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History in Africa, Volume 32, 2005, pp. 435-444 (Article)

Published by Cambridge University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hia.2005.0004>



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UNWRITTEN HISTORY: AFRICAN WORK IN THE YMCA OF SOUTH AFRICA

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I

In mid-1995, walking out of the door of my house, I received a telephone call. On the other end of the line was a distinct, well-spoken, but clearly faraway male voice. The man introduced himself, saying:

My name is Vusi Kaunda, calling from Johannesburg, South Africa. I recently read an article you wrote about the YMCA, referring to events that took place some 75 years ago. I have been working for the South African YMCA for 10 years and I never knew anything about all this. Where did you get your information?

Conditions did not permit us to take this conversation to its logical conclusion. I was on the way to conduct a history class; we had clearly connected at an inconvenient time. But that verbal exchange has stayed on my mind ever since. It demonstrated the power of the written word to connect people separated by thousands of miles, yet discover that they have a common purpose. Ours is to tell the story of the African voice in a new inclusive historiography of South Africa's Young Men's Christian Association.

II

My discovery of the YMCA of South Africa came as a result of researching the life of Max Yergan, an African-American YMCA Secretary who, representing the "jim crow" "Colored Work" Department of a segregated North American YMCA, entered the Union of South Africa after considerable opposition, on the second day of January 1922. This was Yergan's third overseas posting and second African assignment, the first

History in Africa 32 (2005), 435–444

being in Kenya, and then Tanganyika during the East Africa campaign of World War I. He had joined the YMCA as a Shaw University sophomore in Raleigh, North Carolina in 1911, rapidly rising in its ranks to become a national figure in their Black "Y" network. Yergan became the third "non-white" YMCA Traveling Secretary in South Africa and the first to attempt to do so on a full-time basis, succeeding J. K. Bokwe and D. D. T. Jabavu.

While each of his famed predecessors represented an educated elite, the so-called "school people" produced by foreign-based Christian missions and training institutions, it appears that neither left behind a print record of how these "native" branches functioned.

Without such a chronicle we are left to conjecture about what actually took place during those early days. It is not surprising that Mr. Kaunda was unfamiliar with his forebears in the YMCA, for there is relatively little that has been written on this subject for any of the departments of the South African YMCA, regardless of race or place. Part of this could be attributable to the ravages of the system of "separate development," but South African 'Y' work actually antedates *apartheid* by nearly a full century. The problem is thus both longer and larger than racism, either individual or institutional; it is principally archival.

The answer to Vusi Kaunda's query lay in the simple fact that the repositories in which I researched were housed in North America. Yergan, posted to South Africa as an emissary of the YMCA's New York-based International Committee (later International Division) and funded by U.S. school and community branches comprising the 'Colored' "Y"'s constellation, was required to convey all correspondence, copies of reports, and other relevant official documentation homeward, a continent away from his foreign field.

No wonder he was unaware of what had happened three-quarters of a century earlier; but he was certainly not alone. Despite a vigorous, dedicated body of secretaries in urban and rural areas, the South African YMCA has yet to find its historians. The challenge has not escaped notice from the present YMCA administrative apparatus, however. National Secretary Treven Hendricks has made clear that historical reconstruction is a 'Y' priority.

III

Vusi Kaunda was a vital link in the chain of testimonies that made it possible for me to glimpse the contours of black YMCA history in South Africa. Before he found me I groped in the dark, drowning in my files

from the 1920s and earlier, but lacking a real sense of the field where this work had to be done. In July 2000, as a result of being part of the “African American Historical Linkages With South Africa Project” with research colleagues Bob Edgar and Robert Vinson, I was finally able to meet with Mr. Kaunda in person.¹ Connecting at the University of the Witwatersrand, we arranged to spend the better part of a day touring Soweto and speaking to YMCA officials, including Treven Hendricks and Shakes Tshabalala, a veteran “old school” official who started under Ray Phillips in 1956 at the Donaldson Orlando Community Centre. The two staffers were a study in contrasts, Hendricks, a youthful, ebullient, zealous, thoroughly politicized, transplanted Capetonian, Tshabalala, a wizened, mature, hospitable, jovial, circumspect pensioner with a wealth of experience honed in the hard times of the 1950s and 1960s, when no person in their right mind could have imagined a day that the YMCA executive truly would reflect the nation.

Hendricks spoke in the YMCA’s downtown Johannesburg headquarters, perched above the noise of bustling city streets. He clearly sandwiched me between a host of rather more urgent meetings, but gave me his full attention when we shared information.

Tshabalala greeted me at his home, where Kaunda deposited me after we had toured the Donaldson Centre, sharing a luscious lunch at Wandie’s restaurant and passing through the streets where the students of Soweto staged their valiant uprising against instruction in Afrikaans in 1976. Tshabalala met me outside and together we reminisced about what had to happen in order for the YMCA to open the door to the black majority, and how he had been a part of that process. Unassuming, self-effacing, and soft-spoken, he was also still full of the determination that I saw and felt in so many South Africans whose history has been etched in the blood, sweat, toil, and tears expended in striving to build a new society.

From Tshabalala I found corroboration of what I had earlier gleaned from reading between the lines of my primary and secondary sources—that the YMCA was not actually one unitary organization, but a widely-ramified assortment of quasi-autonomous, highly-decentralized local bodies, each with its own particular directorial cadres and members.² He had been a product of an urban industrial regime shaped by the forces of rampant capitalism that both created the colossus that was the South African economy and did so by riding roughshod over the proletariat, whose

¹This text, *Crossing The Water*, is discussed in http://www.founders.howard.edu/reference/bob_edgar_site/

²Interview, Shakes Tshabalala, Orlando, Soweto, Johannesburg [Gauteng] 4 July 2000.

labor fueled that extraordinary development. Although there were antecedents of the work he detailed along the great Reef of the Rand, we do not know just how they responded to the needs of the “non-white” laboring masses.

A handful of references to “Native” mine labor barely hint of their sacrifices and travails. This would not change until 1917, with the emergence of the Bantu Men’s Social Centre, founded by the American Board of Commissioners representative Frederick B. Bridgman, and aided by his able assistant and subsequent successor, Dr. Raymond Edmund Phillips.

Even less evident is the story of the rural branches in training schools, save for the American Board campuses in Natal and the senior African YMCA flagship institutions of Lovedale and Healdtown in the Eastern Cape. While it is apparent that “Native” YMCA branch work in these institutions dates from as early as 1896 (and in others is rumored to have started considerably earlier) the extant documentary evidence thus far appears not to be readily accessible within South Africa itself. While this may change with time, for the moment we must regard the pre-1896 assertions as the stuff of legend. Some of these are easier to corroborate than others. It is alleged, for example, that before 1896 there functioned an indefinite number of semi-autonomous local YMCA branches in historic Basutoland (Lesotho); this requires searching the unindexed *Leselinyana ea Lesotho*, one of the oldest print media in the country. While this shall take time, it has already yielded rich fruit.³ One person’s name to check would be that of Oswin Boys Bull, who reached South Africa in 1907, visiting the Basutoland Protectorate during 1908, 1909, and 1910.⁴

³Sesotho documents generated on a prior search were made available by Stephen Gill, director, Morija Museum and Archives, Lesotho. Gill to author 2/26/03; 4/23/03 and 5/31/03. Extracts of these 1923 and 1925 articles appear in David Anthony, “Max Yergan Encounters South Africa: Theological Perspectives on Race,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 34(2004), 235-65. Complete translations will appear in D. Anthony, ed., *African Affairs: A Max Yergan Reader* (work in progress). Original reportage was undertaken by such giants of modern Sesotho vernacular literature as Z. D. Mangoela and L.M. Moletsane in *Leselinyana ea Lesotho*, T.M. Leanya, translator. The inauguration of ‘Y’ formation in historic Basutoland is discussed in Craig J. Hincks, *Quest for Peace: A History of the Churches in Lesotho* (forthcoming) drawing upon earlier *Leselinyana* issues of 1908, 1909, and 1910. These concern trips from South Africa made by Oswin B. Bull.

⁴British-born YMCA secretary Bull (1882-1971), posted to Cape Town in 1906, first saw Basutoland before World War I. It made quite a salutary impression on him. In 1927, after 20 years of South African ‘Y’ service, he became principal of Lerotholi Training College, still a highly-regarded Lesotho technical school.

IV

Primary source material available within South Africa is of three types: archival data stored in libraries and other major research facilities comprising official documents; printed matter produced by organizations or individuals in close contact with the YMCA and its allied trends, such as the Student Christian Association, Student Volunteer Movement, World Student Christian Federation, and various local affiliates (e.g., Teachers' Christian Association); and memoirs, either private or public, in transcript, book, or oral form.

The South African YMCA and SCA each produced several in-house periodicals, most emphasizing the challenges posed by urban life to their principally white clientele, ranging from the rare *Rand Young Men's Journal* (Johannesburg) and *Men of the Fields* (Kimberley) to *The Vanguard* (Johannesburg) and *Manhood: Organ of the Cape Town YMCA* (Cape Town). The Stellenbosch-based SCA published *Unitas*, *Universitas*, and *Omnes Unum*. African training institutions, schools, and colleges typically kept track of YMCA and SCA branch work in their own campus calendars, monthlies, and quarterlies. Bilingual, multilingual, and vernacular newspapers also often carried significant articles.⁵ Overseas "Y" publications, as well as those of related organizations prove equally useful.

This means that while Mr. Kaunda has more sources at his fingertips than we might have originally suspected, it must be emphasized that he would still have had considerable difficulty recovering the African side of the story using any combination of these texts.

"Race" matters profoundly in the reconstruction of "non-white" branches of the South African YMCA and SCA. Such local outposts as did exist typically operated on a segregated basis. This is a major reason that we might not readily identify sites or source materials. It was not until after Luther Wishard and Donald Fraser reached South Africa in 1896 during their global tour, as part of the initiative preceding the foundation of the World Students' Christian Federation that the question of extending this work to African youth and students was even seriously

⁵*Rand Young Men's Journal* (Johannesburg) (1 October 1903-April 1908); *Men of the Fields* (Kimberley) (1 March-3 May 1909); *The Vanguard* (Johannesburg) (1921); *Manhood: Organ of the Cape Town YMCA* (Cape Town) (1921-ns (Johannesburg) 1946-49); *Unitas* (Stellenbosch) (1916-1930); *Universitas* (Stellenbosch) (1-10 April 1920-1930); and *Omnes Unum* (Stellenbosch) (1-15(8); 1931-Nov/Dec/1945). The predecessor of these SCA publications, while named differently, ran concurrently and are often considered synonymous and interchangeable, exchanged articles, was bilingual and (Afrikaans/English) and was called *The Christian Student* (1898-1930). I have not examined this title nor anything later than 1940.

raised, and when it arose foreigners broached it. In like manner it took a full decade for yet another outside visitor to rekindle the inquiry—YMCA leader John Raleigh Mott, who surveyed South Africa along with British WSCF colleague Ruth Rouse. Even then it took another year for England's O.B. Bull to arrive.

Bull relied to a great extent on Rev. John Knox Bokwe, whom he selected as part-time "Native" branch Traveling Secretary from 1915 until the latter's retirement in 1920.

Bokwe, one of the most famous products of Lovedale Presbyterian mission, a teacher, a former private secretary to Principal James Stewart, an ordained minister, and renowned composer was already a sexagenarian when he became Bull's auxiliary. When Bokwe's health failed, he was succeeded by his junior colleague, Davidson Don Tengo Jabavu, son of journalist John Tengo Jabavu, founder of *Imvo Zabantsundu*, whom Bokwe had also assisted. However, little has come to light in print concerning this early period. It is also pertinent to mention that it can be deceptive to try discussing YMCA history as if it was a unitary phenomenon, for the organization was highly decentralized, with rural, urban, school, and community branches spread across the southern African sub-continent.

Further, Y's and SCA's articulated informally with other trends like the Scripture Union.

There were evidently distinctions between work undertaken for "coloured" (i.e., Mixed Race and unmixed African populations) designated as either "Native" or "Bantu" in much of the contemporary literature, particularly SCA and YMCA house periodicals.

This division was evident in the immediate aftermath of the First World War in this item: "It is worthy of record that the Association encouraged and investigated the organization of a Coloured Y.M.C.A. in Cape Town at the end of 1919. The Coloured Troops Rest Hut was transferred to the YMCA, and a good work has been done there."⁶

By 1921 therefore, the Cape Town organization had taken this question to another level.

Our richest time frame from the standpoint of documentation opens with the 1922 arrival of Max Yergan. Celebrated by both English-language and vernacular newspapers, he was heralded in articles in Afrikaans, Isixhosa, Isizulu, and Sesotho. Moreover, he left behind a remarkable paper trail of correspondence and reports that were circulated across three continents in archives within the United States and Europe as well as South Africa. From 1922 through 1936, it is quite a straightfor-

⁶*Manhood* 1:8 (March 1921), 153.

ward matter to plot his career. In many ways his was the trajectory of “non-white” YMCAs in South Africa as a whole. It is the saga of articulation between local rural and urban branches separated by formal and informal patterns of rigid customary racial segregation, some resembling practices common in Yergan’s own North American organization, while others bore an imperial and colonial *imprimatur*. The documents reveal that Yergan was seen as a true pioneer, possibly in ways that gave his presence power different from that of Bokwe and Jabavu.

When Yergan began his circuit-riding in South Africa he was ushered through his new field by either by Jabavu or Bull, sometimes both. Since Jabavu was an experienced “North America hand” the two diasporic Africans forged a firm bond. Out of earshot of their “European” bosses, they exchanged vital inside information facilitating Max’s entry into his complex new milieu. Yergan proved a herald in every sense of the word, turning racial stereotyping on its head, yet tightly imprisoned within his own color contradictions.

Jabavu and Yergan looked into one another’s metaphorical mirrors, an African who lived in the US befriending an African-American deeply devoted to deciphering Africa’s code.

In the 1920s YMCA and SCA black work was cast in terms of the “Native Question.”⁷ In 1923, for example, this reference appeared in the journal of the Cape Town YMCA:

The Native Affairs conference had unanimously adopted a resolution asking the National Council to co-operate in their work, and had elected a Standing Committee, consisting of the Archbishop of Cape Town, Dr. J. du Plessis, Mr George Louw, Rev A Mtemkula (sic) [M’timkulu] and Mr D D T Jabavu, to see that the resolutions of the conference were carried into effect.⁸

⁷For representative examples of this see J. Gow, “Settling the Native Question,” *Manhood* 3:9(January 1923), 209-13 and 3:10(February 1923), 229-33.

⁸“Native Institutional Work,” *Manhood* 4:7 (November 1923), 133-35. Earlier the journal reported on a South African Council of YMCAs Conference held in Johannesburg on 1-2 October 1923 during which the question of “Institutional Work Among Natives in Urban Areas,” was addressed. The conference proceedings were summarized in meeting minute form in issue 4:6(October 1923), 107-09, 113-14. Two months earlier, the Dutch Reformed Church convened a Johannesburg conference of “Native leaders. Representatives of great Missionary Societies, Native welfare societies, and others.” *Manhood* also had reported that “The conference passed a resolution urging...the desirability of establishing Institutional work among native ‘boys’ working in urban areas of the country,” numbering about one million. W. E. Easton, “The First Bantu Association,” *Manhood* 6:2(June 1925), 20-21. Most YMCA members were Afrikaners.

Jabavu is also interesting for the way that he was, like Gold Coast-born Dr. James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey, and Jabavu's own compatriot Rev. John Langalibalele Dube, an African disciple of Booker T. Washington. In very short order, Jabavu and Yergan became fast friends. Although somewhere down the road that appears to have changed, it seems that during this collegial honeymoon, so-called "non-European" YMCA work was booming. I sound tentative and hypothetical here because the documents are thin on the ground, depending almost exclusively on Yergan's files in the U.S. and Geneva. I do not know what happened to the YMCA archives in South Africa, and having been there three times without locating anything, I am embarrassed to admit that. I do think I have gotten much closer to them, though, now that I have a conduit to the National Executive.

Since I worked in the old 'Y' archives at the Bowne Historical Library in 1974, I know a great deal about what survives and what might not, and black and "non-European" work seems expendable. Yet in research little is irretrievable and historical data is rarely totally lost. Often it is misplaced and if not eaten by termites, burned, or washed away, it frequently resurfaces, perhaps in an attenuated form, but sometimes with startling detail. An example of this is the discovery of speeches Max Yergan made in Basutoland in 1923 and 1925, translated into Sesotho so the original English manuscripts sermon, or lecture notes—if they ever existed—appear not to have survived. With the help of the staff of Morija Museum and Archives in Lesotho, however, we tracked these down and translated them, yielding the most detailed accounts of Yergan as a sermonizer that I have ever uncovered.

Yergan was a guest in all-white universities and colleges, speaking to students in 1922 at Stellenbosch in the Afrikaner heartland and at a restricted University College of Natal in Pietermaritzburg, driving, on horseback, hitchhiking, riding inside flatbed trucks, wagons, changing tires on country roads, cursed and spat at by poor white wage workers, and so on. So I know much about the milieu within which he operated. I also have found articles unavailable overseas (published in either English and Afrikaans), in local Student Christian Association periodicals titled *Unitas*, *Universitas*, and *Omnes Unum* ("All One," the slogan of the World Student Christian Federation) and short-lived YMCA media perused: *Men of the Fields*, *The Rand Young Men's Journal*, *The Vanguard*, and *Manhood: Organ of the Cape Town YMCA*, and vernacular gazettes *Iso Lomuzi* or *De Stellenbosse Student*.

V

Oswin Bull, Yergan's white predecessor, contemporary and ostensible supervisor is also of great importance as the founder of "non-white" SCA and YMCA organizations.

Taking his lead from John R. Mott in 1906, it was Bull who devoted much, if not most, of his time between his arrival from Britain in 1907 until his recall to England during World War I to the establishment of an SCA that would address the needs of South Africa's racially, ethnically, and religiously fractious communities, in tandem with the YMCA. A considerable amount of that time was taken up with laying the groundwork for "Native" work, alone, and then with aid from Bokwe and Jabavu. While much of the credit for this work belongs to Bull's African auxiliaries, he himself gained in knowledge by leading it.

In 1924, for example, he wrote the following observations for the *South African Outlook*:

The Land Question is a vital one for the African and has got to be dealt with. What has to be recognized is not so much that there should be a clear definition of area and ownership on both sides, as that the white man must make up his mind that there are no more big areas for white settlement outside those which are already held by him or are in the process of immediate occupation. He must accept a stringent self-denying ordinance in this respect so that it will come to be accepted that Africa is no longer one of the colonizing outlets for the white races. Nothing less than this will suffice to prevent interminable unrest. So, for the continent as a whole, we can look ahead and agree generously and reasonably that it is to be the black man's continent, diverting our larger streams of emigration to the spacious and more suitable areas which are open to us elsewhere.⁹

This seems a remarkably prescient and progressive position for any British-born, South Africa-based Student Christian Association and YMCA executive officer to take in 1924.

⁹O.B. Bull, *South African Outlook* (March 1924), as cited in Walter Aidan Cotton, *The Race Problem in South Africa* (London, 1926), 115-16. Having run South Africa's SCA before the war, Bull returned after the war to head the YMCA.

VI

There remain phenomenally frustrating *lacunae*. I have yet to encounter any local branch rosters. I don't have any reports, newspapers, newsletters, or anything of the kind that was not generated from a distance. We can find out a lot about Johannesburg, Cape Town, and other burgeoning metropolises, but at the branch level this is difficult and for rural areas, impossible. I do not necessarily believe that this will always be the case, for things and people turn up, often when least expected, when seekers have given up hope.

An unasked question is why should any of this matter today? Surely the problem posed by sparse YMCA documentation is not unique to South Africa; now that minutely-crafted histories exist not only for the developed world, in majority and minority settings, shedding light on "Y" activity among women and men, but in non-Western, even Third World situations in clearly challenging cultural conditions, most notably China and India, there is no excuse for not attempting similar reconstruction for the African continent, few parts of which have full national, territorial, or local studies of "Y," SCA, or allied activity.

More specifically, anecdotal evidence and preliminary elite network analysis hints that YMCAs played pivotal roles in anti-*apartheid* agitation, generating cadres who rose to prominence in local and national positions including today's administrators.¹⁰ If it is accurate that the YMCA was a major actor in popular resistance precipitating the emergence of the "New" South Africa," recovering this unwritten and hidden history of the institution seems imperative, not only for historians, but for a country in its objective of reconceiving itself as a diverse people who constitute an inclusive nation.

¹⁰D. Anthony, "Toward A History of 'Black Work' in the South African YMCA."