

M. McCORD
The calling of Katie Makanya
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The calling of Katie Makanya is one of the most engrossing and heart-rendering books I have had the privilege of reading. It is the life story of Katie Makanya from her youth in the eastern Cape to her death at the age of 83 in 1955. It is based on interviews she had with Margaret McCord for whose father, Dr. James McCord, Katie had worked for 35 years as interpreter, dispenser and assistant in Natal.

Katie grew up in a devout Christian family dedicated to education, self-help and improvement and intensely loyal to and trusting of Britain and Queen Victoria. One of the highlights of her life was two years spent in Britain in the early 1980s as a member of an African choir, the Jubilee Chorus. During this period the choir sang before the queen and was presented to her at court. Katie also met Gladstone, the British prime minister, and Lord Knutsford, the colonial secretary, who gave her a pearl necklace. She even attended a suffragette meeting. One of the greatest revelations was seeing whites working as labourers. An astounded Katie observed that the British were their own 'Kaffirs'.

The choir was so successful that Katie and her elder sister Charlotte were also invited to sing in the United States. Katie declined the invitation, but Charlotte visited and studied in America where she became the first African woman in South Africa to be awarded a BA. Back in South Africa, Charlotte would become a prominent educator, social worker and founder, as well as president of the African National Congress (ANC) Women's League. Katie played a less public role than her elder sister, but would also be an influential and prominent figure in Durban's African community.

The story of Katie's life is an important commentary on the way of life by Christian and educated Africans from the late nineteenth century up to the apartheid years. It illustrates African life in the new cities of Kimberley and Johannesburg. The ghastly African location in dusty and ugly Kimberley, the harshness of Johannesburg where Katie as a house maid had to endure humiliation and discrimination. Her story also contributes to the destruction of the myth that the South African War of 1899-1902 was a purely white war. Katie lost all her possessions in the conflict and her and her husband's best friend died attempting to leave Johannesburg. In addition she did not see her husband for two years after he was forced to become a driver for the British army.

It is, however, Katie's poignant descriptions of the ambiguous position of Christian and aspiring middle class Africans that are most touching. This group was trapped between African traditionalists who regarded them with contempt and whites who rejected them as cheeky trouble makers. After her return from Britain Katie could not adapt to the ways of her grandfather's traditional homestead and moved to Johannesburg. Yet in Johannesburg, in an attempt to secure employment as a maid for a wealthy white family, she had to pretend that she was a simple farm girl. The treatment she received at the hands of whites embittered her and for a while, until she met the saintly Dr. McCord, she wanted nothing to do with them. As she grew older she became more conservative, disagreeing with the growth of radicalism amongst younger Africans and their

insistence on their rights. She was an admirer of the moderate and cautious John Dube, the Natal ANC leader, and condemned the radicalism of the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) and its leaders, Clements Kadalie and George Champion. The ICU was a powerful organisation in Durban in the twenties and did not take lightly to her criticisms. Katie was marginalised and for a while even feared for her own life. Fortunately this lasted for only a short period and during the depression of the 1930s she assisted Champion in his efforts to alleviate the position of Africans. Katie became a highly respected African woman who in her moderate way, played a leading role in opposing discriminatory measures.

The main emphasis of Katie's life story does, however, not centre on politics, but on the love, sorrow and devotion of a remarkable wife, mother, medical assistant and above all, Christian.

The calling of Katie Makanya is a touching, readable book and is highly recommended.

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