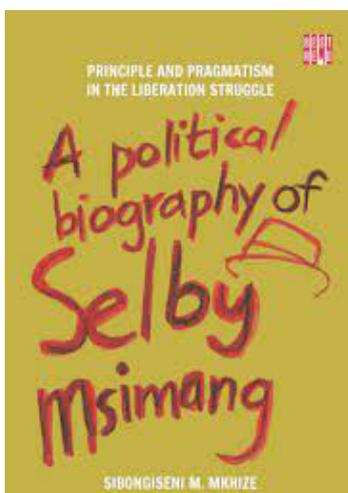


Principle and Pragmatism in the Liberation Struggle

A Political Biography of Selby Msimang?

MABUTHO SHANGASE (PHD) 

Institute for Global African Affairs, University of Johannesburg
mabutho_shangase@yahoo.co.uk



This book zeroes into the life of Selby Msimang a politician and activist of the early 20th century South Africa. Msimang's life is thrust against the social and political backdrop of South Africa beginning in the middle 19th century in colonial Natal. The historical context of conquest and colonialism is an important setting for this life story. It is this background of black oppression and struggles that Msimang navigates as he dedicates his life to the fight against black oppression and his own personal tribulations as a man and political activist. Whilst the author does not overtly express the linkages between the protagonist's life at micro level of social interaction and the macro level historical institutions that structure and shape Msimang's journey, the connectedness is quite glaring.

Accordingly, the political biography is not only a life story of just an individual but an ethnographic reflection on native life in South Africa. Msimang's personal struggles are interwoven with the meso and macro level experiences of the black community as well as the organisations that he became part of. In this sense, the political biography is a frame narrative, "a story within a story", with the context of conquest and native domination being the first and largest frame, followed by the social and political history of the African community as a collective, then the history of the political organisations Msimang was part of including the SANNC, ICWU, Liberal Party, and the Inkatha. Lastly, his own personal and family life forms the smallest frame. This last frame is saturated with thick description of the protagonist's life.

The author organised themes along a timeline in an accessible and lucid language. These broad strokes include, inter alia, African nationalism, community activism, politics of race, class and gender, and African economic emancipation. This ordering does not necessarily suggest that each theme is bound to a particular period, accordingly most of them could have been elicited across the timeline. Moreover, the sequencing is more about the progression in Msimang's life than it is about the themes themselves. The recording of Msimang's life along the timeline and over a long period, with the superimposition of themes, also points to the conjunctural nature of not just life in general but also the activist's political life as he moved across time, traversing space, reacting to events and changing conditions. Thus, this story is also a document on the capricious nature of native life in South Africa under white domination.

The ideological outlook and disposition of Selby Msimang.

In the book Msimang is touted as a moderate and pragmatist. Accordingly, his political career reflected these outlook traits throughout, a moderate, liberal, pragmatist, conservative, and perhaps a realist. A different reading of his disposition could portray him as flexible and adaptable to prevailing circumstances and conditions at a particular juncture. It is also possible that he lacked ideological conviction, or was a product of his time like many of his contemporaries.

Looking at his ever evanescent employment prospects, business efforts, and overly ambitious schemes, he was a man of modest means who always had to devise ways to earn a living, therefore he invariably fought for survival. He was therefore a bona fide product of his material conditions. These circumstances made most of his life inclined towards calculation and survival. Accordingly, he came across as ideologically incoherent or irresolute. One major theme and struggle that he committed his life to is that of economic emancipation of Africans, ironically a prominent issue that troubled his personal life. In page 62 he is described as “a man of political paradoxes, assuming multiple political identities while embracing pragmatic approaches to the problems of South Africa’s race relations”, p.62 “his narrative suggested that he had always been prepared to modify his stance depending on the circumstances and on the likelihood of achieving a positive outcome from his actions”. One could argue that what is implicit here is the African National Congress (ANC) notion or description as a broad-church. In other words, one could justify their conflicting moves and get away with it since the organisation itself comprised of traditional leaders, communists, business people, religious people, and trade unionists. Also, it is highlighted that there was a clash between Pan-Africanism and liberalism within the organisation (p.61). People could oscillate from the left to the right of the political spectrum in the same organisation. Thus, as example Msimang was able to switch sides from a radical Abantu-Batho publication to a rival uMteteli newspaper which was viewed as a “mouthpiece of the whiteman” (p.63/63).

In other issues such as on the issue of the Native Urban Areas Act (no. 21 of 1923), he was initially silent in opposing the legislation but later in his biography sounded more determined against it (p.57).

Msimang was also wedged between internal conflicts within the ANC. For example, he found himself caught up between a leftist Josiah Gumede and his presidency and the conservative Pixley Seme around 1937. His serving on government structures such as the Joint Council Movement, Native Advisory Boards, Native Representation Commission, Local Health Council, amongst others, also demonstrated the complexity of his political beliefs and career, as these structures promoted the policy of segregation (p.72). These organisations were also noted as conduits for white liberalism and were paternalistic towards Africans. With regards to the Hertzog Bills of 1936 and the abolishment of the Cape African franchise, he changed his views within a period of less than nine years.

In other instances, such as in the “Crisis pamphlet” which he authored, he adopted a militant tone. Mkhize (p.85) asserts that Msimang’s political views evolved in a curiously hybrid direction in the 1940s from radical discontent and loss of faith in interracial cooperation to advocacy for participation in government created structures. ANC members participated in the Native Representation Commission. After 1946 new ANCYL voices called for the boycott of the NRC. Before his death in 1947 Anton Lembede disagreed with Msimang’s motion on the Representation of Natives Act of 1936. Msimang was not in favour of a total boycott.

Pragmatism is accordingly problematic as it operates within the scope of the prevailing paradigm or framework of ideas here this being colonialism and apartheid. The NRC participation and abolishment by the apartheid government brought ushered in a new dawn and this was an inflection point for Msimang, his pragmatism was no match to grand apartheid of the National Party. His

fighters with AWG Champion and resignation from the Natal Provincial executive however shows that he was a matured and selfless leader who could put organisational interests before his own.

Again he was also a victim and product of his own time as seen through his resignation from the ANC and cosyng up with white liberals of Natal. Msimang was a founding member of the Liberal Party in 1953 until its dissolution in 1968. His final chapter as a founding member of the Inkatha, his last political home is arguably the reason for his erasure in ANC historiography and collective memory of the struggle. This was however exacerbated not by his own doing or mere membership of the Inkatha as an organisation but rather by the period of internecine political violence between Inkatha and the ANC affiliated United Democratic Front a few years after Msimang's death in 1982. Msimang thus remains an underrated but significant figure in South African political history having been a founding member of three political organisations, the African National Congress, the Liberal Party, as well as the Inkatha Freedom Party. He therefore traversed three essential ideological traditions, African nationalism, liberalism, as well as Zulu nationalism over more than seven decades and just one lifetime.

Book information

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