

Perspective on Ideas and the Arts
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Interview of Chief Albert Lutuli
by Studs Terkel

TERKEL: Here in a suburb of Durban, South Africa, we are sitting with Albert John Lutuli, winner of the 1960 Nobel Peace Prize, and deposed chief of the Zulus of the Groutville Mission Reserve near Durban. Our meeting must take place almost in the dead of night at the home of a mutual friend because, ironically, Chief Lutuli, one of the world's most distinguished citizens and a leader of his people in the true Christian sense, is under an arrest by the Government of the Republic of South Africa. In order to understand better who you are and what you represent, Chief, could you tell us about your life and how you came to be chief of the Abase-Makolweni tribe of the Zulu?

LUTULI: Since I became the President-General of the African National Congress in 1952, I have had three of these arrest bans imposed upon me: the first for one year, the next two, and the present one for five, which will expire in 1964, and which prohibits me to travel beyond a fifteen-mile radius. In 1935, I was elected chief of my tribe; the Zulus for some time now have had the privilege of electing chiefs. Back in the 1840s, an American missionary, Reverend Aldin Grout, who converted my grandfather to Christianity, founded the mission station of Groutville among the Zulu, and soon our people were clamouring for the right to elect their chief.

After having attended local mission and boarding schools, I qualified as a teacher at Adams College, the high school for Africans founded by the American Congregationalist Mission, where for many years I taught classes in teacher training, Zulu, and music, my own specialty.

Zulu culture, a very definite one in its own right, has also been moulded by contact with other cultures in this modern age, which is a good thing because one expands by mixing with other peoples. I hasten to say that I do not subscribe to the theory that the original Zulu culture cannot expand by absorbing from the modern world but must forever and forever remain what it was. To the current policy of Bantu education, advocating separate education for different peoples by claiming that in this way African tribes will preserve native cultures, I say: We are citizens of the world finally, and therefore we must know what is taking place in the world. Any culture must take into itself the values of other cultures. That culture which the white man brought to Africa, for example, is not merely European because white culture is also indebted to the East. It was natural in the processes of mankind that whites would come here and I do not hold to the view that asks: why did the white come to this continent? Africans have been enriched by the white man's coming - in some respects. Human nature unfortunately being what it is, the white man when he settled here concentrated more on what he could get than what he could give.

When I was secretary of the African Teachers Union, we encouraged teachers to form the Zulu Cultural Society to discover what in Zulu culture could be fitted into the modern world; it was also our duty to know both the weaknesses and good points in Western culture so that we could make a synthesis of the two. Africans must influence the development of their culture.

Bantu today has a political implication which we do not accept at all: the word Bantu is being stressed by the Government because it does not want us to call ourselves Africans; the reason for this, I suppose, is that Afrikaner, which in effect means African, is the white man's name for himself. We say, No, we are Africans, not Bantu. Anybody permanently resident in the continent of Africa is an African. Originally, Bantu was used to distinguish the black group from the Western group living in Africa, which is a use of the word I do not criticise the way I do when it is being used for political reasons.

TERKEL: Bantu education, then, does not permit access to African students of what you called synthesis of cultures.

LUTULI: Definitely not. Think of a university, which is supposed to have universality, being located right back in the tribe which, at best, is a confined area not just geographically but spiritually and mentally: the university should be established near a town where students could be exposed to the crosscurrents of thought. To set the university in Bantu area is an attempt to narrow vision and lessen communication between one group and another.

TERKEL: During your fifteen years as a teacher, were you involved very much with the outside world?

LUTULI: Although I was not involved politically, I was aware of what was taking place. Fortunately, at Adams College, to which I feel very indebted, we were given a wide vision of society. Then in 1933, I was approached by fellow Zulus to ask to stand for the election of chief of the Groutville Zulus. At first, I was quite reluctant: Adams College was a pleasant place and I liked teaching; I knew, too, the difficulties of a chief because my uncle had been one - a chief must sit in judgment upon other people's affairs, domestic disputes and so on, which is not pleasant; also, my movements would be proscribed, whereas at Adams I could move about. But if people want me to come home and be chief, I finally said, who am I to say no? At the present moment, however, the privilege of electing chiefs has been discouraged in Groutville and other African communities accustomed to elect chiefs.

TERKEL: Discouraged by whom?

LUTULI: Ah, by the State. In a community like Groutville, for instance, the tendency is that when a chief retires or dies the Government wants to incorporate his area into part of the traditional tribal area.

TERKEL: Everything seems to be done by the Government to make your people "happy" -

LUTULI: [Laughs.]

TERKEL: How did you, a chief respected by your people, become this kind of "troublemaker" (I use this not in any derogatory sense) for "decent" European people?

LUTULI: One must go back to the days of Adams College, which broadened our view by teaching that a man must not just be concerned with himself but with the welfare of society. Other African colleges also stressed the same thing. When I became chief, it was a time of very heated political discussion in the European communities and among ourselves - the heads of the Smuts Government were initiating the "native" bills which really did make drastic changes in African legislation. Then in 1935, the Natives Land and Trust Act was passed which enforced more drastically the provisions of the 1913 Act which had restricted Africans to reserves by passing a law stating that Africans may not buy land in South Africa except if bought from another African who, after all, didn't have much land in the first place, giving Africans a right, in effect, that they couldn't really exercise.

TERKEL: The right to buy nothing.

LUTULI: Exactly: it meant that. [Laughs.] Africans couldn't buy land outside their reserves.

The existence of reserves started with the British Colonial Government when, after conquest, the land was open for purchase by settlers. Anybody could buy land - no colour distinction existed, which, I must say, was to the credit of the British. When the British realised that the Zulu and other Africans were not purchasing because buying land was foreign to us, and fearing that the Natives might find themselves tenants of European farms, they cut out these reserves as protection. Let me hasten to say that the British never confined Africans only to reserves; they merely said, We create reserves so that Africans won't find themselves tenants. An African could still buy land outside the reserve if he had money.

Then in 1913, the white man came along and said: no purchase of land by the black man. The Law was amended in 1935 to entrench that further; the Government claimed that it was going to increase the areas of the Native reserves by buying land adjacent to the reserves, bringing it to a total of 13 percent of all the land in South Africa. Until the last census, Africans numbered eight million in this country; whites two; Coloured one and one quarter; Indians half a million. Those eight million Africans owned only 13 percent of the land!

Here we touch on an extremely sore point, which, apart from the question of franchise, is the biggest single injustice perpetrated on us. It is not even 13 percent because the white man has not yet redeemed his promise of increasing the land around reserves. Even if it

were 13 percent, how could one accept that? That is sufficient to make anyone enter the struggle.

Life in the reserves is survived on a very low level - hardly more than a subsistence economy exists because there is only about ten acres per family. In the Grootville Zulu reservation, for example, families are given 45 acres because there happens to be enough land. Population increases, however land does not. No doubt this is one reason why the present Government is establishing townships in these reserves in an attempt to crowd people and make the land appear to accommodate more people; but these are people who are surviving on a starvation economy.

TERKEL: One-fourth of the South African population - the Europeans - own 80 percent of the land: that could mean 10,000 acres per family, couldn't it?

LUTULI: Yes; others have 1,000 acres; and good land along the coast may be broken down to 500 or 600 acres per family. I must be fair and say we are leaving aside communal land used for the grazing of stock, but even that land is generally not much and now is being taken to cut out more land for families, and people are being asked to reduce their stock. When a man who might have owned 100 head of cattle is asked to reduce to twenty, this affects the quality of the man. Of course the Government turns around and says, We are encouraging these people to go in for better stock and improve agriculture. That is another issue; it does not justify robbing a man of the right to have more cattle and land.

TERKEL: One hears spokesmen for the Afrikaner establishment complain, But we were here first and we built this up: they merely came from the north.

LUTULI: That makes me laugh. How are they going to alter history? In some South African history books it states that the first contact that the African people, now called Bantu, had with the European was way down by Great Fish River. History has it that shipwrecked sailors along the coast met black men. How then do Afrikaners explain that the first contact between Africans and Europeans, which was a clash, unfortunately, took place down at the Cape of Good Hope if they were here first? Hottentots and Bushmen, moreover, were already occupying the Cape when the first Europeans arrived.

TERKEL: If Afrikaners were here first, why do they call you "natives"?

LUTULI: Exactly. Aborigines is another word they use. Only in recent years, in fact, have they adopted this silly idea of trying to explain away history by claiming that we arrived here at the same time. To discuss whether I came from the north and you came from the south or east is, in the long run, academic. Quarrelling about the past is irrelevant. That we are all here is the main point. Let us try and evolve a way of life. Our duty is to see how we can live together. If the past is raised, then I say that this definitely is my land; you came from Europe, I was in Africa.

TERKEL: Invisible men were here perhaps...

LUTULI: Yes: invisible men! White men were fighting air.

TERKEL: Since I have been here I have heard talk about the townships for Africans: are they exclusively black areas?

LUTULI: Common policy has it that Africans may not reside in the so-called white city. Residences outside of it called townships are established and Africans merely allowed into the city to serve the white man. Here is another attitude that angers one: you only want me when I serve you; when my services are not needed you say, Go away.

The recent policy that even servants cannot live in the white city is another extension of the apartheid doctrine, which the Nationalists stress even a bit more by saying, Servants must not live in the same premises as masters; in the evening they must return to their own township and come back to work in the morning. Any contact except merely as a labourer is reduced to the barest.

TERKEL: Recently I observed a scene at Kruger National Park which I am sure must be repeated a thousand times. Two white men, talking near a Negro scrubbing the floor, were speaking about him and his people as savages and children as if he were not there but the man scrubbing knew some English. I wondered what his thoughts were. What is the nature of the pass book which an African must carry?

LUTULI: One of the sore points is that we feel we really are not regarded as human beings. Whatever else you must do when you segregate, if you must segregate, is respect the dignity of man. There is no respect of that dignity by the European in so far as black Africans are concerned. Europeans merely know the black man as a servant.

The pass book is one of those acts done by the white man when he came to this country in order that he might control the African who was required to carry some document that would identify him and bear witness that he had paid taxes. As time went on, other things were added to this document: it became a labour-service contract - if you are working in town, it indicates for whom; if you move away, it is endorsed to indicate that you have left town. Without that document a black African can be arrested by the police anytime, anywhere; even if his relatives and friends rush the document to him at the police station, he still is liable to be fined 10 shillings.

Originally, the document was one piece of paper; since the Nationalists have come into power they have consolidated several documents - the personal one, the service contract, your receipt for having paid poll tax. Incidentally, the act that brought that about is called "The Abolition of Passes and Consolidation of Documents." [Laughs loudly.]

This pass book also helps to control movements of people in and out of the city. Here is another act of control by the Nationalist Government, which felt that too many black Africans were in town, some of them not getting work, and so the Government started to "assist" the African by not allowing him into town unless there was a call for more

labour. Before an African can enter Durban, the Native Commissioner must OK him; once he does enter, he must get permission from the Bureau to stay and obtain work.

At present, the labour market is virtually closed in the large cities. An African can't move from a rural to an urban area. If a black man is working in Durban, moreover, and returns to the reserve and remains there for over one year, he can't move back to Durban without beginning all over by obtaining permission from the Native Commissioner just to go to Durban and, once there, he must go to the Labour Bureau which will grant him permission to look for work for several days but, if he doesn't find it, he must leave and return to starve in the reserve.

Even in their political movements, Africans are so tied down. I am a firm believer, for example, in the use of the strike as a weapon in the hope that by hitting the economy you may possibly get the white man to sit down and discuss things with you; I believe in the strike, too, as a factor in the pursuance of the desire not to indulge in violence. If an African goes on strike, immediately his master sacks him, and he loses the right to be in the city: you can't get work if you are sacked because of political action. Once sacked, you are allowed to look for work in the city for about a fortnight; then, you go back to a reserve which you may have left ten years ago. The law provides, I think, that to be considered permanent a man must have worked continuously in the city for fifteen years or for one master for ten. I looked at the headlines the other day and found that this, too, has been changed. Black Africans have never been regarded - especially since I have been an organiser - as part of the population of South African cities.

TERKEL: I noticed that when you ask somebody the population he names the white population, and then, as an afterthought, "Oh, by the way, there are 300,000 blacks, too." Officially, the population in South African cities seems to be rather "pure".

LUTULI: In 1949, my own organisation - the African National Congress - formulated what they called the programme of action, having decided that time had come for something to be done to hit at white South Africa with a view to getting it to change. Prior to that, black African leaders had pleaded with the white man through petitions and the seeking of interviews - but the white man had not shown any inclination to listen to any of the requests of the people. Politically and economically, there had been no move at all. Even at the time of the 1935 Natives Land and Trust Act, our leaders went as far as England to protest apartheid but nothing could be done, they were told, by the white man. I realise that there are some whites in South Africa who are trying to improve things but they are in such a minority that all we can say is that we do realise we have a few friends.

In 1949, then, we came to the conclusion that it was time we used methods that might move the white man in the hope that he might change. Non-payment of taxes, and non-cooperating with the Government in other ways - these were some of the methods set down. Strike action was at the top of the list. Non-violence was implied in the very methods adopted.

TERKEL: Were your methods similar to Reverend Martin Luther King and some of the sit-in students in America?

LUTULI: To a certain extent, yes, although I am not very familiar with his progress: I don't know if he would stage a strike, for example. Although I support the attitude of Gandhi, I don't like to feel that I am passive; I am not. Within the orbit of our own programme I am militant; I always say that it requires a good deal of militancy for a person to decide that he must go on strike or defy some particular law.

TERKEL: So often I have heard one of the whites say: There are so many Africans that if they get power or land they will push us into the sea. Haven't you been a disciple of the biracial authority?

LUTULI: Stress here is on the wrong thing. What should really be stressed is not so much the racial groups as it is the democratic process. If the white man in the 300 years he claims he has been in Africa has not trained himself in democracy, it is his own fault. Some of us have sufficiently imbibed of democratic ideas to be able to endeavour to carry them out, which, even in civilised countries, is not always so easy. Does it matter who rules you so long as that man rules according to the democratic way of doing things? That the black man is in the majority in South Africa may mean that the government will be a black government; but if that government is possessed of democratic ideas, then what is the argument?

TERKEL: Do you feel that whites feel guilt that their rule may not have been as humane and democratic as it could have been?

LUTULI: I can only hope they feel that. All of the African leaders before us and those now have said that we have no intention of retaliating. We have had enough of strife. All that we want is a peaceful existence with everybody in the country living together. Some of us have gone further to say that if the government tomorrow were democratic enough to say, A vote for everybody, and then the electorate were to choose, say, Alan Paton or an Indian or anybody else, I wouldn't say, Why did you choose a white man or an Indian? What I am saying is not, There must necessarily be a black man; I am saying, There must be a democratic government. That is all I am fighting for. I am not just speaking for myself: it is what we all wish for, which has been the stand of our people right along. The white man must go - this has never been our idea. But my fear now is that because of white animosity, there are signs that people are becoming impatient, and some are saying, Look, if you do not listen to our leaders or to us, the time will come when we will say that we have nothing to do with you. This I fear. That kind of situation can never create a peaceful existence, whereas if the white man had been broad enough to bring us into the family - even if we were in the majority - we would still have carried out the rules of the family. When the white man brought Christianity into Africa, he didn't say, This is white man's Christianity; there will be another for black men. If he didn't make this distinction in Christianity, then why does he make it in democracy? Why? Democracy is for all. To persecute other people is an evil thing for any government, be it white or black or mixed.

Africa is very much indebted to Christian missions. Although in the process of trying to Christianise us, the missionaries did not take sufficient care to preserve certain values in our culture which could have been incorporated into modern life, I feel so indebted for the start which Christian missions gave Africans that I tend to excuse some of their weaknesses. To me their biggest contribution was when they opened our eyes to education, which they were the first to bring into Africa. Until very recently, our schools were mission schools; then the Government came along, adding others. I am able to speak to white South Africa because the missionaries made me see. After all, we must remember that back in those early missionary days people were concerned not only with the conversion of the heathen but conversion, too, of people in their own territory and country: that was their mission, which they tried to accomplish as best they could.

Shouldn't we then look upon our time as an opportunity to correct some errors of the missionaries rather than throw them overboard? Without us, their task would be incomplete. Our duty is to complete their task.

TERKEL: It occurs to me, as a white man, that the white is hurt by apartheid as much as the black.

LUTULI: In a sense, the white is hit harder by apartheid because by it he narrows his life: he does not become human. A white liberal colleague of mine at Adams College once said: "When you get a white man, particularly an Afrikaner, who can associate with black Africans freely, that man has undergone a terrible process of conversion because we are taught from birth that the black is not a human being like us." To outgrow that, he claimed, was a wonderful transformation.

Even the English, you know, can be extremely snobbish. In all colonies, the settler has been hard in his treatment of the aborigine, and he has always fought the last battle against the mother country when it was trying to give freedom to the Natives. To me, English South African and Afrikaner are the same.

TERKEL: What are your feelings about what urban life has done to young Africans who go to town to earn money?

LUTULI: Well, I am a rural man and I have never lived in the city except for casual visiting, but just from my observations I think it is fair to say that urban life has done a good deal of damage to the African communities in the cities. Because of the absence of proper playgrounds and with insufficient schools, a lot of children simply run about uncontrolled and form gangs. Then, too, there are the insufficient social agencies to take care of them. One always seems to come back to African poverty.

When it comes to the question of the franchise, the vote: I have indicated that we stand for democracy; and the tragic thing is that, because the white man refuses to give us freedom so we can enjoy democracy, he may develop in some of us - I hope not in all - a feeling that says, Away with all of the white man's institutions and influence.

TERKEL: What do you feel about the role of the Church and men of God - what has it been and what can it be?

LUTULI: Although I feel very grateful to the Christian missions, the Church today can still play a greater role than it has. It has tended to concentrate on what churchmen regard as spiritual matters, compartmentalising life into social, political, and economic categories. What we are concerned with, the Church says, is the spiritual life of the people, with the result that the Church has not really done very much. Insufficient attention has been given by the Church to the social development of the people, and least of all to their political development.

I am not suggesting that we should have a political Church or that the ministers should become political. I am saying that the message of Christ is sufficient enough to make the Church stand up boldly and condemn many acts by governments. That message, valid for our day, is sufficient without the minister being political. Apartheid is condemned on the basis of the teaching of Christ. That is where my criticism comes very strongly. To the Church I say, You don't have to be political; but at least you can stand for certain Christian principles and, by standing for them, you will suffer but, after all, your Master suffered. If Christianity is not practised, I believe it must be scrapped; but it must not be scrapped because it consolidates human values that will be valid for all time.

TERKEL: When the authorities deprived you of your chiefship in 1952, you replied: "What the future has in store for me I do not know. It might be ridicule, imprisonment, concentration camp, flogging, banishment or even death. I only pray to the Almighty to strengthen my resolve so that none of these grim possibilities may deter me from striving, for the sake of the good name of our beloved country, the Union of South Africa, to make it a true democracy and a true union, in form and spirit, of all the communities of the land." Since you have suffered banishment, imprisonment, and, I take it, some ridicule, too, how do you feel today?

LUTULI: I feel as I did when I made that statement after I was deposed by the Government. I can only pray that the Almighty might give me strength to stand for the values which I think human values valid for any country and for all people.

America can do much, I believe, to help assist in our liberation here. Americans, you fought to free yourselves from Mother England and, with all of your failings, you are trying to stand for freedom for all and for democracy. America should regard it as her duty never to rest until the whole of humanity is free.