

## **Don Jadu.**

S. E. K. Mqhayi.

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Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi's novella *Don Jadu* is a complex work and truly ahead of its time. It was first published in 1929 with only sections one and two. Section three was added in 1935 and led to Mqhayi receiving the first May Esther Bedford prize.

On the opening page Mqhayi specifically states the purpose of the book: "A story that encourages unity and development." The "vehicle" he uses to explore unity and development is the journey. The plot is built around three journeys. In the first the narrator and main character, Dondolo Jadu, sets off on foot to visit a relative and encounters a series of 'characters'—both human and non-human. These specific encounters form the building blocks of the other later journeys as they take on metaphorical qualities. The first encounter in chapter one, titled "The spark", happens when Jadu is accosted by two policemen, one black, one white, who demand to see his Reference Book (*dompas*).

This stirs Jadu's inner journey and provides a theme of the rest of the story: the injustice towards black people and how this injustice is cruelly perpetuated by black people themselves. Two elements form the basis of the story: how to adapt with agency and vision to circumstances and how to motivate fellow black people to build a prosperous community that benefits everybody.

Subsequently Jadu is attacked by robbers, but saved by a Khoi man, chased by ostriches, just missed being bitten by a puffadder, heavily assaulted by Boers, then given food and lodging by a kind Boer, meets young boys, young girls. Through these metaphorical encounters, Mqhayi paints a vivid picture of the negative political space amaXhosa inhabited at the turn of the twentieth century, and the inner resources called for to survive. The narrator uses these encounters as teaching lessons to himself on which he then builds guidelines and principles for a vision of a community, proud and independent.

The second journey is taken years later, and the reader realises that although the plot is simple, it is bifocal. With nifty summarisation, Mqhayi's plot spans years. By the end of the first part, the young man is no more—Jadu is now married with children. The girl briefly met and much admired during the first journey is now his wife and a minister in the church. Jadu takes a group of people with him as they start their

journey by train. Arriving at his destination he finds much to do. As he himself is educated, he assists people engaging in labour relations, in how young men are housed and taught skills. He is pleased to see that on the place where the robbers attacked him, a beautiful education centre was built. But as the community is finding its upkeep difficult, Jadu draws up plans for them. The assaulting Boers wanted a hotel and some shops nearby, there are plans for a harbour, for buying farms, building a hospital, schools, and so the story continues with a desire for progress, but not blind to the many obstacles.

From the personal Mqhayi quickly takes the reader to the more overtly political. This trip is about black empowerment—a hint even in the place names: Zathuza ("to reason") and Mnandi ("splendour"). This second journey, as the earlier one, is not without problems. Jadu's reputation spreads as does his popularity. He is a man much respected and selflessly of value to others.

The third and last journey takes place against the background of the community's plea for Jadu to return and help them to self-govern. This he does and the third part of the book, epitaphed by the words "The waking up of black people in accordance with their tradition", mainly deals with rules, morals, codes and how to engage with both tradition and modernity, taking what is good and leaving behind what is harmful. Jadu is not alone and the company he has chosen, shows who he is and what he is about. Integrity and related characteristics are spelled out. This is about leadership, agency and respect for self, community and reciprocity.

Interestingly enough, people of various races and from across Africa, as well as from overseas, come to join this new country and nation under black rule. Jadu is made prime minister and after the opening of their parliament the book ends as follows, gracefully linking black excellence, based on indigenous tradition, with external support and tradition.

This is history seen through the eyes of the protagonist with power unobtrusively inveigled—a sign of Mqhayi's prowess as a wordsmith. With sparse prose, seemingly 'lean', he manages to convey a whole range of political spaces and faces. The novella is less than a hundred pages—but abounds with wisdom, wit, and philosophy. Today's readers may find it hard to engage with Jadu's attitude towards women and corporal punishment; but that shows the inevitable change time brings.

Mqhayi is first of all a poet. He can describe the smallest detail: "The snake looked like part of a rocky

outcrop and had the colour of an old weathered white shirt [...]” (14).

He can also paint a large canvass:

Burning pieces of firewood were whipped around by the wind and sparks spattered. The wood packed for later use caught fire and simply swallowed everything lying around. The fire also reached the kraals. E-e! [...] terror hit people [...] Some, when they took fright, took things from their houses and threw them outside. When others became afraid, they took things that were outside and threw them inside their houses; according to *their* judgement the fire was outside! [...] All of us were fighting the enemy of the whole tribe: fire. (49)

Of course, Mqhayi also has a traditional narrative style. What he conveys, he knows will be understood not only by his people, amaXhosa, but also by other black Africans of the southern region of the continent as all share similar myths, legends and beliefs.

He also touches on issues such as racialism, taxes, new diseases, drought, as well as education, religion, and industrialisation—in the new there is both good and evil. He urges his people to honour their own potential through hard work, honesty, and respect for others. Mqhayi has faith in his people.

The *great* country of *magical* change (my italics) highlights the mood, enabling the reader to suspend belief. This comes directly from the storytelling tradition: a narration filled with the magical and exaggerated for effect. His use of the narrative tradition shows how Mqhayi merges tradition (oral literature) and modernity (a story to be printed) resulting in a richer blend. Mqhayi then delves into the importance of self-governance—the ultimate goal. This is not political independence but management of the region’s affairs by the people who live there. Advocating agency, Mqhayi asserts that it is not enough to gain independence—law and order must prevail.

This seems to be the author’s message to his people: Live honourable lives. From the new, take what you deem worthy of knitting into what you have, from which you discard only that which no longer works or no longer serves, weighted against what you now know. Thus, Mqhayi gives a nod to the fact that tradition is time sensitive—an issue that deserves attention even today and even among highly educated people.

In his thesis “The Sociological Imagination of S. E. K. Mqhayi: Towards an African Sociology”, Leo Jonathan Schoots (48) suggests the following about Mqhayi’s writing:

His work is all the more powerful because he is able to maintain coherence within the ‘Xhosa worldview’—reinterpreting it and using its metaphors and ‘common sense’ knowledge to interpret the new world. By drawing on concepts that already exist as ‘given’ or ‘taken for granted’ in the Xhosa knowledge system he is able to make the new world intelligible by people who inhabit the ‘old world’. It is this ability to explain the new as a continuation of an older tradition that makes Mqhayi’s work so powerful and explains why he has been so revered as a public figure in his own time and why his work is still drawn on today.

Much of what we now know of Mqhayi’s philosophy and beliefs forms part of *Jadu*, who functions as a kind of alter ego. Mqhayi and *Jadu* have a lot in common. Both are religious and educated. No revolutionary, Mqhayi, in this novelette, comes across as an earnest evolutionary, battling to envision how a society could survive socio-political change. *Don Jadu* is a book of its times. Insightful? Certainly. But within the limitations that time and period impose on even the most insightful genius. Let me conclude with the words of Ncedile Saule (128): “[...] when Mqhayi implored the powers that be to work towards creating a South Africa in which all people would enjoy equal rights irrespective of colour, creed and nationality—he was far ahead of his time with his prophetic images.”

#### Works cited

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