

REVIEW**William Gumedé**

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Bernard Magubane – *My Life & Times*

By William Gumedé

*There has been a proliferation of autobiographies of black politicians chronicling their involvement in the struggle against apartheid. Yet, there have been very few autobiographies of black academics. This insightful autobiography of Bernard Magubane, one of the leading black social scientists of his generation, is therefore to be prized. Like elsewhere in post-independence Africa, intellectual work in South Africa is rarely valued, or celebrated. Bernard Magubane, with Sam Nolutshungu and Archie Mafeje, are among the outstanding African South African social scientists of the period of the 1970s to the 1990s. Sadly, to say that Magubane, like the others (and many others) are under-appreciated is an understatement. Their work hardly features on local library shelves, academic reading lists or seminars. Among Magubane's core work is the *Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa* that was published in 1979, and *The Ties that Bind Afro-Americans and Africa*, his PhD thesis, published as a book in 1987.*

Magubane triumphed over formidable obstacles to become an internationally respected scholar. The first of these were to successfully navigate the pernicious effect of Bantu Education, surely, among the most crippling legacies of apartheid, as it robbed generations from navigating a globalised world where education is a basic tool for survival. Magubane went from a poorly equipped township school in Chesterville in KwaZulu Natal, to tenured professor at the University of Connecticut in the US. The apartheid government callously refused to extend his passport to complete his PhD studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. Only one with extraordinary grit, tenacity and determination could soldier on under such circumstances.

In South Africa, like in the rest of Africa, very little of the research, grappling with local social problems, is done by locals. More often than not, most of the social research done on Africa is predominantly done in industrial countries, by Western scholars. Moreover, in South Africa, given the nature of unequal access to resources, most of the local research has been done – whether during the apartheid era or now – by white intellectuals. Among the ANC family in exile, most of the social research by academics aligned to the movement was done by white intellectuals.

Throughout his book, Magubane's anger is clear, over efforts to use black intellectuals as props and 'tokens' by liberal white academics. In fact, Magubane takes on liberal white intellectuals, including many of his own teachers, for becoming the 'gate-keepers' on not only what are 'legitimate' social research questions and foci, but also for their 'selective' channeling of research funding and scholarships, to those who accept their 'views', and punishing those who disagree. He describes how during the liberation struggle, liberal white scholars 'marginalised' the voices of African scholars in conferences, publications



My life & times

Bernard Magubane – *My Life & Times*, University of KwaZulu Natal Press (2010)

and seminars dealing with the African struggle for liberation and independence, who took more critical views. He describes how black scholars' careers could be killed if they did not conform.

Sadly, the fault is also with liberation movements and also with liberation movements in government. The black researcher's dilemma is marginalization by 'the establishment', white intellectuals and publishers, if he or she questions orthodoxy. Moreover, during the liberation struggle black intellectuals who were critical of orthodoxy within the liberation movement often also risked facing censorship from the 'black' liberation movement establishment. Furthermore, they may also face being elbowed out by predominantly white theorists in the liberation movement. So in the end many end up in some kind of no-man's land of marginalization. This unfortunately is very much the case still in democratic South Africa.

Nevertheless, Magubane criticizes liberal local and Western scholars' ignorance of black thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney or Cheikh Anta Diop. Magubane lays into Western liberal anthropology and history scholars' (and local white liberal ones) for what he calls overlooking or under-emphasizing the impact of colonialism or apartheid on the victims, and by implication its lingering legacy beyond independence. Throughout his career he has taken on the Manchester School of anthropology, personified by Bronislaw Malinowski, Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, Max Gluckman and Geoffrey and Monica Wilson, for their 'preoccupation' with the 'stability and/or durability of the tribe and how to preserve it'.

Magubane also takes on many of his former teachers, such as Leo Kuper, who were proponents of 'social pluralism'. He argues the proposals made by liberal intellectuals in the 1970s and 1980s, espoused by Arend Lijphart, for a consociational democratic solution for post-apartheid South Africa, was "culled from social pluralism". Locally, such proposals were endorsed by Lawrence Schlemmer, Heribert Adam and Hermann Gilliomée. The Commission set up by Inkatha Freedom Party leader Mangosuthu Buthelezi in 1980, (the Buthelezi Commission), which proposed elements of consociational democracy for KwaZulu-Natal, he says would have meant that the 'Afrikaner, in particular, and whites, in general, could concede some token power to subordinated coloureds and Indians first and later Africans ... was a formula for 'grand apartheid'".

If South Africa, and indeed Africa, is to prosper, we will need scholars and researchers (both white and black, but especially black) that can innovatively grapple with not only the reasons for the region's continued poverty, but also come up with new ideas on how to get out us of this morass. Importantly, we will need a new generation of scholars who can soar above the rigidities of orthodoxies.