

Written by Hlonipha Mokoena

Review by Scott Couper



Hlonipha Mokoena does Inanda Seminary, her high school *alma mater*, very proud with her publication of *Magema Fuze: The Making of a Kholwa Intellectual*

. At the precious age of twelve, the young Mokoena wrote in her application to the Inanda Seminary, “One day I wish to be a doctor”. This doctor of anthropology achieved her goal. Now ‘Professor’ Mokoena teaches at the Columbia University, the same university from which Pixley ka Isaka Seme, founder of the African National Congress, graduated (1906) and received a doctorate in law (1928). Fuze was related to another founding figure in the ANC, Dr. John Dube, and both were newspaper printers and journalists. Though Fuze was older (b. circa 1840), he, Seme and Dube were contemporaries. Fuze wrote the first book printed in *isiZulu*

(*Abantu Abamnyama Lapa Bavela Ngakona*, 1922) and Dube wrote the first novel written in *isiZulu*

(*uJeqe, Insila ka Tshaka*, 1930). Mokoena’s first book is also the first substantive biography to be written on Fuze. Inanda Seminary has always been and today still is an incubator of bright black female amakholwa leaders. Inanda is the home of Seme and Dube. All of these links make for wonderful literary chemistry. The ingredients do not disappoint. The proof is in the pudding.

With her excellent intellectual history of Magema Fuze, Mokoena reveals that she is a more than able partner with Mwelela Cele, a *fundi* of *amakholwa* personalities at the Killie Campbell Collections, and Vukile Khumalo, a *fundi*

of *amakholwa* literary and intellectual history at the University of kwaZulu-Natal. Yet, like Heather Hughes’ recent biography on John Dube (

*First President*

, 2011), Mokoena is wary of the term 'kholwa'. Hughes is concerned that the term too easily bifurcates those who converted to Christianity from those who did not. The two worlds were far more, as historian Catherine Burns is fond of saying, 'imbricated'. While the term *kholwa*

can be crudely translated as "believer" (that is, in the twentieth century 'western' form of Christianity), Mokoena uses Fuze's life to adeptly tease out the more nuanced and thus more accurate social and political meanings imbedded within. Mokoena does not present Fuze as a half-baked Christian or a half-baked African. She presents him as an authentic fusion of the two – a new product. Another prominent

*kholwa*

, Albert Luthuli, once described this fusion when relating his experience at a mission school, "It was no more necessary for the pupils to become Black Englishmen than it was for the teachers to become White Africans...I remain an African. I think as an African, I speak as an African, and as an African I worship the God whose children we all are. I do not see why it should be otherwise" (

*Let My People Go*

, 1962).

Unlike the first substantive biography to be written on Luthuli (*Albert Luthuli: Bound by Faith*, 2010), Mokoena avoids a strict narrative that chronicles Fuze's life. The informational chasms are too wide due to a number of factors, including fire. For this reason, Mokoena's text is refreshingly disorientating. The book is not about a life, as such. And Mokoena warns us of this in the book's opening sentence: "The aim of this book is to describe how...Fuze became a writer". Describing how is far more daunting than simply describing who, what, when and where. Despite the difficulties, Mokoena deals extremely well with intangibles - intangibles of the heart and mind in a distant time.

Another novelty: Mokoena's text is not a hagiography as one would expect. In fact, in an almost shocking fashion that one has to read two, maybe three times, Mokoena states that Fuze is not a 'great man' and his proto-nationalist book is not necessarily good history (however, that may be defined, academically or otherwise!). For example, Fuze does not actually fulfill the quest to which his teasing title alludes: 'The Black People and Whence They Came'. Mokoena's transparency leads her to argue that Fuze's intellect generated creative advocacy rather than regurgitated history. Her analysis of Fuze is as surgical as it is sober.

Fuze's intellect was complicated and temporally distant. Fuze's reality was multilayered: oral and literate, ancient and modern, literal and symbolic, for the present and for posterity, successful and failing, optimistic and disillusioned. In her erudite text, Mokoena comes about as close as one can to accomplishing the impossible. Inanda Seminary is proud; so Magema Fuze also must be.