



Raymond van Diemel. *In Search of "Freedom, Fair Play and Justice": Josiah Tshangana Gumede, 1867-1947: A Biography.* Belhar: Raymond van Diemel, 2001. vii + 198 pp. No price listed (paper), ISBN 978-0-620-28054-9.

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A Life of Josiah Gumede

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Several biographies of major black South African political figures have appeared in recent years, but until now, Josiah Gumede has never been the subject of a detailed study. Brian Willan generated a new interest in such biographies with his book on Sol Plaatje in the 1980s. Just as Willan's biography of Plaatje revealed the hidden contributions and talents of a partly forgotten South African, so too does Raymond van Diemel in his new biography of Josiah Gumede. As van Diemel's book illustrates, Gumede was an eloquent, indefatigable advocate of racial equality and one of the most forceful and visionary opponents of white supremacy of his generation.

Van Diemel received his doctorate in history from the University of the Western Cape in 1997 and is now an independent researcher and filmmaker in Cape Town. This biography of Gumede was his Ph.D. thesis, which van Diemel published himself. The project was undoubtedly challenging, because Gumede apparently left no collection of papers for historians to mine. Van Diemel did an extraordinary amount of detective work in assembling his sources and producing a smooth narrative. He conducted research in South Africa, Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, and France. He draws upon a wide range of sources, such as British government records; South African police archives; newspapers in English, Afrikaans, and Zulu; correspondence; and interviews. He also demonstrates his familiarity with the

relevant secondary literature.

Gumede is a worthy subject for a biography. Born into a Zulu family, he grew up in the Eastern Cape and became part of the Christian, educated African elite. Throughout his life, he blended loyalty to Zulu culture with efforts to promote a wider black South African unity. He was a man of many callings. He served as a teacher, an adviser to chiefs, an intelligence officer for the British during the Anglo-Boer War, an interpreter, a legal assistant for a white law firm, and a newspaper editor. In the latter position, Gumede wrote countless columns criticizing the policies of the South African government and advocating expanded African rights. He became heavily involved in African political organizations in Natal and was appointed to the executive committee of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) at its founding in 1912. He frequently worked on behalf of Africans who were trying to reclaim their ancestral land, especially after the passage of the 1913 Native Land Act. Like many of the founders of the SANNC, Gumede was well-traveled. He made several trips overseas and participated in delegations to Britain in 1907 and 1919-21 in an effort to urge the British government to intervene on black South Africans' behalf. During the latter trip, Gumede had separate meetings with the Archbishop of Canterbury and British Prime Minister David Lloyd George. His disillusionment over the lack of official British intervention in South Africa increased as time wore on.

1927 marked the beginning of a new, more radical phase in Gumede's career. He attended the first conference of the League against Imperialism in Brussels and came away thoroughly impressed by the communist delegates' support of colonized peoples. The encouragement Gumede received at the conference convinced him that communists could be valuable allies in the fight for liberation in South Africa. From 1927 onward Gumede would cultivate alliances with communists, even though he refrained from joining the Communist Party itself. Shortly after the Brussels trip, Gumede was elected president of the African National Congress. Besides advocating closer cooperation with the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), Gumede endorsed more confrontational tactics against the white government. In so doing, Gumede began to attract unwelcome attention from the South African police. His positions also began to alienate the old guard in the ANC, especially the traditional leaders in the organization. In late 1927, Gumede attended the tenth-anniversary celebrations of the Russian revolution in Moscow, where he even met Joseph Stalin. Gumede's positive experiences there led him to label the Soviet Union "the new Jerusalem." Perhaps the author should have commented on his subject's idealization of the Soviet Union, especially when he quotes Gumede as describing Russia as a "free nation" where all people were equal. When it came to the Soviet Union, Gumede clearly embraced the myth rather than the reality. Nevertheless, as a result of Gumede's overseas experiences in 1927, "the ANC-CPSA alliance was born" (p. 120).

Gumede's overtures toward communists put him in a difficult position at home. While testifying before a South African government commission in 1929, he purposely distanced himself from communism in order to allay government suspicion. In doing so he damaged his standing with some of the very communists with whom he wanted to collaborate. Gumede lost the ANC presidency in 1930, largely because his alliance with communists had generated so much opposition within the Congress. Despite his failed re-election bid, Gumede remained politically active until his death in the 1940s, chairing meetings, managing an African newspaper, and giving speeches. The ANC's growing militancy in the 1940s gratified Gumede as he reached the end of his life.

Van Diemel's portrait of Gumede has much to recommend it. The author skillfully interweaves the story of his subject's life with the larger South African historical context. He traces both the increasingly segregationist policies of the white government and the debates in African protest politics over strategy, ideology, and al-

liances. The prose is also clear and highly readable. Interesting anecdotes enrich the story, such as that concerning the campaign Gumede and his colleagues launched to pressure the British to award them the medals they had been promised after the Anglo-Boer War. Another vivid anecdote concerns Gumede's trip to Britain in 1919-21, when he urged British officials to protect the rights of black South Africans. During his campaign, Gumede developed a thoughtful argument. He said that the British had defended Africans in central Africa against King Leopold's atrocities and they had responded to some of Gandhi's concerns about the treatment of Indians in South Africa. Therefore, he argued, should they not also ensure that the black South African majority was treated fairly? As Gumede put it, "Why shall veiled slavery be permitted in a British Dominion, under the British Flag" (p. 66)?

Other aspects of the biography deserve praise. Van Diemel clarifies how Gumede's outlook changed over time, particularly in the 1920s. Having once placed great faith in Britain, Gumede became ever more disillusioned with that country's lack of support. Having expressed hostility toward communism for much of his career, he began to support an alliance with communists. Van Diemel argues that Gumede's initial hostility toward communism stemmed from his perception that it threatened Zulu traditions and the status of African property owners, of which he was one. His cynicism toward Britain eventually caused him to reach out to other potential allies, including communists. Finally, having once supported legal means of protest, Gumede began to support mass action. Gumede was ahead of his time in many ways, both because he realized the futility of constitutional protest and because he recognized the need to build a united front in the struggle against South Africa's system of racial segregation.

This biography displays an admirable balance of praise and criticism. Although van Diemel clearly admires his subject, he never crosses the line into hagiography. Gumede's weaknesses are noted, such as his misplaced trust in the British government, his poor administrative skills, and his periodic ambiguity on communism.

Unfortunately, numerous stylistic errors mar the text in its present form. Too many typographical, spelling, and formatting errors appear. The dates in the book's subtitle, 1867-1947, conflict with the year of Gumede's actual death, which was 1946 (p. 167). The text on the back cover notes that Gumede was elected ANC president in 1930, when in fact he was elected in 1927 and defeated

in 1930. Some passages appear twice in the space of a few pages. Some quotations lack citations; some block quotations are italicized, while others are not; moreover, there are too many quotations in the text in general. The endnotes are mislabeled as the bibliography and there is no index. The book does include eight pages of rare photographs, but several did not reproduce well. Fortunately, most of the book's errors concern style, not substance, and can thus be corrected.

Once edited more thoroughly, this manuscript should be published by a university or commercial press, so that

it can reach the wider readership it deserves. The study serves as another reminder that not all African political leaders were passive before the founding of the ANC Youth League. Gumede's ideas on the value of wider alliances and mass action along with his tireless pursuit of justice show that he was a true pioneer in African protest politics. In the book's conclusion, the author writes that he has sought to "bring Gumede out of the shadow into the light where the critic and admirer can evaluate ... his contribution to ... South African history" (p. 169). He should be congratulated on his success.

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