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# Dr S. Modiri Molema (1891-1965) : The making of an historian

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**ABSTRACT: DR S. MODIRI MOLEMA (1891-1965):**

**THE MAKING OF AN HISTORIAN**

This thesis finds that Dr SM Molema made a considerable contribution to the construction of the history of black people in South Africa, and was the first African historian to do so. Yet, he and other African writers were marginalised from the mainstream twentieth-century canons of South African history. Therefore, the thesis investigates the reasons for which Dr Molema (a medical doctor) became an historian and an ethnographer in 1920, and explores the nature of his critical engagement with the ways in which these disciplines represented black people. To understand the controversial treatment of black historical writers, this study appraises South African historiography and its tendency to construct debates *about* black people, while rendering black writers marginal to such debates.

Further, the thesis explores the generic complexity of Molema's work and finds he wrote in a hybrid genre, autoethnography. This complexity may have contributed to the many misreadings of his work. This study outlines the generic specificity and implications of autoethnography and finds that, like autobiography, autoethnography has been one of the genres of the Self (of personal testimony) that, under colonialism and apartheid, many black writers employed in providing corrective versions of mainstream versions of South African history. Autoethnography enabled Molema to represent his own life, but — more importantly — that of his community (the Rolong boo RaTshidi of Mafikeng) as a form of cultural translation for readers at home and abroad.

Methodologically, the thesis understands that Molema's own family history played a large part in motivating him to write history. In order to explore this relationship between the experience of history and its representation, the thesis has a dual structure: the first four chapters present biographical studies of three generations of the Molema family: Chief Molema, the founder of Mafikeng, his son Chief Silas Thelesho Molema, and Silas' son, Modiri Molema, the historian and ethnographer. Chapters Five and Six present an exposition and critique of his first work, *The Bantu Past and Present.* Dr Molema's biographies of Chiefs Moroka and Montshiwa are used as ancillary texts.

**KEYWORDS**
(these refer to thematic areas)

Autoethnography, Life Genres, historiography, biography, African History, Molema, Plaatje, Mafikeng, ANC History, and Rolong boo RaTshidi.

# A NOTE ON PRIMARY SOURCES

As the Introduction indicates, this thesis owes its existence to the careful preservation of archival resources concerning the Molema-Montshiwa clan of the Rolong boo RaTshidi and the district around Mafikeng.[1] Marcelle Jacobson's introduction to the catalogue of *The Silas T Molema and Solomon T Plaatje Papers* tells the remarkable story of the papers' discovery in the late-1970s. The Molema family and researchers John Comaroff, Tim Couzens and Brian Willan collaborated to lodge these papers at the University of the Witwatersrand.[2]

*The Molema-Plaatje Papers* are a large collection: using the Catalogue's classification, this thesis relied particularly on sections ***Ad, Seetsele Modiri Molema***: correspondence, manuscripts, documents and personal papers. Dr Molema's letters were crucial in constructing his own biographical portrait, in Chapters Three and Four. The manuscripts of his *History of the Barolong* [Ad6.1] and his biographies of *Solomon T Plaatje* and *The Scapegoat of the Boer War* (General Piet Cronjé) [Ad6.4 and Ad6.3, respectively] contributed to the writing of Chapters One and Two. Also valuable was the correspondence located in ***Ae, Other Family Members***, viz. Harriet Molema Montsioa, Morara Tolo Molema and Miscellaneous (Sefetoge's letters). ***Section Aa, Silas T Molema*** contains the considerable weight of Silas assisted in telling the story of his life in Chapter Two. ***Section G, Maps and Sketches***, helped to locate Silas' central roles in drawing boundaries, in the Barolong Farms disputes and in negotiations surrounding the Jameson Raid.

Other aspects of the Molema history were gleaned from ***Ab, Joshua Molema*** and ***Ac, Sebopioa Molema***. While *The Molema-Plaatje Papers* have few primary sources dealing directly with Chief Molema himself, Chapter One relied on Section ***Ba, Chief Montsioa***, for details of the embattled history of the Tshidi-Rolong (1850-1896). Material from the Transvaal Archives substantiates these documents (*see below*). In dealing with the conflicts besetting the Tshidi (1900—1920), Chapter Two made use of documents in ***Sections Bb-Bf, Chiefs Wessels, Badirile, Lekoko, Bakolopang and Lotlamoreng***. Further insight into Tshidi history and politics were obtained from ***Section C, Tshidi Barolong Tribal Papers***. Photographs in ***Section F*** have been a rich source of personal, community and cultural history. Documents outlining Silas Molema and Sol T Plaatje's personal and business relationship are archived in ***Section D, Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje***.

Less well-known is the sizeable collection of *Molema Papers* in the University of South Africa Archive, Pretoria. ***ACC142*** and ***M842*** (microfilm) contain a prime collection of the essays that Dr Molema wrote in later life on anthropological, political and historical matters. In addition, the African National Congress Papers AD2186 has microfilmed some of Dr Molema's historical essays and correspondence with other ANC leaders. These documents are cited throughout the thesis.

Material from the State and Provincial Archives has helped to document the history of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century education, missionary activity, land claims, politics and legal proceedings. Chapter One relied on documents in the Secretary of State's Archives [***SS***], of the South African Republic (Transvaal Archives), some copies of which are also found in the Molema-Plaatje Papers (***Section Ba***). These documents contributed to reconstructing the biography of Chief Molema. His initiative in sending his fifth son, Silas, to Healdtown for his education (Chapter Two), is documented in the amazingly well-preserved archive of the Secretary-General for Education (Cape Archives). Inspectors Reports in the SGE Archives also cover the period during which Dr Molema attended both Healdtown and Lovedale (see Chapter Three).

The Archives of the Native Commissioner for Mafeking (***1/MFK***) provided records relating to Rolong politics during the South African War, and Silas Molema's role in arresting Abram Matuba, an act that planted the seeds of future conflict with the Rapulana Rolong. The enormous legal case, between the Tshidi and the Rapulana Rolong is housed in the Native Affairs Archive [***NTS***]. The labyrinthine correspondence between the warring parties, their lawyers, the local Superintendent of Natives, the Native Commissioner(s), the Secretary of Native Affairs and his deputy, unfold the story of ethnic conflict, stoked by the new South African state's increasing determination to impose an "official" history of the region on the Rolong. Simultaneously, this and related documents in the NTS and Governor General's Archives [***GG***] gradually trace the state's diminution of the political and

1 Cf. *supra*, p.16.

2 See Jacobson, pp.vii-ix. In his Introduction to *The Mafeking Diary of Sol T Plaatje*, John Comaroff relates (Plaatje, 1973 & 1999: 6-7) how Barolong Victor Molema, grandson of Plaatje and Silas Molema disclosed the existence of the Diary manuscript and various other family papers to him in 1969.

administrative powers of African chiefs, culminating in legislation limiting the jurisdiction of "Native Chiefs" in British Bechuanaland (***GG 380, 7/3329, 1924***). Silas personally delivered a petition protesting against this law to General JBM Hertzog.[3]

Information relating to the state's attempts to locate, use and abuse the histories of the Tswana communities around Mafikeng is archived in the fascinating case, *Daniel Mokhatle & Others v JBM Hertzog* (Transvaal Provincial Division, NTS 315 15/15, 1 1924). The University of Cape Town's *Lestrade Papers* contain Plaatje's ethnographical evidence at the Mokhatle Trial (***UCT, BC255F3***).

University collections in South Africa, Glasgow and London have been crucial in establishing sequences of events and the correspondence concerning them, as well as the participation of the African elite (Silas Molema and Plaatje, in particular) in giving evidence to government commissions, and the education of Dr Modiri Molema and his friend, Dr JS Moroka. The University of the Witwatersrand Government Papers provided access to major twentieth-century government commissions that formed the basis of territorial segregation: the *Imperial Blue Book of the British Bechuanaland Land Commission* (1886), the *South Africa Native Affairs Commission* (1903-1905), the *Beaumont Commission* (1916) and the *Western Transvaal Land Commission* (1918). Further *Imperial Blue Book*s record the communications between Chief Montshiwa and surrounding colonial states, and give evidence of Chief Molema's activities in early Mafikeng. The Blue Books also provide evidence of the role of literacy in Montshiwa's dealings with the Transvaal, Cape, and British governments, through the emerging roles of Stephen Lefenya and Silas Molema. Chapters One, Two, Three, and Six rely on information from these sources.

On the question of medical training, the *SGE* (Cape Archives) and Lovedale Papers in the Cory Library at Rhodes University attest to Lovedale's construction of the Victoria Hospital. The Glasgow University Archives [GUA] ***Matriculation Albums*** substantiate Dr Molema's letters to his father concerning the curricula of his medical degrees. The GUA also provided access to official histories of the university's medical programmes. The Edinburgh University Archives similarly provided access to Dr Moroka's medical curriculum and results.

The Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society [WMMS] Archives (School of Oriental and African Studies) house invaluable data on the history of missionary involvement in the southern African interior, and reference Chief Molema's role. In many ways, he was one of those missionaries, but was also part of the Tshidi community under threat of colonisation. He found himself at loggerheads with missionary John Webb, whose letters document their relationship and provide an angle on Mafikeng society in the 1870s. Missionary Ludorf's letters document his relationship with Chief Montshiwa and his conflict with the Boer Republics. SOAS also houses the autobiographical papers of key witness to the founding of the South African Natives National Congress, H Selby Msimang. Similarly, the University of the Witwatersrand's Historical Papers Archive has the manuscript of Dr Molema's contemporary, RV Selope Thema's autobiography. Thema's comments on Lovedale and on segregation, feature in Chapter Three.

Inspection Reports in the Standard Bank Archives testified to the financial status of Silas Molema immediately after the South African War. Further information about the Siege of Mafikeng was to be found in the Mafikeng Museum.

Another category of primary sources, Newspapers, offered invaluable information on daily events (the *Mafeking Mail*) during the Siege of Mafikeng. *Koranta ea Becoana*, *Tsala ea Becoana* and *Tsala ea Batho* often featured Plaatje's, and sometimes, Silas Molema's opinions (1901-c.1915). Other newspapers in several South African languages provide insight into emergent African Nationalism in the post-Union period.

The Interviews that I conducted in Mafikeng and Gaborone (1991-1992) with members of the Molema family, and Molema family associates and friends, Spencer Minchin, Rre Piriepa Thwane and Victor Mapanya have been essential to understanding and attempting to reconstruct the texture of the lives of three generations of the Molema family.

3 See *supra*, p.130 & fn.192.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I with to acknowledge my gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Bruce Murray, whose patience has somehow kept pace with a project that took far longer than expected, frustrating his plans for a relaxed retirement, and a cricket-watching life. At his first lecture 1977, he impressed us with the first principles of historical method: "you must have the documents". This was my first lesson along empirical lines, and one never to be forgotten.

Many people have assisted me in various ways with this thesis, but that I shall thank here only those directly connected to the research and the writing.

Members of the Molema family were extremely generous with their time and reflections on Dr SM Molema's life. Mr Solomon Molema and his wife Elisabeth were unfailingly kind, even helping me conduct and translate the interview with Rre-Piriepa Thwane, Dr Molema's steward at Motsosa Estate, who also shared his memories of Chief Silas Thelesho Molema. Both Professor Leloba Molema of the University of Botswana and Ms Warada Molema of Mafikeng provided me with insights into Dr Molema that conveyed his serious academic and professional side, his political intensity and his deep parental love for his family. I must also thank Mrs Seodi Khama, Leloba's sister, for her hospitality and assistance during my interview with their father, Dr Sefetoge Molema, who — though elderly and frail — recounted some memories of his brother, Dr SM Molema.

Perhaps the liveliest informant, Mr Victor Mapanya of Mafikeng, Dr SM Molema's clerk and friend, was a remarkable source of information; he has since passed away, and I regret not being able to present a copy of my thesis to him. I also thank the late Mr Spencer Minchin, Dr Molema's attorney, and the son of Chief Silas' attorney, for a highly professional interview. Spencer stipulated that "no personal questions" would be answered pertaining to Dr Molema's married life or to monetary details of his Estate. He kindly took us on a guided tour of "Boer War" Mafikeng — the 1881-84 and 1899-1902 Wars — and wept on recounting the slaying of Chief Montshiwa's advisor, Christopher Bethell.

Prof. Tim Couzens provided some of the inspiration behind this project as long ago as 1978, when he narrated the fascinating story of the Molema-Plaatje Papers' donation to Wits University. I cannot thank him sufficiently for the guidance, humour and friendship that he has offered me over the years. Likewise, I thank Dr. Brian Willan, author of an incomparable biography of Sol T Plaatje, who welcomed a total stranger with a passionate interest in Molemas and Plaatjes into his Cambridgeshire home and opened troves of information to me with the greatest generosity. The late doyen of Tswana Anthropology, Prof. Isaac Schapera was exceptionally generous at our interviews, and presented to me typed copies of the Genealogy of the Barolong booraTshidi that he and Chief Sebopiwa Molema had drawn up in 1943 and of his research on Barolong Farms.

Two friends and mentors will always have my gratitude for their challenging questions and practical counsel: the late Professor Phyllis Lewsen and Dr Baruch Hirson. Phyllis' luminous biography of John X Merriman provides continual inspiration, and reminds me of what it is possible to achieve in the field of biography. Baruch's fascination with history's overlooked actors encouraged me to pursue this biography of an "under-known" South African.

I owe a debt of honour to my colleague at the now-dismantled Vista University, Prof. Stephen Maphike, who helped me translate the Dr Molema's valuable and touching letters to his father and family, which form the core of the biographical chapters on Dr Molema. Ms Nini Seatlholo also kindly answered translation inquiries. Prof. Neil Parsons has, over the years, very kindly answered sporadic questions on Rolong and Tswana research, and Prof. George Shepperson, was likewise generous in sending me a copy of his fascinating article on the heritage of David Livingstone.

I would also like to thank the following Universities and Institutions, for allowing me to use their research facilities: at the University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers, for access to the Molema-Plaatje Papers, I thank Michelle Pickover, Anna Cunningham, and Carol Archibald; the staff of the Government Papers Division and the Africana Library; at Vista University, librarians: Mrs Charlotte Kunene and Mrs Millicent Moloko; at the Cory Library, Rhodes University, Ms Shirley Stewart; the staff of the UNISA Archives, for access to their collection of Molema Papers; Glasgow University Archives and Mr Alistair Tough and other Duty Archivists, for friendly and helpful communications in person and online; Edinburgh University Archives, for material on Dr JS Moroka; at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies Library, London University, David Blair and Patricia Larby, and the Duty Archivists at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University. Over the years, staff at the Cape Archives and South African Library in Cape Town, and the State Archives and State Library in Tshwane (Pretoria) were unfailingly helpful — and, happily, increasingly computerised. In addition, I thank the Mafikeng Museum and the Standard Bank of South Africa, the National Library of Scotland, and particularly Ms Estela Dukan of the Royal Society of Surgeons of Scotland, Edinburgh, and Ms Lizzie MacGregor of the Scottish Poetry Library, Edinburgh.

At the University of Johannesburg, I am very grateful to Professors Craig Mackenzie and Rory Ryan, and to Dr Johannes Manyaka of the Soweto Campus, for granting me a sabbatical in which to complete this thesis. In the English Department, Lawrence Ngoveni, Phomolo Mosito and Thabo Tsehloane, and former colleagues, Sue Marais, Michael Gardiner and Antony Goedhals, gave me tremendous support. I also thank my former colleagues in the University of the Witwatersrand's History Department, Profs Noel Garson, Phil Bonner and Peter Delius, and Richard Cope, Graeme Neame, Michael Bratchell, and Gilly Rice.

Over the years, friends and colleagues helped me formulate aspects of this thesis: Karin Shapiro, Stephen Clingman, Deborah James, Carolyn Hamilton, Kathy Eales, Suzie Joubert, Haidar Eid, Anton Basson, Jansie Niehaus, Ben Mazower, Debbie Newton, and my cousins, Glyn Silbermann and Wanda Steyn. To the dear people who held me up so often, Shelley Tracey, Colin Purkey, Andra Eisenberg, Phillipa Norman, Karin Hunt, Liz Barrow and Ntombi Mdunge, you are the guiding strength every PhD student really needs.

Not quite lastly, and with all my love, I thank my family Sue and Penny Starfield, Alan, Sophia and Jeremy Morris, Jean-Jacques, David and Lana Kupiec, who have either all survived the writing of theses, or having theses written in their presence. They all say that life improve post-doctorally.

My beloved parents, Anita and Laurie, have given us all an abiding love of history and literature; they do not just read books, but treat them as old and valued family members whom they are honoured to welcome into their home. My parents also keep alive a great Eastern European and African tradition of oral story-telling, which tethers us to the past, from where we came, and the present, where we are now. In the last months, my father read every page of this thesis, which indicates his considerable powers of endurance, and his determination to help me complete this thesis. We are blessed, as their daughters, to have grown up with their love, trust, and guidance, and now their friendship.

# TERMINOLOGY & ABBREVIATIONS



## A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Southern African place names suffered under colonisation, as settlers and governments attempted to reproduce in writing what they thought indigenous people were saying to them. The decolonisation process beginning in the 1960s saw "Botswana" replace "Bechuanaland" and "Lesotho" replace "Basotholand". Since South Africa's liberation in 1994, precolonial place names are gradually being restored, as in the case of the town in which much of this narrative is set: "Mafikeng". However, it gained worldwide fame as "Mafeking" in late May 1900, with the lifting of the seven-month Boer Siege. The town — and its spelling — is closely bound up with the Molema family's history, and the changing fortunes of the region. Chief Molema Tawana established the town in the 1850s, naming it after the area's main feature, the large natural rocky *lekgotla*: *mafika-kgoa-choana* (place among the rocks), shortened to Mafikeng. In Setswana, the locative "*-ng*" ending preserves the original meaning. White traders who settled northeast of Molema's Town corrupted the name to "Mafeking". In 1972, the government of the independent apartheid Bantustan of Bophutatswana established its headquarters northwest at Mmabatho.[4] This thesis uses "Mafikeng" as a rule, except when referring to documents that carry Mafeking in the title. The titles of people that included the word "Mafeking" are also preserved, e.g. the Regional Magistrate, Mafeking.

Since 1994, the names of key early twentieth-century laws to which this thesis refers, have been changed. Some, like the 1927 Native [now "Black"] Administration Act, have been repealed (late 2005). The 1913 Natives Land Act, which Silas and Modiri Molema and Sol Plaatje opposed vigorously, is now (together with the 1936 Natives Land and Trust Act) known as the "Black Land Act". Many changes the NLA enforced have yet to be reversed.

*Names relevant to Tswana History*:
Bechuanaland Protectorate:
"On 27 January 1885, an order-in-council established British power and jurisdiction in the vast territory bound by the Transvaal, the Cape Colony, the 20th meridian of east longitude, and the 22 parallel of south latitude."[5] In Setswana, the area was called Tshireletšong, according to ZK Matthews.[6] On gaining its independence from Britain in 1966, the country became known as Botswana (place of the Tswana).
British Bechuanaland:
"The part of the new protectorate lying south of the Molopo River was proclaimed the Crown Colony of British Bechuanaland; the area between the Molopo and the 22nd parallel remained under imperial protection."[7]
Tswana-Sotho: while the usual appellation in modern historiography is "Sotho-Tswana", Molema uses placed the Tswana first, using the older spellings "Bechuana" or "Becoana".[8]
Names of African Leaders and Places: white travellers, missionaries and historians garbled these considerably. As African orthographies have transformed over the years, African writers have also rendered these names variously. This thesis uses the following spellings for African leaders who play important roles in the Molema story.

Dithakong (Cape): site of a significant battle in 1823, was spelled "Lattakoo" in missionary sources and "Lithakong" in the orthography of *Sesotho-tsa-Maseru* (Lesotho). Not be confused with the burial ground of Rolong chiefs at Dithakong near Lotlhakana (Transvaal).[9]

4 See *infra*, p.50.

5 Paul Maylam, 1980. *Rhodes, The Tswana and the British: Colonialism, Collaboration and Conflict in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1885-1899*. (Westport, Connecticut. Greewood Press), p.19. See infra, p.80.

6 ZK Matthews, "Barolong". In Isaac Schapera (ed.), 1954. *Ditirafalô tsa Merafe ya Batswana, ba Lefatshe la Tshiriletsô*. (Lovedale: The Lovedale Press), p.1.

7 Maylam, 1980: 19.

8 See *infra*, p.251, on Molema's Tswana-centric approach to history.

9 See *infra*, p.40.

Gontse: Chief of the Rolong-boo-Ratlou; spelled "Xonntse" in documents and in earlier historical works.
Matlaba: Chief of the Rolong-boo-Rapulana; often spelled "Machabi", "Matlabê" or "Machavie".
Montshiwa: Chief of the Rolong-boo- RaTshidi; spelled "Monthsiwa", "Monsua" or "Monstioa".
Moroka: Chief of the Rolong-boo-Seleka; spelled "Moroco" or "Moroko".
Moshoeshoe: Chief of the Sotho; often spelled "Moshesh".
Moswete: Chief of the Rolong-boo-Ratlou; spelled "Mošwêtê", "Moshete" or "Moshette".
Mzilikazi: Chief of the AmaNdebele: spelled "Msilikazi" and "Moselekatse" in Setswana accounts, or "Matselikatse" in some Boer accounts. Some historians, like Macmillan, used the Setswana spelling.
Sefunelo: father of Moroka; variously spelled, eg. "Sehunelo" or "Sibbonel".
Shaka: Chief of the AmaZulu; spelled "Tshaka" (Theal and Molema), and Chaka in the Sesotho and Setswana orthographies. Thomas Mofolo's novel about the chief, *Chaka* (1925) uses this spelling.
Tshabadira: an important Seleka leader; Moroka's brother was sometimes also called "Sabbadere".

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## FOOTNOTE & BIOGRAPHICAL CONVENTIONS

In footnotes, the first time a published book is cited, I have given:

Author's first name, Author's surname, Date of Publication. *Title*. (Place of Publication: Publisher), page.

For subsequent citations, I use the following convention: Author's Surname, Date: Page. Should a quotation from the text follow, the convention becomes: Author's Surname (Date: Page): "quotation".

When citing works that Dr Molema used, I have generally not been able to find the same editions that he used. As he did not provide publication details in *The Bantu*'s bibliography, I have included the publication details of the editions from which I quote in square, rather than round, brackets, eg:
Molema (1920: 354) cited Machiavelli [1513], *The Prince*, chapter viii. [London JM Dent, 1943], pp.63-69.

In the bibliography, published works are generally cited as:

Author's surname, Author's first name, Date of Publication. *Title*. (Place of Publication: Publisher).

Articles or chapters from edited anthologies:
*In footnotes*:

Author's first name, Author's surname. "Article or Chapter Title". In Author's first name, Author's surname (ed), Date of Publication, *Title of Edited Anthology*. (Place of Publication: Publisher), page.

*In Bibliography*:

Author's surname, Author's first name. "Article or Chapter Title". In [+] Author's first name, Author's surname(s) (ed[s]), Date of Publication, *Title of Edited Anthology*. (Place of Publication: Publisher), page.

If an article forms part of an edited anthology, the individual article is listed in the footnotes, and the collection is listed in the Bibliography.

Journal Articles:
*In footnotes,*

Author's first name, Author's surname. "Article Title". In [+] *Journal Title*, Date of Publication, Issue Number or Month, page.

*In Bibliography*:

Author's surname, Author's first name. "Article Title". In *Journal Title*, Date of Publication, Issue Number Number or Month, pages in issue.

Internet Articles:
these have not been paginated, given that pages in material downloaded and saved in a word-processing programme are notional, and differ from one computer to another.

Interviews: the interviews which I conducted with members of the Molema family and others associated with him, are cited initially in footnotes as "Interview with Prof. Leloba Molema, 1992" and so forth. Subsequent references list the Interview as *Leloba Molema Interview, 1992*. See Bibliography, "Interviews", *infra*, p.370.

Footnotes are usually separated from the text on each page by a short line or footnote separator. Should the footnote text run over onto the next page, the separator line extends horizontally across page. This also occurs when the footnote reference features in the text at the end of a page, but the footnote text appears on the next page.

**OTHER ABBREVIATIONS:**

| | |
|---|---|
| ACC142, MV: | Molema Varia, Unisa Archive —assorted Molema papers mostly not replicated in MPP. |
| ANC: | African National Congress, from 1923; previously SANNC. |
| ANCYL: | African National Congress Youth League. |
| ARA | African Races Association [of Glasgow]. |
| BB: | British Bechuanaland. |
| B-P: | Col. Robert Baden-Powell, British Commander at the Siege of Mafikeng, 1899-1900. |
| BPP: | British Parliamentary Papers. |
| BSAC: | Cecil Rhodes's British South Africa Company. |
| CA: | Cape Archives, generally pre-1910. See also KAB. |
| CC: | Civil Commissioner, eg. E Graham Green, Mafikeng. |
| CED: | Cape Education Department. |
| Chief's Letter Book | A979 Cc1, (Nd), Chief's Letter Book, a translation of Silas Molema's Tshidi history. |
| CO: | Colonial Office, Britain. |
| Col. Sec. | Colonial Secretary. |
| CUP: | Cambridge University Press. |
| DEIC: | Dutch East India Company, English for *VOC: Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*). |
| *DFA*: | *Diamond Fields Advertiser* (Kimberley), to which Plaatje contributed regularly. |
| *EHR*: | *Economic History Review*. |
| GG: | Governor General's Archive, South African Archives [SAB]. |
| GMS: | Glasgow Missionary Society. |
| GUA: | Glasgow University Archive. |
| HSM: | Henry Selby Msimang, long-serving African politician, and organising secretary of the SANNC's first meeting, 1912. |
| HTM: | Harriet Tshadinyana Molema (later Montshiwa), Modiri's second sister, b.1896. |
| *IBB*: | *Imperial Blue Book*. |
| ICS: | Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London University. |
| Illeg. | Illegible, used in footnotes to describe the condition of a document. |
| *JAH*: | *Journal of African History*. |
| JHB: | Johannesburg, Gauteng (formerly Transvaal). |
| *JSAS*: | *Journal of Southern African Studies*. |
| KAB: | Kaapse Argief Bronne (Cape Archival Sources). |
| KMB: | Kimberley, Griqualand West, South Africa . |
| Livingstone (In Schapera) | Isaac Schapera (ed), 1974. *David Livingstone: South African Papers, 1849-1853*. |
| LMIAR: | Lovedale Missionary Archive, Rhodes University. |
| LMS: | London Missionary Society. |
| LND: | Department of Lands, SAB. |
| LP: | Lovedale Papers. |
| 1/MFK: | Mafeking Native Commissioner. |
| MLA: | Member of the Legislative Assembly (Cape Colony). |
| *MM*: | *Mafeking Mail*. |
| Molema, "Barolong": | MPP A979 Ad6.1, [Nd], SM Molema, "The History of the Barolong". |
| Molema, "Mafeking": | UW, AD2186 Fb19, ANC Collection, SM Molema, "Mafeking — A Retrospect". |
| Molema, [Nd]: | UW, AD2186, Fa51, p.4, Molema, [Nd], "Barolong Farms", [very rough draft]. |
| MPP: | Molema-Plaatje Papers, UW, Historical Papers, A979. |
| MV: | UNISA, ACC142, Molema Varia, a collection of his occasional essays. |
| NA: | Archival designation of Cape Native Affairs Department, pre-1910. |
| NAD: | Archival designation of Native Affairs Department, post-1910 (see NTS). |

| | |
|---|---|
| Nd: | No date given. |
| NLC: | Native Labour Contingent |
| Np: | No page reference. |
| N.Pub: | No publication details. |
| Nfn: | No frame number, sometimes appearing with reference to Microfilms. |
| NTS: | [*Naturellesake*] Archive of the Department of Native Affairs, SAB. |
| NY: | New York. |
| *OED*: | *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*. (Complete in 2 vols) (OUP). |
| OUP: | Oxford University Press. |
| p.a. | *per annum* or annually. |
| PMB: | Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu Natal . |
| Proc 2 BB 1885: | British Bechuanaland (BB) Proclamation No. 2 of 1885. |
| RCOP: | Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh and Glasgow. |
| *RDM*: | *Rand Daily Mail*, Johannesburg Daily Newspaper, until 1985. |
| R: Rex or Regina in legal cases, meaning the Crown, or prosecution. | |
| RKP: | The publishers Routledge & Kegan Paul. |
| RM: | Regional Magistrate, Mafeking (dates from the colonial period). |
| ROH: | LIAMR, MS 16 292, "Lovedale Roll of Honour", Rhodes University. |
| RU: | Rhodes University. |
| SAIRR: | South African Institute of Race Relations Papers, AD1189, UW. |
| *SANAC*: | *South African Native Affairs Commission*, 1903-1905. |
| SANC: | South Africa Native Congress, Cape, led by the Sogas and Rubusana, not to be confused with the SANNC, which it predated, and of which it became a constituent organisation. |
| SANNC: | South African Natives National Congress, founded 8 Jan 1912. |
| SAP: | South African Party |
| SAR: | South African Republic (cf. ZAR). |
| SGE or GSE: | Superintendent General of Education for the Cape Colony. |
| SJM: | In footnotes, Sebopiwa [sometimes Sebopioa in documents] Joshua Molema, firstborn son of Chief Moshoela Joshua Molema, STM's brother. |
| SMM: | In footnotes, Seetsele (sometimes Silas) Modiri Molema. |
| SMM, 1955: | Unisa, ACC142, MV, SM Molema, 1955. 'Healdtown, 1855-1955' |
| SMM, 1949: | Unisa, ACC142, MV, Essays. SM Molema, [1949]. 'Fifty Years Ago', (Draft). |
| SOAS: | School of Oriental and African Studies, London University. |
| SS: | Secretary of State's Archive, South African Republic, 1854-1902 (including British occupation, 1877-1881), and Transvaal Colony, 1902-1910. |
| *SS*:*Mafeking Mail Siege Slips* (October 1899-May1900) | |
| STM: | In footnotes, Silas Thelesho Molema. |
| STP: | In footnotes, Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje. |
| TNC: | Transvaal Native Congress, constituent body of the SANNC, to which Thema belonged. |
| TsalaBT: | *Tsala ea Batho*. |
| TsalaBC: | *Tsala ea Becoana*. |
| UCT: | University of Cape Town |
| UP: | University Press. |
| UW: | University of the Witwatersrand |
| WMMS: | Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society. Their Archives are housed at SOAS. |
| WMN: | Wesleyan Missionary Notices. |
| WUP: | Witwatersrand University Press. |
| ZAR: | Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (Dutch for SAR). |

## ABBREVIATIONS SPECIFIC TO FOOTNOTES

These abbreviations indicate geographical direction only when associated with distance, eg. 32km NW of Kimberley:

| | |
|---|---|
| E East | NE Northeast |
| N North | NW Northwest |

When discussing distance, the symbol ± represents "about".