

# Jacob Zuma and the evanescent legacy of nineteenth-century Zulu cosmopolitanism and nationalism

Hlonipha Mokoena

'Cosmopolitan' is not exactly a word that comes to mind when describing South African society — both contemporary and historical. Yet, if we take the word 'cosmopolitan' as implying an embrace of the globe; an unbounded vision of humanity; then South Africa has been in the embrace of the world for quite some time. Whether one is thinking of Adamastor — the Greco-inspired mythological character invented by the Portuguese poet Luís de Camões in his epic poem *Os Lusíadas* (first printed in 1572) — or the indentured labourers (Indian and Chinese) who were transported to South Africa in the 1860s and early 1900, South Africa has been in the world's line of vision for centuries and a destination for many. What has complicated South Africa's 'cosmopolitan' history is its racialisation: the history of apartheid is in some way a history of the denial of the hybridity and indeterminacy created by the forced and voluntary migrations and presence of innumerable cultural influences. The search for purity — a core value of the Afrikaner Nationalists of the 1930s — was a symptom of this fear of 'otherness'. The ascendancy of Jacob Zuma to the presidency of the African National Congress (ANC) and his inauguration as South Africa's fourth democratically-elected president has once again forced South Africans to reconsider what they understand to be the cosmopolitan values of the society. 'Cosmopolitanism' should not be confused with that other perennial debate in South Africa, namely, the 'Rainbow nationalism' debate. The manner in which Jacob Zuma rose to power brought to the fore not only questions of cultural tolerance and relativism but also the unspoken and uneasy history of 'exile' in South African politics. While the sensationalist reporting and analysis of Zuma focussed on his personal life

— his polygamous household; the corruption and rape charges; his relationship to Schabir Shaik; his personal finances and alliances — there were historical echoes and questions that remained unexplored. Zuma is not only a 'Zulu' but he is also a former exile and guerrilla operative and in all the debates that swirled around 'JZ' — as he is affectionately known — the meaning of Zuluness was a question mark and a taken for granted assumption. Whether he was singing *Umshini Wami* or choosing to testify in court in *isiZulu*, Zuma's ethnic identity was easily available to be parodied, pilloried and purloined while at the same time he also played into the hands of his critics by constantly playing the 'Zulu card'. What was often forgotten in these debates is that Zuma was not the first 'Zulu' to lead the ANC. Now that the election drama is over, perhaps we have the time and the reason to examine the historical antecedents of Pixley ka Isaka Seme (1881-1951) and John Dube (1871-1946), who were both ethnically Zulu and committed nationalists and cosmopolitans. Their instrumental role in the establishment of the ANC may help us understand why JZ's Zuluness is simultaneously a return of 'ethnic politics' and a revival of long-forgotten nineteenth-century cosmopolitanism. If we are to de-racialise the country's history, then we need to excavate the lives of those South Africans who embraced and were embraced by the world; South Africans who chose to be citizens of the world. Even this process of excavation is fraught — for a long time it's been dominated by the biographies and autobiographies of the exile community — those South Africans who wilfully chose exile or were forced into exile in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. The problem of the 'exile' is a problem of a negative cosmopolitanism; a cosmopolitanism that emerges out of crisis rather than as a celebration of global diversity and difference. Jacob Zuma, like many of his ANC comrades, is a product of

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Hlonipha Mokoena is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University in New York.

this kind of cosmopolitanism. This contrast between the exiled and the nineteenth-century cosmopolitan is central to understanding the persona of Jacob Zuma. The contrast also serves a second function, which is to remind us that the nineteenth-century cosmopolitans were also in a crisis of sort — the crisis of being a colonized subject — but that they nevertheless tried to imagine a different place for South Africa both in Africa and the world.

## Amakholwa — the historical background

It is impossible to understand the lives of John Dube and Pixley ka Isaka Seme without understanding the history of colonialism in southeast Africa. Although the colonial narrative of South Africa properly begins with the Cape, 'Natal' became an important site for the grand experiment of indirect rule and has therefore become central to historical interpretations of imperialism in South Africa. Thus, for example, Mahmood Mamdani's book *Citizens and Subjects: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* references and uses the Natal and Shepstonian system of indirect rule as the archetypal example of 'decentralised despotism'. The *amakholwa* (educated, converted and Christian Africans) were in the simplest terms, the Africans who were neither 'tribal subjects' nor 'colonial citizens' — to use Mamdani's vocabulary. Yet, this dichotomy and schizophrenia of being 'neither' 'nor' wasn't the only defining characteristic of the educated Africans of nineteenth and early twentieth century Natal. In fact, their relationship to the colonial state wasn't purely that of supplicants petitioning for admission into the exclusive sphere of colonial civil society. Much of their writing and thinking focussed on the possibility of an African 'imagined' community, that was often removed, both culturally and ideologically, from the colonial state's definition of tribal society or the 'educated African'. This alternative public sphere which the *amakholwa* created and staged in newspapers, books and pamphlets is a repository for re-imagining South Africa in the nineteenth century especially if one is interested in sketching a more demotic picture of who was a 'historical agent' in that century. Too often studies of this period focus on the colonial state and its officials as the main 'agents' of history in colonial Natal. Alternatively, too much credit is given to the missionaries and their proselytization, which is depicted as the main transformative power and engine

of social, political and intellectual reconfiguration of African society in the nineteenth century. What is often occluded in these studies is the fact that colonial society was a polyphonic society; there were multiple voices that spoke to the state and to the missionaries, and this includes the African voices that supported or were ambivalent towards the imperial and the cultural enterprises represented by 'the Queen' and her messengers — the missionaries and officials.

## Seme and Dube — the biographies

The biographies of Pixley ka Isaka Seme and John Dube have become 'public' or 'common' knowledge since they were both instrumental in the foundation and establishment of the African National Congress in 1912. There are therefore several websites where you can just 'cut and paste' their biographies. There is little room for an original biographical interpretation and it is therefore easier to borrow and acknowledge these sources. The South African History Online (SAHO) project — an educational and encyclopaedic source on South African history — gives the following account of John Dube's life:

"John Langalibalele Dube was born in Natal in 1871. He was the son of Rev. James Dube one of the first ordained pastors of the American Zulu Mission. John Dube's grandmother was one of the first Christians to be converted by the American Daniel Lindley."

"Dube was educated at Inanda and Amanzimtoti (later Adams College). In 1887 he accompanied the missionary W.C. Wilcox to America. There he studied at Oberlin College while supporting himself in a variety of jobs and lecturing on the need for industrial education in Natal. He went back to Natal but soon resumed to the U.S. for further training and to collect money for a Zulu industrial school - as he called it - along the lines of the Tuskegee Institute."<sup>1</sup>

Or, alternatively you can read his biography on the African National Congress website, which states:

"B.W. Vilakazi, a poet and author, wrote in 1946 that Dube was "a great, if not the greatest, black

1. <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/dube-ji.htm>.

man of the missionary epoch in South Africa” and earlier A.S. Vil-Nkomo had written in the same vein: Dube was “one who comes once in many centuries - No one else in his education generation has accomplished so much with such meagre economic means. He was scholar, gentleman, leader, farmer, teacher, politician, patriot and philanthropist”.

There were other judgements. To the Governor of Natal in 1906 Dube was “a pronounced Ethiopian who ought to be watched” and John X. Merriman, a Cape “liberal” described Dube in 1912 as a “typical Zulu, with a powerful cruel face. Very moderate and civilised, spoke extraordinarily good English ...”. A little later he commented:

“Dube in conversation gave me a glimpse of national feeling which reminded me of Gokhale. How they must hate us - not without cause.”<sup>2</sup>

On Pixley ka Isaka Seme the SAHO website states:

Pixley Seme was born on 1 October 1881 in Natal. He was the son of Isaka Sarah (nee Mseleku) Seme. He obtained his primary school education at the local mission school where the American Congregationalist missionary, Reverend S. C. Pixley, took an interest in him and arranged for him to go to the Mount Hermon School in Massachusetts in the USA. He then attended Columbia University in New York and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree (B.A) in April 1906. At the same time he won the University’s highest oratorical honour, the George William Curtis medal. His topic was “The Regeneration of Africa”.<sup>3</sup>

These and other biographical treatments of the two men give us a sense of two visible factors that dominated and structured their lives: first, the missionary education they acquired in colonial Natal and second, their worldly travels and contact with people and institutions beyond the parochial intellectual culture of Natal and South Africa. The latter factor is what constitutes their cosmopolitan identities.

The competing power and pull of Zulu nationalism and cosmopolitanism

2. <http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/people/dube.html>

3. <http://www.sahistory.org.za/pages/people/bios/seme.p.htm>

In trying to understand the impact of the ‘wider world’ on Dube and Seme it is tempting to focus only on the American and African-American connections evident in their biographies. However, in conceiving of themselves as educated Africans who were obliged to ‘spread’ their knowledge and invite other Africans into modernity, both Dube and Seme presented themselves using a kaleidoscope vocabulary of Zulu nationalism, Pan-Africanism and cosmopolitanism. This trilogy of -isms was not neatly arranged and packaged by the two men; these ideas competed with each other for prominence. These competing ideologies have led many scholars to conclude that the modernity represented by the *amakholwa* was inauthentic, ambiguous or at worst, a naïve mimicry of the Western version. When however one hears Seme speak of what it meant to be a ‘modern’ African, then these conclusions seem hasty and incomplete. In his 1906 speech, he told his Columbia audience:

I am an African, and I set my pride in my race over against a hostile public opinion...The races of mankind are composed of free and unique individuals. An attempt to compare them on the basis of equality can never be finally satisfactory. Each is himself...In all races, genius is like a spark, which, concealed in the bosom of a flint, bursts forth at the summoning stroke. It may arise anywhere and in any race. (Karis and Carter 1972: 69)

Compare this statement on being an African, to Dube’s vision of a future Africa enunciated in 1892 in a pamphlet titled ‘A Talk Upon My Native Land’:

Oh! how I long for that day, when the darkness and gloom shall have passed away, because the “Sun of Righteousness has risen with healing in His hand.” This shall be the dawning of a brighter day for the people of Africa. Christianity will usher in a new civilization, and the “Dark Continent” will be transformed into a land of commerce and Christian institutions. Then shall Africa take her place as a nation among nations... (Karis and Carter 1972: 69)

Although Dube more than Seme gives his vision of a new Africa a Christian foundation, the common thread that binds both men is that they thought of Africa as being on a point of renaissance and rejuvenation. In his oration, Seme focussed both on the glories of the African past — the pyramids of Egypt and Ethiopia

— and on the impact of Africans on European culture. On the latter he cited ‘one professor of philosophy in a celebrated German university’. He was referring to Anton-Wilhelm Amo (b. 1703 – d. 1756) who taught at the universities of Halle and Jena in Germany. This reference to the achievements of Africans outside the continent is the first of many examples of Seme’s cosmopolitan perspective and his attempt to link his struggles as a Zulu-speaker and colonial subject with those of other Africans in the diaspora. Dube on the other hand emphasised the role of Christianity in ushering in modernity into Africa. This is not surprising since he was a convert, but it has been inordinately highlighted as an example of the extent to which Dube and other *amakholwa* had succumbed and been seduced by the elusive promise of Christian humanitarianism and Victorian progress. This is partially true — the language of missionary emancipation and equality was certainly attractive to the *amakholwa*, but this is not a symptom of seduction as it is a sign of their ability to grasp and understand the power and effect of the discourses introduced by the missionaries. The discursive appeal of Victorian modernity was not a chimera for Dube and Seme; it was a horizon of possibilities in which they read not only the modernization of the Zulu and African peoples but also the modernization of the colonial state, which was intent on excluding them from the boon of progress. As representatives of an African modernity, they were therefore not just committed to Christianization but also the democratization of modernity, albeit in the form of Victorian respectability and civility.

In Seme’s terms this democratization of modernity was a rejection of the relegation of Africa to a marginal status in the production of knowledge. His regeneration of Africa therefore necessitated that Africans should, as in times past, contribute to the ‘store’ of knowledge. He noted:

He [the African] has refused to camp forever on the borders of the industrial world; having learned that knowledge is power, he is educating his children... These return to their country like arrows, to drive darkness from the land...

The African is not a proletarian in the world of science and art. He has precious creations of his own, of ivory, of copper and of gold, fine, plated willow-ware and weapons of superior workmanship. (Karis and Carter 1972: 71)

Although there is not space to elaborate on the fullest implications of Dube and Seme’s ideas and how these influenced their decisions to participate in the nascent political organizations that led to the formation of South African Native National Congress (1912), the predecessor of the African National Congress, it is important to point to the one sphere where Dube exerted an influence that was simultaneously political as it was intellectual. In 1903, he established the newspaper *Ilanga lase Natal* and was editor until 1920. This bilingual Zulu-English newspaper was not only the first newspaper to be established by an African in Natal, it became the main medium through which the Zulu-speaking literati of southern Africa communicated current affairs and opinion while also debating the very ‘essence’ of Zuluness and the meaning of their Zulu cultural heritage. It is this expression of a cosmopolitan consciousness that defines the contribution of Dube and Seme. This leads us to several kinds of theoretical conclusions that we can draw about the historical legacy left by the *amakholwa* literates.

The first kind of conclusion concerns the terminology introduced by Homi Bhabha (1994: xvi) to describe an alternative cosmopolitanism that as he states, ‘measures global progress from the minoritarian perspective’. He calls this cosmopolitanism a ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’. If we take these definitions seriously and apply them to the colonized *amakholwa* of Natal, we are confronted with the problem of having to define the extent to which their marginalisation could be called a ‘minoritarian perspective’. Experientially, the *amakholwa* understood themselves as a deterritorialized Zulu-speakers; they had severed ties with the independent Zulu kingdom and they were even labelled by their former cultural compatriots as *amakhafula* — ‘those who have been spat out’ — to symbolically and linguistically mark this expulsion.

The notion of a vernacular cosmopolitanism is especially apt when one considers that John Dube was not just a newspaper editor and a founder and first president of the ANC. He was also the first African to write and publish a work of fiction in the Zulu language. In 1930 he published the historical novel *uJeqe: Insila ka Shaka*, translated into English as *Jeqe, the body servant of Shaka* (1951). The significance of the novel resides in the fact that the ‘bodyservant’ / ‘*insila*’ is the subaltern of subalterns in the Zulu king’s household — he is the living spittoon upon whom the king expectorates because the king’s spittle was considered to

have ritual power and therefore could not land on the ground for fear of being collected and used by wizards, witches and such. I haven't thought about this book since my teens; it was a 'set work' for my aunts in high school and now it has been given the status of a modern classic by Penguin who have recently republished the English translation. The question is: what does it mean when a supposedly elitist *kholwa* intellectual publishes a historical novel about a Zulu subaltern? In my reading it means that Dube like his contemporaries was establishing a *kholwa* literature and an archive which deserves a revisiting.

The other cosmopolitan literature that has been archived belongs to the twentieth century when thousands of South Africans went into exile for political and cultural reasons. This is the 'negative cosmopolitanism' alluded to at the beginning. Unlike the subject of a colonial state, the twentieth century exile was thrown into a condition of statelessness and for most their departure from South Africa was defined by the 'exit permit', which was apartheid's spiteful version of a one-way ticket. Existentially, the experience of exile was summed up by Mark Gevisser — in a review of Hilda Bernstein's book *The Rift: The Exile Experience of South Africans* — as 'the mundanity of dates and moves; a train-timetable of displacement'. Another exile, Nat Nakasa described it differently in his essay 'A Native of Nowhere', when he wrote that his future 'lies in a number of diplomatic bags'. This constant shuffling of past, present and future and the feeling that one has been reluctantly forced into a condition not of one's choosing undoubtedly shaped the manner in which exiles thought of their relationship to the wider world. The grand image of the world traveller, embarking and disembarking wherever they wish, was not for them. The deprivation, isolation and homesickness led many, as Gevisser points out in his review, to alcoholism and fatalism even as they struggled to create new forms of community. This sense of community, formed out of the necessity of survival and the desire to preserve a modicum of homeliness, was what the returning exiles brought back with them in the 1990s. And, in the climate of South Africa's transition and the anxiety induced by the sudden conversion of freedom fighters into negotiators and 'stakeholders', these communities morphed into cliques and factions. These contests over power and influence were the basic ingredients of the Mbeki-Zuma saga and they cannot be understood without understanding the nature of the cosmopolitanism imposed by exile.

## Jacob Zuma and his 'Return' to Zuluness

As interesting and noteworthy as the biographies of Pixley ka Isaka Seme and John Dube may be, there is no obvious connection with Jacob Zuma and the 2009 South African elections. The main rationale for comparing Jacob Zuma with his *kholwa* predecessors is that one of the subterranean transcripts of the Zuma saga — especially its conspiratorial version — was that the ANC as a political party had been hijacked by Xhosas and that Zuma was the fitting heir to return the party to its 'Zulu origins', namely the legacy of John Dube. This is the evanescence referred to in my title. In the context of the contemporary crisis in the ANC, the legacy of John Dube was utilised to transform a leadership conflict between Jacob Zuma and his erstwhile rival into a 'return' to origins — whether these are Zulu or *uMkhonto we Sizwe*. As my portrait of Dube has shown, his was not an ideology of Zulu chauvinism, even though it was tinged by a desire for a reformed and modern Zulu kingship and identity. When compared to Seme as well, Zuma does not seem to represent the trilogy of forces that were at work in the formation of their ideas namely Zulu nationalism, Pan-Africanism and cosmopolitanism. During the election campaign, Zuma was depicted and sometimes presented himself as a motley caricature of a singing and dancing Zulu warrior who was clutching at the straw of an ethnic identity in the hope that it will transform into the ubiquitous 'machine gun' which he conjured up every time he started up his signature song '*umshini wam*'. His attempt at marshalling Zulu identity for this purpose can be interpreted as a contemptuous reaction to the intellectualism and worldliness of Mbeki and his inner circle. Now that he is president of the republic, and has even passed the dreaded 100-day mark, Zuma seems to have abandoned the Zulu ethnic identity. He is transmogrifying into the president he was elected to be; part pragmatist and part conciliator. His aversion to intellectualism was entrenched in his State of the Nation speech, delivered to parliament in June 2009. It had none of the grandeur and poetics of a Mbeki speech; it was realistic — jobs, service delivery, poverty and social infrastructure were the keywords. Yet, even when he was being a programmatic, Zuma showed off the 'warmth' that Mbeki apparently lacked; he spoke in all but the 11<sup>th</sup> official language. He called for unity in *Sesotho*, he asked the rural poor for their co-operation in *isiZulu* and he conjured the spirit of communalism in Afrikaans. Thus, unlike Mbeki his

eye for diversity was focussed inwards — the diverse languages and cultures within South Africa — rather than outwards in the direction of the continent or the world.

Although a State of the Nation speech is not a predictor of the style of a presidency, it is already clear that Jacob Zuma is not interested in the kind of cosmopolitan vision represented by Mbeki, especially his diplomatic and foreign politics. This seeming disavowal of the legacy of Dube and Seme's cosmopolitanism, which Mbeki attempted to emulate with mixed success, is not in itself a sign that Zuma is not cosmopolitan in his outlook. Rather, it creates the false impression and dichotomy, namely that only intellectuals, like Mbeki and his acolytes, can be cosmopolitan. It entrenches the idea that being cosmopolitan is a luxury, reserved for those who have the leisure and the means to contemplate the world. It stifles conversations about history, especially the history of South Africa's relationship to the African continent. It leaves us floundering for an explanation of our *kholwa* and creole pasts. And, it does not bode well for our uncertain futures.

For a scholar interested in the history of South Africa's relationship to the world, the equating of cosmopolitanism with intellectualism, complicates any recovery that one may attempt of the other cosmopolitanisms that have created the diversity, which South Africans celebrate in our constitution and our motto.

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