

Delightful and informative contribution to Luthuli Studies

L. Naidoo, *In the Shadow of Chief Albert Luthuli: Reflections of Goolam*

Suleman Luthuli Museum, Groutville KwaDukuza, 2010

93 pp

ISBN 978-0-621-39747-5

R100.00

That Albert John Mvumbi Luthuli (1898–1967) is increasingly one of the most frequently invoked South African political leaders speaks both to current perceptions of leadership crisis, and to a burgeoning reclamation of the past seen most prominently in memoirs but also in new histories of peoples and places once ignored. The intersection between local and national, and memoir and history can be a fertile one for understanding the past in depth and texture.

“The Chief” was an elected *nkosi*, ANC president and Africa’s inaugural Nobel Peace Prize winner. Despite his hero status, some of the finer detail of his life has remained elusive. In part, this reflects the dark days of his banning but also the obscurity of his Papers, available in one abridged microfilm version with a second, richer one overseas lingering mysteriously just out of reach of historians. Renewed interest in Luthuli is sparking further research. We might even say writers are fighting over his legacy. Recently Scott Couper, in a fine if rather narrowly focused “ecclesiastical biography”, *Albert Luthuli: Bound by Faith* (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 2010), has added greatly to an earlier, shorter treatment (if informed by first-hand contact) by Mary Benson, *Chief Albert Luthuli of South Africa* (Oxford University Press, London, 1963). Peter Alegi has written of his passion for soccer; Raymond Suttner on dress, dagger and cross in his life.¹⁷ Benson and Suttner bring out the significance of his politics, Alegi his leisure-time obsession. Couper’s mission is to give us more detail of what we always knew of Luthuli’s unshakeable religiosity (after all, the ANC has always been a broad church with many clerics among its leaders and a political culture of prayers and hymns). Yet in all these important contributions, something is missing. What of Luthuli’s friends, neighbours and comrades-in-arms on his home turf? This local focus and intimacy is the hallmark of a modest but important publishing debut of the Luthuli Museum.

In 1990, Nelson Mandela came to see his old friend Goolam Suleman in Stanger (in 1998, this region was renamed KwaDukuza, which now includes Groutville and Stanger). Madiba felt a comprehensive biography of Luthuli was needed. Inspired, Suleman sat down with his friend Logan Naidoo, a high school history teacher, and the result is this slim volume that will help the bold historian who eventually writes such a balanced scholarly biography.

In the Shadow of Chief Albert Luthuli is the story of Suleman’s shared experiences with the chief as transcribed and edited by Naidoo, with assistance from Barbara

17. P. Alegi, “Sport, Race, and Liberation: A Preliminary Study of Albert Luthuli’s Sporting Life”, in C. Thomas (ed.), *Sport & Liberation in South Africa: Reflections & Suggestions* (University of Fort Hare Press, Alice, 2006), pp 66–82; R. Suttner, “Periodisation, Cultural Construction and Representation of ANC Masculinities through Dress, Gesture and Indian Nationalist Influence”, *Historia*, 54, 1, May 2009, pp 51–91; and R. Suttner, “‘The Road to Freedom is via the Cross’: Just Means’ in Chief Albert Luthuli’s Life”, *South African Historical Journal*, 62, 4, December 2010, pp 693–715.

Wahlberg at Luthuli Museum. They have done a fine job of transcribing and editing reminiscences that have much to tell historians. This is not just about Suleman and Luthuli, but also their great friend, E.V. Mahomed, their families and comrades, their lives together and how they outwitted the Special Branch to let ANC leaders such as Luthuli and Mandela continue operating despite bannings. Other rather neglected historical actors such as M.B. Yengwa also spring to life.

Seven short, well-written chapters take the reader breezily through the lives of Suleman and Luthuli with due care for detail but letting the insightful anecdote speak volumes. Chapter 1 sketches the background of Suleman's life, his Muslim family migration from Gujarat and his father's settlement in Stanger where in 1900 he opened a general dealer's shop, later renamed Liberty Stores by Goolam, which would serve local sugar workers – and Luthuli and the ANC. This humble shop is important in the narrative for it becomes for a while the node, the beating heart, of the ANC, not just in Stanger and Natal but nationally (a reminder that the history of merchants, covered to some extent by Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, Grietjie Verhoef, and Alan Cobley, needs more attention). Goolam was born in 1929, played soccer with local Africans, and became fluent in isiZulu. He grew up with stories of the brutal suppression of the Bhambatha Revolt under a father much respected by local Africans and increasingly aware of poverty and injustice (pp 3–4). Chapters 2 and 3 introduce the chief and his national politics, with the next chapter covering local politics. Chapters 5 and 6 treat his growing international recognition and Nobel Prize, the final two chapters his passing and an epilogue on the new democracy.

The narrative heats up with Mandela's secret visit to Stanger, where they spend the day together. Tipped off about police raids, the team melts into the countryside, Mandela as chauffeur to Goolam, driving the back roads south to resurface in Durban and then go underground again. Along the way, we meet the local Special Branch and see Goolam doing his part to help organise the Congress of the People. There are comments on the Treason Trial and involvement of the CIA with apartheid police in the betrayal of Mandela; but before this, the vigilance and attention to detail of Mahomed and Suleman must have saved Madiba and the chief from many an arrest. In dodging the special branch, their help was crucial. This is underground adventure at its best – and a reminder that historians should build on the wealth of memoirs, the SADET volumes, and the theoretical work of Suttner to write a more detailed history of the underground.

After bannings of the ANC and Luthuli, meetings were stifled so Goolam must now rely on correspondence. The chief turned his hand to shop-keeping, increasing his indebtedness. He also purchased two Swazi farms for exiles, disputed by some but confirmed by other accounts such as this. Treated also is the re-awakening in Stanger of the Natal Indian Congress, which helped keep political activities going and exposed harsh conditions of workers. On the cause of Luthuli's 1967 death, the narrative faithfully follows the family account of suspicious state involvement (p 77), a view strongly challenged by Couper. There is interesting material on how, after the death, Goolam assisted Nokukhanya (who called him "eldest son", p 78) to pay debts and kept in touch; a touching photo shows him pushing her in a wheelchair at the 1989 March for Freedom flanked by an ebullient Winnie Mandela and a Muslim mullah.

We learn of Luthuli's affableness, culinary tastes and friendships. There is background on his political rise, Congress Alliance history, local politics, and relations between Indian and African South Africans. The two families, notes Luthuli's daughter

Jane Ngobese in a preface, were very close; they shared meals and dreams; and geographic proximity. The inaccessibility of the African location in Groutville necessitated Luthuli relocating his headquarters to Stanger, where he frequently took meals or held meetings at Goolam's shop. Through the intimacy of meals and fun together, and despite the pressures of apartheid and astonished neighbours, there developed strong bonds of solidarity (p 16). Here then is a feast of insights into Luthuli the man at the local level, side by side with his religiosity and political dedication.

In all of this Luthuli is to the forefront but so too are Goolam, "E.V." and other foot soldiers, a reminder that without followers, chiefs and presidents have no purpose. We see Luthuli's normally apolitical wife Nokukhanya forced by his banning into politics (p 71), *pace* Gorky's *Mother*. So too the historian might ponder how the complexity of history is played out in the central involvement of Muslim Indian South Africans in the care, protection and everyday functioning of an ANC president with his devout Christianity, alongside his close working relations with atheist African communists such as Moses Kotane, who also appears in the book.

This is good local history. We see evidence of Luthuli's great popularity, his popular touch with locals. Often local history is rather specialised, but the Luthuli Museum has added footnotes, an index, appendices and high quality plates, some previously unpublished, to add to the book's value. There are also touching forewords by Kader Asmal and Jane Ngobese. A future expanded edition might reproduce the full manuscript. It would be nice to have the translation of Yengwa's isiZulu praise poem side by side with the original. At times one wonders if we read the words of Goolam or the editors and the title page could make this clearer, though fuzziness of authorship was typical of a complex anti-apartheid alliance in dangerous times. A few minor typos (South African Federation (not Foundation) of Women) and a few errors (Dr. Xuma and not John Dube was ANC national president in 1945) do not detract from the overall usefulness of a work that recaptures the role of "ordinary" people in the anti-apartheid struggle.

Perhaps we are exhausted by the flood of memoirs. However, the serious study of the lives, and works or *oeuvre* of eminent Africans remains neglected. It may no longer be culturally correct to build a canon, but other cultures have their Shakespeare, Dante, Lincoln and Gandhi Studies. The *oeuvre* of some African political figures, such as Sekou Touré and Nkrumah, are compromised but South Africa has its burgeoning Mandela and Gordimer Studies. Yet enormously significant figures such as A.B. Xuma, Charlotte Maxeke, Pixley Seme (and now John Dube) have attracted a bare minimum of in-depth treatment. It is time for historians to return to biography and textual analysis in all its nuance, for nothing is more cultural, more local, and insightful than the story of human lives and words. We will see more, and critical, Luthuli (and Mandela) Studies.

Other, still neglected, themes of Luthuli Studies – such as the role of culture, nobility, and language, the influence of African comrades, and diverse intellectual currents – await integration with works such as this, with its focus on the personal and local, and with other recent works, to produce a balanced life story as demanded by Mandela. Luthuli was in many ways a typical *keholwa* and ANC leader, yet his was a complex identity obscured if we view it only via an external lens. Future research might pay more attention to his isiZulu notebooks, his correspondence, and extended family. This book, a very useful contribution that adds to our knowledge of Luthuli and his friends, community and family, will help such a process and delight and inform all

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interested in South African history and national and KwaZulu-Natal politics and community relations.

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