1926: "You must also realise, my dear friend, that the members of the Council are in a better [position] to realise the danger confronting the I.C.Uo than perhaps you and many others would. Surely, if you in Durban cannot realise how the enemies used the Communist bokey (sic) in the I.C.U. then I am afraid none else will. It was but a few weeks ago when Messrs. Ncwana and Nyombolo. launched a gigantic attack upon the movement in Durban, and they used the Bolshevik bokey (sic) to frighten the rank and file and then solicit Government's interference in our work." Wickins subsequently alleges that Lenono's actions had been connected with Ncwana and Nyombolo, pp.446.
- ⁶¹ Found in SANA GNLB 400 55/1 Commission in the Union: Reports of Meetings held by Agitators (1929)
- ⁶² Ncwana, *The Activities of the ICU*.
- ⁶³ SANA, JUS 919 1/18/26 Native Agitation Reports 19/03/1928 - 02/06/1928 (1928), Police Report on ICU Meeting, 01/04/1928.
- ⁶⁴ Kadalie, 'Manifesto'.
- ⁶⁵ S.M.B. Ncwana, 'Congress and Communists', *Udibi Lwase Afrika*, September 1927.
- ⁶⁶ UCT BC581 Forman Paper B3, A.W.G. Champion to S.M.B. Ncwana, 05/10/1927.
- ⁶⁷ P. La Haussee, 'The Message of the Warriors: The ICU, the labouring poor and the making of a popular political culture in Durban', paper delivered to the History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand, February, 1987, p.24.
- ⁶⁸ C. Kadalie, 'Manifesto'.
- ⁶⁹ C. Kadalie, *My Life and the ICU*, p.204; Western Cape Archive, 1/ELN 87 C3 Native Unrest (1930-1933), Police Report on Independent ICU Meeting on 22/09/1931.
- ⁷⁰ Kadalie, *My Life and the ICU*, p.57.
- ⁷¹ UCT BC581 B3 H.D. Tyamzashe to the Editor of *Umteteli*, c.15/11/1926.
- ⁷² B. Willan, 'Sol Plaatje, De Beers and an Old Tram Shed: Class Relations and Social Control in a South African Town, 1918-1919', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 4:2 (1978).
- ⁷³ J. Campbell, 'T. D. Mveli Skota and the Making and Unmaking of a lack Elite,' paper delivered to the History Workshop, University of the Witwatersrand, February, 1987.