

Forms of Engagement in early twentieth century South Africa: Alfred Mangena and Pixley Seme revisited

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For many key African intellectuals in early twentieth century South Africa there are as yet no adequate biographies. We know more about Alfred Mangena and Pixley Seme than most, but much about their lives remains unclear and unresearched. This paper will attempt to bring together what has been written about them, and will utilise newly discovered source-material, to consider how they interacted with the wider communities with which they worked in the first decades of the twentieth century. Mangena was an activist in the black African community in Cape Town before he left for Britain, where he continued to be involved with South African issues. Seme after studying at Columbia University moved to England, where he joined Mangena as a key figure in the small African community there. Both men went on to play important roles in the establishment of the South African Native National Congress in 1912. While Mangena practised law in the Transkei and died relatively young, Seme founded the newspaper *Abantu-Batho*, some copies of which have only recently come to light, and went on to become active in Swaziland and elsewhere in the region before increasing alcoholism began to blight his career. That neither man fulfilled the potential of their early careers must in large part be put down to the increasing racial segregation in South Africa. Especially after the establishment of Union in 1910, this helped to close off opportunities for men like Mangena and Seme to become more important figures in their communities than they were.