CHAPTER FIVE: “‘WHETHER THE PAST REALLY IS PAST’: RE-READING THE BANTU PAST AND PRESENT”¹

The writing of history conceived of in disciplinary terms, that is, the production of professional history—not necessarily by academy-trained historians or full-time historians, but by researchers who viewed their task as a scholarly and autonomous exercise—began in South Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the work of George McCall Theal, George Cory, and Eric Walker. Largely concerned with the emergence of colonial society these works treated African societies as peripheral to colonial history.²

History is never over and done, and South Africa is not a world apart, a discursive space separated from the rest of humanity by its racially-torn history. This was the point Modiri Molema wanted readers to grasp. Writing as an amateur historian and ethnographer as these two fields’ disciplinary boundaries were being created, he rejected their frequent inscribing of the country’s racially-intolerant rhetoric into history and ethnography. Once he began writing, though, it was harder to resist this dominant historiographical trend. As this chapter makes clear, Molema’s representation of African people was often ambiguous. In discussing The Bantu over eighty years after its writing, this thesis examines the historiographical climate in which Molema wrote it as well as the reception of his work since then.

Like any discursive form, South African historiography represents more than historiographers of the past two decades may willingly concede. In its canonising and enshrining it has become contested terrain, leading to the creation of some dominant and several subaltern discourses about South African society. The dominant histories have informed and legitimised academic understandings of the past and popular ideologies of racial supremacy and segregation. Tensions between dominant and subordinate historiographies have taken particular forms in specific historical eras. Academic history, resident within the universities, has claimed authority over the discipline, defining and delimiting its generic frontiers. The canons that Christopher Saunders and Ken Smith constructed towards the apartheid era’s close, revealed that while the history academy displays great ideological divergence, its members share much in common. They base claims to authority on their own professionalism, primary research and deductive reasoning. Subaltern discourses have won ill-repute: apart from the many methodological heresies that spring up inside the universities, amateur writers (self-trained, or operating outside the academy) have mostly had their works relegated to the margins of historical debate and canon.

“A profound historicity penetrates the heart of things”:³

The story of Molema’s historical writing is the story of many South African historians: those who preceded him, whose work he critiqued, and those who have written about him or in his field. His story may not be told without theirs. Yet, his work has often been omitted or marginalised, obscuring his achievements. Chapters Five and Six explore the past and present according to Molema, and their meaning for the place and time we call the present. They deal with the ways in which we inscribe the past, the reasons for doing so, and whom we allow to write about the past.

¹ Said, 1993: 1, for full quotation, see Epigraphs to thesis.
³ Michel Foucault, 1966 & 1984. Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines. (Paris: Éditions Gallimard), p.14: describing the changes in the theory of representation that began during the nineteenth century, Foucault remarked on the dislocation of representation from its alliance with “language, the order of things, riches and value”. Language, now tied to the new historicity, “isolated things and defined them in terms of their own coherence, imposing on them the forms of order implicated in the continuity of time….and above all, language loses its privileged place and becomes in turn a figure of coherent history with all the texture of its past”.
Chapter Five explores Molema’s first historical and ethnographical work, *The Bantu*, written in Glasgow and dedicated to the many Scots who devoted themselves to Africa. The meaning of Molema’s chosen title, *The Bantu Past and Present*, shifts as one reads the book itself. The title’s temporal aspect apart, “Bantu” was an invention, newly coined in a country lately invented. It was, supposedly, a more modern alternative to “Native”, the terminology of the initial colonial encounter still favoured in governmental and popular parlance as part of a handy vocabulary of cultural difference. “Bantu” became the academy’s preferred term, as historians and ethnographers established their disciplinary rites in the mid-nineteenth century. “Bantu” enabled them to begin to speak and write with more systematic coherence about the people, their languages, and the customs of the country.4

“Past and Present” was a popular idiom for the past’s shaping of the present. One creator of nineteenth-century historical discourse, Thomas Carlyle used it in 1845, and others applied it to South Africa. Missionary, James Stewart named a memoir of his school *Lovedale Past and Present*; Violet Markham entitled her account of a South African visit *South Africa Past and Present*.5 By linking these terms to “The Bantu”, Molema mapped a new intellectual space that few settler historians knew as he did.

The relationship of “past” to “present” structured Molema’s study temporally, with white colonisation dividing the two periods. Though not in the title, the book’s final section inferred “Future” as a consequence of “past” and “present” which, in the colonial period, implied change and continuity, similarity and difference between a time of imputed barbarism and one of Christian sobriety. The future (or rather this thesis’ present), had Modiri but known it, has proved to be an Age of Theorising. In the 1970s, cultural historian Raymond Williams theorised these three sentinels of time. He equated “past”, “present” and “future” with ideology’s “residual”, “dominant” and “emergent” forms.6 Late twentieth-century writers or even virtual common-rooms, have added to this periodisation the epithets “premodern”, “modern” and “postmodern”.7 Modernism was important to Molema, but he understood the terms, “Bantu”, “past” and “present” temporally, spatially, and ideologically, in terms of the three contexts in which he wrote: Scottish, African, and historiographical.

Molema dedicated *The Bantu* to the context he wrote in: Scotland. His publishers resided in Edinburgh, and he hoped for wide Scottish readership. While writing, he had imagined *The Bantu’s* other context, Africa and defined himself, in nationalist mode, as “African” (rather than as “doctor”, “historian” or even “Methodist”), while apostrophising Scotland as progenitor of South Africa’s missionary “heroes”.8

---

8 Molema, 1920: unnumbered page preceding Preface. MPP A979 Ad1, 15 July 1920, SMM, Glasgow, told STM, Maf, how hard it was to get a passage home after the war. He reached Glasgow just before war began and remained until 1921.
Self-conscious personalising in this passage enabled Molema to link himself as writer (“the African author”) to anticipated readers (“Scotland…and its People”), and their shared and continuing “present” context: World War I. Molema’s epigraph attempted to lead readers beyond the diametrically-opposed racial categories that imperialism ceaselessly reproduced, towards a new appreciation of Africa.

This opening pæan, “To Scotland”, placed him on the historical stage: “I may say that I am a member of the [Bantu] race whose life I have described in the following pages kith and kin of the people whose story I am unfolding to the world”.9 Some Classical Greek dramatists used this technique, parabasis, to take the stage personally, presenting themselves and their aims to the audience outside the dramatic form. De Man termed it “‘a gesture of address that suddenly confronts the audience of a representation with the framework of its performance [:]...the author’s intrusion that disrupts the fictional illusion’”.10 Molema’s advent interrupted an historical convention: into the illusion of objectivity intruded his narrative first person (“I”), declaring the author a life-historian: autobiographer and autoethnographer.

Epigraph and Preface helped make Molema a much-misunderstood historian.11 He intimated that, being African, he could better represent the continent than could colonial history, whose misrepresentations he proceeded to expose. Several historiographers (liberal and radical alike) have misunderstood Molema’s purpose, condemning him harshly, and relegating him to a minor place in their historiographical canons.

All canons imply choices, usually revealing as much about the chooser as the works chosen. This thesis investigates these writers’ evaluation of Molema and the extent to which they comprehend his reasons for writing and the literary mode in which he opted to write. Chapter Five bridges this thesis’ two sections, the biographical and the historical, two modes that elucidate Molema’s complex choices as a writer. It also assesses the contributions that his careers as medical doctor and African nationalist politician made to his lesser-known career as an historical and anthropological writer.

With little training in either discipline, his strength was an authority based on personal knowledge. He was not the only historian or ethnographer to argue that his subject position and experience made his insights unique, “correct” or “truthful”. More than many amateurs, he read widely in both fields and debated these works in scholarly fashion. He was also aware of his status as member of a racially-defined community much under the microscope of scholars, travellers, and politicians. They wrote as observers; he wrote as the observed and, from this position, provided a corrective reinterpretations.12

Some harsh critics have berated his attitudes, omissions, and perceived contradictions. Worse, they found his research unoriginal and derivative. His personal friend, Victor Mapanya admired Molema’s books, but feared that the Doctor’s complex grammar and wide vocabulary made “youngsters” struggle with them. His notions of social stratification and support of the British Empire puzzled and disappointed ANC “Youth Leaguers” in the more militant 1960s. Molema, the Defiance Campaign’s quiet bankroller in 1950, was out of vogue.13 The cultural context in which he wrote was embedded in his language, perhaps obscuring the extent to which his subject matter exposed the heart of the colonial encounter: the notions of race, supremacy and intelligence in which imperialism was grounded.
Like other early twentieth-century writers, his conceptions of race and class were related to notions of property and education his peers shared, and to ethnographic studies he had read. He recognised astutely that the colonisation process brought people like himself into complex associations. Colonial culture’s impact induced many of the colonised to explore its apparent obverse, the meanings of being African: the earlier generations’ precolonial character, the effect of “western” life-styles, and the cultural identity of modern Africans. Few South African historians (amateur or professional) explored these underlying questions as he did, through conditions he knew well, understanding how a writer’s worldview is ingrained in every text. His ideas would reflect on and interpret African history, and he perhaps naively trusted that print technology and publishing networks would distribute them widely.

The three “contexts” in which Molema wrote overlapped. Firstly, there was his personal life as a medical student in a Glasgow during World War I. Secondly, at home, the “war of extermination” (Abdurahman and Plaatje’s term) raged, transforming all Africans’ lives. Thirdly, the historiographical context involved Molema’s use of his sources and, particularly, his allegorical “closeness” to Theal.

His work prompts examination of historical professionalism’s institutionalisation and canonisation in South Africa. Nearly ninety years after The Bantu’s writing, Molema may be viewed as a Standpoint Theorist, building an epistemology around a given group’s experience of difference from the cultural mainstream. Critics contrast “Standpoint” historians and “professionals”, as they offer marginal and mainstream accounts of the past. Molema, the marginal writer, duelled with mainstream depictions of African people, trying to “redeem” a counter-image: Africa from an African point of view.

Preserving cultural forms of narrating the past was partly his project, though, as is shown below, he did not believe Africans possessed a strong tradition of historical narration:

“[w]ithout some species of writing, no people has ever preserved the faithful annals of their history....Information about their opinions, practices, usages, customs, doctrines, rites and religion has been handed down generation after generation from ancestors to posterity, and this has been progressively mangled and corrupted”.

The Torch reviewer “Tau”, who slated Molema’s Moroka for representing the Rolong as “totally illiterate” perhaps mistook Molema’s real concern over the piecemeal ways in which oral transmission occurred. Molema was, like Plaatje, deeply concerned about the “lack of [reliable] narrativity” in precolonial societies. He included two indigenous historical forms: African oral poetry, and Nguni and Tswana-Sotho chiefly genealogies. Like Plaatje, he believed that preserving the past was a

---

14 Selby Msimang’s father, Rev Joel, Methodist Minister (ordained 1890), (“Notes from Autobiography”, pp.2-4), believed “very strongly in education....My father had no political ideas at all…he believed in the power of God to provide for all. He never felt inferior”. For HSM, education was a marker of social difference “[t]he attitude of local uneducated people to our family was all that could be desired. They respected my parents very much”. He was of the third generation in his family to be educated into these technologies.

15 See Chapter Four.


18 Molema (1951: 188-89) quoted Edward Gibbon’s Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Chapter IX. For Moroka (1951), Molema did conduct oral interviews: Stephen Lefenya was one of his sources. In 1913, younger men thought Lefenya, Montshiwa’s secretary, ancient. TsalaBT, 14 June 1913, “Personalia”, praised his memory: “Chief Stephen Lefenya is an old man ...[of] 77 years ...but can speak and write the English language well. His memory is fresh...he remembers events that happened a few years before Bechuanaland was proclaimed British territory [when] he was the secretary of the late Chief Montsooa”. Cf. supra, pp.67, 97 & infra, pp.246-47, 294-95, 304.


20 See Molema (1920: 39, 48, 57, 388-90) for genealogies and p.42 for Chief Moroka’s Praises, “Ke ngoana oaga mang
scramble against time; they feared that memories of the precolonial past might die with the older
generation’s passing. Molema desired to safeguard this past in order to explain African culture, socio-
economic needs and good intentions in the present. These *bona fides* were vital, given that settlers
imputed all manner of ill-will to Africans.

He also fell prey to the Social Darwinist belief that communities lacking a written historical record
cowered way down the scale of civilisation. He believed, sadly, that warfare and the lack of written
record had combined to rob many societies of a sense of history and ethnography. Incidents like inter-
tribal warfare, unleashed by Shaka and Mzilikazi, had dispersed tribes and the bearers of their oral
traditions. Warfare caused “ignorance and backwardness” and what Molema called “stereotypy”.22

This lament needs to be seen in its own context. Hayden White contested the notion that absence of
written historical narrative means the absence of an *interpretation* of the past:

...the possibility of representing the development of certain cultures in a specifically historical discourse is not
sufficient grounds for regarding cultures whose development cannot be similarly represented, because of their
failure to produce these kinds of records, as continuing to persist in the condition of “prehistory”.23

Here Molema’s argument implicitly revealed his own motivation for writing; he sought to demonstrate
African societies “civilised” status by representing not only their past, but also their historical and
ethnographic consciousness. Hayden White understood the dangers of domination by so-called
“historical cultures” (usually western) that then sought to record the histories of the “primitive” peoples
whom, it pleased them to argue, had little or no historical consciousness:

...that panorama of the domination of the so-called “higher” civilizations over their “neolithic” subject
cultures and the “expansion” of Western civilization over the globe that is the subject of the standard
narrative of the world-history written from the point of view of historical cultures. But this “history” of
“historical” cultures is by its very nature, as a panorama of domination and expansion, at the same time the
documentation of the “history” of those supposedly “non-historical” cultures and peoples who are the victims
of this process.24

Molema’s motivation in writing was not only to save the fleeting African past from oblivion, but also to
place it alongside the august annals of the so-called “civilised” nations.25 His style and tone subtly
pointed to the difficulty of writing as a member of one such “non-historical” race.

His academic and personal sources affected the text’s narrative tone and structure, disturbing early
twentieth-century positivist conventions that separated narrator/researcher from subject matter.26 Even
in the late-1900s, two key South African historiographers overlooked poststructuralist critiques of
historical “objectivity” when segregating the historical canons into professional and amateur.
Professionals were widely held to represent, through archival and theoretical labours, the “truth” about
South Africa’s past. Amateurs, “untrained” in evaluating primary sources, often narrated history
through personal opinion, and were judged partisan, and beneath agreed standards of professional
research.

---

22 Cf. infra, pp.246, 297-98, 300.
23 White, 1984: 31-32: “[n]arrative is at once a mode of discourse, a manner of speaking, and the product produced by the
adoption of this mode of discourse”.
24 White, 1984: 32.
25 In a sense, this was also Plaatje’s aim in collecting the *Sechuana Proverbs* (1916b: 6). Plaatje entitled one section, where
he compares English and Setswana vocabularies “*Mabapi le Merafe e Mengoe*” (“Compared with Other Nations”).
Twentieth-century definitions of South African “professional history” reflect aspects of the country’s politics and society. There were practical considerations: “[b]lack intellectuals have also been forbidden entrance into some of the basic institutions required to practice history, such as archives and public libraries.” Theal had no university training, but based his stature as an historian on access to and, later, control of the Cape Archives. It is unlikely that the archives would have admitted Molema in the 1910s; Theal’s opportunities of making good on his lack of training would have eluded him. But archival access might not have helped him much. Writing a history based on primary sources was difficult then: “[a]rchives were [mostly]…uncatalogued and unclassified, there was no official documentation”.

Some South African academic historians (Marxists, liberals, and various nationalists) have claimed history as a science with, in Igers’ phrase, “a discipline guided by rigorous methodological assumptions”. Others have shown the fluidity between “history and myth, history and poetry, history and ideology”. Following English social historian, Laurence Stone, Igers noted a rejection of quantitative method: “[t]he movement to narration by the new historians marks the end of an era: the end of the attempt to produce a coherent scientific explanation of change in the past”. In South Africa, this “return” gained momentum in the 1980s, as social and cultural history began to overtake (or incorporate) the positivism of much liberal and Althusserian Marxist historical work.

Molema prefigured this interest in cultural history. His contribution to intellectual history was to illuminate a period and worldview that fairly few have recorded. His moral critique made iconoclastic statements about the treatment of Africans. For example, he believed post-Union parliamentarians had forsaken political and social ethics in governing Africans. This led him to quote Nietzsche:

[slavery with all its sordid passions has been disinterred and revivified and re-established in all but name in South Africa. Morality in South Africa has long since been throttled and buried.

“I say: as long as your morality hung over me
I breathed like one asphyxiated. That is why
I throttled this snake. I wished to live,
Consequently it had to die.”

Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, vi.

To Molema, Zarathustra exemplified morality’s disappearance from modern life: ends and not means justified government policy. He overcame his religious difference from Nietzsche, whose identification of the modern lust for power helped him explain the expediency of post-Union white politics. Nietzsche’s radical doubt in accepted secular truths and philosophies attracted him. By doubting the “truths” and teleologies of race, Molema could condemn segregation and the white “will to power”.

Machiavelli, another anatomist of power, identified the shameful dissonance between a ruler’s promise to serve his people and real political expediency, and bolstered Molema’s analysis of white domination:

---

27 Bozzoli & Delius (1990: 16) argued that from the 1950s, the closure of mission schools and imposition of Bantu Education undermined many African students’ intellectual resources.

28 Smith, 1988: 58. Molema used some archival sources for Moroka, but none for The Bantu, which he wrote in Scotland.


32 Molema was not a Nietzschean; it is hard to reconcile his Christian moralism with the philosopher of: “…we, we immoralists and Antichristians, find our advantage in this, that the church exists”, from Nietzsche’s Twilight of the Idols, (1889, Preface, pt.3), which Molema read, along with Beyond Good and Evil (1886), Thus Spake Zarathustra, (1883-85) and Anti-Christ (1888). While writing The Bantu, Molema stated that he continued his weekly visits to church. See supra, pp.214, 217-18 & fn.127.
[a] prudent prince (or ruler) neither can nor ought to keep his word when to keep it is hurtful to him and the causes which led him to pledge it are removed...and no prince was ever at a loss for plausible reasons to cloak a breach of faith. Of this numberless recent instances could be given, and it might be shown how many treaties and engagements have been rendered inoperative and idle through the want of faith in rulers, and that he who was best known to play the fox has had the best success.\footnote{Molema (1920: 354) cited Machiavelli [1513], *The Prince*, chapter viii. [London JM Dent, 1943], pp.63-69: “Concerning those who have obtained a principality by wickedness”.
}

Since 1994, it has become a commonplace that self-serving rulers dominated South Africa in 1920. It took great bravery plus Nietzsche and Machiavelli’s philosophical backing, for a black man to hint that the white government might have lost black citizens’ trust. Molema’s unassailable narrative strategy (grounded in universal justice) condemned all abuses of power. Around this scaffolding, he built an argumentative superstructure out of allegorical and analytical comparison, to show that African history equalled that of any European culture. To accomplish so vast a task, with such philosophical assurance, one needed Molema’s formidable energy, intelligence and moral conviction.

His diverse secondary reading showed *The Bantu*’s diverse origins. Molema interbred strains of history, education, anthropology, ethnography and moral philosophy to form his own critique.\footnote{A conventional definition of anthropology in colonial situations would be Jacques Maquet’s in “Objectivity in Anthropology”. In *Current Anthropology*, 5: 1 (Feb): 50. In Tim Youngs (ed), 1997. *Writing and Race*. (London: Longman), p.3: “[a]nthropology is the study of nonliterate societies and their cultures, [and] emerged in the nineteenth century as the discipline devoted to peoples considered by evolutionists of that time as ‘primitive’ and ‘inferior’, and is distinguished from sociology which is the study of ‘advanced’, ‘complex’, industrial, literate, large-scale societies.”}

He added the deductive methodology of his training and deep cynicism about power to his analysis. On occasion, his style, tone, subject-matter, use of idiom and anger made his work as complex for readers as Dr Johnson had found the conceits of metaphysical poets: “heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together”.\footnote{Samuel Johnson, 1779-81. *Lives of the Poets: and a criticism on their works*, v.1, Waller, Milton, Cowley http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/lfwal10.txt
}

This thesis argues that his heterogeneity led historiographers to marginalise him; he baffled their “neat” categories. Late 1980s canon-makers, Saunders and Smith struggled to pigeonhole Molema with others of his “kind”, which eluded easy definition. They classified him according to more obvious features, race and religion, using these handy categories to label him and other black historians cursorily.

In the politically polarised 1980s, Saunders disparaged Molema’s links with Theal, notorious as perpetuator of racial myths about the country’s history. Several amateur historical trends had Thealite origins, Saunders asserted: African nationalism, Afrikaner nationalism and even a brand of socialism:

...ranging from S Modiri Molema (1891-1965), the young African author of *The Bantu Past and Present* (1920), to Sydney Olivier (1859-1943), a social democrat highly critical of South African racial policy, and Gustav Preller (1875-1943), leading Afrikaner nationalist historian.\footnote{Saunders, 1988: 41. Cf. infra, p.247.
}

Molema, he defined racially, Olivier politically, and Preller ethnically. As an African, Molema should have condemned segregation more, Saunders contended, but did not investigate why he had not. Smith forwarded racial and religious arguments, conveniently holding African missionary education responsible for the way all black writers wrote history. Both canon-creators overlooked the ambiguities of early twentieth-century African nationalism, Cape liberalism, and imperial capitalism.

The binaric “professional”/“amateur” division Saunders and Smith employed blunted their appraisal of genre. What they saw as inadequate qualification to write history was partly the infiltration of a life genre into historical writing.\footnote{See Appendix B: “The South African Historical Canon”.} While lumping together various underqualified amateurs, they overlooked an important shift among “adequately” qualified or professional writers. Had they identified
the new shift in “radical history” (cultural history and the resurgence of biography), the so-called amateurs’ intentions might have been easier to comprehend.

They mentioned the radicals’ prioritisation of class over race, but neglected the concept of ambiguity, which Marks’s study of Dube articulated in 1974. Her conceptualisation of ambiguity and revival of interest in biography and autobiography continued in the mid-1980s. Saunders and Smith’s omissions made their portraits of the African elite and intellectuals, like Molema, Soga and Fuze, rather one-sided. Lacking Marks’s subtle approach, Saunders and Smith’s equated Molema’s recognition of the missionaries with their dominance of his — and contemporary amateurs’ — thinking:

[i]there is one other group of writers whose work falls into the liberal tradition. There are very few academically trained historians among them, and in fact not many of them have written histories. What they have done, however, is to express a particular view about the past that coincides closely with the liberal standpoint. The writers who belong to this tradition, what for want of a better name may be referred to as a mission-inspired liberal trend, are black, but not all blacks belong to this tradition.

Certainly, devoutly Christian Molema was educated at three mission schools. While writing The Bantu, he was but a marginal member of the SANNC, whose ruling elite fused aspects of Cape liberalism with their African nationalism. These points are correct. However, Smith did not explore why Molema wrote both history and ethnography. As a result, he did not assess Molema’s cautious revaluation of the missionary contribution to South African history, an assessment usually credited to Macmillan.

Saunders’ canon prioritised professional historical discourse, and seemed to equate Africanness and non-professional status. Theal, he believed, founded academic writing, originating several historical “schools”: Afrikaner nationalists, his orthodox followers, and an English-speaking white liberal core, indebted to his groundwork, but averse to his racial views. At their heels snapped combative, younger radicals, clashing with them over the merits of race and class as measures of social difference. Controversially, Saunders argued that outside the academy, African nationalist amateur writers relied on Theal, possibly because of the ubiquity of his works. Early twentieth-century African writers lacked access to historical training, archival sources and publishing houses. However, many African historians addressed a wider readership than the university, aiming to educate broadly, although not always attracting their target readers! In the 1980s, Saunders canon thus reflected a deeply-segregated society and academy.

Molema was one of the first African writers to produce a full-length study of the sub-continent’s past. So far, no earlier publication is known; Plaatje’s Native Life in South Africa (1916) was not a general history. Molema tried to render “usable” the past of one population group, but his motives were neither as overtly political as Olivier’s nor as “polemical” as Preller’s. The task of consolidating the very diverse Bantu-speakers’ history, from ancient times (less-known in 1917 than in the later-1900s) until Bantu settlement of southern Africa and then colonial times, was immense. Besides introducing new material to the discipline, he questioned both the governing white elite’s ideological legitimacy, and historians who accepted it! “Race” was his organising motif, and mediated the vital theme of power. In systematising the African past, he helped to create a critical historical and geographical map of the segregation process.

39 Smith (1988: 165) discussed the 1987 History Workshop at which several such papers featured. See Social Dynamics, 1988, 14. Bundy (1990: 134); Saunders (1988: 190) and Smith (1988: 216) guardedly admitted the importance of social class: “no serious historian could ignore class or a political-economy approach” (Saunders). Smith stated more guardedly that the new approach has succeeded in “calling attention to very important areas which have thus been overlooked”.
41 WB Rubusana wrote Zemk’ Inkomo Magwalandini (1904). See supra, p.175 fn.73.
The ARA provided the forum and some impetus for Modiri's decision to write *The Bantu*. By 1917, after three years of Glasgow exile, he needed to explain himself and his different, distant home to his African and Caribbean friends and then, to the public. His training for the task was Lovedale's matriculation curriculum, including Classical European History. Had he read history at Glasgow University, he might have become South Africa's first African professional historian, worthy of more historiographical attention! But he studied medicine and only great diligence drove him, out of choice and necessity, to complete *The Bantu*'s mammoth reading list as well. He wished to emphasise the educational struggles Africans faced, because he believed that education was the key to changing their lives. Yet in 1914, education was only marginally more accessible to Africans than to Silas' generation. Universities were accessible only to those who enrolled overseas, a costly enterprise. In Modiri's absence, Fort Hare College opened near Lovedale (1916) to meet African matriculants' tertiary needs.43

Education helped to place one in that dubious category “civilised native” (a term Leloba Molema mulled over sardonically and rejected when trying to characterise her uncle’s worldview).44 It was the term the Cape administration devised for the narrow stratum of enfranchised Africans, a group progressively undermined by the increased franchise qualifications that protected the “political dominance of the white electorate.”45 As Molema found, belonging to the colonial order through education and franchise qualifications enabled him, theoretically, to participate in political debates as an equal of his white compatriots. Many of his peers and mentors in the African and “Coloured” elite (the Sogas, Plaatje, Rubusana and Abdurahman) did so with consummate fluency. While their engagement in colonial politics was chiefly political, Molema engaged colonial culture and its treatment of Africans intellectually. Holding his stethoscope to the tough breast of that society, he diagnosed its pathologies.

One mentor was Plaatje, whose missionary education, Kimberley and Mafikeng experience, journalistic flair, and political acumen made him a senior SANNC politician.46 After returning from England, the NAD thought his outspoken criticism of government put him “well on the road to becoming a troublesome professional agitator”.47 Under Plaatje and more radical leaders, the SANNC tried to steer popular protest around the country. His contacts with Molema have been outlined in earlier chapters.48

While not as polemical as Plaatje, especially in its first half, *The Bantu* maintained his mentor’s values of fairness, justice and Christian morality. Plaatje’s rationale for salvaging African literary and historical genres appealed to Molema. These ancient genres inspired Plaatje’s collection of Setswana proverbs and tales, and his novel, *Mhudi*.49 His philosophy in all three works was redemptive, aimed at

---

43 Costs were also medical: Tiyo Soga and Alfred Mangena’s overseas sojourns ruined their health. Inclement Glasgow made Soga consumptive, a condition that later proved fatal. See Skota (1930: 90-91) on Mangena. Mostert (1992: 756-57; 823): Fort Hare was named after Lieutenant-Governor John Hare, who succeeded Andries Stockenstrom in 1838 as the Cape administration devised for the narrow stratum of enfranchised Africans, a group progressively undermined by the increased franchise qualifications that protected the “political dominance of the white electorate.”

44 Leloba Molema Interview, 1992.

45 Davenport (1991: 91, 127): in 1865 and 1896 respectively, Natal Africans and Indians lost the vote. In 1853, the property qualification for the males-only franchise was £50 per annum or “occupation of a site and structure together worth £25”. These restrictions were enacted in 1887 and 1892; those included in the 1894 Glen Grey Act made a mockery of the “non-racial” franchise. Lewsen (1982: 132) cited JX Merriman to JG Fraser, 25 Feb & 10 March 1887, *Merriman Correspondence*, v.1, 241: Jabavu called it the “‘natives’ disrepresentative bill”. Sprigg and the Bond planned to change the Voters’ Registration Act “to limit the Transkeian black vote... While nearly all the 10,000 white residents could easily qualify for the vote, only one African in 200 could qualify: about 2,500 voters in a population of 500,000”.


47 SAB NTS 7602 (01), 17/328, “Mr. Sol T. Plaatje”. The police followed Plaatje’s career with interest, after he returned from England. When he planned to address Witwatersrand gatherings, AL Barrett, Kimberley’s Inspector and Protector of Natives, warned the Director of Native Labour, Johannesburg of his “radicalism”.


saving Tswana oral wisdom “from oblivion” for future generations. Both writers hoped to make oral idiom and African history available to the Empire’s reading public, and particularly to black South Africans. Their Modernist, syncretic vision assimilated elements of past into present ideology. They both sought to understand urbanisation and migrancy’s impact on the expressive forms, culture and language. In the colonial era, many Tswana were leaving the Setswana-bounded world to communicate multilingually in urban and rural contexts. “Multilingual” refers to hybridisation or creolisation processes in which both writers engaged. Fluent in several languages, they moved in multiple cultural milieux. Through creolisation, cultures mingled, gave up the apparent “purity” of their inheritance, and adapted to others. The hybridity of African and missionary beliefs is implied in the title *The Bantu Past and Present*.

Molema and Plaatje’s modernist worldviews were part of the transformation of daily life and intellectual orientation that colonisation and urbanisation helped impose. In the early 1900s, technological transformation was a major condition sustaining capitalism, and modernism was its cultural logic. These enmeshed processes threw together communities formerly less permeable, creating many opportunities for cultural “brokers”, like Molema and Plaatje, to translate African cultures into the Empire’s received linguistic and cultural conventions. Molema felt it vital to place African history in context, contrasting rural experience with that of new South African cities and Europe’s older ones.

Some institutions, like the gold mines, reinforced ethnic separation, allegedly to avert conflict and, from the white minority’s viewpoint, perhaps to prevent a more dangerous outcome: the integration of diverse groups. Larger cities, targets of mass migration and migrancy, might require one to live amid a series of proximate languages and cultures. Even in small Mafikeng, a Morolong might each day encounter a cultural range, from Benjamin Weil, local Jewish merchant, to assorted African communities in “strangers location” between Stadt and white town. In Kimberley, Plaatje courted family censure by marrying his Xhosa-speaking friend Isaiah M’belle’s sister. At Lovedale, Modiri was not the only Motswana in the melting-pot, and interacted with people of many ethnicities. Visits to Johannesburg, Kimberley and Cape Town showed both men how, in confining urban spaces, diverse communities shared daily intimacies that invited linguistic, cultural and religious interaction.

Molema and Plaatje introduced themselves personally to readers as representatives of people whose literature (in Plaatje’s case), history and lifestyles (in Molema’s) they sought to represent. In this, they initiated the strategy of writing “on behalf of others” that many twentieth-century black South Africans employed. Abrahams, Mphahlele, Modisane, Kuzwayo and Noni Jabavu all adopted this partly autobiographical and ethnographical approach, claiming to speak for a larger community.

52 On “cultural logic”, see Fredric Jameson, 1984, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”. *New Left Review*, 140: 53-92. Many African intellectuals were cultural brokers in this way. Jordan (1984) argued that Rubusana “was a committed modernist: represented by his espousal of Christianity and western education, while…recognising that there were a number of abiding values in traditional African society”.
54 RU, MS 16, 292, Lovedale ROC, 1911: of 49 students’ names (and homes) on Lovedale lists kindly supplied by Rhodes University, 8 (16.3%) students came from Kimberley, Bechuanaland and Thaba ‘Nchu; 8 (16.3%) from Basutoland and OFS towns; 2 (4.1%) from Natal; 27 (55.1%) from the Cape, and 4 (8.1%) from Johannesburg and the rural Transvaal. In 1900, Sebopiwa Molema’s class showed a slightly higher Cape contingent, perhaps because the South African War impeded travel from or through the Boer Republics.
56 Molema (1920: 162) lamented: “[t]he Bantu themselves are anything but a reading public”. Cf. supra, pp.17f, 34-35.
and non-African anticipated readers. The strategy immersed readers and writers in each other’s strangeness. Vincent Crapazano has commented:

[the ethnographer is caught in a second paradox. He has to make sense of the foreign. Like [Walter] Benjamin’s translator, he aims at a solution to the problem of foreignness, and like the translator (a point missed by Benjamin) he must also communicate the very foreignness that his interpretations (the translator’s translations) deny, at least in their claim to universality. He must render the foreign familiar and preserve its foreignness at one and the same time.]

**The History of oneself as Other — Molema and the Art of Cultural Translation:**

Rendering the foreign familiar was not Molema and Plaatje’s only task: they and many journalists also participated strongly in creating the emergent discourse of African Nationalism. They created an intellectual challenge to the many “legitimating” narratives of colonial historians and anthropologists. South African history is a doubly-discursive space, where popular and academic debates about the past overlap, often conflict, and co-exist for differing purposes. Both writers attempted to open up a public anti-racist discourse, in which African intellectuals might participate, and thereby challenge, segregation as a popular ideology, government policy and academic discourse.

In entering the “learned” debate about Africa, Molema engaged with western scholars, travel writers and some poets’ representation of cultural difference. His writing embodied a shift away from the absolutes of colonial judgment and a move towards the recognition of cultural relativity during the mid-twentieth century. In the “relativist” era that would later emerge in twentieth-century ethnography, there would be “no Archimedean point of view from which to represent the world…. one cannot occupy, unambiguously, a bounded cultural world from which to journey out and analyze other cultures. Cultural analysis is always enmeshed in global movements of difference and power”. Molema introduced some relativism into the analysis of precolonial and colonial southern African power relations. His statements about the corrupting influence of dictatorial power contributed to the Bantu’s Christian humanist allegory. Corrosive power (which Shaka, Mzilikazi and the post-Union state wielded) damaged his belief that power should be used for humanity’s greater good.

Chapters Five and Six also explore Molema’s treatment of cultural multiplicity, which is vital, in the twenty-first century, to late-capitalism and informs one’s reading of The Bantu eight decades after its appearance. Dislocation of Victorian certainties, possibly beginning even in 1891, when Modiri was born, had accelerated acutely by 1920. “Difference and power” were the tectonic plates whose shifts threatened to fracture society along increasingly recognisable lines: race, gender, class, and religion.

---

57 In “Hermes Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description” (In Clifford & Marcus, 1986: 52), Vincent Crapazano cited Benjamin’s *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969], p.75): “[a]ll translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages”. South African autoethnographers include Abrahams, Jabavu, Mphahlele, Kuzwayo and Modisane, see Bibliography, infra.

58 Foucault (1966 & 1984: 15) [trans]: “[t]he history of madness could be the history of the Other, — that which is both part of a culture and simultaneously strange, therefore to be excluded (in order to exorcise the inner danger) but by imprisoning it (to reduce its Otherness); the history of the order of things would be the history of the Same...”.


60 For Dubow (1995: 68) these narratives were “legitimised” by the entrenching and justification of white colonists’ dominance through so-called scientific knowledge. Examples exist in all Plaatje’s journalism, and in his “The Case of the Barolongs: Tribe’s relations with the Voortrekkers”, 04 March 1924, *The Cape Argus*.


Early in the 1900s, ethnography did not entertain notions of multiplicity. As a discipline, it was a “closed shop”, in which metropolitan or settler experts tended to establish relations of dominance and subordination by reifying “primitive” peoples’ customs and capacities. Few objects of analysis ever joined the ranks of commentators, save Molema, whose 1920 entry into the field bucked this trend. Others followed. Given power relations within the discipline between researchers and researched, his ethnographical practice could be highly contradictory of its own aims, and of disciplinary norms.

Representing cultural and psychological Otherness is highly problematic in ethnographic research. The discipline may have begun the last century certain of received wisdoms, but by its close, ethnographers would hesitate to pronounce on other cultures’ moeurs. Ascribing Otherness came to implicate the ways in which an observer’s or ethnographer’s own milieu influences his/her judgment of others. Molema’s ethnographic process is fascinating: his own capacity to “Other” objects of analysis exposes as fallacious any assumptions that, as a black writer he would necessarily represent his own community without distortion. Even Saunders and Smith apparently expected him to provide an “authentic” black history. When he disappointed, they avoided the substance of his work, superficially dismissing him as “missionary” — frequently an insult (Smith) — and an often-reactionary liberal (Saunders).

Molema’s writing illustrated the difficulty any writer has in rendering nonpartisan accounts, despite all avowals of telling the “truth”. He could, like any contemporary ethnographer or historian to “Other” African people. His ethnographic practices reflected that:

- That “Othering” was not necessarily racially-defined. Rather, it depended on power-relations in the disciplines of history and ethnography, and the interactions between the researcher’s and his/her object of study.
- That all writers may “Other” the objects of their analysis in some way. In trying to understand this Object, one often projects what is inside oneself onto what is “out there”.
- That race is but one of many “variables” or “social cleavages” influencing a writer’s “othering” of objects of analysis. Gender, culture, religion and class are among other influences.

Table 7: Molema’s Ethnographic Practices: Representing the Other

Molema’s interpretation of class, religion, education, and culture made him view the day’s burning issues, like “civilisation”, ambiguously. Since the 1830s, the Molema family had asserted their difference from the rest of the Tshidi by assimilating missionary culture and religious belief. He accepted this way of life as his own, and was very conscious that the “civilised” or educated African was a “rara avis”. 63 He forthrightly classified those Africans who had not been educated or converted to Christianity as “Other” under the rubric “barbarian”. “Barbarian” may shock today’s readers, leading one to misread Molema’s work, as Saunders and Smith did in 1988. After his division of the African race into civilised and barbarian, his tactful general introduction to The Bantu may surprise. His plea for attention showed his awareness that the circumstances in which he wrote might predetermine readers’ reception of the book. The introduction drew attention to African writers’ “rareness”; the very low literacy rate among Africans inhibited the growth of African studies of Africa. This famine contrasted sharply with the glut of white “expertise”. Yet, as his own case showed, education could enable an African to treat a subject learnedly.

Molema deployed tact as his preferred idiom: even when angry with his father, his letters were never discourteous. 64 Secondly he wished to gain readers’ confidence by respecting them as equals. He knew too that even anger becomes tedious, so he held back in chapters on education, labour and segregation,

63 Molema, 1920: 307. See supra, pp.206, 213. For Holub’s comment on missionary culture at Mafikeng, see supra, p.83-84.
64 See supra, pp.194-95ff, 207-08.
to make a greater impact. His contribution to South African historiography was an argumentative approach, now agreeing with sources, now disagreeing. Though not introducing primary sources, his weighty task was debating academic discourse. He critiqued many secondary sources on race, to show that South African history was no longer a well-defended invader castle, but an open discursive field. 

Yet, *The Bantu* had other innovative objectives. His historical and ethnographical initiative was mimetic (cultural translation), interpretative and synthesising. In Talal Asad’s view, translating culture means, “the anthropologist must first read and then reinscribe the implicit meanings that lie beneath/within/beyond situated speech”. This activity engages the writer-translator in expanding the semantic and cultural significance of words, actions and contexts.

Assembling the culture’s elements entailed theoretical extrapolation and labelling for convenient analysis. Thus, nineteenth-century linguists and ethnographers adduced “Bantu” as an overarching category to sub-contain the customs, historical narratives and habitation patterns of linguistically-defined communities. Theal’s *Ethnography* confidently extrapolated the concept “Bantu” to generalise about southern African cultures. The term was minted as a function of white colonial settlement and ethnographic inquiry. Molema termed “Bantu” an European ascription:

> [t]he name “Bantu” (properly a-Bantu) is a Xosa-Zulu word meaning “people”. Its form in the language of Bechuana-Basuto is *Batho*...The name Bantu was first applied by the philologist, Dr Bleek, as a generic name for those peoples (south of 5°N lat.) speaking such closely allied languages.

Bleek’s linguistic term was part of a larger colonial definition of the southern African subset of “the Negroid race”. Molema’s role as ethnographer was to generalise across cultures and historical periods, synecdoches of a composite whole, to extrapolate Bantu culture and history. While creating a “usable past” from diverse sources, he contributed to a public scientific discourse about African history and society among African intellectuals, and also critiqued in the wider international discourse about Africa. He invited readers to gaze in new, possibly strange ways upon South African society.

Gazing is never non-ideological: “…cultural debates, particularly in South Africa, have been tied to an identity politics based on visibility: a visibility largely reliant on markers of race”. From the first, southern African inhabitants’ physical features and colour magnetised the colonial gaze, their features embodied the visible difference between colonist and colonised. For Ricoeur, visual images figuratively represent pre-existing phenomena: “[t]his is because image is…a construct, but nonetheless is tied to

---


67 GM Theal, 1919. *Ethnography and Condition of South Africa before 1505*. (London: George Allen & Unwin), p.143: “[t]he Bantu tribes of Africa south of the Zambesi vary so greatly in appearance…speech…customs, and intellect, that it is evident they do not form one homogeneous race…Of late years a flood of light has been thrown upon the condition of their kindred in Central Africa, and by applying the knowledge thus gained…the history of the Bantu family can be traced backward in general terms, though not in a detailed form”.


69 Molema, 1920: 1. See Appendix C for Molema’s Bibliography. Theal (1888: 195) registered “Bantu” as a convenient term that ethnologists had chosen “to distinguish the group to which they belong from the rest of mankind”. He did not state that “the Bantu” spoke several languages; “ntu” is an Nguni (Isizulu and Isixhosa) term; the Sesotho- Setswana equivalent is *motho* (plur. *Batho*). The SANNC called its first paper, *Abantu-Batho*, making it meaningful to several language groups.

70 Molema (1920: 63) discussed Livingstone’s mapping of Setswana’s extensive use. Xolela Mangcu characterised the continuing presence of the powerful colonial/white gaze in South African society in “*Yizo Yizo*: we need Steven Spielberg, not Quentin Tarantino”. (*Sunday Independent*, 08 Apr 2001). He criticised social analysts and media who treat Africans as objects of analysis: “…the black community has always been a target of the voyeuristic gaze, from early European anthropologists to postmodern representations of the black body as a symbol of sexual virility. You see we’re a fascinating bunch to outsiders and to ourselves. How else does one explain the absence of such programmes [*Yizo Yizo*] about the pathologies of the white community or any other segment of our population?”
what already exists: ‘it remains a process for making present to oneself the things of the world’”. Pre-existing ideologies accompanying each settler generation, helped make gazers view African features and colour as the ultimate signifiers of difference. Colonialism empowered white South Africans inscribe these visual differences into legal separation and domination. In addition to the strongly Christian settler culture that imputed evil to blackness and semi-nakedness, came increasingly popular pseudo-science: craniology, another form of ideological gazing, bolstered assumptions of black inferiority. Colonial discourse, a form of “Orientalism”, was comprised of such assumptions.

To a large extent, Molema proved aware of the dangers of “Orientalism”. In Said’s analysis, the West gazes on Asian cultures through Orientalism’s ideological lens. Orientalism demonstrated “the hegemony of an imperialistic culture”, as it had “...the epistemological and ontological power virtually of life and death, of presence and absence, over everything and everybody designated as ‘oriental’”. Said’s work also illuminated the textualisation of Africa and Africans.

“Africa” and “African” designate geographic, racial and ideological identity. Many of the cultural practices involved in depicting Africa from the early 1800s, negatively re-created African as “Other”. Conceptually, the “Other” in postcolonial theory is derived more from Fanonian analysis, with its emphasis on the unequal power relations between Subject and Other, than from Freud and Lacan:

…in post-colonial societies, the participants are frozen into a hierarchical relationship in which the oppressed is locked into a position by the assumed moral superiority of the dominant group, a superiority which is reinforced when necessary by the use of physical force….The dialectic of self and Other, indigene and exile, language and place, slave and free, which is...is also an expression of the way in which language and power operate in the world.

For Theal and other Settler historians, Africans were different and Other, representing all that whites claimed not to: “savagery”, “violence”, “barbarism”, and lacked “education and sophistication”. His 11 volume History of South Africa (1915) placed 260 years of white history centre-stage, barely allowing 2,000 years of African history out of the wings; it formed brief, violent entr’actes between the narratives of settler experience.

Molema centred African history, tracing the past from “tribal” division to his own day, when nationalism captivated many of the African elite, who tried to unite Bantu-speaking groups to assert positive intentions towards Africa. The elite mostly resisted populist Garveyite call of “Africa for the Africans”, and radical working-class politics and fought to override settler perceptions of their

---

72 In The World, the Text and the Critic. (London: Vintage, 1983), pp. 222-23, Edward Said’s analysis of the Orient’s representation under western eyes bears critically on depictions of “Africa” and “the African”, and is vital to understanding Molema’s work. Said stressed (1983: 261, 264) that capturing ideological space was germane to colonialism: “[...]he simple fact is that between 1815, when European powers were in occupation of approximately 35 percent of the earth’s surface, and 1918, when that occupation had extended to 85 percent of the earth’s surface, discursive power increased accordingly”.
76 Theal (1919: 230): (on stupidity, lack of theoretical knowledge); 191, 271 (savagery against other humans); 266 (difficulty in bringing Bantu under civilised government); 311 (on intrinsic African inability to grasp financial affairs).
“difference” and “Otherness”. Molema emphasised the similarities between black and white, even voicing support for the British Empire. For this purpose, he greatly needed cultural translation.

Yet, Molema dealt ambiguously with “difference”. Indigenous writers educated into the colonial order often made ambiguous “accommodations” between nationalist ideology and dominant colonial discourse. Likewise, scholars mapped onto Africa “Othering” discourses that, as Said remarked,

...realized a very important component of the European will to domination over the non-European world, and made it possible to create not only an orderly discipline of study but a set of institutions, a latent vocabulary (or set of enunciative possibilities), a subject matter, and finally — as it emerges in Hobson’s and Cromer’s writings at the end of the nineteenth century — subject races.

Under European colonisation, he argued, those termed “non-European” were considered “Other”, and rendered doubly subject. “Subject” denoted both political and discursive subordination. “Enunciative”, here, implied the writer’s participation in creating a text, and a spatio-temporal relation: “[t]his énonciation includes a speaker who enunciates, a listener whom one addresses, a time and a place, a discourse that precedes and follows; in brief, a context of enunciation”, in Todorov’s words. Thus, any account of the colonial past implicated the writer’s own subject position, sense of the past and connection to readers. Molema’s opening “Preface” was an attempt to declare his subject position and attempt to engage his readers in the collaborative, historically-grounded reader-writer relationship.

Africanism, which sounds like an African analogue of Orientalism, is actually its obverse, being an assertive attitude rather than a dominated position. It implies Africans forcefully representing the continent to counter negative colonial images. Twentieth-century “Africanism” began as political opposition to imperialism, segregation and apartheid. Molema wrote Africanist history, but did not adopt exclusive political Africanist. For Saunders, “Africanism” included a broad range of contributions to the historical analysis of Africa: so Molema and Macmillan were early “Africanists”!

Saunders did not clearly distinguish between historians of European descent making Africa their interest, and Africans, like Molema, writing their country’s history.

Saunders other “Africanists” represented a considerable political range, though all focused on African subjects. He grouped them together seemingly in terms of colour, rather than on generic or ideological approach, including writers as diverse as John Knox Bokwe, FZS Peregrino, AK Soga, JH Soga, Walter Rubusana, Plaatje, Molema, Magema Fuze, Clements Kadalie, TD Mweli Skota, plus HIE Dhlomo (a playwright and journalist) and Thomas Mofolo (a novelist)! Saunders added Mhudi, to this assortment, but called it a “novel”, rather than the historical epic (and allegory) Plaatje intended. Despite overlapping generic variation, Saunders revealed intense early twentieth-century interest in the writing of history. It is important to see Molema in this context, rather than writing in isolation.

---

78 Thema (1935: 33) learned about “difference” in Pietersburg [now Polokwane], during his clash with a racist station foreman: “[w]hat made him furious was not so much my trespassing on ‘holy ground’ but my ability to speak English and my venturing to argue the point with a White man”. See supra, p.196.
82 Tom Lodge, 1983. Black Politics in South Africa since 1945. (JHB: Ravan), pp.20-21, 80-84, 26-27: from 1944, political “Africanism” emerged in the ANC Youth League (ANCYL) under Anton Muziwakhe Lembede, as an exclusivist nationalism, challenging successive white governments’ segregationist policies and the Congress Alliance’s polite politics. The ANC’s internal struggles in the 1950s, and later conflict with the PAC involved Molema politically, but is outside this thesis’ ambit. Saunders (1988: Chapter 10) is entitled “Early Africanist Work”. Cf. supra, p.19.
Biography and autobiography were key genres among black Africanist writers, but Saunders did not comment on their historical importance. Mweli Skota (1890-1976), ANC Secretary-General and compiler of the *African Yearly Register* [*AYR*] (1930) helped to establish biography as an alternative discourse. Skota recruited early biographers as writers: Plaatje sketched the lives of Chiefs Montshiwa and Moroka and HIE Dhlomo also contributed vigorously. 84 Saunders mentioned Dhlomo’s dramatic biographies, *Moshoeshoe* and *Cetshwayo*, and journalism (he edited Dube’s paper *Ilanga lase Natal*). Yet, Saunders overlooked Couzens’ landmark study of Dhlomo’s strategic use of biographical drama as historical and cultural critique, and an attack on segregation “*Cetshwayo* is to the 1936 Acts of Hertzog what Mhudi was to the 1913 Natives Land Act”. 85 Saunders merely observed that Dhlomo “offered a view of the past very different from that in the textbooks written by whites”. 86

In Smith’s approach, African historical writing made a thin filling between two large chunks of “professional history”: the Settler historians and the liberal-radical debate. Like Saunders, he wrote within history’s “professional” mainstream, purportedly the authoritative interpretation of the past. Smith also labelled almost all African, “Coloured” and Indian writers “amateurs”, a term impugning the authority of their accounts. 87 He termed them “non-academic radicals”, perhaps a more elevated status than Saunders’ “amateurs”. This was confusing, as some writers were academics, but not historians. 88

Smith’s survey of select black “mission-inspired” writers’ narratives of the past was interesting, but cursory. Like Saunders, he overlooked Marks, Willan and Couzens’ nuanced biography as African social history in the 1970s and 1980s. Nor did he mention unpublished historical works, like Molema’s Setswana biography of Plaatje, residing in the archives of UNISA where Smith was History Professor. 89 He considered the kind of history each African had written a direct reflection of their education and function in society — a determinist analysis for a liberal historian:

> [t]hey included among their numbers a medical doctor like SM Molema, who was also an African National Congress (ANC) official; a journalist and secretary of the ANC like ST Plaatjie [sic] “who had never received any secondary training”; a Presbyterian church minister like James Henderson Soga, and a trade unionist like Clements Kadalie, founder of the Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union. These writers were themselves actively involved in black politics — they were office bearers in the ANC, the founders of black trade unions, members of political groups founded to resist the whittling away of the few remaining black rights.


85 Couzens (1985: 126, 161-63): *Moshoeshoe* was first performed in 1939, but probably written in 1937.

86 Saunders (1988: 110): of Thomas Mofolo’s novel *Chaka* (1925), a fictional biography and the first novel published in English by a black writer, Saunders noted cautiously that it tried “to make Shaka a more human person”.


88 Smith (1988: 155, 172) dealt with ER Roux, 1944 & 1948. *Time Longer than Rope.* (London: Gollancz) and Simons & Simons. Sociologist Jack Simons and his trade unionist wife Ray Alexander (1983: 494) referred to a Dr DS Molema, whom the context suggested was Modiri Molema, not his brother Dr Sefetoge Molema. Botanist Eddie Roux was wrote history from a “standpoint of humane indignation”. As Communist Party of South Africa members, their histories (banned in South Africa) upended the dominant racial analysis, by charting the rise of radical working class and intellectual movements.

89 It is not clear whether Smith (1988: 157) found Molema’s article from *Bantu World* in this collection. Cf. infra, p.285.

90 Smith (1988: 132) cited Plaatje’s *Native Life in South Africa*, p.11. While writing *The Bantu*, Molema was not an ANC (SANNC) official but a Glasgow University student. Before, during and after World War II, he held several local offices in Mafikeng. Cf. *supra*, p.13 & fn.71, on his participation in the Defiance Campaign and charges relating to this.
He labelled Molema “derivative”, perhaps an odd charge from an historian constructing an historiographical “tradition”. Like discourse, “tradition”, implies a genealogy of thought, a bequeathing, inheritance and critique of ideas. Strangely, Smith’s “canon” permitted academic writers to absorb the paradigms of their intellectual forebears, but he obliged non-professionals to be entirely original! The phrase, “mission-inspired” remained unexplained. He did not unpack the elements of missionary ideology, the phrase’s religious implications or the contribution of both to the formation of nationalist resistance. Thus, his classification of Molema’s 1940s and 1950s’ activist essays as “mission-inspired” and “radical” requires investigation. “Mission-inspired” was a yoke that did not quite fit Molema and his peers’ diverse cultural and ideological experiences.

Anthropologist of Setswana society, Isaac Schapera, also observed that the most important influences on Molema were missionary. Yet, as the Comaroffs have argued,

[n]otwithstanding the fact that Christianity has allegedly been among the more effective agents of change in Africa...the anthropology of missions...is still in its infancy, and this in spite of some notable efforts to expand its scope.

Missionary influence has had a very broad socialising effect as well as being a major theme in South African history. Perhaps it is an easy classification whose ramifications are underexamined. Analytically, African and missionary cultures have often been placed in binary opposition. Historians and anthropologists have adopted indigenous terms for Africans educated along so-called “western lines”. Some missionaries feared converts’ imminent relapse into “Africanness”, unless constantly primed with evangelical zeal. Educated or “Christianised” Africans were “men of two worlds”, partly formatted “African” and partly “western”—two identities uneasily inhabiting one physical body. The 1980s historiography did not admit much ambiguity: while for Smith, early African writers were “mission-inspired”, for Saunders’, they were “early Africanists”, and both canons were sadly fettered by late-apartheid tendencies to segregate South African history’s different strands. These powerful racial technologies overrode what EH Carr called modern history’s departure from group generalities towards the intricate workings of individuals, their peculiarities and, often, their idiosyncratic allegiances.

“Between the ‘road of freedom’ and the ‘road of repression’” — Molema and “The Champion of the Boers”:

The reassessment of a racially-divided historical canon was, Bundy observed, central. When Macmillan declared, after extensive research in the archive of Dr John Philip’s papers, that his findings established the need “for a radically new interpretation of new and generally undisputed facts”, it was a modernising moment. He denied the facts, framework and colonial fantasies that Settler “fathers” Theal

91 Smith, 1988: 162.
92 Isaac Schapera Interview, 1991.
94 Jordan (1984): “[t]he traditionalists saw the converts as a potential source of subversion, whom they designated ‘amagqoboka’ — the penetrable ones”. Another term for the converts was Amakholwa or believers.
Chapter Five

and Cory had advanced as South African historical “reality”. As De Kiewiet noted, Macmillan exposed the “shaky foundations” of Theal and Cory’s work, “so that I began to see that really there was no South African history. It had to be rewritten, and round a fresh architecture”.

Bundy asserted that “[t]he South African past hinges around the clash between enlightenment and obscurantism, between the ‘road of freedom’ and the ‘road of repression’ that [Macmillan] associated respectively with the Cape Colony and the Boer Republics”. Molema largely supported this view. In Part III of *The Bantu*, he configured “the Present” as a conflict between missionary enlightenment and the government’s conservatism. He hailed the Cape Colony’s racially inclusive “native” policy:

...which was rightly and proudly held out to the world as a model of just and enlightened administration; that policy which had won love and loyalty for Great Britain among the Bantu people, who ever ran to her and craved to be let to “hide and rest in the ample folds of the Union Jack”.

Molema wrote this a decade before Macmillan’s 1929 call for complete revision of South African history. Macmillan did not allude to *The Bantu* in his 1929 study of race relations *Bantu, Boer and Briton*, but it is important to note that both he and Molema were reaching similar conclusions.

Whereas Theal had stressed South Africa’s racial divisions, Macmillan and De Kiewiet had found that: “...an irreversible economic and social integration in South African history cuts across and confutes segregation. Thus ‘the most distinctive feature of the history of whites and blacks is not race or colour, but a close economic association’”. Molema affirmed black and white economic interdependence:

[t]he gold mines of Johannesburg and the diamond mines of Kimberley are worked by, and depend entirely on this lazy Kafir. The labyrinth of railways throughout South Africa is constructed by him. He it is that tunnels mountains, breaks down the rocks to make roads. In the farms he is indispensable. By his help all the cities of South Africa are built. The very breath South Africa draws depends on the lazy Kafir’s limbs....In short, as the South African Native Commission put the matter succinctly, “the native supports the whole economic fabric on his despised and dusky back”.

Molema anticipated aspects of Macmillan and De Kiewiet’s revision. However, lacking their access to new primary material, he was overly reliant on existing secondary sources; two of these were Theal’s *Ethnography* and his *History*. Before proceeding further, let us investigate how “dependent” he was on these two substantial works. Yet, he recognised whose side Theal supported in historical matters.

Molema called Theal “‘the champion of the Boers’” in *The Bantu*’s final chapter; he knew exactly where Theal’s ideological sympathies lay. Yet, he did not interrogate Theal’s every statement; indeed, he used the *History* and his *Ethnography* extensively and re-examined some of Theal’s questions about the past. Theal believed that societies could not record their pasts reliably without systems of writing, whose absence made “tradition” an unreliable authority. Discussing “Great Zimbabwe”, Theal claimed:

---


100 Bundy, 1990: 124.


103 Molema (1920: 254) also showed the pejorative sense in which “Kafir” was then used by citing Pringle’s “The Caffre”. Cf. *infra*, p.291.


It was not until the second decade of the twentieth century that any Bantu asserted that it [Zimbabwe] was handed down to them by tradition that the buildings were erected by their ancestor as places of worship. This shows what extreme care must be taken in dealing with so-called Bantu traditions.

Theal claimed, without citing sources, that these buildings were thought “the work of superhuman beings.” He scorned African people’s sense of history. The History argued that Africans could provide “...very little direct information” on the past. When an African informant could not answer Theal’s questions, he assumed that African “historical events are either entirely forgotten in the course of three or four generations” were inept at “prolonged reflection”, and that Africans were “altogether untrustworthy”. Africans could not conceive of the “past” and “history”, he implied, assuming that white scholars’ superior education and understanding equipped them to infer these “primitive” societies’ history. Not necessarily following Theal, Molema regretted the absence of writing in precolonial societies:

In the absence of any system of writing, that great trophy of intellectual conquest, we find the Bantu a stereotyped people. Their past is dark and their history shrouded in mist, for want of the photographic light of writing, the progress almost nil for want of the kinetic force of advance, betterment and civilisation which writing alone can give.

Reading and writing were, to him, individualising and modernising technologies that freed people from tradition’s “stereotyping” or perpetuating in an unchanged form. Precolonial Africans lacked a catalyst of progressive change, being content with traditional lifestyles. Before writing’s advent, knowledge of one’s forbears was limited to “living memory” — an ephemeral archive — hence Molema’s imagery of “darkness” and “mist”. Through reading and writing, one absorbed information oneself rather than accepting a single authority’s oral pronouncements. A researcher selects what to preserve for posterity, and “stores” it in writing for later use. Thus, both Theal and Molema faulted precolonial societies’ capacity to store historical information faithfully; however, this did not mean that Molema concluded, like Theal, that traditional Africans lacked logical powers. Rather, he followed the missionary belief that literacy was an essential tool, enabling one to interact successfully in Christian communities and the modern world.

Nevertheless, Molema knew, when beginning The Bantu, that Theal’s œuvre was the “standard” South African history. Saunders considered Molema deeply indebted to Theal although he had “in part” used “personal information”. The difficulty of establishing this “personal information” eighty years post facto is immense. By “personal”, Saunders implied material outside Molema’s lengthy bibliography. He hinted that Molema imported knowledge available to him because he was an African, viz. oral history. While Molema may have included certain anecdotal elements in his texts, his already-cited disdain for oral narratives in societies that did not practice writing, contradicts Saunders’ theory.

---

106 Theal (1919: 422) is also the source of the preceding quotation.

107 Theal, 1915: 5, 457-58. Theal’s (1888: 203) informant “…believes firmly in the existence of ancestral spirits, and that sometimes those spirits come in the form of animals to see him. But if anyone who had had long intercourse with the cleverest of them were to ask...Did the spirit of Tshawe exist before Tshawe was born in the world?....No answer would be obtained excepting I do not know he never thinks of such a matter, and to follow a question of this kind to its logical conclusion is foreign to his nature”. Tshawe, Chief Xhosa’s great-grandson, was all Xhosa branches’ common ancestor. On the lack of African historians, see Theal, 1915: 5, 457.


109 Molema, 1920: 162. Walter Ong, 1982. Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word. (London: Methuen), p.41: “[s]ince in a primary oral culture conceptualized knowledge that is not repeated aloud soon vanishes, oral societies must invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages. This need establishes a highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that with good reason inhibits intellectual experimentation”. On Theal’s beliefs about African logic. Stewart (1903: 180) observed: “[f]or missionary education communicated no other power than ability to read the Bible, it would still justify itself”.

110 Molema (1920: 357) cited supra, p.244ff.

Far from disparaging oral narrative because it was Tswana or African, he mistrusted all oral historical forms. He was not alone in believing that human memory, a frail resource, caused creeping inaccuracy in the oral communication of history. Neil Parsons commented on the partiality of Tswana oral accounts of the past, particularly some Tswana communities’ claims to seniority over others. For Molema and Parsons, oral history’s frailty relates to the pull of the performer’s own age on his/her interpretation of the past. If anything, Parsons concluded, an account of the past might be an allegory of present power relations. In the light of this insight, it is perhaps ironic that Molema reacted against the reliability of oral sources: he used aspects of the past as allegories of power and injustice in his written works.

Molema’s renown as a published historian co-existed with his popular reputation. Tswana communities around Mafikeng regarded him as an authority on Tswana history and custom, regardless of whether his sources of knowledge were oral or written, Tswana or colonially-derived. His close friend, Piriepa Thwane explained that because of his great Setswana knowledge, the Doctor was often invited to install new Chiefs, including Lucas Mangope, Hurutshe chief at Motsweding:

...[t]his is because he was very conversant in Setswana customs and traditions and even conversant in the installation of chiefs, the history of the Tswanas, as you know by the books that the has written...[given]...his knowledge of Tswana customs and tradition, during the jubilee, of Chief Lotlamoreng, he was appointed to be the chairman and where he organised the various main Tswanas into mephato [age regiments]...and he’d also instruct them as to what they should do. Even anything that needed to be done in Mafikeng and whatever, it has to go through Modiri, because he had a vast knowledge of what should be done.113

Mr Thwane’s commentary indicated that he felt no qualms about the hybridity of Molema’s sources. Secondly, Molema’s knowledge of the past won him many traditional leaders’ respect.

The Bantu’s opening address indicated that he foresaw a very public role for history in South Africa. His desire to “save” history from being rolled over by the aggressive present was as important a struggle as was that over land. This determined sense of social responsibility as an historian to a specific community made him stand out as an historian. Molema’s oeuvre showed his lifelong concern for African history, save for his unpublished biography of Piet (“Rantho’akgale”) Cronjé, Tsela Ya Damaseko (“The Road to Damascus”), and Yuropa le Jerusalema (“Europe and Jerusalem”).114

The uneasy question of Molema’s reliance on Theal remains. However one views Theal, his prominence may not be ignored. His Settler historian colleague, Cory, asserted in 1926, “no one can write upon the history of this country, without having recourse to the work of the late Dr Theal”. How far he bestrode the known world of South African history becomes clear from a survey of his life and works.

Theal’s career may seem anomalous: without university training, he began as an amateur, but acquired professional status through his archival and synoptic work. Soon after reaching the Eastern Cape from Canada, Theal (1837-1919) joined Lovedale College (1870). There, he published A Compendium of...
South African History and Geography in 1874, coincidentally the year Silas Molema enrolled at Healdtown. Modiri Molema read three of the prolific writer’s works for The Bantu: The Ethnography of South Africa (1919), The Beginning of South African History (1902), and The History of South Africa (1904).117 Theal’s growing phalanx of volumes gave him hegemony in the field through his “pro-colonist representation of the triumph of white power over African people”. Throughout, he “championed” a pro-Boer account of South African history and settlers’ landed interests. He was also decidedly anti-missionary, perhaps in relation to his years at liberal Lovedale, and chiefly anti-Philip.118 Although originally an amateur, Theal launched many of South Africa’s historiographical conventions. Saunders and Smith named him the pioneer of professional history, but also held him responsible for institutionalising racist perceptions of conquered peoples in the discourse of the region’s past.119 Theal became a legend in his own research time. In 1992, Mostert reflected on his historiographical role:

Theal obviously regarded himself as having the final word on African studies of the day, and indeed for the better part of the twentieth century many accepted him at his own estimation. He was a great researcher and produced some fifty works of reference that remain invaluable. “See Theal” is the ubiquitous footnote reference scattered through countless historical works on Africa. His history writing, however, was flawed by raw and vigorously explicit colonial prejudices. As these mostly were perfectly acceptable to the times in which he wrote, they did not affect his influence, which was enormous. A new generation of South African historians began questioning his work in the 1920s and 1930s but for the wider public and the conservative academic world who accepted his eleven-volume History of South Africa not only in South Africa but abroad, Theal offered the definitive view of southern African history and…of the Bantu-speaking peoples.120

Theal provided a scaffolding for successive generations of historians, as stated, to Afrikaners, English, and Africans. Indeed, he created a kind of vernacular for communicating South African history. His ideas so saturated the discourse that many writers reverted to them unconsciously.121

Hardly an originator, Theal made largely unacknowledged “borrowings” from George Stow’s The Native Races of South Africa.122 Stow, a geologist and anthropologist some fifteen years Theal’s senior, contributed significantly to the “legitimising” narrative of South African history, which helped entrench and justify white colonists’ dominant presence through “scientific” knowledge. The manuscript was unfinished at his death, and Theal emended it significantly before publication.123

Liebenberg, (Nd). Reader on Trends in South African Historiography. (Pretoria: UNISA), pp.23, 28: born in New Brunswick, Canada, to staunch imperialist parents, Theal settled at the Cape (1861), and took 3 language-related posts on the Eastern Frontier: as an East London newspaper editor, and as a teacher at Dale College, Kingwilliamstown, and at Lovedale’s Preparatory School. BJ Liebenberg, “George McCall Theal as Geskiedskrywer”. In Liebenberg (Nd: 8): after some diamond digging in Kimberley, he returned to Lovedale, and began a more illustrious career in historical research.117

117 Smith, 1988: 32-33; Saunders, 1988: 231. Saunders dated A Compendium’s publication in 1873. See Appendix C, on Molema’s sources. He did not state which editions of Theal’s works he used.
119 Saunders, 1988: 9: “[i]n the first decades of this century, Theal’s eleven volume History of South Africa and the numerous shorter histories he wrote together constituted the single most influential body of work on the South African past”. Smith, 1988: 31: “[n]o other historian has stamped his authority on the study of South African history to the same extent as...Theal”.
120 Mostert, 1992: 42.
121 In “Theal: Conflicting Opinions of Him” (from Critical Assessments of Dr George McCall Theal, [MA Thesis, UCT, 1962]. In Liebenberg, [Nd]: 18), M Babrow argued that he provided a basic narrative structure by stressing the importance of racial difference: “[m]oreover, even historians who reject Theal’s interpretation and facts, usually continue to work largely within the framework erected by him — his selection and choice of themes and events. We may agree or disagree, but our thoughts tend to centre round his interpretation; his work determines our selection of what is important and relevant”. See Carolyn Hamilton The Mfecane Aftermath. (JHB & PMB: WUP & U. of Natal Press, 1995): 28 years after Babrow [later Lipton] wrote, historians disputed his racial reification of black people at a heated conference on the Mfecane.
122 See Stow, 1905.
Stow’s research significantly altered Theal’s version of the legitimising narrative. Before *Native Races*, the sequence of South Africa’s habitation was conceived as: “Hottentots” (Khoikhoin), “Bushmen” (San). “Bantu” and whites arrived simultaneously in the mid-1600s, meeting at the Fish River a century later. Stow concluded by 1880 that “the Bushmen alone were the true aborigines of the country, and that all the stronger races without exception, were mere intruders”. Before editing Stow’s *Native Races*, Theal had thought Khoi and San habitation simultaneous. In 1905, Theal’s edition of *Native Races* appeared. Thereafter, his expanded 1915 *History* followed Stow’s thesis: San—Khoikhoi—Bantu. Molema’s exposition of the San partially relied on Theal, but strongly depicted what he regarded as the San’s merits. In a series of contrasts between allegedly “more advanced races of Europe” and “backward peoples of Africa”, he questioned the usefulness of such notions.

In Dubow’s view, the intellectual climate of Social Darwinism, and the Eastern Frontier’s smoking Xhosa-Settler conflict infused Theal’s beliefs in “stronger” and “weaker” races; to these, he added Stow’s habitation theories:

[[the use which Theal made of this model of sequential migration imported to Stow’s work a slant to which its original author did not necessarily subscribe: if it was true, as Stow claimed, that the Bushmen possessed the only true claim to South Africa, it surely followed, in light of their subsequent “extinction”, that no other group could claim prior ancestral rights to the land....This is clearly the sub-text of much of Theal’s work. As a proto-colonial nationalist, deeply imbued with the ideas of Social Darwinism, he was strongly concerned to provide historical support for the claims of English- and Dutch-speaking expansionists.]]

Subsequent historians interacted ambiguously with Theal. Molema criticised his “bias”, but paralleled his narrative sequence in *The Bantu*’s Parts I and II. Many others did so too. Only a year after Molema’s study appeared, Eric Walker (History Professor at the University of Cape Town) embarked on a weighty one-volume *History of South Africa* (1928), inspired by a 1911 meeting with Theal, and the “synoptic” view of history. He reproduced the “Bushman-Hottentot-Bantu-white” settlement pattern Theal had delineated. Like Molema, he later distanced himself from Theal’s conservatism.

Macmillan and De Kiewiet offered alternatives to Theal’s legitimising narrative between 1927 and 1941, partly questioning his depiction of racial difference as natural. Against Theal’s separationist view, Macmillan’s *Cape Colour Question* and *Bantu, Boer and Briton* regarded race relationships as interactive. Macmillan began probing people’s shared experiences, rather than their differences:

---

124 Molema (1920: 165) cited Stow (Np).
128 Dubow, 1995: 68-69. Liebenberg ([Nd]: 9-10) believed that the failure to acknowledge sources compromised Theal professionally “The historian must disclose the sources of his narrative — especially if he, like Theal, is largely describing unknown terrain” (trans.). Theal’s justification of his omissions may seem arrogant: “I need not give my authorities for what I have now written concerning these peoples, for I think that I can say with truth, that no one else has ever made such a study on this subject as I have”. (Theal, *The Portuguese in South Africa*. In ID Bosman, *Dr George McCall Theal as die Geskiedskrywer van Suid-Afrika*. [Amsterdam: no publisher, 1932: 65. In Liebenberg, (Nd): 7]).

due stress on the different mentality of the Bantu becomes too often an excuse for shutting the eyes to the unpleasant fact that the Bantu are ordinary human beings, and...are inextricably entangled in and dependent on our economic system....At the present time it is more urgent that we see he is provided with bread, even without butter, than to embark on the long quest to understand the Native Mind.\textsuperscript{131}

In 1941, Theal-style general history tempted De Kiewiet to produce a condensed reinterpretation of the past. He varied Theal’s linear narrative by beginning his account towards the “middle” of the sequential migration narrative. Like Macmillan, he understood racial ideologies as complex and denaturalised Theal’s notions of segregation. De Kiewiet’s “South Africa” was characterised by familiarities, and creolisations. In this he prefigured later theorists and Édouard Glissant, who argued that cultural creolisation — not separation — typified the colonial past.\textsuperscript{132}

The development of white society was profoundly influenced by its relations with slaves, Hottentots, Bushmen and Bantu. The true history of South African colonization describes the growth, not of a settlement of Europeans, but of a totally new and unique society of different races and colours and cultural attainments, fashioned by conflicts of racial heredity and the opposition of unequal social groups.

Theal contributed a “legacy” of South African racial mythology, which contended:\textsuperscript{134}

\begin{itemize}
  \item That African communities were ethnically discrete “tribes” with essentially different characteristics and behaviours, and coveted each other’s land and livelihood.
  \item That the Shakan Empire’s rise and tyrannical control of Natal, was not new; despotism was commonplace in Africa.
  \item That in addition to the tribes’ inherent violence, cannibalism was rooted in “Lesuto” and “Natal”.
  \item That “Savagery” or “barbarism” was the predominant African way of life.
  \item That Africans were incapable of technological advance, for example, a non-African people must have built Great Zimbabwe.
  \item That being irredeemably primitive and childlike, Africans would never attain a European degree of maturity; all African societies were incapable of change.
  \item That African societies' inherent weaknesses were responsible for their collapse in the face of European settlement; one version of his History argued that blacks would die out as white civilisation advanced.
  \item That the black population’s irresspressible fecundity threatened to overwhelm the relatively small white settler community.
  \item That Bantu-speakers entered South Africa only in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, just as Dutch were colonising the Cape Peninsula and thus had no more “right” to the country than white settlers.
  \item That the interior of the country was “uninhabited”, justifying the Voortrekkers’ migration and settlement.
\end{itemize}

Theal represented white and black people’s settlement as a land grab in which each occupied parts of the country on a “first-come-first-settled” basis:

...the Bantu now in and south of Natal are very recent immigrants, their ancestors having come down from the north less than four centuries ago.... It was into this vast stretch of vacant land that white men moved from the

\textsuperscript{133} De Kiewiet, 1941: 19. Robert Shell later (Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838. [JHB: WUP, 1994], p.41). In Nuttall & Michaels (2000: 8-9) raised this idea in re-thinking slavery, which: “brought different people together, not across the sights of a gun, as on the frontier, but in the setting of a home”.
south and black men moved from the north almost if not quite simultaneously. Near its centre they met, and there a struggle began as to which should go further… it was not an attempt of white men to take possession of land owned by black men, it was an effort on both sides to get as much unoccupied land as possible.…  

To him, the country’s interior was *terra nullius* (empty land) making both peoples equal colonists of the land. His depiction of the two “immigrant” people’s meeting on the Fish River was a *deus ex machina* that downplayed white colonisation and supported his metanarrative of racial separation. He helped demonstrate the Frontier Thesis that mid-twentieth-century liberal and Afrikaner historians so favoured.

Contrary to Saunders’ view, Molema tackled several aspects of Theal’s racial mythology and, thus asked earlier than Macmillan, “how and why a racist South African society had come into being.” His use of heterogeneous sources and approaches for this critique showed that he was not Theal’s disciple. He was more inclined to accept on faith missionary views like Stewart’s and Livingstone’s. While gratefully embracing Plaatje’s contributions, he strongly repudiated Augustus Keane’s segregationist excesses. *The Bantu*’s bibliography revealed his diverse thinking; its 115 works were organised in two sections, with direct and indirect reference to Africa. He also cited other writers within the text itself.

So extensively had Theal packed South African history’s discursive space with his works that Molema, unable to do primary research, could not avoid them. *The Bantu*’s first two sections relied heavily on Theal’s precolonial work. Only in the final section did he disclose antipathy for Theal’s anti-black views. Using Theal as a stalking-horse, he declared the “Boers” so racist that even their “champion…and the writer of what is allowed to be the standard historical work on South Africa” doubted the “genuineness of their religion”. “Is allowed” means “is acknowledged”; the passive form cast doubt on Molema’s opinion of Theal’s status. Unreserved approval would have required an active phrase: “all acknowledge” or simply “what is the standard work...”. Theal merely identified the inconsistency that “side by side with expressions of gratitude to the creator are found schemes for robbing and enslaving natives”. Yet, he did not criticise the inhumanity of this treatment, as did lawyer, WP Schreiner, “friend of the natives” and the Cape’s liberal Prime Minister of (1898-1900):

> [t]he Boers not only do not recognise any equality between them and the black people, but they do not believe that black people have any rights, even what are generally spoken of as primary human rights. The Briton believes that the coloured man is a human being and British law treats him as such. The Boer looks upon him, even if Christianised, civilised and educated, as a mere animal and acts accordingly, as often treating him kindly as one does a domestic animal, but as often treating him brutally without compunction, and ridiculing the very idea of his having a claim to the same legal, civil, and political rights as the white man.

Schreiner’s analysis of the Cape’s oldest political organisation, the Afrikaner Bond, presaged many Africans’ anxiety about their vulnerability after 1910. They feared the Boers and believed that the British Empire would treat them more fairly. Boer-British opposition cloaked some strikingly ambitious men’s political aims. The maturing Bond’s political acumen informed their opposition to the pro-imperial Cape English-speaking vote after the Jameson Raid. Rhodes, heading the pro-British tendency, saw advantages in harnessing the Bond, led by JH Hofmeyr, to his aim of uniting southern African into

---


136 Saunders (1988: 70) hailed Macmillan as the first historian to institute this inquiry.

137 “Keane (1833-1912)”, Dubow (1995: 83) noted was, “emeritus professor of Hindustani at University College, London, and a former vice-president of the Royal Anthropological Institute”. He popularised racial typologies according to “appearance, mental traits, temperament etc.”, which manifested “extreme antipathy to blacks”. See Appendix C, *The Bantu*’s bibliography.


Regional dominance based on mining motivated Rhodes and the policies of affiliated mineowners. By contrast, the Bond backed the interests of farming and Afrikaner nationalism. Molema tended to emphasise Rhodes’s views on “equal rights” without understanding him as a politician.

In representing Boer and British attitudes to Africans as diametrically opposed, Molema (like many African nationalists of the day) overlooked the real commonality of interest that existed between them. The conjoined issues of African land and labour were one instance. Rhodes, whose views on “equal rights for all civilised men south of the Zambesi”, Molema found so enlightened, had been the architect of the Glen Grey Act (1894). Starting in the Ciskei, this would serve as “a model for all future schemes of land tenure and management”, and would help to create a legal apparatus for the undermining of African land occupation and the creation of an African wage-labouring class. Moreover, Molema favoured British imperialism, as an alternative to Boer domination, yet did not appear to see the long-term dangers of their economic and social engineering. Lord Milner, High Commissioner for South Africa and later Governor of the Transvaal and Free State Colonies, introduced policies “…determined to transform all black tenants into wage labourers”. Labour was an issue dear to the hearts of Afrikaner farmers and imperially-aligned mineowners. In developing policies to proletarianise Africans, first Rhodes and then Milner had the interests of both in mind, with Africans cast in the servile role. Molema tended to play down the negative aspects of imperialism because he believed that, on the issue of racial equality, the British would treat Africans more fairly than Afrikaners would.

Molema’s preference for Schreiner’s views arose out of this once-conservative politician’s alliance with black Cape voters. In the 1890s, with Cape politics “hung” between the Bond (and allies) and members of the new Progressive Party, all politicians courted African votes — JT Jabavu’s particularly. In the bitterly fought 1898 election, the moderate Schreiner, with “Eastern Frontier-cum-Kimberley...attitude towards Africans”, defeated Sprigg, and came to support African rights to legal and political equality. That year, Schreiner underwent a political volte-face, returning from the Ciskei and Transkei “a convinced and unwavering liberal”. His meetings with Africans from all walks of life taught him that they were “human beings endowed with souls and not so very different from white folk”.

After the South African War, he was a leading negotiator of Union but, dismayed at the Constitution’s colour-bar clauses, led a multiracial deputation to the British parliament in protest. This failed, but Schreiner’s reputation as a liberal supporter of African causes was enhanced. His defence of King Dinuzulu increased his status in the African community. After 1910, he became one of the first Native Senators. Yet, as a liberal, he was in the minority when, Afrikaner and mining capitalist interests ascendant, Botha’s cabinet immediately began defining and limiting African rights.

Molema was, through his father, his Eastern cape missionary education and friendship with Plaatje, heir to this alliance of African elite and some white Cape liberals. This political context informed the understanding of the Afrikaner-English divide that Molema aimed to show British readers: South Africa’s colonial situation was not a case of white hegemony and black subordination. Readers should,
he held, grasp that continuing Afrikaner attempts to build an oligarchic power bloc, would completely dilute Imperial influence. Afrikaners rejected all that the educated African elite epitomised, as Schreiner’s words showed: “civilised” Christian humanism. Plainly, under Afrikaner rule, Africans would be treated as mere labour, not as participant citizens.

In labelling Theal “champion of the Boers”, Molema also identified the “Boer” ethos with an oppressive and, most shockingly, unchristian political and social agenda. He invoked Livingstone, himself a Calvinist, who had believed that Boer Calvinists distorted the doctrine of the Elect outrageously.

Molema underlined his point with angrily ironic censure of the Transvaal Grondwet (Constitution), Article IX, which had “disclaim[ed] an equality between white and black in Church and state”. The Act of Union (1910) confirmed this by preventing the extension of the Cape’s more integrationist laws to the northern provinces, as white liberals and African politicians had hoped. While condemning the Boers politically and morally, but praising the British, he voiced his own views and predicament:

...the British and Boer disputes have in most cases resulted from their divergent views as to the position of the Muntu (pl. Bantu) in the scheme of Creation — the Boers believing him to be of brute creation, and the British recognising him as a man. We have shown how the Boer was incompatible with justice in government and how the British imperial idea prompt[ed] justice and fair play.

Though preferring the British, Molema abhorred their desertion of Africans to Afrikaner rule following 1910. Only through missionary labours would Africans have ongoing access to education. Here, he wholly opposed Theal’s strong anti-missionary line. Theal denounced Ludorf, Montshiwa’s first missionary, for supporting Rolong claims at the Bloemhof Land Court. Missionaries like Ludorf deluded Africans about their true place in the colonial hierarchy, he averred. Theal also attacked Dr Philip’s “theory” that “the coloured races were in all respects except education mentally equal to the European colonists, and...were wrongfully and cruelly oppressed by the white people and the government”. Instead, he backed Dutch Reformed minister, Andrew Murray’s belief in black inferiority. Africans were best used as cheap labourers, argued Theal, rejecting the notion of black-white equality. These deeply prejudicial beliefs feature in his History and Ethnography’s assertions of African violence, ineducability, and childlike behaviour. The implications of Theal’s Social Darwinist thinking are further investigated below. In 1917, when Molema completed the first draft of The Bantu, the 11-volume edition of Theal’s history had just appeared. Theal died in 1919, shortly before The Bantu’s publication. The great reassessment of his oeuvre had not yet commenced, and Molema was hardly

145 Molema (1920: 252) set out post-Union governments’ treatment of Africans in Chapter XX, “South African Government and the Bantu”. He concluded: “[t]hey [government policies] show that the Government of South Africa is more than anything else an oligarchy, with a privileged few and an oppressed many”.

146 Molema (1920: 358) cited Livingstone’s Missionary Travels in South Africa. (London: John Murray, 1857), p. 27: “[t]he Boers are all traditionally religious...they call themselves ‘Christians’, and all the coloured race are ‘black property’ or ‘creatures’. They being the chosen people of God, the heathen are given to them for an inheritance, and they are the rod of divine vengeance on the heathen, as were the Jews of old”.


149 Theal (1915: 5, 505-06): Murray had accused Philip of “making false statements to the commission of inquiry” about black people’s capacities and ill-treatment at the hands of white settlers. Cf. infra, pp.330, for Molema’s view on Murray.

150 Theal, 1915: 5, 457. Babrow in Liebenberg (Nd: 13): the anti-missionary Theal voiced widely-held white-employer view that education raised the labour price by giving Africans skills too sophisticated for the work available to them. Molteno (1989: 55) cited G3-‘92, GM Theal’s evidence. (In Rose & Tunmer, 1975: 215): Theal claimed that high wages had forced him to seek “a Red Kaffir boy” as groom and gardener: “...simply because he demands half the amount that the educated boy does, he does his work as well, if not better, and is more amenable to discipline. To have 20,000 to 30,000 of this class in the Colony would be a serious matter”. Saunders (1988: 27) termed Theal a Social Darwinist. See infra, p.261 fn.194.
alone in relying on Theal’s work. What made his work differ from Preller’s, Olivier’s and many others, was that he began extricating himself from ideological servitude to the “champion of the Boers”.  

Three Allegories and an Historian — Re-reading The Bantu Past and Present:

The Bantu’s framework was overtly chronological, yet often diverted by ethnic themes. Several metahistorical narratives (concerned with the techniques of historical writing) organised it thematically and philosophically. Metaphoric elements suggested, rather than sustained the allegory. Christianity was one structuring principle: the four sections were partitioned into two testaments. Parts I and II (“The Revelation” and “The Past”) formed an “Old Testament” covenant, beginning with the genesis of life in Africa, and advancing through the Bantu’s exodus and north to south migration. They combined chronological history with a thematic ethnographical analysis of expressive forms: culture, language, and religion. The penultimate chapter (XIV) covered European and Arab slave-traders’ violent entry into Africa; white colonisation followed and regional societies collapsed. Molema then broached the epic nineteenth-century warfare, culminating in African submission to Boer and British conquest.

His New Testament (Parts III and IV) hailed the new faith that transcended the subcontinent’s old ways and celebrated the arrival of missionaries, literacies and humanism in Africa. Part III, “The Present” delineated missionary activity in southern Africa positively: the initial arrival of the “Apostles of Africa”, particularly Livingstone, who “delivered” new converts from their previous existence. However, the rise of settler-dominated colonial states seriously disrupted this idyll.

Together with industrialisation and urbanisation, Christianisation, “civilization” and education led to African society’s class-stratification. Many colonists rejected missionary intrusion into their sphere by seeking to “save” Africans for cheap labour. In contrast, missionaries prepared Africans to enter higher levels of the colonial labour market. This triangle of interests began a lasting conflict to control African society. After the South African War, an uneasy Boer and British alliance with metropolitan imperialists collaborated to gain independence from Britain for the existing settler colonies. This post-war confederacy had barred Africans, “Coloureds” and Indians from political participation in their “Union” by 1910.

Molema tactfully protested African loyalty to Empire for British and South African readers in Part III. Chapters XXII-XXIV accentuated African readiness to defend the Empire in international wars: the Rolong, for example, had pledged loyalty in repeated petitions to the crown. Africans chose Britain’s “just” rule over the Botha government’s exploitation. Molema foresaw that many would distrust the new South African state. The new constitution and first three governments (1910, 1912 and 1915) favoured the former Boer Republics’ racial policies, and eroded the Cape’s liberal “native policies”.

---

151 Cf. supra, pp.244ff.
152 Cf. Molema’s exposition of Tswana-Sotho and Nguni history and culture, discussed infra, pp.276ff. Appendix F outlines The Bantu’s structure.
153 Chapters XIX, “Education of the Bantu” and XVIII, “Civilisation of the Bantu”.
154 See Hofmeyr (1987: 96-99) for the introduction of the Afrikaans language and the term Afrikaner. Incidentally, a direct translation of “Afrikaner” into Setswana is leburu (pl. maburu), from “boer”. Both Dr Molema’s daughter, Ms Warada Molema, and Prof Leloba Molema used “boers” in our interviews, when discussing the Afrikaners who harassed Dr Molema.
156 Walker (1928 & 1959: 538, 546, 564): in 1910, Botha’s South African National Party [SAP], a mix of Cape, Transvaal and OFS Afrikaner politicians, took power. In opposition, these provinces’ Progressives formed the Unionist Party. Independent and Labour Party MPs completed the House of Assembly. In 1912, Botha reshuffled the cabinet after Hertzog’s resignation. In the 1915 general election, Hertzog’s Nationalist Party dented Botha’s majority (1910 figures in brackets): SAP: 54 (66); UP: 40 (39); NP 27 (-); Labour 3 (4); Independents 6 (12).
Playing metatext to Molema’s work was the dominant nineteenth-century discourse of racial-thinking and race prejudice. His relationship to that discourse problematised his work for twenty-first-century readers: how could he entertain notions of civilisation while angrily attacking Social Darwinism? Mindful of readers’ sensibilities about Empire during World War I, he adopted what Marks termed “the mask of deference” to British ideals. Nevertheless, from Chapter XVIII, his anger at the Empire’s abandonment of Africans to Botha’s untender mercies caused that mask to slip. He unleashed this righteous anger in Part IV, confronting racism’s ethical ills as well as its daily manifestations.

Molema’s medical training enabled him to address the “scientific” basis of racial thinking. In Chapter XXII, he outlined its principal elements, only to dismiss many of its premises and practices (like craniology, in which Theal so delighted) as “pseudo-scientific muddle”. He based this ethical critique on scientific and religious argument, reconciling the two despite the modernist indifference to religion. Personally, he was too inspired by the century of medical missionaries, many preceding him at Glasgow and Edinburgh Universities, to treat science and religion as mutually-opposed.

Christianity was his moral touchstone for evaluating the Union Government. He skillfully turned the settlers’ own religion against their moral shortcomings. In highlighting African devotion to British notions of equality (Chapters XXIII-XXV), he de-emphasised any SANNC anti-imperial radicalism (Chapter XXIV). He and Plaatje reasoned that loyalty demanded a return from Empire. When this did not materialise, Molema matched Plaatje’s 1914 heights of fury at Colonial Secretary Lewis Harcourt’s palliation of the Union Government. He attacked government policy on three counts:

- The 1913 Natives Land Act and its denial of Africans’ future economic prospects.
- The racial inequalities in the education system.
- The new constitution’s clear preference for “Boer Republican” exclusion of black people from direct parliamentary representation.

\textbf{Table 9: Molema’s Attack on the Union Government’s “Native Policy”}

\begin{itemize}
  \item The 1913 Natives Land Act and its denial of Africans’ future economic prospects.
  \item The racial inequalities in the education system.
  \item The new constitution’s clear preference for “Boer Republican” exclusion of black people from direct parliamentary representation.
\end{itemize}

*The Bantu*’s third metatext was a spectrum of European philosophy from early Renaissance essays on government (like Macchiavelli’s), to European Enlightenment philosophes asserting the freedom and equality of all humankind (Rousseau and Montesquieu). In opposition were those underlining the differences between human beings (Hobbes, Spencer, Nietzsche and Ratzel).

He brought European philosophy and scientific wisdom to bear on southern Africa. Those accusing him of being derivative perhaps neglected his original critique of sources. Other historians cited Herodotus’ *Melpomene* on Africa, but few recruited Machiavelli to appraise British betrayal of loyal black ex-subjects. Again, few rallied Rousseau and Montesquieu to underscore African rights to full education and civil liberty. Molema the scientist enjoyed debates between nineteenth-century Lamarckians and neo-Mendelians, over whether acquired and inborn characteristics could be inherited (Chapter XXVII).

\footnote{Molema, 1920: 146. Cf. Theal, 1919: 10.}

\footnote{Spencer Minchin Interview, 1991: “I’ve been told by nurses who were there that he always said a prayer before operations. He was a very religious man. (Long pause).” See infra, pp.33ff.}

\footnote{Willan (1984: 196-97): “[Native Life] was formulated as a direct and often highly emotional appeal to the British public to right the wrongs being done to the African people of South Africa...”. Lewsen, Dart (1982: 2-3): the Cape’s nonracial franchise was one of two entrenched clauses in the 1910 constitution; and a “condition for the Cape’s entry into Union”.

Molema (1920: 107) cited Ratzel (cf. infra, p.292) to show that African tribal disunity diluted their resistance to colonial rule. Dubow (1995: 76): comparative philologist, Friedrich Ratzel debated the various narrative explications of African origin. He studied “philological and population migration models to explain the historical relationships which supposedly underlaid similar cultural patterns and traits among different peoples — no matter how large the distances separating them”.

Molema (1920: 349, 354) cited Machiavelli on a ruler’s need to keep faith with his people, clearly a lesson for the South African government. Molema cited ancient authorities that Theal also used, but often selected different passages from his. Both referred to Herodotus’ apparent mention of the Bushmen’s ancestors, then in Northern Africa. Theal (1919: 16, 84)
The Bantu’s overarching concerns, Christianity, race, science and culture, were expressed explicitly and allegorically. Molema realised that by the early 1900s, these forms of knowledge were housed in powerful institutions of thought. The new state deployed these institutionalised modes of analysis to buttress relations with settler and subject peoples, building historical discourse into plans for advancing the former and restricting the latter. Government based the 1913 NLA, its first drastic attempt to redivide colonial spoils, on the massed historical, ethnographical, economic and political data the Lagden Commission (1903-1905) had gathered. Just after the South African War, Lagden’s commissioners interviewed Africans around the country about their historical attachment to the land, the effects of migrancy, education, and traditional rulers. Members of the chiefly class and African elite gave evidence; in Mafikeng, Chief Badirile called himself and his people “progressive”. Plaatje, the next interviewee, directly rebutted him! The state crystallised its own account of African history from such evidence, formed from it the NLA and other policies that aroused African communities’ outrage.162

Molema examined the portrayal of Africans’ past circumstances and future prospects in several existing sources. Saunders stated that he relied on Theal “and other Eurocentric sources, and reproduced their myths”, but did not mention Molema’s critique of these sources, or his integration of several disciplines besides history. He referred to Harry Johnston, the two Kidds, and Drummond’s the historical ethnographies of Africa, plus the historian Buckle, who compared the Roman and the British Empires.163 Molema often rose above his sources to declare White and Black history interdependent, shortly before the Liberal critique began. De Kiewiet stated that, in the 1920s, he and others had laboured to “bring the native problem as it was then called, into [a] creditable historical economic and social focus”, that made Africans “the central element in South African society”.164

Like any historian or ethnographer, Molema had “blind spots”, one being missionary intervention in African affairs. His family’s staunch Methodism, and his Wesleyan and Presbyterian education fed his writing and spiritual life. The missionaries’ dual role in his development meant that he often took Livingstone and Stewart’s writings as “gospel”. A disciple of what Tim Jeal called the “Livingstone myth”, he relied also on Stewart’s general history of African missions, Dawn in the Dark Continent. In the Molopo, missionary history was also family history, which he found difficult to separate from secular Rolong history.165 He begged readers’ indulgence when confiding autoethnographical third-person history: “Molema was the grandfather of the author, and perhaps the reader will pardon us if we say one or two words about him....”. He re-told much of the Molema–Montshiwa rivalry (Christian versus “Pagan”) that Chapters One and Two have recounted. While Chief Molema thought Christianity was “ennobling the Barolong”, his brother and rival, Montshiwa, believed it was “‘making old women of them’”. His own knowledge of Rolong history, backed by Mackenzie’s experience taught him, “[a]mong pagans, Christianity almost invariably splits households and families”.166

In the mixed genre autoethnography, he fused personal annals into the usually “objective” narration of public history — albeit an often Tswana-centric account. The book’s hybridity let him move through his own concerns to a communal vision of African polities. The symbolic framework supported a

---

Footnotes:

165 Molema (1920: 27) seemed dubious: “[i]t is also thought they were descendants of the pigmies described by Herodotus”.
166 Molema (1920: 43-44) also summarised Mackenzie (1871: 103): “[i]n Montsioa and Moleme, who are brothers, we had an instance of the separation which the gospel makes in heathen lands: the one believing in Christ, the other cleaving to Paganism.” (The Bantu’s [Struik, 1963] spacing errors have been corrected.) Molema (1951: 90-93) returned to this episode.
historical ethnography pinpointing race, physique, economy, culture and language. Fifty years later, University of Cape Town Social Anthropologist, Professor Monica Wilson (another ex-Lovedalian) also dislodged the unity of these social elements in terms that illuminated Molema’s attempts to do so:

[j]it is of course obvious that economy, language and physical type are not necessarily connected, but we South Africans tend to assume that they are, and we have long used the word, Bushman, to imply three different things, a hunting economy, a category of languages, and a physical type... If we are to understand our history we must separate economy, language, and physical type, and this I shall try to do.

“Obvious” in the first sentence, commented Dubow, “is an immediate signal that what Wilson took to be self-evident in 1970 was still by no means universally accepted or understood”. How much less likely was it, before 1920, that historians and ethnographers would dislocate one element of this eugenicist “package” from the rest? Molema both accepted and critiqued these notions, but habitually linked physique to race (or “blood”) and cultural expression. Paradoxically, The Bantu’s third section challenged writers who held it “natural” that Africans with particular physical characteristics, economic lifestyle, and culture, would fail to “rise” out of the impoverished conditions in which they lived. These views sprang from the evolutionist notion that world populations were ranged hierarchically from “most primitive” to “most developed”. This “scale” measured each “nation’s” level of civilisation or barbarism. Like many contemporary intellectuals, Molema created his own somewhat Thealite mental map of southern African communities according to their “barbarous” and “civilised” tendencies.

Eugenics (the science of good-birth), an ideological permutation derived from Darwinian biology, formed Social Darwinism’s framework. It created semi-scientific metaphors for the transmission of physical and mental characteristics: “laws of natural selection” and “biological inheritance”. Williams called the argument that Social Darwinism influenced the socio-political realm, but not vice versa, a “false application of biology”. Even before the Darwin family’s researches, biology had a “strong social component”: “[w]e have to think of this dialectical movement between the two areas of study as a fact from the beginning”. Williams also thought Darwin relied greatly on Malthusian demography.

In scientific and popular circles, Darwin guided nineteenth-century preoccupations with evolutionary thought, to which his family had contributed for several generations. Though bearing his name, “Social Darwinism” was not of his making but the brainchild of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). He crafted Social Darwinism’s “signature” truism “survival of the fittest” (1864), often wrongly ascribed to Darwin. As society and human physiology’s evolutionary progress were given, en route unfitter races or classes would decline. Spencer insisted that no agency, let alone the state, could retard this “natural” process: “[h]e opposed state aid to the poor on the grounds that this would preserve the weaker, less successful members of the race”. He linked social selection to the utilitarian idea that discarding the weak served mankind’s greater good. The “end” (progress) justified the “means” (selection).

---


168 See Molema (1929: Chapter XIX) for attention to the social issues preventing African advance.


171 Williams, 1980: 87: “...one must make clear that Social Darwinism, the popular application of the biological idea to social thought, comes not so much from Darwin as from the whole tradition of evolutionary theory, which is much older than Charles Darwin, which indeed goes back at least to his grandfather, Erasmus, at the end of the eighteenth century, and which, in the first half of the nineteenth century, is already a well-founded system of thought”.

---
Practically, this utilitarian belief ignored the needs of the weak: “[i]f you really believe...that there is a system of progressive social selection going on, it can seem a wild infamy to interfere with it”.\(^{172}\)

Spencer did not convince Molema, who cautioned readers against believing that acquired characteristics, like morality and other learned behaviours, could be inherited.\(^{173}\) Spencer’s ideas, formulated when “the sciences of heredity and evolution were still in their infancy”, Molema noted, were based on Lamarckian biological inheritance theory:

> [b]iology at present divides characters into two large classes, namely Inborn or Innate and the Acquired or Environmental. The Inborn characters alone can be transmitted from parent to offspring, being carried in the germ-plasm. They are therefore termed gametic and are heritable. But the Acquired characters — they are due to the play of habits, accidents and environment of the individual. They cannot be transmitted by parent to offspring, for when they are acquired, the germ-plasm which is to pass on to the offspring has already been formed.\(^{174}\) [My emphasis]

Using German biologist August Weismann’s notions of the “germ-plasm” (an early conceptions of the gene), Molema differed from Spencer’s conclusion: as socially-acquired qualities were not transmissible, it would definitely be possible for Africans to progress:

> [a] generation, according to this view, may reach the height of moral and intellectual excellence by self-exertion, but it cannot transmit any of this to the next — to its sons. Similarly a barbarian does not, cannot transmit his barbarism to his son. The son’s barbarism is entirely a matter of the atmosphere in which he is immersed, the environment in which he grows up.\(^{175}\)

Thus, Molema invalidated Thealite racial convictions. His explanation of heredity took him out of the eugenicist Victorian age into what cultural historians term (conceding its difficulty) “the modern era”. Kupiec and Sonigo’s later genetic research suggests a greater complexity to Lamarck’s ideas. In summary “…the conditions of life, the environment, model directly and uniformly the bodies of living creatures. These modifications will, thereafter, be transmitted to the offspring owing to the inheritance of acquired characteristics”.\(^{176}\) Molema observed that Lamarck’s theory of environmental transmission “has not only been impugned but definitely disproved”.\(^{177}\)

Darwin’s model of transmission overtook Lamarck’s deterministic model. Following Darwin’s model, there is random selection,

> …a risky phase, which leaves to the free play of chance the variations of living creatures, followed by a phase of sorting, the selection of certain of the variations produces by this (random) chance…. In the Darwinian explication, there is no direction in the change, only an a posteriori stabilisation of certain forms produced by chance.\(^{178}\)

Social Darwinists retained a notion of private property, a “kind of interference with competition”. Social Darwinism accepted the predetermining role of “the family and private property as precisely the
continuation of what you can now see to be strongest and best species”. In other words, they applied a Lamarckian conception of physical inheritance to the social sphere.  

Eugenics, which dominated early twentieth-century policymaking and popular belief, emanated from a desire to create a superior human society. Ideologically indebted to Lamarck, Eugenics owed much to Gobineau’s 1850s prophecy that miscegenation would hasten the human race’s decline. In 1883, Francis Galton, Darwin’s cousin, patented “the science of the ‘well-born’...as a social programme dedicated to the improvement of racial stocks”.  

Molema wrote in a climate in which Eugenics held sway, from the 1890s through World War I “which did a little selection of its own”, Williams quipped. Eugenics favoured breeding the human race from the intellectually- and socially-advantaged. More sinesterly, it favoured limiting the reproductive rights of the “unfit”, as many scholars, statesmen, and even patriotic poets defined the mentally and physically incapacitated, the indigent or militant poor, the lower classes and “weaker” races. Imperialists, fancying the “Anglo-Saxon race” as the acme of human development, joined Spencer’s admirers. They believed humanity had “a duty to...continue to assert itself, not to limit its competition with weaker peoples out of some false ethical consideration for them or...legalistic notion of their rights”.  

In questioning Social Darwinism, Molema alluded to August Weismann’s “continuity of germ-plasm” theory, which disputed Lamarckian notions of inheritance. He denied the environment’s role, insisting that heredity alone transmitted physical characteristics. This heralded a return to Mendelian genetics, which argued, “dominant and recessive genes revealed how specific traits could reappear in successive generations”. When Molema defended African “possibilities” (Part IV), he had analytic tools from science, social science, and what he called “pseudo-science” (craniology). After rejecting the latter, he used “germ-plasm” theory to counter Social Darwinism, which underpinned South Africa’s widespread racial stereotyping. Dubow cautioned that few social scientists entirely deserted theories about colonised peoples’ “adaptation” to civilisation, and continued to see inherent criminality in the “lower races” (thus, the African majority).  

Archæological discoverers of early “man” endorsed whites’ innate intelligence and blacks’ relative ineducability. They helped generate an eschatology of racial characteristics for classificatory purposes, with direct consequences for the social, political and cultural treatment of the “lower” races designated Racial and eugenic thinking seemed to be ineluctable at this time, Dubow found:  

Eugenics’ broad bracket appeared to include Molema initially. He soon ventured into the modernist temptations of anthropological environmentalism. Readers who disparaged African culture and ability

---

179 Williams, 1980: 89. The climate of evolutionary thought did not only inspire eugenicist analogies; Williams (1980:93) cited Marx’s comments to Engels in 1860 after reading Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*: “Darwin’s book is very important and serves me as a basis in natural science for the class struggle in history.


182 Williams, 1980: 92.

183 Williams, 1980: 93. Dubow (1995: 121) detailed the coincidence of Eugenics, the massive urbanisation, industrialisation, and working-class militancy in Europe and, simultaneously, “the rising intensity of imperialist feeling from the 1880s, helping to stoke nationalist fervour and providing a convenient rationale for the colonial subjugation of non-Europeans”.

184 Dubow (1995: 122): German biologist, Weismann’s works were available in English from the 1880s. Molema listed his *Essays on Heredity* in his bibliography, and mentioned his “germ plasm” theory on p.325 without attributing it to him.

were sternly reminded that Africa’s missionisation and “civilization” were recent phenomena, and that Europeans should not forget their own history:

[i]t should always be remembered, in estimating the results of missionary work in Africa, that the work is comparatively recent…it took no less than ten solid centuries to nominally Christianise Europe, minus Russia, Scandinavia, and Spain…an area roughly equal to the Congo Basin alone, with superior advantage of communications and facilities of climate.186

In Part III, *The Bantu* disputed theories that Africans stood inherently low on the evolutionary scale. Given the correct environment (improved education, social conditions, and land access), Africans’ would “progress” (*Molema’s* *summum bonum*) dramatically. Courageous in an age when race preceded all other concerns, he asked readers to evaluate Africa reasonably and fairly. Starting diplomatically, he endorsed opinions he believed would be familiar, before broaching more contentious issues.

**Revelations — Dr Molema’s Unknown Africa:**

Alluding to Africa’s “unknown” status, Molema entitled *The Bantu’s* first section “The Revelation” “…because it is at once introductory, and also deals with facts less commonly known than the little-known facts contained” in the other sections.187 He used “revelation” secularly, as “a striking disclosure of something previously unknown”. Most Molema texts had spiritual overtones; “revelation” also indicated *The Bantu’s* Christian allegory: “the disclosure or communication of knowledge to man by a divine or supernatural agency”.188 Molema drew his study’s parameters to the reader’s attention directly:

[i]t is well here to specify the limits of this work — to say what it is, and especially, what it is not. It is not a history, properly so called. That work must be left to much abler pens. It is purposed in this work to describe, in a simple way, the life, not of all the Bantu race, but only of a section of them. This section of the Bantu shall be that which inhabits the lands over which Great Britain holds sway, in particular, those…in the “Union of South Africa”, and, to a less degree, those that are in the British Protectorates and Crown Colonies.189

Chapter I established the book’s structure, identifying racial classification as part of the colonial project. The introduction emulated African-American sociologist, Du Bois, one of Molema’s non-Eurocentric sources, who had introduced himself and his own autoethnography, *The Soul of Black Folk*:

[herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.

“The problem of the color-line” pervaded *The Bantu*. Du Bois’ textual presence was, like Molema’s, liminal (part insider, part outsider) to Black Nationalist history. *The Soul* lifted a “Veil” on the black world for white readers.190 Race, for Molema was both natural and ideological. A “race” was a “limited group of persons descended from a common ancestor” or “a tribe, nation or people regarded as of common stock”. The common ancestor was often inferred, in the absence of evidence. Later, he added physical and cultural aspects to this primary ancestral definition.191

---

186 Molema, 1920: 223.
189 Molema, 1920: 1. Dubow (1995: 5): “…race, considered as a social and intellectual construct, has had a real and enduring existence for much of [the twentieth] century”.
190 Du Bois (1905: vii-viii) including the above quotation.
Molema’s definitions formed part of the racial narrative (or discursive trope) Dubow distinguished. A century ago, the evolutionary outlook on the indigenous races was so grim that many Social Darwinists predicted their imminent demise. From the 1850s, Bleek’s term “Bantu” separated them from the two allegedly more “primitive” races, “Bushmen” and “Hottentots”: “...whereas the racial origins of the Bushmen and Hottentots were primarily addressed by physical anthropologists interested in questions of human ancestry and evolution, the issue of Bantu origins was more centrally the domain of linguists and ethnologists”. The racial narrative essentialised differences between people. Theal and ethnographer Maurice Evans, whose comparatively liberal approach Molema apparently trusted more, emphasised physical disparities among Khoisan, Bantu, and white settlers, and within Bantu groups.

In the “knowledge-vacuum” Molema had identified, historians of Africa commonly used argument by analogy to explicate the “dark” continent. Using a stereotyped physical anthropology, Theal expanded Bleek’s linguistic definition of race features. He dwelt microscopically on the physique of San, Khoi, and Bantu. Invoking the analogy of Ancient Britain’s successive invasions, he asserted that “Hottentots” and “Bushmen” might belong to the same “family”, but were “as distantly related as Celts to Teutons”. Later historians and anthropologists challenged Theal’s theory of distant relation, stating that this determination to see difference has obscured the existence of a conjoint Khoisan community practising cycles of seasonal transhumance. Theal probably mistook lifestyle difference for racial distinction.

Theal helped cement notions of racial hierarchy: cattle-rearing Khoi had a higher civilisation than animal-hunting San. Physically, small stature indicated the San’s lower evolution, while the Bantu’s superior physical size meant that their development almost matched Europeans’. Khoisan ugliness, nomadism, “clicked” languages, “levity”, minimal weapons, and few domestic animals also signified primitiveness. Perhaps paradoxically, Theal assumed that darker pigment meant greater development. What marked Theal’s analysis “Social Darwinist” was the assumption that superior white civilisation had naturally ruled “unfit” San hunter-gatherers, Khoi pastoralists and Bantu agro-pastoralists.

In 1930, two contrary analyses of the Khoisan illustrated the diversity of debate in South African academe. UCT Anatomy Professor, Matthew Drennan called the San the “‘lowest of the human races’”, and not man’s “‘direct ancestors’”. He and others of this view “echo[d] the widespread belief that the aboriginal races of the world were heading for extinction”. That year, Schapera’s research into international and South African obsessions with racial difference in the physical and human sciences found that the Khoi and San’s shared characteristics outnumbered the differences between them.

Theal’s was not the only linear narrative to naturalise white colonisation; Molema cited many contributors to it. Keane asserted that “miscegenation” (intermarriage between members of different races) might enable a primitive race (like “the true Negro”) to rise to the “somewhat higher stage of culture represented by the Mohammedan Arabs of North Africa”. “True Negroes” differed racially from...
the Bantu, “in which the Negro element is least pronounced”. “Judicious European control” could raise the “higher Bantu groups [to] a relatively high degree of social culture” without miscegenation! Molema included Keane’s example of the Xhosa to reveal its bombastic racism:

“[m]entally the Kafirs [meaning Xhosa] are greatly superior to the Negroes, displaying considerable tact and intelligence in all their political and social relations. They are remarkably brave, loyal to their chiefs, warlike and hospitable, but certainly deceitful and treacherous — duplicity, cunning, and falsehood being…regarded as accomplishments, and instilled into their minds from early youth as part of their military education”.197

As Dubow showed, these arbitrary racial definitions depended on idiosyncratic beliefs. Molema rejected Keane’s ideas as “unexplained dogmatisms….entirely based on local impression and subjective feelings, and coloured by emotional attitude, personal bias, and hasty conclusion”.198

To Bryce, another Social Darwinist, the linear narrative of physical, linguistic and cultural differences between Africans and whites was also natural rather than ideological.199 He explained white colonists’ extreme dislike of blacks, by arguing that the disparities between “modern Europeans and Kafirs” [sic] exceeded those between “civilised” [sic] peoples like “Spaniards and Frenchmen”.200

The Social Darwinist chorus included Benjamin Weale’s argument that the “Negro” had always been a “perfect example of arrested development”. Even after three thousands years of “‘contact with other peoples, he has never learnt much’”, black people allegedly remained uneducable. “The Negro” had never aspired to nationhood, and possessed a “‘tragic and featureless history’”.201 Here, Molema both reflected and criticised contemporary thinking: he agreed with Weale that Africans had not achieved much, but believed that it was “premature” to say that if given the opportunity, they could not achieve! Molema argued along historical lines that slavery, above all, had degraded Africans’ environmental, moral and spiritual resources, leading to their political subjugation:

[slavery has done more than any other force to make Africa an outcast — a land, to all intents and purposes, of the dead. And the life of its sons must be reckoned from the disappearance of that force — from the Abolition of Slavery, the Emancipation of the Negroes — from yesterday, in the historical sense....The balance has been lost, and must take time to be recovered. The degradation and oppression of centuries — these have left effects which cannot be eradicated by a few years of freedom — yet not freedom either, for the economic emancipation of the Negro and Bantu is yet to be.202

He found it illogical that, after slavery’s abolition, fundamentalist racial theories enthralled so many of the Empire’s powerful government and university minds, and upheld the “dominant” white race’s survival. His usual support of Empire wavered; Britain had yet to help its subject peoples overcome all forms of subjection. Though egalitarian in principle, imperialists blamed nature for differences between its constituent peoples. Biology, stated Hobsbawm, “was essential to a theoretically egalitarian bourgeois ideology, since it passed the blame for visible human ‘inequalities’ from society to nature”.203

202 Molema, 1920: 331. His admiration for the Anti-Slavery movement’s stalwarts is discussed, infra, pp.326, 329, 344.
203 Hobsbawm (1987: 252) discussed scientific racism and positivism’s impact on patterns of thought in the Empire.
From the late-1890s, Britain’s South African representatives engineered the “development of a capitalist state, which would be more fully capable of fulfilling the demands of the mining industry” in the country. From 1902 to 1910, eugenic plans to restructure race and class relations were endorsed.\textsuperscript{204} Charged with unifying the country Lord Milner and successors, Lord Selborne and later Afrikaner cabinets’ far-reaching projects affected all Africans (the Molemas included). Their task was to institutionalise racial inequality and white ruling-class supremacy, and develop the mining economy.\textsuperscript{205}

The Bantu’s final section appeared in the wake of Union and its ambiguities reflect Molema’s closeness to events. While segregationist laws disillusioned him about the South African Party’s good faith, he wished, perhaps naively, to give Milner’s notion of equitable segregation a chance.\textsuperscript{206} Yet, he remained deeply suspicious of the Botha government’s probity; with Britain no longer directly responsible for ruling South Africa, the Boer “Republican” ethos would soon undo any idea of racial equality.

Notions of racial difference peaked when the Union Constitution and segregationist legislation entrenched racial inequality from 1910 onward. Milner’s vision of Union depended on the Boer and British rapprochement. His commanding vision saw racial and class segregation eventually coinciding. Economically, he foresaw a skilled white middle-class while living on the benefits of black labour. Politically, white supremacy emerged after his postwar reconstruction of the Boer Republics. Then, in 1910, three of the four provinces excluded Africans, “Coloureds” and Indians from the franchise.

Milner’s Social Imperialism found segregation a useful “instrument” for modernising South Africa: an efficient “road” to capitalisation and industrialisation. His flexible version of segregation allowed “all civilised men” to participate in the new ruling order, including educated and enfranchised black and coloured persons. Molema, \textit{inter alia}, viewed Milner’s views as modernist, tolerated their segregationism, and dubbed him “one of the ablest administrators ever sent out to South Africa”. Yet, he accepted that Milner’s imperialism gave “subject races” a back-seat in the Empire theatre:

“...[i]t would be a mistake to undervalue the attachment to the Empire which undoubtedly exists even among the subject races of India and Africa, however crude and childlike may be, must be in the majority of the people, their conception of what the Empire is. I have certainly had occasion myself to realise the strength of that sentiment in some of the African tribes”.\textsuperscript{207}

Milner mistakenly misjudged the age of the “subject races”. For years after Milner had left South Africa, Molema supported and trusted the Empire as the only alternative Africans had to the Botha government’s exclusionist racism. He was not merely trying to win readers’ trust. The Empire would protect the privileges that he, an enfranchised Cape citizen, still enjoyed, post-Union.

This ingenuous support of Milner and of Smuts’s 1917 Savoy Speech on “Equitable Separation” of the races revealed Molema’s difficulty in writing far from home. He was perhaps unaware of the SANNC’s frustration over this attempt to deflect Africans from demanding direct parliamentary representation.\textsuperscript{208} He was also uninformed of (or chose to omit) the radicalisation of black workers, and one section of the political leadership. From 1917, SANNC leaders were losing hope of realising their founding objectives in Bloemfontein, 1912: to be a representative parliament for black people.\textsuperscript{209}

\textsuperscript{204} Marks & Trapido, 1981: 54.
\textsuperscript{205} Marks & Trapido, 1981: 67-68.
\textsuperscript{206} Molema, 1920: 366.
\textsuperscript{207} Molema (1920: 365-66) omitted the source of Milner’s speech.
\textsuperscript{208} Walsh, 1970 & 1987: 60.
\textsuperscript{209} See Baruch Hirson, “The IWA and the ICU: 1917-20”. In Baruch Hirson, 2005, \textit{A History of the Left: Writings of Baruch Hirson}. (London: IB Tauris), pp.9-10: the SANNC attended an International Socialist League meeting “to protest against the Native Affairs Administration Bill — a draconian measure allowing the governor-general to make any law, by proclamation, for the ‘peace, order and good government of the Reserves’”. Smuts had defended this Bill in his Savoy Speech. See \textit{infra}, p.312.
Places of Memory; Narratives of Redemption:

In 1918, Molema assessed Milner’s views without the benefit of his private correspondence (published in 1931). Therein, Milner communicated the imperial project’s unsavourily exploitative side: intended Africans to becoming the new underclass to enrich the mining and agricultural sectors. With most mining companies still under British control, and the world still on the gold standard, the entire Empire [Commonwealth, by 1931] would profit from African labour.

Molema’s ambiguous beliefs about Empire (loyalty to its notional racial equality, yet criticism of its abandoning black South Africans) had several sources. Milner and Smuts’s “promises” briefly muted his anger at Britain’s retreat. Besides, Du Bois, an Africanist source, hinted that black potential was yet unrealised. Molema quoted his expressions of inspirational nationalism — and “veiled” doubt:

“[t]he silently growing assumption of the age is that the probation of races is past, and that the backward races of to-day are of proven inefficiency and are not worth saving. Such an assumption is the arrogance of peoples irreverent towards time, and ignorant of the deeds of men.

A thousand years ago such an assumption, easily possible, would have made it difficult for the Teuton to prove his right to life. Two [thousand] years ago such a dogmatism, readily welcome, would have scouted the idea of blonde races ever leading civilisation. So woefully unorganised is sociological knowledge that the meaning of progress and the meaning of “swift” and “slow” in human doings, and the limits of human perfectibility are veiled, unanswerable sphinxes on the shore of science.”

Within the racial paradigms they adopted, both Du Bois and Molema clearly believed that people of African descent could achieve great things, but did not know how long this would take.

Du Bois’s sociological task was lifting the veil on the humanity of the black “Other”, whom white readers feared. He and Plaatje taught Molema to use “salvage” narratives instructively, even as an allegory through which to analyse the present. In first two sections of The Bantu, Molema demonstrated by example the salvaging of the past; in Part III, he analysed this practice.

Patently, these three writers believed that they and their communities’ rural and traditional lifestyles were under catastrophic threat. In Parts II and III, Molema represented the way these lifestyles, arguably unchanged over generations, now quaked and shattered under modern transformation: urbanisation, migrancy, low wages, and the NAD’s ultimate control of chiefly authority. As a confirmed modernist, his desire to “salvage” or “redeem” the past was perhaps contradictory. Yet, perhaps not: he encouraged fellow Africans to “collect and record the history of their people” with a view to giving modernisation an African character. Yet, his intensely ambivalent feelings towards tradition deserve exploration.
For Molema and Plaatje, fears of cultural loss related to colonial violations of Africans’ sense of place. In post-slavery America, Du Bois found that industrialisation and agrarian change fuelled African-American migration from countryside to city. In new urban milieux, “traditional” cultural practices transformed under pressure of colonial artifacts and market culture. Pierre Nora situated this anxiety about popular memory within the transition from one economic mode to another:

The country’s incorporation into new global configurations accelerated the “collapse of memory”:

Memory, Nora stated, is the technology preliterate, peasant societies use to organise a collective sense of their shared past. Written, documented history is a professional technology that individuals (often outside ethnic communities) use to represent the past: it is a “reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete” and is a “critical discourse…antithetical to spontaneous memory”. Both Molema and Plaatje wrote amid these kinds of changes, and tried to focus public attention on the ways in which oblivion or written history were overtaking Africa’s residual recording technology, memory. Molema resented the colonial tendency to distort African history and culture. While Plaatje’s *Sechuana Proverbs* took memory, a vanishing technology, as their source, *The Bantu* drew mostly on repositories history has established, “lieux de mémoire” [places of memory].

One such “lieu”, libraries and their published tomes were *The Bantu*’s main source, leavened by excerpts from primary documents. In tackling the biases of historical and ethnographical writing, Molema manifested “an historiographical consciousness”, interpreting the histories he read. In Nora’s view, what distinguishes memory from history is “the emergence of a history of history”.

Marcus argued that “[e]thnographies have always been written in the context of historic change: the formation of state systems and the evolution of a world political economy”. Although Molema did not always practise ethnography as the participant observer of a “strange” community, he read widely in South African anthropology and adopted several ethnographic techniques to record information. In Part II, he varied tone and structure to move between historical and ethnographic narratives.

Molema’s ethnographic “salvage” anticipated Marcus and others’ term. Intellectuals preserving the past during disruptive changes usually choose between two modes of narration, “salvage” and “redemptive”:

---

216 Du Bois also sought to strengthen and celebrate fragile aspects of African American and West Indian culture. The term “colonial” belongs in the American setting, as slavery and the post-bellum treatment of African Americans has been a form of internal colonialism.


219 Nora (1989: 12): “libraries, dictionaries, and museums as well as to commemorations, celebrations, the Pantheon, and the Arc de Triomphe; to the *Dictionnaire Larousse* as well as to the Wall of the Fédérés, where the last defenders for the Paris commune were massacred in 1870”.

220 Molema (1920: 368-88): “Select Constitutional Documents bearing on Part II — The Past, and Part III — The Present”. *Infra*, Appendix C, lists the documents. Only for his later works did he have more access to primary material.


223 Molema, 1920: In Part II, Chapters V-VIII and XIV were mainly historical, while Chapters IX-XIII were ethnographical.
In the salvage mode, the ethnographer portrays himself as “before the deluge”, so to speak. Signs of fundamental change are apparent, but the ethnographer is able to salvage a cultural state on the verge of transformation... In the redemptive mode, the ethnographer demonstrates the survival of distinctive and authentic cultural systems despite undeniable changes. The redemption of cultural authenticity is often undertaken and measured against some imputed pre-modern or pre-capitalist state — the “golden age” motif or else a spatial, rather than temporal, preserve is found for cultural authenticity amidst transformation — the anthropologist’s odyssey up-river to the back country to situate fieldwork where “they still do it”.224

Molema’s project often went beyond “salvage” into “redemption”, as The Bantu’s contrasts between present and past reveal. This original purpose made his project original in South African ethnography. The first half mainly used “salvage mode” to narrate precolonial history. There, and particularly in Part III, “The Present”, he created a profound sense of the narrator’s religious distance from the past. In admitting scholastic and missionary voices, he partly acknowledged their authority on the subject, and partly showed The Bantu’s allegorical design.225 Like his mentor, Plaatje, he strove to write the past into memory. Contra Marcus, who criticised many “salvage” ethnographers’ ahistorical consciousness, Molema recognised the historical gap between the modern and pre-capitalist periods in the book’s overall design and in the narration. Through constant reference to his source material, and by applying Christian moral judgements to pre-Christian conditions, he also kept an interpretative distance from the past. He moved from salvage to redemptive mode by illustrating the continuity between pre-capitalist and capitalist modes.

He evoked the past for three purposes: firstly, to establish a coherent historical narrative of previously uncharted African times. In that, he joined Plaatje and Du Bois as the past’s “preservers”. Secondly, antiquity served an allegorical purpose: to illustrate the uses and abuses of power, a vital theme. Thirdly, the nineteenth-century past’s purpose was allegorical and proselytising. In Parts III and IV, he emphasised the syncretic processes overtaking precolonial lifestyles after their absorption into colonial culture: christianisation, urbanisation and industrialisation. Administrative transformation also undermined African chiefs’ independence, and subjugated them to the colonial order. In the period since 1994, Molema’s opinions of precolonial Africa seem controversial; to him, society without Christian enlightenment was barbaric; Christianity and education were Africa’s redeemers in the present.

His underlying “two-testament” structure guides readers through Molema’s allegory of spiritual evolution. His “Old Testament” began at the “dawn” of human existence in Africa, with “The Antiquity of Man in Africa” and ranged scientifically over mankind’s possible origins. The devout Molema saw no contradiction in relying on then-recent science: anthropologists agreed that man had “ape-like ancestors, like the old-world Simian species of monkeys, technically known as the Catarrhini”. Writing before Dart’s palæontological discoveries, Molema echoed doubt over where, when and from whom humans evolved.226 As loci of human evolution, he tentatively mentioned “the torrid zone of the old world: Asia or, more likely, Africa, still inhabited by the gorilla and the chimpanzee, the nearest living relations of man” in the “Middle Tertiary (Cainozoic) period”.227 Once Dart and heirs’ research findings appeared, he revised his 1917 notions:


226 Molema (1920: 3, 4-6): “it is also possible that Europe might have formed an area of evolution of man...”; “it is thought by many authorities that the Negro or his forebears emigrated from [Asia] through Syria, Persia, and Arabia into Africa about 50,000 years ago...”.

227 Molema (1920: 3) offered several tempting theories of human origin, including Asian evolution. Yet, he sided with those beginning to argue for the origins of human life in Africa. Larousse (2002: 472): the Cainozoic or Cenozoic commenced ±65 million years ago, containing the tertiary (neogenetic and paleogenetic systems) and quaternary periods. The latter is sometimes considered a separate era, in which alpine flexure and mammalian diversification occurred.
Africa is at once the oldest and the youngest of the five large divisions of the earth known as continents....The late Dr Broom who died recently...tells us that man was probably evolved right here in South Africa; that Africa is the mother of mankind.228

Molema explored this conjectural knowledge but concluded that the “prehistoric” period was hardly as significant as Africa since 1600. In a mythographic tone, he hinted at the many unproved academic assertions about Bantu origins:

[a]midst inferences, surmises, speculations, and conclusions, one fact stands out in bold relief, ...evolved there or not, the Negro ultimately made Africa his home. And there is evidence to show that he populated it almost in all its parts for a long time, but was later (6000 to 8000 years ago), conquered and replaced or absorbed by the Caucasian in some parts, notably along the Mediterranean seaboard....How the section of the Negroes south of the equator and known as the Bantu actually arose will always be a difficult question to answer....They are said to have sprung from the mingling of Negro blood with that of the Hamites of North Africa and also the Semites of North and East Africa. In short the Bantu are a hybrid race — Negroes modified by considerable infusions of Caucasian blood.229

By 1917, racial typology had proliferated since Swedish naturalist, Linnaeus’ spare, continental subdivisions of mankind: European, Asiatic, African and American.230 Molema apparently partly used, the framework of Blumenbach (1752-1840), an influential physical anthropologist, who proposed five principal racial divisions based on physical attributes and geographical location: Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, Malayian and American. By the mid-nineteenth century, Thomas Huxley and followers had augmented these racial sub-types. In 1862, he summarised the craniological methodology adducing cultural behaviour from the size and shape of each race’s skull.231 Molema read three of Huxley’s works for The Bantu.232 A memorable Huxley pronouncement struck him forcibly:

[j]t may be quite true that some Negroes are better than some white men, but no rational man cognisant of the facts believes that the average Negro is the equal, still less the superior, of the average white man. And if this be true, it is simply incredible that when all his disabilities are removed and our prognathous relative has a fair field and no favour, as well as no oppressor, he will be able to compete successfully with his bigger brained and smaller-jawed rival in a contest which is to be carried on by thoughts, not chews.233

Disregarding Huxley’s eminence, Molema rejected craniometry as “pseudo-scientific muddle”.234 Resisting the reductionism of both Huxley and Theal, Molema rebutted the popular notion that

---

228 UNISA ANC Papers, AD2186/N, Fb23, [Nd], SM Molema, “Africa and the Peace of the World”, p.1. Dr Francis Thackeray, “‘Mrs Ples’ and our distant relatives”. In Science in Africa (Online), Nov 2002, 22, www.scienceinafrica.co.za/2001/may/ples.htm: in 1947, Scottish medical doctor turned paleontologist, Robert Broom, of the Transvaal Museum, Sterkfontein Caves, found parts of an upright hominid skeleton he named Plesianthropus (“almost human”). “Mrs Ples”, over 2 million years old, has been shown to belong, to the genus Australopithecus africanus.

229 Molema, 1920: 5.


233 Molema (1920: 327) did not disclose which of the above three works contained these words. Huxley’s measurements relied on the “Gnathic Index, which records the degree of projection of the maxilla or cheek bone and upper jaw”. Prognathous “races” included the Negroes, Tasmanians and Australians, while the Chinese, Japanese and Bantu were Mesognathous (less jaw projection), and the Europeans and Bushmen were Orthognathous (yet less marked).

234 Molema, 1920: 328. Theal (1886: 195) wrote that the skull of a black man (as opposed to a Hottentot) “…is shaped like that of a European, but the bone is thicker. His intellectual abilities are considerable, his reasoning powers when defending himself in a controversy being equal to that of an ordinary white man”. Blacks “stood” between Khoi and whites on Theal’s evolutionary scale. Cf. comparative diagram of South African races, after p.267. Dubow (1995: 70) dealt with the source of the given diagram, Theal’s first separate volume of Ethnography (1919), The Yellow and Dark-Skinned People of South Africa South of the Zambezi. (London, 1910: 31-32).
thickness of bone and facial structure could denote a person’s intelligence and ability. Seme, an African intellectual, whom he admired, had similarly denounced craniometry as racism.\footnote{In Pixley Seme’s successful first case (TsalaBC, 18 Feb 1911, cited in Walshe, 1987: 33), he attacked “…the so-called scientists who have it that the black man’s skull has got something which arrests the native’s development at a certain stage”. Cf. Molema’s meeting with Seme (Kimberley 1914). See supra, pp.213-14. As recently as 1974, noted physical anthropologist Philip Tobias incorporated craniology into a study of “The Biology of the Southern African Negro”. In Hammond-Tooke, 1974: especially 5-30.}

Some of his sources expressed great certainty about racial origins, and about African inferiority. He familiarised readers with current debates on race, mentioning one certainty: the Bantu’s racially-hybrid origins and the difficulty of proving all racial heritage:

...the difficulty is the complete and abrupt separation of the Bantus from Negroes in language, and also the striking homogeneity of all the Bantu languages as opposed to the astounding diversity of the Negro languages.

Linguistic diversity fascinated him: while Northwest African Negroes were of similar appearance, their “languages [were] as different as English is from German”.\footnote{Molema, 1920: 5. This is also the source of the preceding quotation.} English, though a Germanic language, differs markedly from German through its admixture of Romantic and Celtic languages. Many scholars puzzled over subequatorial Africans physically differences, but “remarkable uniformity” of language.

Summarising the little-known, “hybrid” Bantu’s migration south, he dated their arrival in Central Africa some “30,000 years ago”, and their intermingling with Hamites from 20,000 to as late as 3,000 ago. “Hamitic blood”, declared Keane, whose \emph{Africa and Ethnology} Molema read, was “the crucial determining racial influence on the Bantu…which most decisively differentiated them from ‘Negroes’”. Keane overtly reviled black people, but he “softened” on the southern Bantu for being “...far more intelligent than the true Negro, equally cruel, but less fitful and more trustworthy”.\footnote{Molema (1920: 10) cited JT Bent, 1892 \& 1896. The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland. (London), p.76. See also Dubow, 1995: 87. Theal (1919: 419) mentioned Bent’s work. Cf. infra, p.311 fn.119.}

Several late-Victorian Social Darwinist anthropologists upheld the Hamitic bloodline’s mythic power to redeem Africans from “darkness”. Believing Hamites Caucasoid, Keane raised them above Africans on the evolutionary scale. Archæologist Bent believed that “people from Southern Arabia” built Great Zimbabwe, a theory Molema took “\textit{cum grano salis}” — the medical prescription it deserved.\footnote{Molema (1920: 10) cited JT Bent, 1892 & 1896. The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland. (London), p.76. See also Dubow, 1995: 87. Theal (1919: 419) mentioned Bent’s work. Cf. infra, p.311 fn.119.}

Bent thought it “incredible that such a style of architecture…and such a civilisation as it signifies, could have originated and developed in South Africa...”. Molema defended African architecture, but credited Bent’s devotion “to the study of the ruins, [he] felt persuaded that Zimbabwe was built by people from Southern Arabia”. The italics indicated polite criticism; he did not wish to seem a disrespectful, African hothead. He tactfully added that Bent’s “conclusions have been impugned of late” to engage readers in reconsidering received opinions of Africans.\footnote{Molema (1920: 10) cited Bent, 1892 \& 1896. Molema, 1920: 10, 147. Saunders (1988: 108) mistakenly criticised Molema for disbelieving the Shona origins of Great Zimbabwe.} In Molema’s view, the Bantu’s much-conjectured migration began shortly after their separation from the Negroes, and advanced at varying paces:

[from this equatorial region the huge, seething mass of humanity began a southward migration on a broad front but separate lines — now rushing forward with impetuosity, now advancing more slowly, and now halting but never receding. The advance was necessarily slow, and it was probably only a few decades before Christ that the Zambesi was crossed, and about the fifteenth or sixteenth century the Limpopo was reached.\footnote{Molema, 1920: 6.}]

\footnote{Cf. Molema’s meeting with Seme (Kimberley 1914). See supra, pp.213-14. As recently as 1974, noted physical anthropologist Philip Tobias incorporated craniology into a study of “The Biology of the Southern African Negro”. In Hammond-Tooke, 1974: especially 5-30.}
He depicted an epic movement, if fictionalised, in the manner of Jehovah’s seven-day creation.241 One thing Molema knew was the journey’s direction. He also used Theal’s argument that migrants came south in three separate groups, similar to the linguistic divisions among modern South Africans.242 This linked his periodisation to Theal’s dangerous calculation (playing into white settlers and later segregationists’ hands) that Africans only reached the Eastern Cape in the 1500s, leaving the country’s centre largely vacant. Molema lacked evidence to the contrary. His critics seemingly expected him to anticipate discoveries of Stone Age hominids and Iron Age settlements south of the Limpopo after 1925.243

Chapter II presented The Bantu in microcosm. Molema compensated for great lacunae in evidence by threading the allegorical “unveiling” motif of “dark and light through the text. “Africa is a ‘dark continent’ in a threefold sense”, he introduced “Prehistoric Africa”, an unknown land in a time before written records. The light-dark binary connoted knowledge and ignorance, plus “enlightened” and “uncouth”, and linked thereto an alternative leitmotif, “civilised” and “barbaric”.

[Africa] was practically unknown to, and wholly untouched by, the civilisations of Persia, India, Arabia, Greece, and Rome. Up till modern times, Africa was “known only in its skirts”.244

“Skirts” were the coastal regions. Its inland plains or forests were inaccessible, making it, with the population’s hue(s) the “dark” continent. Yet, their darkness was also spiritual, “perhaps most important of all, these dark-skinned Africans had no light: they were in darkness — the gross darkness of ignorance”. He made this succinct statement of belief in the virtue of modern, western education, declaring Africa and Africans not just unknown, but also unknowing.245

Writing before carbon-dating, and before humanity’s australopithecine ancestors’ discovery, Molema surveyed ancient Africa’s “skirts” through Homer, Herodotus, Ovid, Pliny the Elder, Marinus of Tyre, and Ptolemy’s annals.246 “Rays” shed by Egyptian and Carthaginian civilisations extended his light/dark imagery, whereas the continent’s vast hinterland elicited the term “benighted”. Egyptian history interested him dually: in its racial demographics and in its inhabitants’ incursions south to Somaliland (±1500 BC). From 900 BC, Egyptians were “chiefly Hamitic people, with strains of Negro blood...the progenitors of Nubians”. Herodotus’ Histories described Pharaoh Necho [Nikku] II, who engaged Phoenician sailors to sail round Africa via the Red Sea and the “Pillars of Hercules” (Straits of Gibraltar) and supply the first known report that Africa was a continent, “surrounded by sea”.247

241 In the King James translation of Genesis (1: 5), “day” is the name God gives the period of light that is not night. The “days” play a narrative function, indicating immeasurable stretches of time in which God enacts considerable creative feats.

242 Theal (1919: 181-83): “[t]he hordes migrated slowly, often remaining for two three years at favourable localities on the way...”, but “years” were poetic licence. Neither he nor Molema had scientific means to verify the migration’s speed.


245 See infra, p.323f fn.201, for “light/dark” imagery in the both Testaments.

246 Homer, c.VIII BC, epic Greek poet, from Asia Minor (according to Herodotus) and The Iliad and The Odyssey’s author, referred to the “Ethiopians [a name by which Africans were then known], the far-off Ethiopians — the Ethiopians who dwell sundered in twain, the farthestmost of men, some where Hyperion sets and some where he rises...” (The Odyssey, Book 2, line 25). Publius Ovidius Naso, 43BC-c.18AD, Roman poet of The Art of Love, and mentioned the Nile River in Metamorphoses, Book 1, line 24, Ed. Arthur Golding, [http://www.perseus.tufts.edu]. Herodotus, c.484-c.420BC, wrote a history of Ancent Greece’s Middle-Eastern empire. Pliny the Elder (23-79), admiral of the Roman fleet at the naval base, Misena, authored the Natural History, which recorded his extensive Mediterranean travels. He perished in the eruption of Versuvius (AD79).

247 Larousse (2002: 1559): the Nubians founders of the Meroe Kingdom were non-Arabic people living what is now northern Sudan and southern Egypt. Larousse (2002. 2003: 1556): Pharaoh Nechao II (XXVth Dynasty, 609-594BC) defeated Josias, 16 King of Judah at Megido, but fell to Nebuchadnezzar II at Karkemish. Molema (1920: 8) cited Herodotus’ Melpomene. The Histories, Book IV. Trans. A. de Selincourt [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954], pp.54-55 verifies his account. Molema noted later explorations of Africa by Hanno the Carthaginian (c.500BC) and Cambyses, Persian King, c.525BC. Ptolemy of Alexandria and Marinus of Tyre were early geographers who first mapped the known world using lines
The “fierce, burning Sahara” confounded Greek and Roman forays beyond North Africa. Pliny the Younger remarked, in the first century AD, that the terrain “beyond Abyssinia, was utterly unknown to the Romans”. Through such anecdotes, Molema mapped early knowledge of Africa, mostly from non-African sources, given the scarcity of African sources in 1917.248

The Fall of the Roman Empire took Molema into another level of the “unveiling” allegory: “civilisation” versus “barbarism”. In North Africa, Vandal and Gothic invasions “blotted out” Roman rule, and Islamisation proved lasting. He defied claims that early conquerors had not crossed the Sahara: Pliny, Marinus and Ptolemy showed Arab trade between East Africa and “India, Egypt, and Rome”. Pliny’s geography described Mauretania in the west and Egypt in the east, and dwelt on Carthage.249

With an eye to southern Africa’s future European conquerors, he concluded: to “Western civilisation …nothing was known of this coast, or any part of Africa south of the equator, until the dawn of Portuguese maritime enterprise”.250 Life in Africa continued despite European disinterest. Returning to the main “plot”, European conquest, in the next section he unveiled subequatorial Africa.

The Bantu differed significantly from most contemporary histories of Africa, which concentrated on various European conquests. He breezed through early modern Portuguese exploration: Henry the Navigator (1394-1460) (João I’s younger son) sponsored the first “discoveries” of Africa (1469-1521). Portugal’s “Golden Age” navigators, Bartholomeo Diaz (c.1450-1500) doubled the Cape of Good Hope (1488) and Vasco da Gama (1455-1495) pioneered an Indian sea-route (1497), making “Portugal the world’s emporium, and the first sea power of Europe”.251

These “intrepid sailors” remapped the known world’s borders, enabling other European powers to “cast their eyes abroad. The east commanded attention and all eyes were on it”. Portugal’s Angolan and Mozambican coastal entrepôts expanded, but Cape visits almost ceased after Hottentots slew Francesco d’Almeida in 1510.252 Molema’s early chapters provided an accomplished and witty overview of European explorers’ travails, to buttress the main plot.

Readers anticipating another narrative of the Cape’s annexation to the Netherlands as a “half-way house” en route to the eastern Spice Trade would be disappointed. His account skirted Dutch interests and retold an African past, as few pre-1920s historians had done. The effects of European colonisation were key to the main plot, and he traced a direct line between Van Riebeeck’s 1652 arrival and South Africa’s 1910 union. However, given that Molema aimed to explain South Africa’s place in the British Empire, this leap from 1652 to 1920 was precipitate. He compacted 150 years of Dutch Colonisation, often denouncing the Dutch (mostly termed “Boers”) as the Bantu’s primary exploiters. He regularly ignored the continuity between Dutch and British colonial institutions after the latter’s second annexation of the Cape in 1806.253
Colonisation by a European power was inevitable, he implied. Given that his main interest was the racial nature of Dutch rule, he showed more interest in lengthy Dutch attempts to enslave allegedly “lazy” Hottentots than in the economic reasons for Dutch settlement. To meet their labour needs, the Dutch imported slaves from the “East Malay Archipelago ... Mozambique, Madagascar, and the west coast of Africa”, with consequences analysed in Chapter XIV.\(^{254}\) While other histories dedicated their bulk to the ruling Dutch East India Company [DEIC], sideling the interior’s black polities, he inverted this Theal-entrenched convention. Theal devoted 11 of 12 chapters of his 1888 History (2nd volume) to Dutch Governors, with a lone chapter (XXIII) describing “the Native Races of South Africa”.\(^{255}\)

Instead, Molema built the narrative action around black South African history: San, Khoikhoi and Bantu, and themes of racial inequality, freedom and unfreedom, power and disempowerment. Thus, the Cape slaves’ role as labourers interested him more than the colonists’ agricultural experiments. Slavery showed that the seeds of exploitation were planted along with the colonists’ first corn and vines.\(^{256}\) In the 1830s, disputes over the ethics of slave-holding precipitated Boer-British conflict. The former migrated into the interior, where greater racial strife ensued. Britain’s Abolition of the Slave Trade was a moral victory: “[a]t this time, the star of philanthropy was in the ascend[a]ncy in the British Isles and elsewhere, also there was a fever for exploration raging in the land”.\(^{257}\)

As ever, imagery of light (“the star”) depicted political and moral progress. The Abolition struggle won nominal success in the British parliament in 1807. Molema’s source here was probably Clarkson, whose History of the African Slave Trade he read, but did not cite. Church of England evangelical reformers and Wesleyan Methodists undertook the eighteenth-century abolitionist battle, recognising the humanity of Africa’s inhabitants, and initiated a new form of outreach to them. By highlighting Abolitionists’ endeavours, Molema indirectly sketched the roots of his own spiritual conviction in nineteenth-century philanthropic and missionary intervention in southern Africa.\(^{258}\)

Other histories recounted the deeds of Dutch and British governors; Molema led readers across the Fish and Orange Rivers (colonial boundaries) into precolonial African societies, and the first white-black interactions. He prefigured the evangelical revival, by devoted Chapters XI and XIII to precolonial Africans’ “Moral Conduct” and “Religious Beliefs”.

Reviewing Part III, he introduced the progressive Europeans missionary explorers who opened Africa to enlightenment. British occupation, he argued, encouraged such inquiry and “armies of missionaries, explorers, travellers, hunters and naturalists” penetrated the “hitherto unknown interior”. Their quest was not after knowledge for its own sake, but to study and present all the country’s aspects “to the civilised world”. Waves of missionary-explorers and anthropologists mapped the territory geographically and culturally.\(^{259}\) Livingstone’s expeditions awakened the Royal Geographical Society’s

---


\(^{255}\) Theal (1888: v.2) covered the period 1691-1795, i.e. to Britain’s first occupation; references to black-white frontier interactions peppered three chapters (XXIII-XXV). In Theal’s expanded, 1915 edition, (History of South Africa since 1795. [Cape Town: Struik; first George Allen & Unwin, 1964], v.5, 1795-1828), he still allotted 19 of 21 chapters to governors and settlers, with two chapters (XIX and XX) to African history. So Thea[t]u’s structure definitely did not emulate Theal.

\(^{256}\) Molema (1920: 180): “within two years of their arrival the Dutch Government introduced Malays from their Batavian Republics and Madagascar, and by 1658 introduced many more Negroes from the Guinea or West Coast of Africa”.


\(^{258}\) WJ Townsend, HB Workman & George Eayrs (eds), 1909. A New History of Methodism. (London: Hodder & Stoughton), I, 370. I thank Professor TJ Couzens for giving me Dr Molema’s own set of this collection. Dr Molema annotated the essay on South Africa’s Methodist movement. Clarkson, William Wilberforce’s contemporary, helped lead the struggle against slavery. Molema (1920: 14): “[t]he occupation of the Cape...by Great Britain in 1795, and, finally in 1806, coincided with a great revival — evangelical and geographical. Philanthropy and exploration were the order of the day”.

\(^{259}\) Molema (1920: 14-15) named a first wave of scholar-evangelists and travellers: Campbell, Moffat, Van der Kemp, Lichtenstein, Casalis, Arbousset, and Gassellin. In the late 1830s, Boer emigration from the Cape Colony opened the area to settlement, trade, conflict and controversy. A second wave of missionary exploration, begun by Livingstone “was the opening of the greatest activity in the history of the exploration of South Africa”. Cf. infra, pp.321ff.
formal interest; they sponsored Burton and Speke’s extend exploration of the Nile. Several explorers were among his sources, like Harry Johnston, “doyen of early twentieth-century British Africanists”. Thus, he allied his perspective with those of men who had mapped Africa for the Empire.

“The Bantu peoples are ‘colonists’ in South Africa”, he announced, outlining the key theme of power in the “Geographical Distribution of African Races”. This epitomised his broadminded analysis and sense of historical and cultural relativity. Before whites “discovered” the subcontinent, an earlier wave of colonists took possession, naming and surveying its rivers, mountains and settlements. A detailed hand-drawn map of demographic changes illustrated his discussion.

This chapter has implications for the whole narrative’s racial-texturing, as he unfurled the vocabulary of race and hybridity germane to most current discussions of Africa’s populations: “mingled”, “tinctured”, and “mixed blood”. For instance, the Hausa, “also mixed”, had “more Negro blood than Mandingo”, while Abyssinians (“with strains of Hamitic and Semitic blood”) and Gallas were “a mixed people, with at least as much Asiatic as Negro blood...”. In 1½ pages, words connoting racial hybridity occurred six times. Complex phrases denoting racial mixing followed: “...races in which the predominant element is Caucasian”, and “...varying strengths of Negro blood...”. This chapter’s politics of racial historiography was fast revealed as his most contentious theme.

He also presented the racial proportions underlying segregation: South Africa covered nearly 1,000,000 square miles. Its population was almost 8,000,000, one-sixth white, and the “overwhelming majority of five-sixths made up of Bantu [6,000,000] and coloured peoples [500,000]”. His time-limits on some races were contentious: the Bushmen and Hottentots, like Australia and New Zealand’s “natives”, were “dwindling races” or “practically extinct”. However, a statistic more likely to incite outright conflict was the white and coloured races’ differential access to land. It underlay the bitterest political and socio-economic conflicts in the country’s past and present, then, in 1920 and after 1994.

The chapter on the Khoisan, tackling socio-cultural difference, set up his concern with the history of power and disempowerment. He began focusing more on lifestyles, than on racial characteristics to differentiate Iron Age Bantu from Stone Age San and Khoi (“Primitive Races”). “Primitive” was used ambiguously, in the uninflected sense of “ancient” or “original” inhabitants, and the more pejorative “backward” and “uncivilized”.

Later scholarship on the Khoisan shows that reports of their imminent extinction were exaggerated. Molema’s brief chapter appeared during great speculation that aboriginal races cowered low on the evolutionary scale and would accordingly, die out under competition from stronger, more technically advanced races. Theal and Stow, his main sources, thought San “inability to adapt” to modern life a racial weakness. However, a statistic more likely to incite outright conflict was the white and coloured races’ differential access to land. It underlay the bitterest political and socio-economic conflicts in the country’s past and present, then, in 1920 and after 1994.

60 Dubow, 1995: 75. 1858-1927. On Johnston, see infra, pp.312-13, 316 & fn.157 and 296 fn.23.
61 Molema (1920: 17-21): this is Chapter III’s title. See a reproduction of his Map following this page.
63 Molema (1920: 20-21): 1 million square miles = 1.6 million km². Other writers compared Africans’ condition to the abject state of aboriginal peoples in Britain’s other white-dominated colonies. TsaliaBT, 28 June 1913, “Hon WP Schreiner, Kc., On the lands Bill; S Africa not a Free Country”. Schreiner contrasted the African plight to that of less-favoured New Zealand Maoris. Stewart (1903: 14-15) believed that “contact with European nations seems always to have resulted in further deterioration of the African races”. He hinted that the missionaries’ provision of “definite religious beliefs” filled a moral vacuum in their lives. Cf. infra, pp.330ff, 351.
66 Dubow (1995: 68) cited Stow (1905: 36, 215): the San showed “...a determination to maintain and die in their primitive modes of life”, courting their own extinction by “stronger races” from the north. It is unknown which editions of Theal’s History and Ethnography Molema used. For a summary of Theal’s comparison of racial characteristics, see following page.
In 1911, Evans found “Bushman” and Bantu unable to co-exist on grounds of race and lifestyle. The “primitive hunters…were driven into the recesses of the most inaccessible mountains”, later raiding their African neighbours’ cattle when game grew scarce. African retaliation, it was claimed, almost exterminated the San. In three cardinal sources, Stow, Theal and Evans, “primitive” races naturally faced elimination by “stronger” races. Evans confidently added that Bantu strength and “fecundity” might save them from the “extinction” suffered by the weaker “Red Man,...Australian black, and...Polynesian”. Inadaptability to European rule, alcohol addiction, and “inevitable” exterminatory wars decimated these sorry peoples’ numbers. The San, Bryce considered, were South Africa’s “real aborigines”, “one of the lowest race…as low as the Fuegians or the ‘black fellows’ of Australia”.

Molema recognised his sources’ Social Darwinism and deliberately depicted San- Bantu interaction from an African angle: “[t]he Bushmen were called Barwa by Bechuana, the first Bantu with whom they came into contact; while the Xosas called them Batwa. Both mean men of the south”. Not knowing that the San had initially come from the north [a Thealite view], the Bantu first met them moving north to escape “the stronger Hottentots” and later “the much stronger Dutch settlers”.

His summary of San physique resembled Theal’s closely: both termed the San of “dwarfish” stature and “yellowish brown” colour. He eschewed Theal’s noxious phrase “face triangular or fox-like in outline”, but used the rest of his physical description: “protuberant” stomach, “hollow” back, and “large buttocks”. “Steatopygia” described the San’s extreme development of “hard fat and muscles in the buttocks”, echoed Theal’s “steatopogy”, and linked their depictions definitively. However, Molema avoided Theal’s disparagement of the San’s low “cranial capacity”. Thus, in some cases, he borrowed from Theal, inscribing his Social Darwinist discourse and othering of the San into The Bantu.

Innovatively, Molema found many positive aspects to San culture. As a doctor, he hailed their “knowledge of toxicology and materia medica” as “quite respectable, being, in fact greater than that of any other South African aborigine”. Their knowledge of these poisons’ antidotes, and “experienced” hunting skills were commendable. He countered Theal’s denigration of their language and art:

[a]mong the lowest of the world’s inhabitants, they exhibited some traits of the most advanced; such...is the inflexion of their language. Much lower in the scale of humanity than the Bantu round about them, they showed greater advances in some arts — such as painting — than they....In their folklore, too — in its abundance of material, wealth of thought and poetical fancy — if they did not actually surpass, they certainly were not surpassed by the Bantu. The same holds true of their music.

---

267 Theal (1919: 19): the “more intelligent and consequently the stronger races” were victorious in competing for natural resources. “It seems to be God’s law that man must raise himself constantly higher and he who cannot as well as he who will not conform to that law must pass out of existence.” The inferior races faced with extinction were Aurignacians, Bushmen, and Pygmies of the North, all being “unimprovable”, “inert and stagnant”. Aurignacians (from around Aurignac in the Pyrenees) were Upper Paleolithic hominids, inhabiting Central Europe ±40,000 years ago.

268 Evans, 1911: 55-61.


270 Molema, 1920: 22-3. Cf. supra, fn.267, for Theal’s beliefs about the San’s relationship to Pygmies.


273 Molema (1920: 23-24): with professional fascination, he listed the poisons the Bushmen deployed: *Euphorbia arborescens*, *Amaryllis toxicaria*, *Digitalis purpurea* leaves, *Strophanthus Kombe* seeds and a species of *Strychnos toxifera*.

Unlike his sources, Molema’s portrayed San creativity. Bleek’s Bushman Folklore aided him, but he sought someone to “speak for” the San and turned to African Sketches, the 1834 verse collection by another Scot: Thomas Pringle, an 1820 Settler from Bruintje’s Hoogte, near Ft Beaufort. Through Pringle, Molema connected to the Enlightenment and Romantic influences that inspired the poet, Walter Scott and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s friend. Pringle’s Scottish radicalism induced him to defend the black inhabitants he met while farming; he realised the political problems that they presented to Governor Lord Charles Somerset. Pringle’s poetry and journalism maddened this authoritarian, who branded him “an arrant dissenter who had scribbled”. Pringle supported the Anti-Slavery movement’s bid to free all the Empire’s slaves. Here, his and Molema’s views coincided; several Anti-Slavery leaders, William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp, were quoted in The Bantu.

The three Pringle poems Molema quoted embodied the Enlightenment principles both men admired; Molema made Pringle’s battle against 1820s’ oppression an allegory of the present-day tyranny against which all black South Africans struggled. In so doing, he aligned his work with the major conflict in South African history, as Bundy understood it: “between enlightenment and obscurantism, between the ‘road of freedom’ and the ‘road of repression’”.

Postcolonial critics problematise the idea of a white settler speaking on behalf of an oppressed indigene. Yet, Linda Alcoff argued cogently that a member of the dominant race may appropriately speak for a silenced Other only when the Other cannot speak for him or herself. Molema used the San narrator of Pringle’s “Song of the Wild Bushman” to speak feelingly of his silenced people’s plight, and to counter Thealite negativity while defending the San’s imperilled hunting lifestyle against white colonisation.

---

275 Pringle (b.1789, Teviotdale, Scottish Borders) died in 1834, the year of African Sketches’ publication. Several poems had appeared in 1827. Pringle studied literature at Edinburgh University, worked in the Register Office from 1811, and left to edit the Edinburgh Monthly Magazine (later Blackwood’s Magazine) before emigrating to the Cape with his family. Coincidentally, his farm in Bruintje’s Hoogte had belonged to Frederik Bezuidenhout, who launched the Slachtersnek Rebellion there in 1815 (“Letters of Thomas Pringle to Sir Walter Scott”, Letter 2, 22 Sep 1820, pp.52-53).


280 Bundy (1990: 124), also cited supra, pp.244-45 fn.98-99.


The speaker’s subjunctive opening (“Let...”), and first person leitmotif (“my”, “I” and “me”) forcefully proclaim his independence. In the sequence of rejections, the speaker abjures settlement for his “home” in the “wild” (“desert”, “mountain rocks”). Because “home” means endless nomadism, he upsets western and, in Africa, colonial notions of settlement and nurture. The San speaker frustrates the whites, for whom he will not “toil”: he chooses wild deer herds over pastoral farming (like the Xhosa), and natural flora over crops. Molema spoke his own attack on colonialism through Pringle’s final stanza, rejecting hypocritical Christian colonists who appropriate indigenous peoples’ land and labour.\(^283\)

Pringle’s notes glossed “Christian’s hand” as “that of the Dutch colonists, the boers”, excluding English settlers like himself as oppressors.\(^284\) The speaker knows that to colonists, he is just a sheep dog, a metaphor for his lowliness in the colonial world. In oxymoron, he stays free inside his Desert bounds. Somewhat vengefully, he likens himself to the “Serpent”, knowing its meaning to the “Christian”. Molema admired the San’s toxicological knowledge and the poem ends on a threat: the serpent’s “sting” is really the speaker’s arrow, dipped in lethal poison for any provocative white “Christian”!\(^285\)

To Molema’s credit, his relatively sympathetic evocation of the San and Khoikhoi’s plight differed from Theal’s when few other sources queried his orthodoxy. On balance, Molema’s San are more marauded than marauding; he condemned eighteenth-century burnings of “cavefuls of them” and “extirpat[ion] by order of a ‘civilised’ Dutch Government up to...1837”.\(^286\)

---

Molema, 1920: 25.

\(^{284}\) *RPO*, Pringle’s note on Line 27.

\(^{285}\) Molema (1920: 24) cited *supra*, p.273. *QBSAL*, vol.7, No.2, Dec 1952, Pringle, Cape Town, to Sir George Mackenzie, Edinburgh, 25 June 1825, p.48: literature and life diverged on the Eastern Frontier: Pringle lapsed at least once into the colonial stereotype of gun-toting hunter: when some San hunted his stock, he hunted them down. He also posted a “Bushman” skull to his friend George Mackenzie, a noted mineralogist also interested in “phrenology” (i.e. craniology)!

\(^{286}\) Molema, 1920: 27. Before Molema left for Scotland, AK Soga of the Cape’s South African Native Congress raised the issue of “extermination” in *TsalaBT*, 18 Oct 1913, “Correspondence: The War of Extermination”: “There are many ways of exterminating nations, and since the ‘battues’ of Bushmen which were countenanced by the old Dutch Government have gone out of fashion, the more civilized tyrants of the present day prefer to accomplish their ends by the exercise of the constitutional methods of Parliament.” Molema, teaching in Kimberley in 1913, may have read Soga’s letter.
Although less controversial, his picture of the Khoihoi followed the format used for the San: origins, features, habits, “historical events”, and language. All these pivoted on the Khoi’s racial distinctiveness. On reaching the Cape, they were a “separate race”, not a San-Bantu mixture, as some surmised, but their language and ethology refuted. Dutch expansion eastwards brought racial mixing: by the late 1700s, the Xhosa, Tinde and Gqunukwebe lineages had “a considerable amount of Hottentot blood”. 287 Levy and a tendency to drink were, he suggested, racial traits. Ironically, Molema praised them as “excellent servants” to the Dutch settlers, “in spite of their alleged laziness”. 288 He wrote before the extensive research into abusive master-servant relations at the Cape, which contributed to high rates of alcoholism in Khoisan and slave communities. Molema’s teetotalism may have shaped this portrait. 289

Moreover, he wrote before early liberal reinterpretations of Khoisan history: Macmillan (1927), JS Marais (1944) and Schapera’s extensive ethnography (1965). Molema claimed no knowledge of the various Khoi clans’ social organisation and the political resistance that they offered the Dutch. Since the 1970s, Khoisan historiography has expanded massively, as the works of Elphick, Marks, Shell, Legassick, Wright, Parkington, AB Smith, Ross and Freund has demonstrated. 290

“The Present Moment of ‘The Past’”, or The Bantu, Part II: 291

In 1919, TS Eliot’s eloquent debate on the meaning of the past in relation to literary tradition has relevance for history and culture as well. His discussion of history, its traditions and their meaning for anyone living in “the present”, characterise the contradictory nature of Modernism. This movement involved diverse intellectuals and artists around the globe, and took on an acutely African significance in Molema’s writing where, in his day, “tradition” meant a precolonial observance. The modernising forces in his world overlapped with those of Eliot: education, religion, urbanisation, industry, and “[t]he Great War” that he “quoted to explain everything”. 292 Though thinkers like Molema and Eliot did not enter military operations, they lived the war as an experiential break with the past. For Molema, it meant a period of exile and time for reviewing African history and culture. Like Eliot, he explored the meaning of a vanishing past for what seemed such a new and war-changed world in the present. Also like Eliot, he held the Modernist belief that the past had a specific existence in the present moment.

As a Modernist, Molema outlined The Bantu’s allegory in Part I, but began its autoethnography in Part II, “The Past”, to which he found his own beginnings “knotted”. 293 Part II’s two overarching sections,

---

288 Molema (1920: 32) anal ogised the Hottentot rites to ancient Greek worship; “libations in honour of Phoebus” in other words evidence of solar and lunar worship. Theal’s (1919: 97, 121-24) account of the Khoi’s “large powers of imagination” was highly detailed. He called them “the happiest people in existence”, though assumed them incapable of “intellectual enjoyment”! He took a far more moralistic line than Molema on their drinking: “[b]randy has been a perfect curse to them”, but did grant that “they” served competently in the lower military ranks. Unlike Molema, he reviled their “filthy habits”, pronouncing them ‘only slightly superior to Bushmen”.

289 For example, James C Armstrong & Nigel A Worden, “The Slaves, 1652-1834”. In Elphick & Giliomee (1989:146): “Tobacco rations were often supplied and on wine farms the tot system, by which slaves were given regular portions of wine throughout the day, was well established by at least the eighteenth century”. Leloba Molema Interview, 1992.

290 They are just some of the scholars writing on Khoisan history; these works are cited in the Bibliography.

291 Another set of inverted commas is inserted into Eliot’s quotation to echo the title of Part II of The Bantu. TS Eliot, 1919. “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, In Selected Prose of TS Eliot. Ed. F Kermode. (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), p.44 & 38: “Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.....”.


293 Tim Couzens & Essop Patel (eds), 1982. The Return of the Amasi Bird. (JHB: Ravan), pp.216-17: in Mongane Serote’s magnificent poem about modern identity, “Alexandra” (1971), the speaker is inextricably tied to a place (Alexandra Township): “…Alexandra, my beginning was knotted to you/Just like you knot my destiny”. Molema felt “knotted” to a sense of the past, and that it exerted a powerful influence on both present and future.
history and ethnography united his academic interests. The first further divided “Bantu” history ethnically: two large chapters represented the Tswana-Sotho and the Nguni (Zulu-Xhosa). Eastern frontier conflict between Xhosa and colonists formed a third chapter. Marginalised emergent groups received a short fourth chapter: west-coast Damara and “Coloureds”. 294 Subjects like “Manners and Customs”, “Moral Conduct”, “Bantu Language”, “Religious Beliefs”, and “Slavery” each received a chapter in the ethnographic second subsection. A retrospective analysis of “The Past” completed Part II.

The “first ethnical group” brought Molema into the semi-personal territory of Tswana history, where he walked a tightrope between autobiography and historical ethnography. Exploring various historians’ portrayals of the distinctions between coastal and interior peoples reduced the personal aspect. With Stow and Theal, he argued that while all three “ethnical groups” belonged to an original group of Bantu-speakers, few political interactions among them over time were non-violent. Differences between “Becoana-Basuto” and “Xosa-Zulu” languages diminished communication. Within the Tswana-Sotho group, there was greater cultural compatibility and physical resemblance than among the Nguni:

…the average man of one group recognises no ethnical relation between himself and a member of another group. It is manifest, therefore, that the division of the South African Bantu into three groups is not at all arbitrary. This is further emphasised in…that while a member of a midland tribe was at liberty to take a wife in another midland tribe, he could not go further and take one from any coast tribe east or west. The former alliances were encouraged, the latter were reprehended. Among the east coast tribes this peculiar Hebraic custom — so fanatically upheld by all Bechuana to this day — was much less operative, or is so now.295

The Comaroffs confirmed this, stating that marrying “cousins of all types” or endogamous marriage is very common in Tswana societies. Molema had cause to know this custom personally: his own extended family was entwined by cousin-intermarriage to strengthen unions doubly and trebly.296

Diplomacy is Greater than Military Operations — “Ntoa kgólo ke ea môlomo”
(The greatest war is the war of the mouth):297

Molema accompanied each ethnic history with a short group taxonomy, contained in the accompanying diagram. The first two groups’ “characters” were almost directly opposed. Where the Tswana-Sotho were innately peaceable, the Xhosa-Zulu (especially the latter) were “naturally” warlike, seeking to dominate others and destroy their property.298 Between 1820 and 1840, Tlokwa and Matabele military interventions shattered highveld polities, governmental systems and allegiances, paradoxically providing new bases for cooperation and state building. From 1836, a third catalyst of change, the Emigrant Boers (later termed “Voortrekkers”) accelerated the interior’s twin-processes of land- alienation and state formation. Molema’s Christian analysis perhaps overstated Tswana-Sotho peacefulness under Matabele attack. The ways of peace must, in his philosophy, outweigh the assegai:

294 Theal (1919: 204-05) divided the migrating Bantu-speakers into 3 different groups: the first included east coast Xhosa, Thembu, Mpondo, Baca [sic], Mfengu, Tonga, Shangana, Zulu and Matebele. The second occupied the central interior: Thaping, Kgalat, Rolong, Hurutshe, Ngwaketse, Kwena, Ngwato, Venda, Pedi, and Sotho. He called the third, “western coast tribes”, recent arrivals, speaking “more primitive dialects”, and settled between the Kalahari and the Atlantic coast.

295 Molema, 1920: 64.

296 Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991: 138. See Appendix A, “Genealogy of the Molema Family”. Many cross-cousin marriages succeeded: like that between Modiri’s brother, Sefetoge, and his wife Anna’s sister Helen Keketso. However, indications are that Silas complicated Harriet’s life by insisting that she marry their relative, the mentally unstable Chief Bakolopang. (See supra, p.159). Modiri probably also knew of the opposition that Plaatje had faced in 1898 when he had married Elizabeth M’belle who, being of Xhosa family, was not initially acceptable to the Plaatje clan. (Willan, 1984: 50-51.)

297 Plaatje (1916b: 77, Proverb 532), literally: embodies the oft-claimed Tswana preference for talking rather than fighting over things, a custom sometimes honoured in the breech. In modern orthography, “ntoa” is spelled “ntwa”, and “ea” is “ya”.

298 Molema, 1920: 65. Table 11 on the next page follows Molema’s outlines (1920: 35-37, 70, 108) of each group.
[The Tswana-Sotho] had made more progress in the arts of peace, and therefore, greater strides into civilisation. They were more truly agricultural and pastoral in their pursuits. The extent to which they practised agriculture, even with their rude implements, was a constant subject of comment by travellers. In pottery, smelting iron, carving wood, and in the construction of their houses, the making of their habiliments...they far surpassed their more bellicose neighbours of the east coast. All this would, of course, follow from their greater leisure afforded by peace, and would, in turn, increase their love of peace.299

This exposition of Molema’s analysis of a precolonial African society brings several of his allegorical concerns into play: Christianity, racial or racist ideology, and Enlightenment philosophy. Verbal echoes of the “master” spiked Molema’s comparison of east coast and interior communities. Theal’s History reported that “[t]he Betshuana system of government is the least despotic form known to any Bantu, it allows the right of free speech to every man, admits of a public discussion of matters of weight...”300 But he then expressed sentiments that Molema’s pro-Tswana account omitted: “[t]he man of the coast was braver in the field; his inland kinsman was in general an arrant coward. The one was modest when speaking of his exploits, the other was an intolerable boaster”.301

Another of Molema’s sources, Evans, made a similar “east-coast” versus “interior” comparison: “[t]he Zulu is...more warlike than the Basuto, more devoted to pastoral pursuits and less to agriculture, less industrious and not so advanced in some of the arts”.302 Molema’s use of varied sources revealed that he depended on Theal, but not exclusively. Theal equated militarism and manliness, but Molema’s Christian beliefs set him against violence; practically too, war squandered human and material resources and hampered socio-economic progress.

His depiction of the Tswana relied on Stow who argued that the Tswana country developed “their agricultural proclivities”, inclining them to settle in towns. To Stow, town life suggested “a more advanced state of society than that exhibited by the more primitive kraals of the coast tribes”, who had (allegedly) lived by subsistence until the colonists’ arrival. In this “improved mode of life”, the Tswana devoted their leisure to improving their towns’ layout and their crafts and metalworking. This enhancement of the “‘purely pastoral pursuits’” their ancestors had practised modified “‘very considerably their wandering and warlike propensities’”.303 Molema endorsed Stow’s approval of the Tswana’s puritan work ethic (profitable use of leisure time) and proto-capitalist profit-motive. Nineteenth-century western capitalist values shaped Stow’s assessment of African transformation. Accepting his “authority”, Molema’s analysis contrasted “advanced” with “primitive” African cultures:

[the] government of the Bechuana tribes or nation was, like that of the other Bantu, patriarchal..., but it had a distinct democratic touch wanting in the warlike coast tribes, for while among these latter the supreme chief was a despot, among the Bechuana his power was limited by the authority of his councillors — generally his relatives and other headmen. Any matter of tribal importance...was discussed in the khotla...and every man present was at liberty to discuss the question freely even if in so doing he differed from the supreme ruler.304

Here (as when describing the Khoisan), Molema attributed Tswana-Sotho and Nguni behaviour to their essential cultural and ethnic traits without further analysis. Moreover, he ascribed more negative qualities to the Nguni, but condoned similar actions among the Tswana. Nguni chiefs were overweening tyrants, abusing power at their subjects’ expense, whereas Tswana leaders governed together with their councillors and people. Herein lay the roots of his Tswana-centric history.

300 Theal (1915: 4, 390) made this statement during a discussion of Rolong history.
301 Theal, 1919: 278.
302 Evans (1911: 26-27, 37): Molema dodged his advice on distinguishing different tribes” blackness, skull size and physique
304 Molema (1920: 64, 65) avoided “Supreme Chief” to mean the leader of an individual polity. It is not clear whether he knew that the 1910 Constitution accorded the South African head of state, this putative title, making him (in theory), chief of all African communities.
If one sets aside Molema’s tendency to essentialise, and examines his attention to lifestyles, he sows the seeds of socio-economic arguments that 1970s and 1980s historical materialists later proposed about the relationship between climate and participation in the colonial economy. Tswana-Sotho agropastoralism around Kimberley and Johannesburg contributed to more rapid participation, in contrast with the Nguni (Mfengu excepted) reluctance to enter the colonial economy. However, as these historians explained, the pace of political conquest also clearly played a role in proletarianisation. Theal made an exception to ethnic stereotypes. Despite the Tswana’s democratic tendencies, Molema’s ancestor, Rolong Chief Tau the Great did not behave according to “type”:

[c]ruel almost beyond the conception of Europeans, treacherous to a degree that civilised men would regard as infamous, caring so little for the lives or the rights of his own people that he was in the habit of causing any one who offended him in the slightest degree, whether male or female, adult or child to be hurled over a precipice, at the foot of which was a great heap of the bones of his victims.

Molema apparently followed Theal in calling Tau “savage”, but omitted accusations of torture. Rolong violence at the Battle of Dithakong (1823) was, stated one distressed eyewitness, Moffat, who called Chief Tawana, Molema’s grandfather, “savage and warlike”.

Molema omitted Moffat’s Missionary Labours from his readings, but could have found his views mentioned in Theal. Tawana’s defence of the Tlhaping capital, Dithakong, which Sikonyela and the “Mantatees” were besieging, earned these epithets. Molema conceded that Tswana commitments to peace might slip temporarily. It was a bloody era, and the Tswana had worse offenders than his grandfather. Ngwaketse Chief Makaba II, Tawana’s foe, was “a monster of cruelty, for it is said he killed his parents first, his brother next and then his own sons”, probably to guard against rivals. He made the Ngwaketse “a military people, and by a series of forays on the surrounding tribes”, soon terrorised many groups. After the Mantatees slew him, the “once powerful tribe fell an easy prey to Moselekats’e’s relentless wardogs...”.

Molema did entertain criticism of the Tswana; he deferred to Dr Livingstone’s unflattering opinion that they owed their “superiority...over other Bantu nations” to missionary intercession:

He says: “It is among these people that the success of missions has been greatest. They were an insignificant and filthy people when first discovered....The young, who do not realise their former degradation, often consider their superiority over the other tribes to be entirely owing to a primitive intellectual pre-eminence”.

---


306 Theal (1915: 4, 390-91) spelled the name “Tao”.


308 In Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa (New York & London: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1842 & 1969), p.490, Moffat his virtual sermon to Tlhaping Chief Mothibi: “[a]lthough I was not preaching, I spoke with great solemnity, asking him if the bleached bones on the Barolong and Kalagare [Kalahari] plains, the souls his clubs and spears had hurried into eternity since he left home, and the innocent blood with which he had stained the desert but a few days ago, were not sufficient to glut his vengeance”.

309 Theal, 1915: 5, 444-45. Davenport (1991: 17): the origin of “Mantatee”, denoting highveld fugitives-turned-raiders, is doubtful. Some historians believe it derived from “a mistaken association of the refugees with the Tlokwa Queen Mma Nathatisi”; others believe it a corruption of “Mabele”. Theal (1915: 5, 430-31) thought the “Mantatee” raiders Tlokwa misplaced after the marriage between Tlokwa chief, Mokotscho, and Monyalwa, nearby Basia Chief Mothage’s daughter. After their first child, Ntatsisi’s birth, Monyalwa was called MmaNtathisi. They first occupied “the slopes of the Kathlamba [Drakensberg], about the sources of the Wilge and Mill rivers... [near present-day] Harrismith”. See supra, p.59ff, for debate on the invaders’ identity.


Mackenzie and Stewart added to Molema’s account of Tswana-Sotho and Nguni military engagement and state structure. He embraced missionary condemnation of violence, diverting from Theal’s evident relish for inter-African carnage: MmaNthatisi, Shaka and Mzilikazi’s campaigns disappointed him. Like Livingstone, he believed that few people acted morally without Christian enlightenment.

Some necessary comparison demonstrates how Theal and Molema’s representations differed. In Theal, mother-and-son Tlokwa team, Sikonyela and MmaNthatisi’s insatiable need for power and bloody conquest matched Shaka’s. Yet, he made her the more monstrous for being feminine:

[a] tall, slender woman, lighter in colour than most of her tribe, and with regular features that were more Asiatic than African in outline, she possessed the qualifications requisite for controlling barbarians. Europeans who met her in later life described of her as of dignified demeanour, tawny rather than black in colour, acute in reasoning, and possessed of considerable ability. In her youth she must have been handsome, though her eyes were cold and piercing, such as command obedience without inspiring affection. She was utterly callous to human suffering. Such was Ma Ntatisi, the mother of Sikonyela, the terrible exterminator of the Bakwena north of the Vaal. From her the whole fugitive horde, though composed of the remnants of numerous tribes that remained distinct from and independent of each other, has ever since been known as the Mantati destroyers.

Theal gave the convention of anatomising a female form a racial overlay: that her intelligence and statuesque form owed something to “Asian” ancestry, implied a link to Mongol invaders — he called her followers a “horde”. “Tawny”, often reserved for lions, endowed her physical form with animal ferocity. She was an obscure object of desire in his Social Darwinist worldview, the more aberrant for being both “acute in reasoning” and a woman “utterly callous to human suffering”. Her otherness, to him, was racial, gendered and pre-Christian. Theal portrayed her leaving racial hybridity (“fugitive horde”, “remnants of shattered tribes”) in her wake, to appal readers. The colonial sense of natural order he invoked invoked abhorred things mongrel and miscegenated.

“Bana ba tädi ba itsioe ka mereto” says the Setswana proverb, or qualis mater, talis filius. Theal’s Sikonyela alarmingly combined beast with human savage. The warrior queen’s son was “of a particularly savage disposition”, very lithe and strong, perfectly embodying “the wild cat, the siboko of his tribe”. Theal revelled in Sikonyela’s early brutalities, including decapitating his mother’s lover and murdering twenty followers (1821). The Tlokwa were blamed for destroying highveld polities in the pre-Matabele era. This “murderous host” caused such destruction (incredibly set at 50,000, Theal stated, by “Messrs Moffat and Melvill”), that survivors resorted to cannibalism.

Cannibalism was the ultimate “savagery” colonists feared. To Theal, it consummated expectations of the African as “the exotic other”, confirming Africans’ “inferior” status in the human chain. It destined them to be “slaves to their superiors” or, at best, servants. In the racial plot structure of Theal’s work, cannibalism provided a climactic, almost gothic thrill, clinching his argument that Africans’ inherent

313 Theal, 1915: 5, 442.
314 Plaatje (1916b: 22, Proverb 29) translated this as “Kittens of the wild cat are known by their mewing”, but gave the English equivalent as “like mother, like child”. In modern orthography, “itsioe” is spelt “itsiwe”.
315 Theal, 1915: 5, 441-42. See supra, pp.59-64, 97-98, on the Mantatees’ identity.
cruelty justified the colonisation of their country. Cannibalism and warfare, he alleged, depopulated the interior after Mantatee and Matebele attacks:

> great numbers of these people perished of starvation. Others tried to make their way to some distant country where food could be obtained, a few thousands of whom managed to reach the Cape Colony in a half-dying state. They made their appearance on the northernmost farms as skeletons covered with wrinkled skins, barely able to creep along, and fighting with each other for garbage that only a vulture would not turn away from.  

Theal’s affectedly epic style was built on hearsay and moral pre-judgement. Fictional techniques like repetition and hyperbole hammered home some shocking “facts”. From “great numbers”, victims swelled to “[t]housands, tens of thousands”, plus a thousand refugees. In a further difaqane tally, he claimed that Tlokwa numbers shrank from 130,000 to 14 or 15,000 (to ±11% of their population). 300,000 was his final figure of those destroyed in this conflict. These statistics’ source remained veiled. Casting doubt on Theal’s fanciful figures, Macmillan stated: “the statistics of slaughter in the Chaka wars are a little more scientific that Herodotus’ fabulous estimate of the size of Xerxes army”.

Molema represented cannibalism as the reaction of small starving “tribes” routed by the Zulu. These communities later re-grouped as the Mfengu and sought shelter among the Xhosa. His did not view cannibalism as innately African. Nevertheless, he rather dangerously followed Theal’s anti-Nguni bias, blaming the alleged depopulation on the Zulu: Tshaka had destroyed “some million souls” and the “Zulu-Xosa tribes of the coast were far behind their Bechuana neighbours” in practising “the peaceful arts”. Molema’s own beliefs about the nature of power made him conclude, however, that Africa was not uniquely “wild”; precolonial and colonial brutality had much in common. The Tlokwa incursions were, for him, the first of several, ending in British colonisation: “the MaNtatisi invasion, Matabele massacres, Boer reprisals, and, finally, British suzerainty”. In equating the attempts at colonising the highveld, he demonstrated independent thinking and abandoned Theal’s influence.

This thesis has considered several Theal texts, and will do the same for Molema on this point. In Chief Moroka (1951), he found the voice and historical authorities, absent in 1920, to criticise Theal for belittling the Rolong role in Mzilikazi’s defeat. He stated that Rolong clans at Thaba ’Nchu, all “rejoiced at the prospect of having powerful allies, by whose help the Matabele terror might be lifted, and Mzilikazi’s tyranny destroyed”. A common enemy united Rolong and Boers: the latter respected Rolong “knowledge of the country” and “unspeakable hatred of the Matabele”, while the Rolong relied on Boer help to expel the man who had destroyed their country.

He considered that Theal had “wasted much ink and time in trying to belittle the African [particularly Rolong] contribution” to Mzilikazi’s defeat. The anti-Matebele force was equally comprised of Boers (107) and Africans (107, plus Griqua and Korana soldiers). In 1951, Molema authoritatively corrected mistold histories. Rebutting Theal, he returned to statements that Seleka Chief Moroka and Rapulana Chief Matlaba gave the Bloemhof Commission of 1870-1. He made important historiographical and social points in chronicling Rolong resistance to the Matebele. Rapulana, Ratlou and Seleka clans constituted the 60 Rolong soldiers present, but “the greatest number [were] from the

---

318 Theal, 1915: 5, 446. Theal (1919: 271) later moderated this view: “[w]hen reduced to great extremity of want by the ravages of enemies, sections of the Bantu sometimes resorted to cannibalism, but the horrible practice was by no means common”. Molema (1920: 119) probably used this passage as a source: “[i]t is reported that many Bantu tribes, when reduced to extremity, made no scruple of eating human flesh”.


320 Macmillan, 1929: 179.


322 Molema, 1951: 49-50.

Tshidi Barolong”, under Motshegare, Tawana’s eldest surviving son. 324 About 40 Griqua and 5-6 Korana joined them. New ally, Sikonyela’s last-minute arrival put black soldiers in the majority. Most white warriors and some black soldiers were mounted, though the majority went on foot, all following emigrant Boers’ Hendrik Potgieter and Gert Maritz’s command.

In *Moroka*, in more astringent tones than in *The Bantu*, the experienced historian (by 1951, ANC Treasurer-General), challenged the historical fraternity and the newly-installed Nationalist government:

[w]ho does not know that in South Africa, if ten black men and ten white men together do anything worth while, the ten white men are singled out and particularised for individual praise, while the ten black men are either not mentioned at all…? Who then can wonder that the historians of this expedition should speak only of “107 burghers”, and either forget the contribution of the blacks, or superciliously refer to it as “slight assistance” or arrogantly dismiss it as “the help of some armed savages on foot”? 325

By 1951, South African history’s ideological trends were clearer than in 1920. Molema’s attack acknowledged the prevalence of Thealite racial myths, such as Preller’s *Voortrekkerdense* (1918-1938). 326 The above outburst suggests that Saunders was not considering Molema’s later writings when calling him uncritically Thealite. 327 Molema travelled ambiguously in a discursive region that Theal had mapped. In *The Bantu*, he criticised Theal’s pro-Boer sentiments just once, but grew far more critical in *Chief Moroka*, as it became clear that apartheid itself relied on Theal’s mythology.

**The “Sharp-Shearer” of Lesotho:**

Molema’s Sotho history pressed even more the peaceable virtues of diplomacy over the iron-tongue of war. In the early 1800s, many African polities were destroyed and new states formed. In about 1786, a child was born whose wisdom and statecraft made historians hail him as Shaka’s antithesis. Like Shaka, he left behind a form of “autobiography”. 328

You who are fond of praising the ancestors,
Your praises are poor when you leave out the warrior,
When you leave out Thesele, the son of Mokhachane;
For it’s he who’s the warrior of the wars,
Thesele is brave and strong,
That is Moshoeshoe-Moshaila.

**Chief Moshoeshoe’s Praise Poem**

Moshoeshoe, Molema’s undoubted hero of African engagements with Boers and British, embodied wisdom, intelligence and justice. “Moshesh”, the saviour of many small communities surviving Matabele and Shakan onslaughts, founded a state that exemplified the use of political power for nonviolent ends.

---

324 For Motshegare, see supra, pp.51-52 & fn.66, 67-72, 81.
Group remnants and refugees roaming Basutoland’s mountains were absorbed into the new polity, whose language, he stressed, was a modified Setswana, given Kwena predominance. The Sotho polity’s genesis and character emerged during warfare: Nguni attacks, Boer (after 1836) and British (after 1850) encroachments. His concise exposition of Sotho history largely concerned the “Euro-Basuto Wars”. Theal and others sympathised with Orange River Sovereignty (later Free State) Boer settlers, and those British administrators promoting Boer interests. Molema favoured Moshoeshoe.

Both Molema and Theal portrayed Moshoeshoe as a strategist state builder, primarily aiming to preserve Sotho unity. Both thought Shaka a cruel military general and selfish expansionist; Moshoeshoe’s wisdom in using war only to protect Sotho cohesion meant he only challenged Boer and British forces as a last resort. Theal showed the British duplicitously pledging faith to both Boer and Mosotho until order was restored to the region. Britain’s “ultimate abandonment” of the ORS was “a settled point in the imperial policy”. His anti-Sotho partisanship shone through, in calling General Cathcart’s “heroic” white band “friend”, and the Sotho, “foe”.

Theal hailed this Transgariep state’s racial nature after British withdrawal (1854): “[s]eldom has a civilised community been thrown entirely upon its own resources under such unfavourable circumstances”. Its 15,000 Europeans had freedom “to form a government in any manner they might choose”. “Naturally”, black OFS inhabitants had no such liberty, following British social engineering during their brief rule. Black-designated areas swiftly fell to the Sotho (Sikonyela, Gert Taaibosch and Carolus Baatje’s locations), and Moletsane ceded Moshoeshoe his location. Thaba ’Nchu was one of two independent locations inside the OFS.

Molema had no such view of “natural” hierarchy and appended the OFS’s Constitution with its “whites only” electoral laws to expose its racial exclusivity. Boers and Sotho became polarised, but an 1841 treaty gave Moshoeshoe British protection. Ethnicity and race expanded the conflict into a “triangular” struggle among Boers, Sotho and “Bechuana of Thaba Ncho”. Britain colonised the OFS and wished to subdue the Sotho, inciting the 1851 “First Basuto War”. Over the next twenty years, Molema showed, four wars were fought and several treaties concluded. Ostensibly all sides were disputing land, labour, power and independence as, over time, one side inched forward and the other retreated.

Politics and war structured Molema’s account: he wished to display Moshoeshoe’s skills in civilian and military government, rather than the colonial stereotype of savage bellicosity. His sources (chiefly Stewart and Encyclopædia Britannica) let him sidestep Theal, who cryptically withheld victory from Moshoeshoe, and overstated his fears for Cathcart’s men. Theal also “inferred” that Casalis dictated Moshoeshoe’s proud but conciliatory letter (20 December 1852) to the British. Molema stated

329 Molema (1920: 59) added that: “[a]s to get to Basutoland from the mass of the new nation had to travel from north southward, they were called by their neighbours Makone, that is Northerners, or men from the north”. Professor Desmond Cole (An Introduction to Tswaana Grammar. [JHB: Longman, 1955], xv-xvi) termed Setswana “a member of the Sotho group of the South-eastern zone of the Bantu languages”, which also includes a. Southern Sotho b. Northern Sotho (Sепedi) of the Northern Transvaal (Limpopo/Mpumalanga), Lozi (Rotse/Kololo, of Zambia) c. Kgalagadi of Botswana d. and several hybrid languages, Lobedu, Phalaborwa. Molema’s list of the component communities was far more extensive than Theal’s, suggesting some independence from the “master”. Ba-Khatla, Ba-Fokeng, Ba-Peli, Ba-Phalana, Ba-Tsatsing, Ba-[L]ete, Ba-Mookare, Ba-Mokhachane. (Molema’s orthography).


331 Theal, 1915: 7, 327, 328ff, 347.


333 Theal, 1915: 7, 441-42.


335 Molema (1920: 61): Britain’s first invasion (1851) defeated Moshoeshoe’s soldiers at Vierfort. Stewart (1903: 253): this did not bring peace, but “aggravated the murmurs of Basutoland, and led to a second invasion by a British force under Sir George Cathcart (1852)

336 Theal (1915: 7, 341-42) specifically used “inferred”. He displayed bias by calling Cathcart’s men as “our troops”.

337
unequivocally that Moshoeshoe’s forces had “severely defeated” Cathcart’s, citing the same letter to display Moshoeshoe’s diplomacy: “you have shown your power, you have chastised, — let it be enough, I pray you”.337

Whereas Theal stressed the racial enmity between Sotho and British, Stewart included Cathcart’s later praise: he called Moshoeshoe “not only the most enlightened but the most upright chief in South Africa, and one in whose good faith I put the most perfect confidence, and for whom, therefore, I have a sincere respect and regard”.338 Theal’s version of Sotho-OFS relations was compellingly detailed, so it is vital that Molema chose Stewart’s morally forceful account, which recognised Moshoeshoe’s stature.339

Molema knew when to distance himself from Theal.340 Where the latter found Moshoeshoe calculating and “politic”, Stewart thought him deliberately misunderstood (implicitly by Settler historians and politicians) because of alliances with the French missionaries.341 Moshoeshoe’s personal resistance to Christian conversion was not necessarily a weakness. Stewart’s writing-style may seem patronising today but, unlike Theal, he praised Moshoeshoe’s multifaceted character and trusted his motives:

[t]his remarkable man...presents one of those instances rare in African history of a native ruler, humane and sagacious, who loved peace better than war, was always faithful to his word, and though living in the darkness of barbarism, dimly foresaw the benefits to his people of civilisation, perhaps even of Christianity.342

Molema quoted this passage verbatim, without comment, apparently accepting all Stewart’s sentiments. When disagreeing with historians, he usually cited then criticised their opinions.343

The Euro-Basuto Wars subsection demonstrated Molema’s debt to missionary sources, and effective use of mutually opposed sources. His gift for summary enabled him to step smoothly from the early 1850s to subsequent Basuto Wars (1858). Unresolved Sotho-Boer tensions over cattle led to further military engagement in 1865 when, “after much growling on each side”, the antagonists resumed battle. The Boers tried to envassal Moshoeshoe’s people, and Sir Philip Wodehouse ignored Sotho appeals for protection. Here, Molema exposed his historiographical hand:

[t]he protection was not forthcoming for some time, and the Boers resorted to their usual ways of getting land....But too well acquainted with Boer methods, Moshesh once more appealed for British protection.344

**Anti-Boer History? The Allegory of Power and Molema’s Critique of Theal:**

Family and community history, the “Anglo-Boer War” and the First World War shaped Molema’s representation of African interactions with the Boers. His criticism of Boer actions related literally and figuratively to the allegory of power, and gave rise to an evolving critique of Theal. The collapse of the

---

337 Molema, 1920: 61. Theal (1915: v.7, 341-42) included a rather differently-worded letter from the one Molema cited. In Theal’s version, Moshoeshoe pledged faith to Queen Victoria, before giving his part of the bargain: “I will try all I can to keep my people in order in the future”.

338 Stewart, 1903: 252-53.

339 Theal (1915, vol.7) devoted Chapters LIV-LVII and LXI-LXII to the OFS’s affairs in the 1850s.

340 For example, Molema (1920: 357) called him “the champion of the Boers”.

341 Theal (1915: 7, 342) declared the letter to Cathcart, written by Moshoeshoe’s son Nehemiah “in his father’s name”, “the most politic document that has ever been penned in South Africa”. This usage of “politic” united its several meanings: “pertaining...to a constitutional state, as distinct from a despotism”, still current in the late-1900s, or “Apt at pursuing a policy, shrewd...Judicious or expedient...”. It may also connote artfulness and contrivance. (See *OED*, 1980: II, 2228.)

342 Stewart, 1903: 252-53.

343 Molema, 1920: Chapters XIX and XXII.

Rolog-Boer alliance against the Matebele and ensuing Boer colonisation of Tshidi lands led him to berate the Boers’ anti-African actions, beliefs, and unauthorised land-seizures. Chapter One has dealt with the historical events of the late-1830s and 1840s, but the historiographical outcome of what Molema termed “the land-grabbing propensities of the Boers” are built into The Bantu’s theme of power and its abuse.345 History’s repeated lessons became part of The Bantu’s allegorical structure, for he saw great similarities between past “land-grabbing”, and present land alienation under the 1913 Natives Land Act, which aimed at “reducing the Bantu people to serfdom”. In condemning this Act, he referred repeatedly to the old “Republican” mindset, which had denied Africans access to government in the “whites-only” Transvaal and OFS. The allegory of the past Boer-Bantu confrontations was borne out in The Bantu’s penultimate chapter, where he observed, “the happy condition of the Bantu under the Imperial régime is being replaced by the unhappy one under the Republican régime…” 346

As he later argued, pro-Boer history had justified land seizures across the Orange and Vaal Rivers during the Rolog and other Tswana communities’ Thaba ‘Nchu exile. In 1951, Molema disputed Theal’s slanted account of Montshiwa’s return to Lotlhakana (c.1848), and relations with the Boers:

[t]he story, as ingeniously woven and arranged by the historian, Theal, [sic] and his school, is an interesting plea of extenuation and attempted justification of the Dutch Afrikaner thoughts, methods and point of view. They [sic] say, “after the expulsion of the Matabele, the Bakwena returned from their hiding in the desert, and Potgieter gave them permission to reside at their former home, but they were not allowed to possess guns, horses or wagons, the object being to prevent them from acquiring military power”.347

Montshiwa suffered a similar fate that drove him into a further period of exile to avoid sending his men into military service with Kommandant Scholtz, and betraying his Tswana allies.348

Molema evidently developed his critique of Theal over a period of time. Likewise, he formulated a critical approach to British imperialism in later life. In 1920, for The Bantu’s anticipated British readers, he magnified imperialism’s benefits. Like his disapproval of the Boers, this impacted on his history: by hailing Britain’s colonising role, he condoned in the Imperial actions what he condemned in the Boers’. For instance, he understated the role of both Cape and British (General Gordon) in subjugating the Sotho through the “Disarmament Act of Cape Colony” [sic], and the resultant Gun War (1880-1881): “[a]fter that the country came, and has since remained, under the direct control of the Imperial Government, and enjoys the greatest liberty among all native states of South Africa”.349

Throughout, he argued that Boer domination curbed African advancement, while British colonial policy promoted African progress, continuing Sotho “progress” under Moshoeshoe’s successors: Letsie I, Lerethodi, Letsie II, and Griffiths. Molema made his narrative contemporary by raising the controversial question of African “loyalty” to Empire in World War I. The South African government devoted much energy to recruiting Africans for non-combatant, menial service during the European War:

[the Basotho have demonstrated their loyalty. In a practical way during this war, by donations exceeding £52,000 to the war funds by sending men to France, “to be used in whatsoever manner the King shall find fit; for” says Griffiths. In true Mosheshic similes, “shall the Basuto stand by while the King’s house is on fire? No they must run to extinguish the flames.”350

348 See supra, pp.76ff.
349 Molema, 1920: 63. See infra, pp.363-69, for a summative discussion of Molema’s attitude to imperialism.
In 1952, after publishing his second historical work, Chief Moroka, Molema made a statement about contemporary nationalist politics that brought his ideas about nineteenth-century African/Afrikaner conflict up-to-date. While Afrikaners had the British to thank for awakening their nationalist passions, he argued bitingly that Africans could thank Afrikaner Nationalists for “arousing him from his stupor of disunion to grope for his equally unprivileged brother to form a Non-European United front, and having exhausted all constitutional methods of obtaining redress, to launch a determined campaign of Civil Disobedience and Defiance of Unjust Laws”.

The angry anti-Boer sentiments articulated in The Bantu had become a fully-fledged nationalist critique, partly deflected at those Africans still unaware of the importance of political unity.

“A Historical Parallel and a Warning” — “Shaka” and the Power Motive in Nguni History

Molema organised the narrative of Tswana-Sotbo and Nguni history ethnically, rather than chronologically, introducing Shaka, whose career was abruptly ended in 1828, after Moshoeshoe, who reigned until 1870. This structure indicates how entwined the two aspects of his work, history and ethnography, were. Molema revealed Mzilikazi’s motivation for devastating the highveld’s Tswana communities only after his dramatic portrayal of Shaka. The history of African communities really required a more chronologically interactive study. However, he began with Tswana history for personal and thematic reasons: he wished to depict their pastoral and democratic societies as the norm for African societies, and Zulu militarism as an aberration. He also wished to establish his authority as a writer by declaring his closeness to a leading African missionary and the ruling Rolong dynasty.

Carolyn Hamilton’s Terrific Majesty considered the multiple meanings twentieth-century South Africans attached to Shaka. In Theal’s work African history was, she affirmed, peripheral to colonial history. Yet, along with Cory and Walker, he accentuated the details of Shaka’s rise to power, his reorganization of the Zulu army, the instillation of perfect obedience in his followers, and his military innovations. Shaka was generally depicted as aggressive and cruel, and his reign viewed as a period of vast destruction and devastation.

Theal regarded militarism and bravery as specifically Nguni qualities. By the early 1800s, their “method of conducting war” was “simple, but not very effective”. Though chiefs were nominal wartime leaders, their followers were an “undisciplined mob”. Attacks were short, unsystematic forays. However, Mthetwa Chief Dingiswayo and Zulu chief Shaka turned disorganisation into martial precision. They drilled age regiments, subjugating them to a vertical military hierarchy topped by the King. Theal attributed the Zulu Kingdom’s increasingly institutionalised bellicosity to Shaka and followers’ inherent barbarism; “Zulu” and “violent” became almost synonymous.

353 Cf. supra, p.256.
355 Theal, 1919: 278. Theal (1915: 5, 436) used “Tshaka” as his preferred spelling and Molema followed this. Theal (1915: 438): “Tshaka governed his people with such cruelty as is hardly comprehensible by Europeans. Every one who displeased him in any way was put to death”. He added “[t]he army...forty to fifty thousand soldiers — became a vast machine, entirely under command of its head. There was no questioning, no delay, when an order was issued...to presume upon either was to court instant death...an order would sometimes be given which meant death to hundreds, and the jealousy between the regiments was so great that if one hesitated for a moment, the others were ready to cut it down...".
European history had taught Molema that extreme violence was not intrinsically African. In the Lovedale Literature Society and the Glasgow ARA, dawning African nationalism had stimulated debates about the characters of nineteenth-century African chiefs. Concurrently, African newspapers popularised leaders like Shaka and Dingana. A decade after The Bantu’s publication, Skota’s AYR (1930), written by, for and about the modern African elite, included a biography of Shaka, “rehabilitating” him as the Zulu nation’s founder. Most entries illuminated people, eminent through mission school education and attempts to better their communities. Few contemporary chiefs were featured, but it subtly extolled the values and ruling styles of precolonial traditional leaders, like Montsioa and Moroka, to contemporary African nationalist leaders. The AYR Shaka lacked the brutality of Theal’s Tshaka, and instead featured him as a great innovator, strategist, thinker, and proto-nationalist:

[t]hat Tshaka, like William the Conqueror, was a great man nobody can doubt, and to state that he was a cruel King is to pay a man who broke virgin ground and founded a nation the poorest compliment. Had there been no Tshaka there might never have been a proud Zulu nation.

Skota aimed to redeem Shaka and other African leaders from virulent “anti-black propaganda and to write history from a black viewpoint”. Dhlomo’s play, Cetshwayo, and Molema’s later monographs, Moroka and Montshiwa, also countered colonial histories’ destructive portraits of black leaders.

[c]even historians are wont to record the worst that is in some of the Africans they sometimes mention in their books. The result is obvious; young children reading in their schoolbooks that their kings and ancestors were murderers, traitors, etc, are tempted to feel ashamed of their race.

Precolonial chiefly leadership became a contemporary cultural trope. Other politicians, Thema, Msimang and Horatio M’belle joined the Bantu Debating Union, where African history, particularly the successes or failures of “Moshoeshoe, Chaka, Dingaan, Sandilo” were passionately debated.

Molema joined this cultural revaluation of leaders, but balked at praising violence. Indeed, his “Shaka” was a set piece in his criticism of the abuse of power and explored the effects of Shakan tyranny on neighbouring communities. Those fleeing Zulu tyranny, and sheltering with Moshoeshoe beyond the Qalamba [Drakensberg] Mountains were justifiable fugitives from “...Tshaka’s cruel and bloody yoke”. This quotation reveals the metaphoric structure of Molema’s “Tshaka”:

In character, the Zulu-Xosa nations are decidedly more aggressive and warlike. It has been seen how great were the devastations of Zulus under Tshaka and his successors, or of the Matabele under Moselekatse, depopulating large areas of land; how savage and sanguine were the wars the Xosa waged against each other — then the Europeans, first the Dutch, then the British settlers in South Africa....The quondam military prowess of the Zulus is a matter of common knowledge and even those who know least about South Africa have heard of Tshaka the King of the Zulus, who drilled his impis, to what, among so rude a people, must be considered a marvellous degree of perfection. He instilled his love of military glory into the young men as Napoleon did with his French guards; he goaded them into deeds of blood-curdling cruelty, so that in a few years, he had raised himself to the peerless but unenviable height of barbaric notoriety. A soldier who had not “washed his spear” in the enemy’s blood stood no chance of recognition or promotion. A regiment that was repulsed met...no sympathy from this austere Nero; nay, it might be exterminated by his order. Like the

360 Skota, 1930: 3.
361 Thema, 1935: 69c & d.
Spartans of old the Zulu regiments must return victorious or not at all. Thus carrying fire and sword into the surrounding countries, putting to flight the neighbouring tribes, butchering friend and foe alike as it pleased his whim, by systematic cruelty and wholesale massacres. Tshaka had in a quarter of a century reduced his own people...from 100,000 to 10,000, destroyed altogether some millions souls or so, rendered barren and desolate districts formerly fertile and populous, and had inscribed for himself in blood a name in history...

The vocabulary of violence works at two levels: the apparently literal and the allusory. Zulu pugnacity and Shaka’s absolutism activated Molema’s thesaurus of violent terms. By contrast, he hailed Tswana-Sotho enlightened democracy as progressive. At least twenty-seven words and phrases [underlined], created a pattern of violence, and their repetition drenched the reader in Shakan gore. The demographic catastrophe that followed his unbridled savagery echoed Theal’s Tshaka.

Allusion redoubled this passage’s violence; “Napoleon”, “Nero” and “the Spartans” provided cultural translations for British or colonial readers. The three exemplary European tyrants, who loved war and violence for their own sakes, also conveyed to readers of African and European descent that such violence was not innately African. By evoking militaristic European empires, Molema also implicitly questioned Social Darwinist notions of evolutionary progress. Just a century before, Napoleon had conquered almost all Europe, around the time of Shaka’s exploits. The pandemonium of the Napoleonic Wars did not apparently make politicians and historians question the levels of European civilisation.

The extended network of allusion upheld Molema’s evocation of Shaka’s destructive empire-building. Like Theal, Molema blamed Nguni violence on their despotic qualities and the state system that enshrined these. In an early version of the mfecane, he claimed that “tribe after tribe of the Bechuana” suffered the Matebele’s destruction. Theal dwelt on combatants’ race, blood, flaws, skin-colour and “natural” instincts for mutual annihilation, while mapping the highveld’s devastation.

But what if environmental destruction were the cause, not just the effect of Zululand’s transformation? Without Guy’s 1970s and 1980s research into the economic, ecological and demographic influences on the kingdom’s productive processes before and during Shaka’s reign, Molema and his sources could only charge Shaka and Mzilikazi and their militarism with the destruction. Guy believed that historians should be less confident of these political arguments than had earlier writers: “[w]e can neither assert that environmental changes ‘caused’ the Shakan revolution, nor that Shaka necessarily realised that there was a population crisis and solved it by slaughter abroad and contraception at home”. Nor had Shaka’s psychological turmoil been necessarily “then transmuted into military vigour”. The Zulu army’s development was greatly significant, giving “the king fundamental powers of control over the manner and the rate at which the physical environment of Zululand was to be exploited”.

---

364 Molema (1920: 120) also called Tshaka “the Attila of South Africa”.
365 Thema, 28 Apr 1917, “Letter to the Editors of Abantu Batho and iLanga lase Natal”, illustrated how common parallels between Shaka and Napoleon then were. Thema attacked the left-wing Congress clique using Abantu Batho as their mouthpiece. He likened their “self-aggrandizement” to that of “Tshaka” and his European “counterpart”, Napoleon, who had both aimed to unite their races but only succeeded in “disorganizing and subdisorganizing them”. My thanks to Dr Baruch Hirson for this article, from one of few surviving editions from Abantu Batho.
366 Larousse (2000: 1547): after arranging the deaths of Claudius’ heir, Britannicus (55AD), Lucius Claudius Nero (37-68AD) succeeded him and then arranged his mother, Agrippina (59AD), and his wife Octavia’s deaths (62AD). He slew many rich citizens to replenish his coffers, and persecuted Christians whom he blamed for burning Rome (64AD). [Automatically generated link: http://classics.mit.edu/Thucydides/pelopwar.html] the Spartans eventually defeated Athens in the Peloponnesian War. Thereafter, Sparta imposed the oligarchic Regime of the Thirty (404-403BC) on Athens. Molema may have studied these wars at school, but did not specifically cite Thucydides, c.431BC. The History of the Peloponnesian War. (Trans. Richard Crawley).
367 Molema (1920: 93) gave no reference for his quotation from Theal.
368 Molema (1920: 85) included the “Bakwena, Ba-Mangwato, Ba-Ngwaketse, Barolong. Such was the more than pestilential advance of Moselekatse when he broke from the sway of Tshaka”. Academic revisions to mfecane/difaqane scholarship are discussed in supra, pp.57ff
Environmental impact on economic productivity and social process surpassed the king’s ability to control circumstances.369

Recent reassessment of the mfecane/difaqane, discussed in Chapter One, shifted the historical debate from “great men” to social interaction with the natural environment, and the spread of trade networks. The growth of arms trading and the “demand for bonded labour emanating from the Cape Colony”, which Griquas and Bergenaars seized from the Sotho-Tswana, explained the highveld’s disruption.370

This research post-dated The Bantu, which censured Shaka sharply, yet viewed his career in a partly Africanist light. Comparing him to epic European autocrats, Molema began dispelling the myth that Africans lacked a sense of their own history. In its own terms, his “Tshaka” is a powerful moral study. Tshaka’s dying words helped to prefigure another aspect of The Bantu’s thematic structure: colonialism. As his brothers’ Dingana and Umhlangana’s spears drew his life’s blood, Tshaka prophetically cried: “‘You think to rule the land after me, but I see the white man coming to take it from you’”.371

Dingana’s ferocity, Molema added, in Edwardian slang, “completely put [Tshaka] in the shade”. Nine years later, Tshaka’s prophecy came true; Piet Retief and his Voortrekkers demanded permission to settle “west of the Tugela”. Molema described unemotionally what became in colonial histories and Afrikaner popular culture the epitome of brutal Zulu perfidy. Dingana “affab[y]” invited them “to take beer and see a Zulu war dance. They took beer, saw the Zulu war dance, and then were killed”. Molema’s description of Blood River and the Boers’ annual commemorations treated both belligerent parties with equally inscrutability.372

Molema drew no moral from the Anglo-Zulu War, the kingdom’s partition and Britain’s annexation of Zululand (1887). After Dinizulu’s trial, Molema conceded that the Zulu approved his son, Solomon’s recognition as recompense for “the indignities Dinizulu had suffered”.373 In his view, British rule would pacify Zululand more than any Zulu ruler had. Strangely, perhaps, he accepted British colonisation, but had scorned Boer seizure of Rolong lands. The Bantu distinguished between “deserving” Africans (the Tswana-Sotho) and the undeserving, the Zulu and Matebele, who lived by “rapine and bloodshed”.374

Molema’s “Tshaka” belonged to his extended allegory of power. Foucault’s thesis of the “‘King’s two bodies’” applies: “the King was supposed to have both an actual and a symbolic body, the latter in attendance at state and juridical occasions”. Foucault used a scene from Dickens’ A Tale of Two Cities as illustration, the execution of Damien, who desired to slay the king. In similar vein, Molema analysed, through Shaka, the organisation of precolonial power. Foucault analysed European displays of power: “hanging, drawing, and quartering”, which displayed “the effects of sovereign power…in cruel quasi-theatrical spectacles. Intelligible as acts of centralized power”.375 Molema understood that state power over the individual displays itself very effectively in taking life ceremonially. Like justice, it must be enacted. He reviled all absolute power and made the Zulu and Matebele prefigure South Africa’s future under an undemocratic, segregationist government, after the British Empire’s departure.

373 Molema (1920: 83-84): “Zululand continued in such a disturbed condition that, in 1887, it was thought that annexation of the country would be the only way of assuring peace. This was accordingly done. The matter appeared quite differently to the Zulu monarch, and the following year there was more trouble in Zululand”.
374 Molema (1920: 85) did not reveal a source for this quotation.
The Frontier “Tradition” in Molema’s History:

Unlike fifteenth-century England and France, the parties to the Xhosa-Cape Hundred Years War (1778-1878) had no thirty-mile channel between them; they had the Fish, Kei and Keiskamma Rivers. The “frontier”, which has entailed nearly a century’s historical wrangling, was physical and cultural:

[The frontier between white and black…was thus the product of two of the greatest human odysseys and endeavours, the terrestrial one of Africa and the maritime one of Europe. It was an encounter moulded by the many interwoven frontiers which affected Europeans and Africans as they came to that historical rendezvous. It was something more. The human collision of the Cape’s frontier became as well therefore a particular frontier of the enlarged global consciousness that sprang from the Enlightenment and from the intensified thrust of the aggressive expansion heralded by Adam Smith in 1776.]

The eastern frontier was a site of historiographical confrontation, beginning with the Settler school and its early Liberal critics: Macmillan, (1919, 1929), De Kiewiet (1927) and Walker (1928). Legassick, Dubow and De Kock have elucidated the ideological framework within which many historians, often unconsciously, made the “frontier” metaphoric shorthand for the country’s racial segregation.

Legassick’s essay bears on recent cultural historians’ debates about “discursive space”. In his analysis, historians characterised the American and South African frontiers as cardinal sites of colonial conflict. These writers often followed historian, FJ Turner, who posited the collision of that binary coupling “savagery and civilisation” on the American frontier. Native Americans, for him, were a “‘savage obstacle’” not “‘a constituent element in frontier society’”. American historians believed the frontier excluded the colonised, while South Africa’s historians found inclusion and exclusion on its frontiers: “

[Yet in the South African situation there has been a tendency to move between the idea of frontier as isolation from the parent society and the frontier as meeting-point of black and white cultures, peoples, and societies.]

To Settler historians, frontier colonists held the moral advantage over barbarians (“Bantu cattle-thieves”). Liberal historians, emerging as Theal’s career ended, thought the frontier an interactive zone inviting “‘the formation of a new society and the establishment of new economic and social bonds’” They hailed colonial liberals, Dr John Philip and Sir George Grey anew as liberalism’s forerunners — and the Settler school’s anathema. The Liberals extrapolated their notions of a complex frontier, site of concurrent cultural and economic exchange and warfare, against the setting of their own contemporary involvement (after 1920) in debates about segregation, land, and urbanisation.

Historiographically, Molema stood between Settler historians and the Liberals. While Saunders correctly identified his reliance on Theal, he omitted Molema’s anticipation of Macmillan, De Kiewiet

---

377 Mostert, 1992: xvii. (Mostert cited Molema as a reference.)
382 Legassick, 1980: 58.
383 Molema (1920: 104) exposed Theal’s conservative criticism of Lord Glenelg’s decision to overturn British annexation of land between the Fish and Kei Rivers (1836) and his attack on liberal and missionary intervention: “[o]utside of Dr Philip’s little party in Cape Town, there was but one opinion: that [Glenelg’s despatch] destroyed all hope of the enforcement of order, and placed life and whatever property was left in the eastern districts at the mercy of the Kaffirs”. Also Legassick, 1980: 63, 65-69.
Molema echoed the Settler school, but presaged the Liberals’ view of race relations, in seeing the frontier as interactive. He hesitated to criticise Dutch and British colonists in the early frontier wars, yet Pringle rescued him. An established poet might openly proclaim in verse what a young, previously unpublished Motswana doctor risked censure in declaring openly. Of the frontier Xhosa’s resistance to the colonists, Pringle wrote:

Pringle’s poem voiced Molema’s protest, overturning with three question-marks Settler stereotypes of thieving, savage Xhosa. Radical in his day, Pringle seemingly betrayed fellow colonists by terming them “bandits”, along with black frontier-dwellers. Yet he called Dutch Christians the greater abusers, as their religion charged them with caring for those less-enlightened. The poem appealed to Molema’s liberal spirit, enabling him to protest the negative ascriptions that colonists applied to Africans.

He began the chapter on the “Euro-Xosa Wars” with the dictum that “[i]t is…not surprising that the contact of Europeans with the warlike…Bantu should have resulted in perpetual friction and war”. “Warlike” interfered with Molema’s relativism; otherwise, he suggested that adversaries on each side of the frontier had morals and cultures of equal standing. What redeemed British manipulation of Ngqika (1818/19) or the shooting of Chief Hintsa (1834/35) from being warlike? In Part II, Molema did not openly censure the Empire’s past actions, possibly to avoid alienating his readers early in The Bantu. Yet, he again displayed Africanism by calling the Xhosa a nation state fighting an international conflict; they valued their land and prestige as much as the colonists’ across the rivers did.

The narrative of the nine wars outlined the advance of colonial expansion. Initially, the eastern frontier separated Dutch from Khoisan. Next under fire were the Xhosa, “the first representatives of the Bantu race” in 1778. He discerned Dutch and Xhosa errors of judgement during the next three years’ conflict over material questions of land, cattle and water (the Fish River), and the ideological issue of political

With freeborn pride
He scorns the herdsman, nor regards the scar
Of recent wound — but burnishes for war
His assegai and targe of buffalo hide.
He is a Robber? — True; it is a strife
Between the black-skinned bandit and the white.
A savage? — Yes; though loth to aim at life,
Evil for evil fierce he requite.
A heathen? — Teach him then thy better creed,
Christian! If thou deserv’st that name indeed.

Thomas Pringle’s “The Caffre”

---

384 Macmillan (1929: 139-40) mirrored Philip’s understanding of “…how necessary it was that the British Government …take full responsibility and control by acknowledging the Kafirs [sic] as British subjects”.
387 Molema (1920: 90-98): the 1818/19 manipulation of Ngqika precipitated the Fifth Frontier War; the shooting of Hintsa occurred during the 1834/35 Sixth Frontier War.
388 Molema, 1920: 96, Davenport (1991: 114-28, & Map, 114): the shifting “Eastern Frontier” zone moved as white farming and trading communities expanded. Firstly, Van Riebeeck’s hedge, Kirstenbosch Gardens separated Khoi and Dutch. The Frontier expanded rapidly along with the 18th-century Trekboers. Governor Rijk Tulbagh’s 1770 boundary was the Gamtoos River. By 1778, Governor van Plettenberg set the frontier at Great Fish River. Thereafter, the Zuurveld, between the Sundays and Fish Rivers, saw major Xhosa-Khoisan-Settler conflict. In 1809, the British tried to expel the Xhosa beyond the Fish and to settle whites in the Zuurveld. Frontier wars erupted in reaction to such attempts to “fix” the frontier, which gradually moved eastward: 1812: Great Fish, 1847: Keiskamma River, 1865: Great Kei, Inland the frontier moved northeast along these rivers: 1798: Baviaans; 1824: Koonap; 1847: Kliplaat; 1853: Black Kei; 1865: the Indwe River enclosed the Glen Grey region. The inclusion of new Xhosa territories also enlarged the Colony: 1865: Ciskei (British Kaffraria). 1879: Fingoland & Griqualand East. 1885: Gcaleka-, Bomvana-, Thembu-, & Emissary Thembulands. 1886: Xesibe, and 1894: Pondoland.
domination. When Britain seized the Cape (1806), the Xhosa seemingly gained the advantage, largely through firearms bought from the Khoi. The British régime then took on “the heritage of Xosa wars”.  

Molema supplied either side’s casus belli and military tactics in each war. Countering Theal, he created heroic black figures, neither monsters (Shaka) nor wily diplomats (Moshoeshoe). He delineated this turbulent century’s power shifts, from equilibrium between the parties (up to the Fifth War, 1819), to Britain’s marginally successful interventionism (following 1835). The Xhosa resisted forcefully, but suffered when the British co-opted the Mfengu to their side in the 1846 War. After their victory, Britain proclaimed the new “Crown Colony of Kaffraria”, between the Kei and Keiskamma Rivers.

Britain’s “native policy” was gradually emerging. Initially, British control of the Xhosa was precarious, as the Eighth War (1850-53) affirmed. From the Ninth (and final) War (1877), Molema drew the lesson that opposition to colonial incursions was doomed to failure, leaving African communities disunited. As a consciously modern scholar, reflecting on the 1870s wars, Molema believed that African rather than “tribal” unity offered the only resistance to colonisation. He cited geographer-ethnographer Ratzel:

[r]ecent years have again shown abundantly how little the South African tribes can do in spite of their numbers and their often conspicuous valour, for want of the mutual confidence which might unite them and give a firm ground for their efforts.  

Partial unity surfaced only thirty-five years after this war, with the SANNC’s formation. Yet, as Chapter Six shows, the missionaries’ peaceable, constructive incorporation of Christian Africans into frontier society raised white and Xhosa hackles, as each group felt its security and livelihood threatened.

In The Bantu, Molema’s perspective ripened into a complexity that placed him between two historiographical “schools”. This ambiguity should at least have troubled his 1980s critics, whether they thought him “Thealite” (Saunders), or “mission-inspired” (Smith). This chapter has shown that neither of their canonical paradigms adequately characterised Molema’s work.

---

389 Molema, 1920: 96-98.
391 The rivalry between Jabavu and Rubusana was exacerbated by Mfengu –Xhosa divisions. See infra, p.338.