

In his own write

Hlonipha Mokoena, *Magama Fuze: The Making of a Kholwa Intellectual*

University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Scottsville, 2011

338 pp

ISBN 978-1-86914-191-2

R238.00

Magama M. Fuze emerges from this exceptional study as a far more interesting and thoughtful character than modern scholars have imagined. The very circumstances that propelled him into the public eye in the 1860s and 1870s ensured that he would be underrated as an independent thinker. Anglican Bishop J.W. Colenso during the

early, evangelical phase of his career enrolled Fuze as a student in his short-lived experiment in elite education, Ekukhanyeni School. After the school fizzled out due to Colenso's financial problems and loss of interest, Fuze stayed on as the bishop's printer. From time to time Colenso wheeled him out as an "authentic" voice of Zulu public opinion. Miraculously, Fuze's views always ran parallel to the bishop's current enthusiasms. After his death, Fuze continued in the employment of the Colenso daughters, Harriette and Agnes, who dedicated their lives to the bishop's last cause: justice for the Zulu royal house. In this capacity he accompanied Dinuzulu during his exile on the island of St. Helena. Up to this point Fuze's public life may be regarded as a textbook example of colonial ventriloquism; he was ever the loyal subaltern whose black skin and Zulu speech could be invoked in support of the Colensos' positions on current affairs.

However, on his return from St. Helena in 1896, Fuze fell out with Harriette and Agnes over the question of his pay. This marked the moment when he finally escaped from their thrall and let his own distinctive voice be heard. For the remainder of his life he mostly made his own way, soliciting subscriptions to support what he promised would be a definitive account of *Abantu Abamnyama* ("The Black People and Whence they Came"). From the 1890s he also made his presence felt as a contributor to newspapers such as *Ilanga lase Natal* and *Ipepa lo Hlanga*. These journals had emerged from missionary-sponsored experiments of the 1870s but by the 1890s editorial control had largely passed to African editors. Reportage and discussions among readers were conducted in both English and Zulu. Over the course of his last three decades, Fuze's contributions were made mostly in Zulu, so a full appreciation of his corpus of writing has awaited someone with Hlonipha Mokoena's command of the language. Operating where literature, history and anthropology intersect, she is able to convey the most subtle nuances of expression and meaning. Unlike the Kenyan novelist Ngugi Wa' Thiong'o, who made a political choice to forsake English for Kikuyu, Fuze seems to have preferred Zulu because he found it a more supple medium. The author shows his capacity for puns, innuendo and myriad other

stylish variations which could not have been accomplished in English.

Mokoena argues persuasively that twentieth-century historians, transfixed by the idea of the educated Zulu as “native informant” missed seeing the creation of “an African-originated narrative style” (p 52). Literary scholars have preferred to study African writers in English, thereby conveying the false impression that Zulu speakers were slow to develop a literary sensibility. The book’s subtitle, “The Making of a *Kholwa* Intellectual” recognises the fact that Christianity was central to the development of a Zulu print culture. This was not because of “the valorisation of the Zulu language by Colenso and his printing press” (p 134), but because from the arrival of the first American Congregational and Presbyterian missionaries in 1836, it had been decided that the evangelisation of the Zulu should be conducted in their language.

Access to the written bible, an essential tenet of Protestantism, required the production of grammars and gospels, which began rolling off the American Board presses well before Colenso appeared on the scene. All the major denominations – even the linguistically challenged Methodists – agreed to use a common grammar. A sign of shared purpose among the competing missions was that Colenso’s translations, which some suspected might be contaminated by heresy, were welcomed because of the bishop’s evident gift for languages. The consequences for national consciousness among the literate elite cannot be overstated. Every person who acquired literacy in Zulu immediately gained access to a community where native speakers were the acknowledged masters of knowledge about verbal and written expression. The colonial condescension directed at defective English vanished when the conversation shifted into Zulu. Soon even the haughty court circles round the royal house were forced to acknowledge that the excellence of their oratory was no match for the worldly erudition of the literate *kholwa* (the term used for Zulu Christians). The Zulu of the *kholwa* thus set the standard for the language spoken and read by millions of twenty-first century South Africans.

The degree to which literacy in Zulu could turn the tables in dealings with colonial authority is illustrated by the case of H.C. Lugg. The man charged late in life with translating Fuze's *magnum opus* into English cut his teeth as a young bureaucrat in Natal's Native Affairs Department translating Zulu passages from *Ilanga lase Natal* for perusal by cabinet ministers obsessed by the idea that seditious writings were being spread in a language they could not understand. This provoked the equivalent of a linguistic shootout when Governor McCallum called *Ilanga lase's* editor, John Dube, in for questioning about supposedly treasonable language during the so-called Bhambatha rebellion in 1906. When Dube protested that his words may not have been correctly translated, the governor insisted that he apologise in print for impugning the superior Zulu language skills of the white men at the Native Affairs Department.⁷

Mokoena's use of Fuze as a representative *kebolwa* intellectual does not blind her to his idiosyncrasies. One of the most engaging features of the book is the way she allows his quirky personality to shine through. Fuze can hardly be considered an orthodox Christian. While Colenso was less likely than most to promote rigid orthodoxy,

Fuze embarrassed the bishop where it was most likely to hurt when he became a polygamist. Colenso had argued in the 1850s that polygamous converts from the heathen should be allowed to maintain their existing family ties. However, he laid down the law when it came to Christian men taking additional wives. The decision by his best known converts, William Ngidi and Fuze, to expand their households was a bitter blow to the bishop's reputation as a missionary. It must have been discomfiting for Colenso sitting on the Natal Native Commission of 1881–1882 when Fuze gave this reply when asked whether polygamy was a good thing:

It is a good thing, because a man with one wife only is a poor fellow. I consider a man has a right to take as many wives as he wishes. Our forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob

7. British Archives, Kew, Colonial Office (CO) 179/235, McCallum – Elgin, 30 May 1906.

*had more wives than one.*⁸

This brief statement supplied proof enough that Fuze had declared his intellectual independence. His later contributions to debates about blackness, Bantu origins and life after death reveal a questing mind at work. Mokoena tends to treat these as the product of his own reflections, but a case can be made out for the impact of wider influences. When he proposed a northeast African origin for the Bantu-speakers separate from the supposed Garden of Eden in Asia, he may, as the author contends, be speculating on the separate creation of different races. However, on the same evidence it could be suggested that it was through his contact with scholars such as Alice Werner that Fuze knew of Harry Johnston's thesis of Bantu origins. Similarly, when he wrote "We are not black, we are dark brown", he may have been arguing that it was time to substitute Western concepts of racial difference for the metaphorical use of blackness in the praises of Dingane. As a *kebolwa* intellectual, Fuze would have been aware of turn-of-the-century debates about spiritualism, theosophy and reincarnation. He most certainly would have known of Rider Haggard's thoughts on life before and after death. When he mused about his own life before birth, he may merely have been reflecting on broader intellectual movements of his day.

In any case, Mokoena has done long overdue justice to a considerable figure and in the process opened new paths for research. Her book deserves a place on every South African scholar's bookshelf. It may not be uncharitable to hope that before long she leaves her post at Columbia to take up a position worthy of her considerable talents in the country of her birth.

Norman Etherington
University of Western Australia

8. Natal Blue Books, *Evidence before the Natal Native Commission of 1881–1882*, p 166.