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1991-08-26
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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

African Studies Seminar Paper
to be presented in RW 7003(7th floor) at
4.00pm MONDAY 26th AUGUST 1991

Title: The Lore and the Proverbs: Sol Plaatje as Historian.

by: Jane Starfield

No. 299

THE LORE AND THE PROVERBS: SOL PLAATJE AS HISTORIAN

Jane Starfield

I. *Introduction*

Sol T. Plaatje's *Sechuana Proverbs* (1916) is a small blue book containing 732 Setswana proverbs, their English translations and their 'European equivalents'. At the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, this store of Setswana wisdom is kept under lock and key, not because it offends against any vicious South African censorship laws, but because it is an old book that needs protection. Notwithstanding the recent reprinting of much early African literature, scholars and publishers have not re-issued *Sechuana Proverbs*, nor do readers in libraries or the open market make any significant requests for it.[1] This state of affairs is, unhappily, not what Plaatje intended when he set out to save these proverbs from the likely oblivion of orality, by writing them down. This was the trap into which writing enticed many of its practitioners among the African elite.

This article explores Plaatje's desire to preserve the proverbs, which he considered central to the continued regeneration of Tswana culture. The paper examines the interface between orality and literacy and the role of those who moved between these two forms of social communication.

Sol Plaatje, South African nationalist, journalist, novelist, translator and cultural historian, lived from 1876 to 1932. Plaatje received his early instruction in Tswana history and language from his mother and grandmother; as a child he attended the Berlin Mission school at Pniel, near Kimberley, emerging with no more than a standard three-level formal education. His linguistic expertise and extensive knowledge of African history were largely self-taught. Through most of his life he made a living as a journalist, while participating energetically in the cultural and political activities of the South African Natives National Congress (SANNC) and the Tshidi-Rolong.[2] This

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1. The Africana Librarian, University of the Witwatersrand, states *Sechuana Proverbs* is kept in this Library's Pre-1925 Section. It may only be read in the library and few people ask to read it.

2. He was not the first non-chiefly member of the Tshidi-Rolong to conduct his life in both the oral and the literate worlds. Constant conflict over resources had created the need for written communication among Serolong, English and Dutch speaking claimants of the Mafeking area. When Tshidi-Rolong chief, Montsioa, allowed the British to colonise his territory, Stephen Lefenya, his interpreter, ably translated one language into the between English and Serolong. Little is known of Lefenya's (sometimes "Lefenye", Lefanler or even, "Lefanen") social position and education. According to S.M. Molema, he held lands at Bodibe (now Polfontein, Western Transvaal) and was Montsioa's "Secretary" or counsellor in negotiations with Theophilus Shepstone (13 Dec. 1877) over breaches of the Bloemhof Convention (1870) and Keate Award (1871). (Both documents delineated Tshidi landholding in the much-claimed "diamond-field" area.)
In 1886, Britain's colonisation of Montsioa's country as "British Bechuanaland", exacerbated ongoing land disputes between the Rolong under Boer rule (Rratlou) and those newly under British (Tshidi). Montsioa repeatedly used Lefenya's written eloquence to press Tshidi claims. Shippard includes a letter of 6 Dec 1886, signed Montsioa, but written by Lefenya, in the minutes of an interview between himself and the aggrieved Montsioa, at Mafeking, on 15 Feb. 1887. Lefenya's formal English on the subject of British policemen

branch of the once united Rolong tribe are considered, ethnographically, part of the broader linguistic and cultural grouping known as the Tswana. In the early 1880s, the Tshidi founded a settlement later called Mafikeng (Place of Rocks) on the margins of the Western Transvaal and Northern Cape. The British annexed the area in 1886. In 1895, British Bechuanaland, was placed under the Cape administration.[3] Until well into the 1930s, the Tshidi chieftainship fought to maintain dominance over the area, a contention involving neighbouring Rolong groupings, non-Rolong vassals, Boer farmers and British colonists. Fought out during these land disputes were interlinked political and cultural issues: the maintenance of chiefly rule and ethnic identity. From the early 1890s to his death in 1832, Plaatje brought some of his own cannon into the field. His defence of chiefly rule and attempts to preserve the oral culture which he thought would perish during the fray, may seem, in the light of their ultimate failure, arcane and misguided. This paper seeks to recover the significance that Plaatje found in writing down oral forms. It seeks to uncover, in his attempts at building a strong sense of Rolong and Tswana ethnicity, a latent tension between the competing demands of regional ethnic politics and the embryonic, but as yet baseless, African nationalism.

1910 and 1912 are both important baseline dates in this competition. In May 1910, South Africa's tenuous territorial unification was accomplished as a means of ensuring white supremacy. By 1912, members of the African elite, were urging Africans to resist to white domination by embracing modernisation and national as well as nationalist political unification. The SANNC was formed in January 1912, to articulate these aspirations. Sol Plaatje, the executive's only Tswana, was named secretary-general. The next two decades were to see the confluence and divergence of his Tswana and nationalist commitments.

In the country of the Rolong, including Mafeking, and the nearby Molopo Reserve, subsistence agricultural and commerce engaged most people to the exclusion of other pursuits. Plaatje found himself virtually alone in his efforts to preserve Tswana language and customs. Plaatje was not just translating regionally-bounded Setswana into cosmopolitan English; in "writing down" oral forms, he was using a technology of storing information unknown and unavailable to most black South Africans.[4] While he hoped writing would preserve Setswana oral forms and the contexts that gave them meaning, writing inadvertantly placed Setswana proverbs in a new context.[5]

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fraternising with Rolong women near Mafeking, to wit, "I have the honour to inform you that I still have much trouble about the policemen coming to my town in the night..." suggests that he was as steeped in official Victorian prose style as Plaatje later became. Fluent as Lefenya was, he did not share, as far as is known, Plaatje's concern for Tswana language and culture.
These letters and minutes appear in *British Parliamentary Papers, [BPP] C.5070* "Further Correspondence re. Affairs of British Bechuanaland and Adjacent Territories", (1887), 46-52. See also S.M. Molema, *Montshiwa, 1815-1896, Barolong Chief and Patriot*, (Cape Town, 1966), 75, 88-93, 113-5.

3. Sillery, A *The Bechuanaland Protectorate* (Oxford, 1952), 173-4

4. I initially use "writing down" in quotation marks to convey the special sense of giving a fixed form to what has been an oral and thereby more fluid form.

5. 'Sechuana' is the older spelling of the term for the language and culture of the Batswana; 'Serolong' referes to Barolong language and culture. Revd. Tom Brown's authoritative *Setswana Dictionary* (Johannesburg, 1980 edition)

Oral literary scholars and anthropologists alike stress the importance of studying proverbs - and all oral forms - in the historical contexts to which they are applied. As Kenneth Burke states, "proverbs are strategies for dealing with situations".[6] The new situations Plaatje gave each proverb were, firstly, a direct English translation and, secondly, one (or more) European equivalent.[7] This paper argues that writing itself was a new context, anticipating a future readership who had lost contact with the oral performance and usage of proverbs.

Oral proverb usage sets up two interacting relations: firstly, between speaker and listener (or audience) and then between the terms of the proverb itself. It falls to both speaker and listener to adduce a third relation, of analogy, between the proverbs' terms, their own interaction and their world of reference.[8] Writing down gives proverbs a further historically-specific meaning which may or may not enable their continued usage. Writing down also enfolds the two 'older' relationships in the two 'newer' author-audience relations: that of the intended reader to the implied speaker-listener and the proverb to its situation. This new written relation is enclosed in that of

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acknowledges the many disagreements over Setswana Orthography and selects for this edition the Department of Bantu Affairs' 1964 handbook's orthography. Brown re-created and standardised Setswana as a written language (a labour that missionaries Livingstone and Moffat began in the mid-19th century) to help "Inspectors of Native Locations in the Cape Province and the Transvaal ... [and] ... Magistrates and Interpreters, Teachers of Schools, and all students of the language, European and Native."
State Archives, Pretoria, Native Affairs Department, [hereafter NTS] 1873, 42/278, pt.1, "Sechuana Dictionary by Revd. Tom Brown", 1923.

6. K. Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (New York, 1957), 256.

7. Plaatje used "European" to mean English, German, French and Dutch, South Africa's second official language, until 1925, when Afrikaans replaced it.

8. P. Seitel, "Saying Haya Sayings; Two Categories of Proverb Use", in J.D. Sapir & J.C. Crocker, *The Social Uses of Metaphor* (University of Pennsylvania, 1977), 77.

Seitel appends the following diagram, adding that the language of proverbs is usually concrete, not abstract, and consists of imagistic analogies to human experience, express in a variety of rhetorical forms.

I. Interaction Situation	A=B	II. Proverb Situation
X // Y	C=D	III. Context Situation

X and Y represent, respectively, the proverb's speaker and intended hearer. The symbol // represents the relationships between the two, with reference to age, sex and community status. Part I depicts the interaction situation in which the proverb is spoken. In Parts II + III, the proverb itself and its context are given. The symbol "=" signifies the relations between images and beings in the social world (C=D) and between the images of that world in the proverb situation (A=B). Parts II and III are in analagous relationship to each other. A proverb performance, if read in these terms, might look like this:

X says to Y that A is to B as C is to D.

writer to prospective reader. Plaatje's 'prospective reader' is central to his cultural and political vision of the future. He saw 'writing down' as the friend, not the foe, of orality. Writing would, he hoped, store permanently, then regenerate the rapidly fading historical memories of African societies. His vision of past and future grew out of the cultural concerns and political beliefs that he hoped to see realised among African South Africans.

Within all South Africa's races, nationalists were imagining the new nation's form and their people's role in it. Plaatje's own motives were embedded in an embryonic Rolong and Tswana nationalism, of which he appears to have been the major, if not the sole, articulator. Moreover, Plaatje understood that African nationalism's weakness was that, bar the few intellectuals who managed to bridge ethnic, language and regional divisions, African politics was still divisively regional in nature. As a result, the broader nationalist mobilisation depended upon the energy generated by ethnic allegiances. To his disappointment, Plaatje found the Rolong, and indeed, other Tswana communities he knew, little concerned to build political organisation around cultural and ethnic issues. Singlehandedly, he sought to reach his future readers by reactivating Setswana oral forms (and, implicitly, their contexts) through his own memory and those of his mother and aunt, his direct links with Tswana oral literature and history. In this way, he hoped to rouse his Tswana contemporaries to a renewed sharing and strengthening of their ethnic heritage.[9]

This paper's first section explores Plaatje's faith in literacy as a new medium that would store and regenerate threatened oral forms. This faith nurtured his vision of a forward-looking nationalism based on oral memory and tradition. The second section establishes the complex ways in which Plaatje linked his ethnic and national concerns. His endeavours to reconstruct Tswana culture in literary and historical terms are seen as ancilliary to his political interests. Section three sets out Plaatje's use of proverbs in his written dealings with the Tshidi chief, Silas Molema. This section shows that Plaatje's use of proverbs to negotiate the formal relationship between subject and chief, evoked, for him, the whole social and political order of chiefly rule that he wished to preserve. The concluding section examines one case, in the 1920s, in which Plaatje's even stronger assertion of cultural memory arose out of his marginality to African politics and his fierce opposition to the practical entrenchment of Afrikaner Nationalism.

II. *Proverb Culture: Author and Audience*

As bodies of cultural wisdom, proverbs' origins resist precise dating in most societies. Their transmission over generations and their adaptability to changing circumstances make them the accompaniments of history. Mostly, they are the cultural property of older men, who may use this rhetorically crafted wisdom to advise, educate and demonstrate their power over younger men. Proverbs are the cultural form that recognises and comments on the importance of age as a social division in pre-capitalist society. Thus, they are an historicising form, in that they enable the transmission of accumulated life-experience from one generation to the next.

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9. In the Introduction to *Sechuana Proverbs* (London, 1916), 3-7, Plaatje wrote, "The best Sechuana speakers known to me owe their knowledge to the teachings of a grandmother, or a mother, or both, just as I myself, as pioneer Sechuana journalist and translator, am indebted to the teachings of my mother and two aunts."

At least two Setswana proverbs comment on this exchange. The older generation might argue, "**Bagologolo ke rona basha**", meaning "we the old folk are the real modern people". The younger generation might counter, "**Basha ke rona mme bagologolo**", meaning "we young people are the really wise ones". Meanings 'straight' and ironic would bounce off these proverbs, depending on the speakers and listeners' ages, their relations with each other and their situation while speaking. Christopher Crocker terms proverbs social "shifters". The meaning generated within the proverb may alter the balance of power or tension in the relationship between speaker and listener. Meaning in both proverbs, arises out of the rhetorical reversal of the respective power and powerlessness of the two social groups.[10] While a direct correlation between migrancy and the break-down of gerontocratic social order is not possible in the South African context, some general features of this massive social shift underlay changes in proverb usage. At the time of Plaatje's writing, the increase of migrancy among younger men (and even women, as the 1921 Census noted), had diluted older men's prerogatives to such an extent that younger men might take political, economic and social decisions, independently of their elders. In this context, older men needed to assert, via the first proverb, their ability to cope in the modern world. At the same time, younger men needed to state that their wider experience matched their elders' wisdom.

Proverbs, as a system, do complement each other in this way. As French poet, Alfred de Musset declared "there isn't one [proverb] that doesn't have its opposite".[11] This reciprocity animates proverbial thinking. Proverb systems distill, record and restate a society's cultural and social beliefs. By drawing on this aspect of proverbs, Plaatje extended his social observation beyond journalism, political polemic and fiction into cultural politics. His comparative translation of the proverbs presented Tswana as the cultural equivalent of the "European cultures" that were so rapidly writing themselves across Southern Africa.

For him, proverbs so embodied Tswana culture because they were in daily usage. In predominantly oral societies, proverbs are seldom reserved for particular occasions as praise poetry and story telling are. Yet, they do have special and varied roles in summing up situations. Despite their often ambiguous rhetorical structures, they recognise and resolve social and political ambiguities.[12] Proverbs' significance is political and often politic: as social uses of metaphor they have most effect in situations that

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10. Plaatje, *Proverbs*, 21-2. Compare the taunts against old age and authority in Proverb no.40, 23: "**Bodipa joa moraka bogaisa joa legae**", meaning "The chieftainship of the cattleposts is often more vigorous that that of their fathers at home." "The cattleposts" is a metonymy for the phase of a boy's education that involves cattle-herding and is also a metaphor for youth itself. The comparison may mean that the boys have more control over the community's material resources than their elders do.

11. Musset's full comment shows humorous irritation with a truth that can be so diverse: "J'aime peu les proverbes en general, parce qu'ils sont des selles a tous chevaux; il n'en est un qui n'ait son contraire" [I generally dislike proverbs, because they are saddles that fit every horse; there is not one which does not have its opposite], quoted in Sapir & Crocker, *Metaphor*, 69.

12. M.D. Lieber, "'Analogic Ambiguity': A Paradox of Proverb Usage", *Journal of American Folklore*, 97, no.386 (1984), 424.

require strategic thinking and speech heightened above the colloquial.[13] Their intervention as universal comments on daily conversation makes proverbs a most adaptive oral form. Through its direct application to the performance situation, the proverb gives its speaker and, if it hits the mark, its auditor, greater purchase on the present moment. Its rhetorical structure, minted so many years earlier, brings to the "present situation", incremental deposits of the community's past social interaction.

Invoking these "deposits" through the proverb's appeal to wit, wisdom and criticism, its speakers may revaluate their society's many traditions while restating them. Proverbs exemplify the view that tradition in pre-capitalist societies was not handed on unscathed by transmission. Plaatje's own restatement of Tswana and Rolong custom was the product of the first generation after colonisation. He grew up during the conquests of African peoples in the 1870s and 1880s, and the large scale missionisation and industrialisation which continued to fracture their societies. He held that these upheavals had made people attach themselves to the unnecessarily extreme poles of "tradition" and "modernity". When political and cultural polarities presented themselves in his own community, he strove to uphold the merits of each.[14]

His attitude to the past bears comparison with that of 'intellectuals' in newly emerging nations the world over. Benedict Anderson points out that the growth of the nation as an idea, whether in Europe or the colonial (now Third) world, depended on the massive re-organisation of older communities into new cultural, political and, where possible, economic, entities.[15] He argues that the building blocks of this modernising process were newly assembled information about the whole country, interpreted and distributed in newspapers (Anderson's "print language") and new composite national histories co-ordinated and constructed with reference to world history (Anderson's comparative history).

Studies of early African nationalism in South Africa deal with mission education's moral and social impact.[16] They do not single out the crucial roles of writing and the printed word in articulating and spreading nationalism, while simultaneously redefining the position of a literate (potential) leadership in relation to their still largely oral communities. Writing has been seen as a value-free tool of social communication, rather than a means of shaping, censoring, standardising and containing the

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13. Seitel, "Proverb Use", 76-99.

14. Plaatje's biographer, Brian Willan, notes that when Plaatje was not travelling for politics or business, he always lived in Kimberley or Mafeking, near the Rolong heartland.
See *Sol T. Plaatje: South African Nationalist, 1876-1932*, (London, 1985), *passim*.

15. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983), 86-7. B. Street, "Introduction" to B. Street (ed.), *Cross-Cultural Approaches to Literacy* (forthcoming) provides a critique of several modes of analysing literacy and orality.

16. Andre Odendaal, *Vukani Bantu!: The Beginnings of Black Protest Politics in South Africa to 1912*, (Cape Town, 1984);
Peter Walshe, *The Rise of African Nationalism*, (London, 1970 & Johannesburg, 1987); Shula Marks, *The Ambiguities of Dependence* (Johannesburg, 1986).

colonisation process. Plaatje believed that print language would be the vehicle to bear his words to the public he wanted to inform. He held, too, that favourable cultural and historical comparisons could only encourage respect for the societies that segregation was denigrating. He saw himself as a latterday Robert Moffat, the early 19th century missionary who laboured to make Setswana a print language. While Moffat's aim was evangelical, Plaatje's was historical and nationalist: he wanted to show that the history of the Rolong was as significant as that of any other African or 'European' polity.

To an extent, Plaatje equated the "traditional" with orality and the "modern" with literacy. In his view, chiefs and their councillors were at the apex of "traditional" social relations. While it pleased him to note his own kinship to several chiefs, he belonged to a newer, more modern style of leadership emerging among the small, but vocal, educated elite. His schooling and entrance, as a young man, into urban cultural and life made him receptive to the modern style. He continued to revere chiefly rule as the backbone of his own and (by extension) every other ethnically-based community. He held that the cultural practices of chiefly rule should be the basis of the new nation and a new nationalism that gave equal respect to all South Africa's ethnic groups. He feared that the economic and administrative unification would rapidly erode regional and ethnic boundaries and entrench the domination of English and Afrikaans-speaking whites over the country's black peoples. For him, the first step to resisting Tswana custom's decline was to assert its right, (and its speakers' rights) to an equal say in the country's transformation. The second step was to preserve Tswana language and custom from within, by, for instance, using proverbs, as a continuing 'critique' and interpretation of the increasingly "modern" world in which the Tswana found themselves.[17] Possessed, for various reasons, of an excellent knowledge of Tswana history and culture, he made himself the unofficial historian, introducing memory to written language, in the hope that they would not allow the ancient lines of history and custom to die out.

Of all the first Congress Executive, Plaatje had the fewest formal qualifications: he was untrained in anthropology, history and linguistics, yet became a participant observer of his own society. The term "organic intellectual" might have been made for him. His chosen professions confirmed him, at different times of his life, in this role of commentator. The social position of Plaatje and almost all his peers was structurally ambiguous. The new elite respected the values and authority of the older chiefly class. That their own educational credentials, urbanity and nationalist aspirations often exceeded those of the very government officials who were excluding Africans from political power, was cruelly ironic. On the one hand, it fed their fury at Britain's abandonment of black South Africans' rights. On the other hand, their sense of injustice spurred the new African elite on. Their eloquence and ability to link urban and rural political demands, gave them the opportunity to orchestrate many campaigns against white supremacy and segregation.[18]

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17. R. Handler & J. Linnekin, "Tradition, Genuine or Spurious", *Journal of American Folklore*, 97, no.385 (1984), 273. These authors identify two main patterns in the ways that anthropologists and philosophers conceive of tradition: the first, the tendency to work from a bi-polar model that opposes tradition to modernity, and the second, the belief that "tradition" may be used as a means of critically interpreting current experience. Plaatje appears to have preferred the latter.

18. The 1913/4 campaigns against the Natives Land Act, as well as the 1918/9 agitation on the Rand, show Congress leaders articulating, but not necessarily originating, popular demands. P. Bonner, "The Transvaal Native Congress,

Their fluency in several South African languages enabled them to channel popular outrage over the loss of territory into eloquently written histories of African land rights. Most of these writers fused the literacy skills they had learned at mission school and university, with an extensive knowledge of vernacular history. Their embattled societies relied heavily on these multilingual, often bi-cultural, men, whose time for writing down history was, consequently, often consumed by their manifold political duties. Some recorded their ethnic histories, focussing more on their forbears' political importance than on the oral culture itself. Dr. Molema, the Edinburgh-educated son of Plaatje's patron, Silas Molema, wrote two biographies of Rolong Chiefs. Magema Fuze, W.W. Ggoba and S.E.K. Mqhayi likewise recorded their communities' oral history and customs.[19] Plaatje articulated more strongly than they the view that the solution to the country's racial conflicts lay in the preservation and exchange of history and culture.

This concern to preserve the core of African society caused him to stress the significance of individual chiefs and chiefly office. Again, he was not alone among his peers in seeing the chief as the symbol and substance of African society. Many journal articles and several longer monographs show that biography and reminiscence were the most popular historical genres among the African elite. Biographies (often in obituary columns) of chiefs and other luminaries appeared in newspapers and in that catalogue of elite aspiration, T.D. Mweli Skota's *African Yearly Register.*[20] From 1911 on, Plaatje wrote short biographies to mark the passing of chiefs, many of whose rule predated colonisation and the social dislocation it had begun.[21] The desire to preserve these chiefs' achievements for posterity was underscored by the new elite's practical dependence on the older leaders. Lack of material affluence rendered some of the new leadership more reliant than others on the resources

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1917-20", in S. Marks & R. Rathbone, *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa, 1870-1930* (London, 1982), 304-6.

19. S.M. Molema, *Chief Montshiwa, Barolong Chief and Patriot* (Johannesburg, 1966) and *The Bantu Past and Present*, (London, 1920). Magema Fuze wrote *The Black People: and whence they came* in Zulu (trans. H.C. Lugg), at the turn of the century. A.T. Cope, its editor, shows that Fuze deliberately attempted to depict the Zulu past as unchanged by war, conquest and migrant labour. (Editor's Preface to 1986 printing of University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg edition, 1979.) S.E.K. Mqhayi, the Xhosa historian wrote *Ityala lamaWele* (Lovedale, n.d.) in the 1920s. In 1888, W.W. Ggoba collected narratives of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing from people who had witnessed it and/or its destruction. See his "Isizatu Sokuxelwa Kwe Nkomo Ngo Nongqause, published in Dr. Rubusana's paper *Isigidimi SamaXosa.*

20. T.D. Mweli Skota, *The African Yearly Register: Being an Illustrated National Biographical Dictionary (Who's Who) of Black Folks in Africa*, (Johannesburg, 1930).

21. Four of these articles appear in the Plaatje Centenary Issue of *English in Africa*, 3, 2, Sept. (1976). "Reminiscences of Sebele, the Paramount Bechuana", *Pretoria News*, 10 Feb. 1911; "Chief Khama of the Bamangwato" *The African World Annual*, Dec. 1914; "Moroka" and "Montsioa" appeared in 1932 in Skota *Register*, 60-4 and 53-7, respectively. The articles show Plaatje's admiration for these leaders' pragmatic dealings with Boers, British, missionaries and African peoples.

of chiefs and ethnic communities. Pixley Seme, credited with founding the SANNC, occasionally worked his tribal connections to advantage. He forcefully advocated an African politics aimed at burying tribal differences beneath progressive, 'supra-tribal' nationalism. Yet, despite some noble political ideals and his law degrees from Columbia and Oxford Universities, he struggled, with educated and unlearned Africans alike, to survive post-war inflation, discrimination and poverty. He and his colleagues could not have bought a printing press for Congress' *Abantu Batho* without the Swazi Queen Mother's financial aid.[22] In this way, he tried to draw an older leader into current politics. By contrast, John Dube, Congress' first president, retired into Zulu ethnic politics when a radical Seme-led grouping within the SANNC rejected his stance on segregation.[23]

Plaatje, meanwhile, devoted himself to national and ethnic concerns. He realised that, though they might overlap, ethnic and national politics remained discrete arenas. Supra-tribal nationalism could neither absorb nor erase these prior identities. Yet African nationalism did, along with segregation and the growth of a powerful central, white-dominated state, threaten those identities profoundly. Overt threats to disrupt African communities' landholding and independence meant that the articulation of ethnic identity depended upon locally organised struggles over resources. After 1910 many communities had to reconsider and, often, articulate for the first time, their sense of ethnic origin and present political allegiance.

III. *A Proverbial Sense of History*

While Plaatje asserted that historical narratives and proverbs were bearers of ethnic identity, he knew that a modern Rolong identity would be formed in the complex interaction between the Rolong, their chiefs, the new administration and, less tangibly, the urban areas to which many Rolong were becoming migrants. The Rolong past would, in this conflict, become the both the servant and the interpreter of current opinion.[24]

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22. Willan, *Plaatje*, 152; Walshe, *African Nationalism*, 33.

23. Walshe, *ibid.*, 228-31; Marks, *Ambiguities*, chp. 2;
J.V. Starfield, "'Not Quite History': The Autobiographical Writings of R.V. Selope Thema and H. Selby Msimang and the Writing of South African History", *Social Dynamics*, 14, 2, (1988), 26-7.

24. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 14-16.

Many people experience ethnicity as a natural extension of individual identity, inseparable from their ancestry and history. Ethnicity is more what Vovelle and Le Goff call a *mentalite*. It resides in the interstices between individual and political thought and feeling and is "irreducible... to the economic and social". Any given ethnic *mentalite* is formed and re-formed in the give-and-take of cultural and political traditions that occurs with increasing exposure to and exchange with other ethnic groups. M. Vovelle, "Ideologies and mentalities" in R. Samuel & G. Stedman Jones (eds), *Culture, Ideology and Politics: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm* (London, 1982), 9.
Jacques Le Goff, *Constructing the Past: Essays in Historical Methodology* (Cambridge, 1974), 170-5, for a discussion of mentalite). He states:

> "Their [ie. mentalities] birth and growth can be studied through an analysis of the social *locus* where they are created and popularised and the groups and professions which act as intermediaries in their diffusion through society... Mentalities cannot be separated, either, from social structures, however complex the relations between the two

For Plaatje ethnicity was as personal as it was communal. He associated the core of his ethnicity with his ancestry. His own lineage stretched back to the Rolong's founding father, Morolong (c. 1400). His loyalty to the chiefly office was personal and automatic, he criticised its individual incumbents.[25] Both narrower (Rolong) and broader (Tswana) identification led him to take up the cause of all African people against the white supremacist government.[26] He considered that the Rolong and Tswana "layers" of the past held essential lessons for all African communities. Thus, history, vernacular language and politics all converged upon the question of ethnic organisation. He made the decision to express and publicise all three through the modernising medium of print. This did not mean that he held the pen mightier than the word. Throughout his life, he addressed himself to the two worlds of verbal and written politics. In 1914 and 1919 respectively, Plaatje the statesman and diplomat joined the SANNC deputations to Britain and Versailles in the hope that direct speech would deliver justice to the African people.[27]

The intense years to which these commitments belonged show the initial confluence, then widening divergence of Plaatje's political and cultural interests. By the 1920s, he, like many of the older Congress leaders, felt increasingly alienated by the mounting militancy of the working class. He was

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may be."

25. The importance of the Plaatje-Molema relationship is discussed below. Plaatje's disappointment in Chief Badirile emerges from the evidence of both to the *South African Native Affairs (Lagden) Commission*, (1905), University of the Witwatersrand, Government Publications Library.

26. From 1908, concerned missionaries wrote to government officials about the disarray of Setswana orthography. No Setswana speakers were permitted to shape the official version of Setswana that the British and Foreign Bible Society - the 1910 Orthography Conference's convenors - established. Plaatje protested his own and other Setswana speakers' exclusion. (Willan, *Plaatje*, 129-31.
Transvaal Archives Depot, N65150, Secretary for Native Affairs [SNA] 406, NA1399/08, 19 May 1908, Rev. E. Gottschling, Hon. Sec. of Transvaal Missionary Association to Minister of Native Affairs, Pretoria.

In 1916, Plaatje began a project with Daniel Jones, to commit Setswana to the International Phonetic Alphabet. At about this time, he also compiled a small collection of Setswana Folktales, closely related to the Sechuana Proverbs.

27. Plaatje, "Native Congress Mission to England", *Diamond Fields Advertiser*, 14 July 1914, quoted in Willan, *Plaatje*, 174:
"I am compiling a little book on the Native Land Act and its operation which I hope to put through the press immediately after landing in England." As light from this arduous and angry work, he began compiling the Sechuana Proverbs. (Willan, *Plaatje*, 192).
Willan, *ibid.* chps. 8 & 10, carry extended accounts of Plaatje's two missions to England. Ultimately, the two Congress delegations received no satisfaction from the British Government.
CO 551/122, 3780, Minute of Meeting between Col. Amery, Plaatje and J. Gumede, 20 Aug. 1919, cited in Willan, *Plaatje*, 238. (Gumede became President of Congress in 1927.)

becoming, in Willan's words, "a leader without a people".[28] In 1917 and again in 1922, the government could not decide whether Plaatje's words could do much more to inflame the already angry workers.[29] The terms and style of struggle were changing rapidly from polite spoken and written protest, to enraged verbal and physical confrontation. The former style, in which he excelled, had little popular appeal after the war; the latter disappointed him deeply. He did not hold the government alone to blame; the SANNC leaders' internal bickering and ineffectual dealings with the Rand's strikers, boycotters and protesters, disillusioned him greatly.[30] The one arena in which he still felt able to make a positive contribution was that of ethnic scholarship. He began transferring more energy into Rolong and Tswana cultural affairs, and became less involved in, though no less committed to, national issues.

His enthusiasm for Rolong culture and history emerged against the backdrop of poor Tshidi leadership during their land battles with other Rolong groupings. At Silas Molema's behest, he became formally involved in these disputes, as Tshidi-Rolong representative on the 1914 delegation to Britain. The delegation opened his eyes to the ethnic complexity of African politics. In his official capacity as SANNC Secretary-General, he was quickly learning that in nationalist politics, one's enemies might not always be white officials.[31]

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28. Willan, *Plaatje*, chp.13.

29. In 1917, A.L. Barrett, Kimberley's Inspector and Protector of Natives, told Johannesburg's Director of Native Labour [DNL], Johannesburg, that Plaatje did not "carry much weight with the Natives". However, in the next line, he declared Plaatje "well on the road to becoming a troublesome professional agitator." He knew that preventing Plaatje speaking might inflame the Witwatersrand's already volatile black populace to revolt. Both the Secretary and the Minister for Native Affairs upheld these reasons for letting Plaatje speak. On later visits to Britain and the USA, Plaatje's impassioned presentation of grievances common to African workers and the elite made him shoot up the NAD's danger-list. He shared a platform with black American radical, Marcus Garvey. The NAD, who held Garveyite ideas responsible for the Union's "native unrest", promptly forgot that he had also appeared with the more moderate W.E. du Bois.
NTS 7602 (01) 17/328, "Mr. Sol T. Plaatje (1917-1924), see the following letters: 12 May 1917, A.L. Barrett, Inspector to DNL, Johannesburg; 15 May 1917, Mr. Woodhead, Ag. DNL to SNA, Pretoria; 1 June 1917, E. Barrett, SNA to DNL; 5 Nov. 1923, Commissioner of Police to SNA. For details of Plaatje's tour in the USA and Canada, see Willan, *Plaatje*, chp.11. For the growth of Garveyism in SA, see G. Hill & B. Pirio, "'Africa for the Africans': The Garvey Movement in South Africa, 1920-40", in S. Marks & S. Trapido, *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa* (London, 1987), 209-53.

30. For a fuller discussion of this radicalisation, see Bonner, "The Transvaal Native Congress", 270-313.

31. In May 1914, he set out to beg the British cabinet to redress the Act of Union's disfranchisement of all but the Cape Province's African peoples and the Africans' imminent removal from all but 7.3 per cent of the Union's land surface. Limiting the African vote to the Cape, was part of the compromise of Union. To placate Hertzog and the former Boer Republics, Africans in the other provinces were given indirect parliamentary representation. See L.M. Thompson, *The Unification of South Africa* (Oxford, 1960), chps 3 & 4. The land

His voyage to England continued stormy long after the rough seas had subsided. Though African nationalism's founding fathers might publicly subordinate their ethnic to their national loyalties, Plaatje discovered that personal tensions among the delegates brought out the former. Once on board ship, Plaatje experienced a sense of ethnic isolation. He felt pressured to yield to the demands of his Zulu (Dube and Saul Msane) and Xhosa (Walter Rubusana) companions. In brief, Plaatje worried that Dube, Msane and Rubusana had not adjusted to their national responsibilities and favoured their Zulu and Xhosa followers too greatly. He feared that the absent, yet powerful Transvaal-based Seme, who had no love of the Tswana to lose, was pulling the Nguni strings, especially Msane's.[32] These underlying ethnic tensions made smallish sparks over tickets, moneys and departure dates flamed into major conflicts over segregation, to which Congress had still not formed a coherent response.[33]

When the Union Government struck at African landholding in 1913, Congress was very much an elite organisation seeking a broad popular following and policies. Recovering from initial disbelief in the Natives Land Act, senior Congress members had studied in detail their areas of origin and built their protests to the British government on these findings. Plaatje's survey of British Bechuanaland and the Orange Free State concentrated his mind on the Rolong land claims. He concluded that the new land provisions, far from serving Africans' needs, would only hasten their impoverishment.[34] Plaatje had some expertise on the land question's history. In 1904, he had testified on the Rolong community's history and current condition, to the very Commission that became the basis of the Act.[35] The anger and mistrust that bedevilled the

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dispensation, set out in the 1913 Natives Land Act, sought to give white farmers power to control and evict their sharecroppers and tenants. It set aside totally inadequate reserve areas for African farming and social reproduction. See T.J. Keegan, *Rural Transformations in Industrialising South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1985), 182-95.

32. Willan, *Plaatje*, 173-4. American "self-help" proponent, Booker T. Washington, was "'patron saint'" and "'guiding star'" to Dube, who went on to study at Oberlin College. Marks *Ambiguities*, vi, 43-5, 52 & 69. Though wary of this influence, Plaatje agreed that Washington's system of "industrial education" was just what black South Africans needed. (U.G.22-'16 *Minutes of Evidence to the Natives Land [Beaumont] Commission (1913-6L)*, 93.)
P. Walshe, *African Nationalism*, 12-14, 34 & 37, and A. Odendaal, *Vukani Bantu!*, 89.
For a discussion of segregation debates within Congress, see Starfield, "'Not Quite History", 26-8.

33. Walshe, *ibid*, 44-56.

34. In evidence to the Beaumont Commission, (U.G. 22-'16, 93-4), Plaatje condemned the Act's unjust provisions, from the apportionment of land for Africans to the anti-squatting clauses. His fury still resounds in the words, "On the morning of 20th June 1913, the South African native awoke to find himself a pariah in the land of his birth." *Native Life in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1980), 21.

35. In the wake of the Anglo-Boer War and the Treaty of Vereeniging, Sir Godfrey Lagden led the South African Native Affairs Commission around the country from 1903-5. Government Commissions later heard Rolong claims as part of a countrywide tour to see if the Land Act's allotments met African needs.

delegation was the accrual of years of hopeful negotiation and polite consultation with British and South African administrators, now frustrated.

On the voyage, Plaatje's distance from his country, and from his companions, gave him the time to translate his hectic daily political involvement into three major literary works, intended for a wide audience at home and abroad. Each dwelt upon the effects of losing land, history and culture on the people thus dispossessed. *The first, Native Life in South Africa* (1916), vehemently denounced the Land Act's prohibitions on African farming, landowning and economic survival.[36] It argued that economic and social disorganisation would disrupt political institutions and fragile ethnic allegiances, which had been, for generations, the raw material of African history.

The novel *Mhudi* was Plaatje's most creative and extended evocation of Rolong history's moorings to the land. The novel locates a major source of Tshidi ethnic identity in their dispossession during battles against the Matabele and the Boers in the 1820s. The novel involves a canny double "contract" between writer and reader. The reader, unaware of its context and Plaatje's convictions, might find it a charming tale of pre-colonial derring-do. In an extended use of allegory, he projects his fears of the Land Act's effects onto the story of the earlier land thefts.

Mhudi is not just about history, but is also about re-telling history. The novel's narrative strategy re-creates Plaatje's own role in transmitting the oral past. As narrator, the act of re-telling the story makes him heir to the past and to its "heroes" and prior narrators, Ra-Thaga and Mhudi. He makes historical narration a powerful political tool that allows him to possess the novel's present, interpret the community's past and warn them of their future. Careful use of tenses and narrative time, enables the narrator to speak as if continuously (and, of course, implicitly) criticising the segregationist evils of the reader's present.

The plot conveys Plaatje's condemnation of segregation and shock at Rolong naivety. He begins, in the early 1820s, with the Ndebele destruction of the Tshidi community at Khunwana. The Tshidi then form a pragmatic alliance with the Boers - still an unknown quantity in the interior - to regain lands lost to the Ndebele.[37] A subtle juggling of main and sub-plots allows Plaatje

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The Commissions were: (i) C.4889, Report of the British Bechuanaland Land Commission (1886); (ii) C.2399, Report of the South African Native Affairs Commission (1905); (iii) U.G.22-'16, The Beaumont Commission (1916) and U.G.-'18, The Local Land Committee Reports (1918). Plaatje gave evidence to (ii) and (iii).

36. The Act reserved 7.3% of the Union's land for 87% of its population. The cornerstone of territorial segregation, the Act was intended to strengthen the state's hand in its interventions between white farmers and black sharecroppers. The Act aimed to turn a number of these into labour tenants and compel the rest to become wage labourers on the farms and in the mines. The Act also represented the state's intervention in the competition between white farmers and mineowners for this "cheapened" African labour.
Keegan, *Rural Transformations*, 184-95, and "Conclusion".

37. A version of this episode, based on the Reports of late-19th and early 20th century Native Commissioners and Sub-Native Commissioners, is included in *A Short History of the Native Tribes of the Transvaal*, (Transvaal Colony Native Affairs Department, Pretoria, (1905), 8-9.) A yet more potted version appears in CAD, Dept. of Land [LD] 1652, AG 2607/08, "Land in Trust for native Chief Moshette and the Barolong Tribe". It gives the history of the

to demonstrate the futility of enmity between African peoples. Ostensibly, Rolong-Ndebele conflict is the plot's main action. However, the Boer intrusion, their alliance with the Rolong and subsequent theft of Rolong lands, is intended to shock the reader, as it shocked the Rolong. They realise too late that the central action in the interior will henceforth be between whites and blacks. Plaatje, in his capacity as heir to the events themselves, reveals that sub-plot is really main plot. He concludes, with bitter hindsight, that the Boers did not look upon their former military allies as partners on the land, but as a ready labour supply. Plaatje depicts the Boers as incapable of understanding Mhudi's heroism. They see her only as potential *ayah* [nanny] material for their own passive wives. At the novel's end, Plaatje predicts an unhappy future into which Mhudi and Ra-Thaga ride on their wagon, a vehicle symbolic of Boer conquest, and now a poor substitute for a Rolong home and land. The Boers, having betrayed the Rolong's initial trust in them, retain command of the land.[38]

Plaatje took pains to identify himself as an historian within the narrative by deliberately placing himself in the direct line of this story's descent: Ra-Thaga to Thaga or Half-a- Crown to Plaatje. Indeed, he needs to identify so closely with the novel's narrator to form a semi-autobiographical bridge between his fictional and historical writing. The 'I' persona authenticates the facts he has witnessed or gleaned from witnesses. These devices are analogous to the academic historian's research and footnotes: they serve to prove the truth of his arguments.

Plaatje emphasised his narrative lineage to link the depiction of Rolong history and culture in the 1820s through earlier custodians of the Rolong past to, he hoped, current and future Rolong readers. His sense that the popular perception of African history was, even after 1912, bounded by ethnic and cultural practices, gave him deep insight into the difficulties facing nationalist politicians. Indeed, this insight proved to be the major contradiction of his political career. He was too aware of the pull of his own 'ethnic' past and the profound ethnic fissures beneath the Congress' surface, to launch himself unequivocally into its supra-tribal organisation. For a

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territorial boundaries between the Rratlou and Tshidi.
Dr. S.M. Molema's *Montshiwa* contains the most extended Barolong exposition of this history. Z.K. Matthews', sometime Principal of Fort Hare University, published a history of the Tshidi-Rolong in *Fort Hare Papers*, (1945), 1, 9-28. The Rrapulana-Rolong lived around Lichtenburg, Transvaal; the Tshidi around Mafikeng and the Rratlou around Vryburg, both then in British Bechuanaland. The Seleka-Rolong trekked to Thaba Nchu in the Orange Free State in the 1820s. See Dr. Molema's genealogy, Montshiwa, 216-7.
Sillery, *Bechuanaland Protectorate*, chp.18, "The Rolong", gives a detailed account of Rolong history, based, on Matthews and Molema, among other accounts.

38. Plaatje, *Mhudi* (Johannesburg, 1975). On completing it in 1917, Plaatje could not find *Mhudi*, the first English novel by a black South African, a publisher. He eventually persuaded Lovedale Press (a mission-run enterprise with a deep sense of literary propriety), to publish, in 1930, a bowdlerised version omitting many of its oral narrative techniques. Willan, *Plaatje*, 349 ff.

time, he sought to create ethnic pride among the Rolong, hoping that it would encourage them to participate in national politics. Only in the 1920s did he retire from this view into ethnic, rather than national, concerns.

The *Sechuana Proverbs* were part of his plan to conserve Tswana historical culture as a moral force. They went a step beyond *Mhudi* in achieving his purpose as an historian. In presenting the Proverbs, Plaatje withdrew from direct narration. However, he gave his clearest statement of purpose as an historian in the "Introduction", stating that his task was to save the proverbs "from oblivion".

In his concern to preserve Tswana culture, he collected many proverbs that characterised the society's fundamental bond: the relations between chiefs and subjects and, thereby, the principles of justice governing Tswana society.[39] Despite his wholehearted support for the institution of chiefly rule, Plaatje's relations with the Tshidi-Rolong chiefs were sometimes fraught. In his written correspondence with Chief Silas Molema, he deployed proverbs when he wished to stress beyond all doubt that his own requests would benefit both chief and community. Proverbs performed for him their timeless task of "shifting" the balance of power in the relationship. While believing that one should "always build a fence around the chief's word" (*"Lencoe ja kgosi le ageloa mosi"*), and that "the word of the Chief is law" (*"Lencoe ja kgosi ke molao"*), Plaatje often tried, sometimes with limited success, to influence the Chief's choice of "word".[40]

IV. *The Chief and the Proverbs*

Although not always resident at Mafeking, Plaatje took a keen interest in the community's affairs through working directly with the Tshidi's powerful 'second' family, the Molemas.[41] The relationship between Plaatje and the brothers Silas and Joshua Molema, was reciprocal. Usually, it was Plaatje who begged the brothers for favours and funding. The Tshidi's dual crisis over land and chiefly jurisdiction gave the Molemas cause to employ Plaatje's

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39. As an interpreter in the Mafeking Magistrate and Civil Commissioner's Office, Plaatje compared the white legal system and Tswana customary law closely. The courts taught him how important accurate translation was to the administration of colonial justice. His famous use of 46 Tswana words to render the phrase: "You are committed for trial", was one example of the care he took. He stuck by the Tswana proverb that the law must be impartial, "*Molao ga o gobelele*" (*Sechuana Proverbs*, no.412, 64). If "commitment for trial" was so alien to Africans, then, he believed, justice was not being done in the colonial courts. He reviled this situation in which, as the proverb says, the law-giver does not really know the law: no.427, 65 "*Mongoa molao ga o itse*". His opinions of colonial justice appear in his 1908 piece, "The Essential Interpreter", Church of the Province Archive [CPSA], University of the Witwatersrand, A979, Db2.

40. Plaatje, *Sechuana Proverbs*, no.292, 51. In similar vein is no. 70, 26: "Chole go dikoa je le fa", meaning "A chief always beats the forces that are present."

41. The Molemas were descended from Montsioa's brother, a convert to Christianity. Willan, *Plaatje*, 62. Sillery states that in Tshidi historical narratives, Molema is called "... a courageous man of strong character and established for himself an influential position in tribal affairs." Sillery, *Bechuanaland Protectorate*, 173.

historical knowledge, political eminence and rhetorical excellence. On Silas Molema's advice, the Tshidi-Rolong chose Plaatje to present their land claims to the British Crown in 1914.

Silas Molema's *seboko* (praise name), the "Son of Tau" (the Lion), embodied much Rolong history. Plaatje often used this respectful praise-name to address his patron.[42] Tau had been the last chief of a united Rolong, in the mid-eighteenth century. Two of his sons, Tshidi and Makgetla, founded the Tshidi-Rolong, while three other sons fathered, respectively, the Seleka, Rratlou, and Rrapulana branches.[43] Along with the name, Silas bore his ancestor's keen intelligence and talent for politics. While Tau had "fathered" the Rolong division, Silas consciously helped to maintain it well into the twentieth century.

From 1870, relations between the Rolong branches were seldom fraternal. Conflicts pre-dating both British and Boer colonisation of their lands fuelled these tensions. The Tshidi and the Rrapulana continually claimed each other's lands as recognised under the 1885 British annexation. Not content with one land war, the Tshidi also fought to retain overlordship of the Tloaro, their subjects since the 1880s. Even as the Land Act became law, the Tloaro were fighting for tribal independence from the Tshidi. C.H. Wessels, a member of the Native Land Committee that the Act established, noted "There is now [1913] an old quarrel between two sections of the same tribe there [Molopo Reserve], which has been going on for many years."[my emphasis][44] As one of Molema's "clients", Plaatje was all too aware of these lengthy chiefly disputes.

A summary of these disputes brings out their relevance to the question of Rolong ethnicity. All parties made Rolong history the justification and the battleground of their claims. Some arguments reverted to the early nineteenth century wars. Most drew on "living memory", and returned to the latter years of the respected Chief, Montsioa, who had willingly signed over the Mafeking area to the British in 1886.

The Tloaro association with the Tshidi began at this time. The agreement allowed the Tloaro to occupy territory which the Tshidi claimed to control. The Tloaro also argued that their chief, Jan Masibi, and Montsioa held equal power in the alliance. The Tshidi, however, considered the Tloaro their vassals. The conflict simmered for some two decades. Then, in 1909, Masibi formally rejected his people's vassalage to the Tshidi. He demanded of the Cape government an official boundary to divide Tloaro from Tshidi, in the Molopo Reserve. The demand struck the Tshidi as rank disobedience and they began lengthy legal objections to Tloaro independence.[45]

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42. Though often used independently, praise-names are associated with praise poetry a formal oral genre intended to establish the public persona of a chief or an important figure. Isaac Schapera edited *The Praise Poems of the Tswana Chiefs*, (Oxford, 1965), but did not give those of the Rolong in full. Dr. Molema quotes one of the praises of Monstioa ("crafty son of Tawana"), in *Montshiwa*, 20.

43. Matthews, *Tshidi-Barolong*, 9-28.

44. U.G.22-'16, *Beaumont Commission*, 98, C.H. Wessels, 4 Dec. 1913.

45. The early stages of alliance and clientage are dealt with by Sillery, *Bechuanaland Protectorate*, 173-4, and K. Shillington, *The Colonisation of the Southern Tswana, 1870-1900* (Johannesburg, 1985), chapters 6 & 7. The continued animosities are catalogued in CAD, NTS 7779, 121/335, 1928-31, "Molopo Native Reserve Boundary between Batloaro of Disaneng and Ratshidi-Barolong". The Tshidi and Tloaro statements, 21 June 1928, mention the 1909 episode.

The Rrapulana-Rolong had also quarrelled with the Tshidi since Montsioa's day. Hostilities increased after the siege of Mafeking (1901). The Tshidi kept asserting dominance over the Reserve; they insisted that Abram Matuba, the Rrapulana headman at Rietfontein (in the Reserve), owed them allegiance. In opposition, the Rrapulana rejected Tshidi suzerainty; they claimed an older allegiance to Israel Matlabe, Rrapulana Chief in distant Polfontein, near Lichtenburg. The tension simmered until Abram's successor, George Matuba, raised the heat in 1912. Furthermore, he had the strong backing of Matlabe, and also Aaron Moshette, chief of the Rratlou, who, as the senior descendant of Tau, claimed precedence over the Tshidi in this matter.

Rrapulana and Tloaro alike invoked the "higher authority" of the South African government to redress their grievances against the overbearing Tshidi. Both groups urged the government to recognise their headmen as independent chiefs, and to demarcate their territory from the Tshidi's. From the Native Affairs Department's (NAD's) point of view, the cases challenged both Department and government to specify the terms of segregation's as yet vague *cornerstones: the term* "tribe", *and the jurisdiction of African chiefs.*[46]

The NAD accepted that the Tshidi's attitude to the Tloaro and Rrapulana might be galling, but held that, for administrative purposes, they would still regard the Tshidi chief as senior in the Molopo Reserve.[47] This decision avoided the conflict's underlying causes. In all three communities, mounting pressure on land and the chiefs' relative inability to reallocate resources, were, as Plaatje feared, helping to redefine the territorial dimensions of chiefly jurisdiction. Local NAD officials stood by as this process escalated. The Beaumont Commission attempted to intervene in a general way. It investigated chiefs and their followers' attitudes to land usage, education and modern farming methods, as a basis for long-term policy making. Barkly West Magistrate, E.C. Welsh, told the Commission that the Molopo Reserve was chronically starved of water. In the absence of state intervention, none of the African inhabitants was willing to dam the Reserve's few rivers to retain the annual rainfall of 24 inches.[48] The erosion of natural resources, always

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Government Ethnologist, G.M. Lestrade, supported the call for a territorial line on the 'natural' ethnic boundary between the groups. The Tloaro, he said, were not "...Barolong, but offshoots of the Bahurutshe."

46. SAB NTS 7779, 121/335: "Ratshidi-Rapulana Dispute", "The Case of Defendant Government", 2:

> The Rapulana and Ratlou are regarded by Government as separate and distinct tribes from the Ratsili [sic] tribe and for the last fifty years the history of the Western Transvaal and British Bechuanaland is a record of disputes and conflicts between these three tribes.

47. Hut Tax provisions appeared in Section 31 of British Bechuanaland Proclamation, No.2 (1885), cited in NTS 7779, 121/335: "Ratshidi-Rapulana Dispute", E. Barrett, SNA to Resident Magistrate, Mafeking, "Rietfontein Affairs: George Matuba", 5 July 1917.

48. *Beaumont Commission*, 98, Evidence of E.C. Welsh, Mafeking Magistrate, H.J. Frost, Superintendent of Natives, Mafeking (responsible for the Molopo Reserve) and J.J. Keeley, a Mafeking Landowner-Farmer. Evidence of Mafeking Farmer, J.W. de Kock, 99, contains rainfall figures. He put the Reserve population at 11,000, but his figures may be an underestimate. They resemble those for 1900, given by Mafeking Magistrate, J.B. Moffat, to Lagden (9 Oct. 1903), *Lagden Commission, 1903-5, vol. II*, 132.

the basis of chiefly power, was, officials concluded, responsible for the current inter-tribal conflict. For years, the turmoil in the Reserve resisted the attempts of local officials and senior NAD policy-makers able to resolve it. Their appeals found the NAD itself in too much confusion to hand down a clear policy on local government.[49] By 1928, armed with the Native Administration Act (1927), NAD officials were embarking on a strategy of retribalisation at local level.[50] Part of "retribalisation" was the recognition that the nature of chiefly rule was territorial, rather than tribal.[51] This policy came to be a major intervention in the Molopo.

This outline does not do justice to the conflict's finer points. It does show that the cohesion of Rolong society, in which Plaatje lived, was being undermined from within during the 1910s. By the late 1920s, new NAD initiatives were cementing the breakdown of chiefly authority. In this context, Plaatje's assertion of the proverbial wisdom "Always build a fence around the Chief's word", revealed his concern for the declining value of chiefly rule. The proverb's metaphoric structure is implicit. The term "fence" suggests that the chief's word is precious land worth protecting. The metaphor implies that chiefly authority was as crucial as land to a rural community's survival.

Plaatje participated in the Molemas' attempts, in the long absence of strong Tshidi rulers, to shore up the chiefly power after Union. According to local native administrators, the Silas and Joshua Molema kept both disputes at boiling point.[52] The Magistrate of Mafeking opined, sagely, that "a good many" of the Barolong land claims "originated in the brains" of the Molema family." A predeliction for petty quarrel, indigence and alcohol, meant that Montsioa's five successors made little attempt to arrest the Tshidi's decline. In contrast, the Molemas pre-eminence in Mafeking politics, their wealth and longevity, made them a more constant and competent political force than the Montsioas in the Tshidi's disputes with the Rrapulana and Tloaro.[53]

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49. S. Dubow, *Racial Segregation and the Origins of Apartheid in South Africa, 1919-36* (Cambridge, 1989), 113-7, argues that this state of affairs continued from 1913 to 1927 when the Native Administration Act brought some clarity to the NAD's policy on "customary law" and tribal rule.

50. Dubow, *Racial Segregation*, 116.

51. This was the Under Secretary for Native Affairs, Howard Rogers' opinion, 19 July 1928, in NTS 7779, 121/335: "Ratshidi-Rapulana Dispute". Not all officials believed that the "tribes" were, in fact, ethnically separate. They agreed to the territorial boundaries in order to avoid conflict.

52. Chiefs Joshua and Silas Molema intervened deliberately on Chief Lekoko Montsioa's behalf to drive Masibi and followers out of the Molopo Reserve. Local officials the Molemas responsible for the Tshidi belief in their seniority in this reserve.
NTS 209, 1/44, pt.2 "Ratshidi-Rapulana Dispute", 8 June 1910, SNA to Minister of Native Affairs (letter incomplete).

53. The relationship between the Molemas and the Montsioas was close. At the time of Montsioa's death in 1896, his nephew Silas was regarded as senior councillor to the new chief's regent, Lekoko. Silas' brother, Joshua, ranked third in importance after Lekoko. By 1917, Joshua had become chief councillor to the new chief, John Montsioa. NTS 7779, 121/335, "Ratshidi-Rapulana Dispute", 29 Oct. 1896, "Minutes of a Meeting of the Barolong Chiefs held in the Courtroom at Mafeking"; 24 July 1917, Mr. Chalmers, Magistrate, Mafeking

The NAD were pleased to style Silas Molema a "progressive" chief, because he did well in farming and cattle-trading. In the increasingly impoverished Tshidi settlements around Mafeking, his financial acumen stood out. He was not too "progressive" and individualistic to eschew chiefly obligations to his community. Plaatje usually found Chief Silas the man most likely to fund schemes, such as newspapers, in the hope of philanthropic as well as commercial returns. Silas' famed shrewdness inclined him favourably to some of Plaatje's schemes, which always had the higher purpose of reversing the Rolong's economic and social decline.[54]

Plaatje's lengthy periods away from Mafeking, ensured that the nature of his friendship with Molema was often literary. Their correspondence was warm, but formal, a mixture of polite and colloquial English and Setswana. Plaatje underscored his requests to the Chief with proverbs, to remind Silas of their mutual bond: "...like the English people say, *Mothusi eo thusang kabonako oaba a thusitse gabedi. Masemela o beile botsebe*", meaning literally, "a helper who helped first has helped twice." The proverb means "the prompt helper has the reward of his efforts doubled". To this he added in like vein, "one hand washes another". He implied that he and the chief were both limbs of the same body and must, therefore, unite their efforts.[55] He knew too that Molema would grasp this meaning and understand that the"body" in question was the Tshidi-Rolong.

Proverbs came easily to Plaatje. In his letters, he deployed their complex metaphoric and rhetorical structures as a general his troops. He sent their verbal echoes and rhetorical patterns as couriers up to Mafeking to win Molema to his side. In the first proverb, the echoes of the verb to help (*thuso*), progress through the noun (*mothusi*) and its defining clause (*eo thusang*), meaning one who can help now and has helped in the past, (*thusitse*) , to conclude that this helping, if repeated, will be doubly successful. Adverbs mark each half of the parallelism: *oaba* (first) places the first "helping" in the past, while *gabedi* (twice or doubly) simultaneously indicates its repetition and double effect.

The second proverb achieves its effect through external metaphor. The comparison is with a tenor outside the proverb itself, namely, the body. The proverb's containing idea is that two hands form a pair, and, as body parts, function naturally together. The proverb also works through metonymy: the hands, symbolic of action, being part of the larger unit, the body. The reciprocal form "wash each other" has much the same force as "helping" in the first proverb; the cleansing or supportive action of one, works to the good of both parties.

Plaatje used the proverbs to "shift" or change the situation between himself and Molema. Unstated, but understood, in the written dialogue between Plaatje, the writer and the reader was a delicate negotiation of the subject-chief relationship, surmounted by the more modern context of mutual friendship. The latter may have operated as a slightly ironic gloss upon the

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to SNA, Pretoria, "Rietfontein Affairs: George Matuba"; GG 50/859, 1920, "Petition of the Ratshidi-Barolong regarding John Bakolopang Montsioa being reinstated as Chief of the Ratshidi".
See also Molema, *Montshiwa*. Dr. Molema, the author, was Chief Silas' son.

54. The correspondence between the two men is in the Plaatje Papers, CPSA, University of the Witwatersrand, A979, Da, Letters 8-18.

55. Plaatje, *Sechuana Proverbs*, no.279.

former, but did not entirely displace the proverbs' serious task of persuasion. Wrapped around Plaatje and Molema's writer-reader relation were their fears of the Rolong's decline, and the Land Act's probable impoverishment of all African people.

As letter followed letter across the Rolong lands between Mafeking and Kimberley, the patron-client relationship seemed, at first, not to yield to proverbial persuasion. Plaatje hoped the Chief would fund his latest newspaper scheme to enlighten the Rolong about the impending local and national crises. Eventually, Silas agreed to prod his well-off brother for aid. Joshua, reportedly of unimpeachable character, was not susceptible to blandishments proverbial or fraternal and refused to be a willing line of credit.[56]

Plaatje's idea of saving the Rolong through journalism was scuttled by the ambiguity of "selling" a literate medium to a largely non-literate community. As noted above, he was not the only African Nationalist to use journalism to create a modern political awareness among the "people" he regarded as "his". He told the Beaumont Commission in 1913 that "the natives are beginning to take more notice of papers". His own experience supported this point. His current paper, *Tsala ea Batho*, had, over the past four years, more than doubled its circulation, from 1,700 to 4,000.[57] However, the low rate of literacy and South Africa's many vernaculars won African journalists only a limited "nation". Plaatje had learnt that the search for a readership meant that African journalism must, more obviously than nationalist politics, assume a decidedly ethnic profile. On his arrival in Kimberley in the 1890s, he found that African newspapers maintained their appeal through a mix of English and vernacular articles. Each ethnic group in Kimberley had its own newspaper, aimed at a readership that moved between the more cosmopolitan town and the more ethnically discrete countryside. The Xhosa had two papers which roughly represented the divisions in Xhosa politics: Rubusana's *Izwi Labantu* and John Tengo Jabavu's *Imvo Zabantsundu*. Both papers, plus John Dube's Zulu paper, *Ilanga lase Natal*, had inspired Plaatje to launch a paper for Tswana and Sotho readers. From 1902, he struggled to maintain three Setswana and English papers, culminating, in 1912, *in Tsala ea Batho*. The unequal ethnic composition of Congress, founded in this year, made him feel all the more that Tswana interests - especially Rolong land cliams - must be widely articulated. These reasons moved him to approach the Molema brothers. He told Silas:

> What tore my heart apart was when sympathetic... Zulus bought us the machinery for L200 and I realised that the

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56. Mafeking's Resident Magistrate found Joshua a "decent enough native as Barolongs go [sic - "Ba-" is the plural prefix; 's' is redundant]". He was said to go, like his father and brother, to Mission church in the Mafeking stad [or location] regularly, had a respectable home, and was "of strictly sober habits". Joshua and Silas Molema's sobriety stood in contrast to the Montsioa chiefs' steady consumption of the liquor that white traders had peddled in Mafeking since its founding in 1882.
This information is contained in CAD, Governor General's Department [GG], 1182, 28/18, "Enquiry regarding headman Joshua Molema and his son Sebopiloa Molema by Regional Magistrate E.C. Welsh for the Secretary of Native Affairs". See also Plaatje Papers, A979, Da14, ? Apr. 1911, Plaatje, Kimberley to Molema, Mafeking.

57. *Beaumont Commission*, Plaatje's Evidence was given in the presence of Chairman, Sir William Beaumont, 2 Dec. 1913, Kimberley, 93.

> Batswana people are unable to collect money and start their own newspaper. Even the scheme for concert was arranged by Mr. Msimang... It makes one sometimesfeel that there is no good in all this [effort] for the rights of the Batswana people.[58]

Zulu patronage, however well-meant, hurt him as much as the his people's evident inability to help themselves. Undeterred, he redoubled his pleas to Silas for funds, stressing the need for Rolong participation in the new nationalist politics. This time he marshalled the proverb "*Ga ke thata ke lenosi, ka thata ka ba bangoe*", meaning "By myself I am nothing, but I am strong in a crowd", to make his point. He also begged Silas to tell Chief Lekoko, the Tshidi Regent, that "...the Barolong must not lag behind, because if they don't involve themselves and make an effort unity will be founded on the terms of the Zulu." It would look very bad if the "Chief of the Barolong [were] against the Union" [ie. Congress]. He endorsed Chief Malunga, the Swazi Regent's disappointment over the absence of "Bechuana Chiefs" from the Congress meeting.[59] Plaatje considered that Malunga had, during his regency, done more for the Swazi than Lekoko, during his, for the Tshidi.[60]

Habitually apathetic, Lekoko was not interested in financing a Setwsana newspaper, so Plaatje had to fight to take the Rolong into the modern world on his own. Two years later, he managed to by-pass "an unfriendly Nguni spirit" in the shape of Advocate Seme, and bought a printing press. He told Silas:

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58. Plaatje Papers, A979, Da1, 8 Aug. 1912, Plaatje, Waaihoek Location, Bloemfontein to Molema, Mafeking.

59. Plaatje, *Sechuana Proverbs*, no.159, 35;
Plaatje Papers, A979, Da20, 14 Aug. 1912, Plaatje, Fordsburg [Johannesburg] to Molema, Mafeking.

60. Malunge and Lekoko were the respective regents for the young chiefs of the Tshidi-Rolong and the Swazi.

> To-day [20 Feb. 1915] the Swazies [sic] mourn the loss of Malunge, second son of King Umbadeni of Swazieland. His eldest brother, Bhunu, also died young. On the latter's death his heir was but a small boy, so Malunge became the principal regent and adviser of the Swazie nation. He came to England with the Swazie deputation about nine years ago, and has since been engaged in progressive undertakings in connection with the affairs of his people, to whom he was deeply devoted.

"The late Prince Malunge", *The African World*, 20 Feb. 1915.
As T.J. Couzens points out, "progressive" was a term of high praise among the African elite. It was usually used of those who took a keen interest in their people's welfare (educational, social, religious and political), who encouraged new farming methods (ploughing, individual land tenure) and who acted out the virtues of kindliness, Christianity and gentlemanliness, earned the respect of Europeans and Africans alike, spoke well did not drink. T.J. Couzens, *The New African* (Johannesburg, 1985), 11.

> On Monday, [I] will print a paper in Serolong, Sepedi and English which will be called Tsala ea Batho. Friends... saw the paper as a union between the Barolong and the Bapedi...[61]

Plaatje hoped that this paper, based on the linguistic links between Setswana and Sepedi, would found a modern political and cultural unity between Tswana and Pedi, in the face of Congress' Zulu dominance.

Plaatje sought every opportunity to draw all the Tswana into nationalist politics. He welcomed his own place on the SANNC delegation to Britain as such a chance. Again, the Tshidi chief showed no interest. Through Silas, Plaatje begged of Lekoko a £100 loan for the journey, urging, in English: "Please help and the trip will be alright. [sic]". In mid-sentence, he switched to Setswana to press his characteristic plea more feelingly: "*re tla lekela Barolong ka gotlhe kafa re ka lekang ka gona*", meaning "we shall endeavour by all means to help the Barolong". At first, Lekoko refused, which Plaatje thought bad for Tshidi interests. At length, Molema persuaded Lekoko that he and his people would be stronger "in a crowd". Plaatje described to Molema his shouts of joy on receiving Lekoko's acceptance. His thanks spilled over in proverbial praise for the chief's authority: "*Lentswe ja kgosi ke molao*", meaning "the Chief's word is law".[62]

With funding assured, Plaatje proceded to Britain to pursue the Rolong land claims. Importantly, he went both as statesman and historian. Silas Molema had himself plumbed Plaatje's historical knowledge of the claims. In 1913, the Mafeking Magistrate warned Silas that his ancestors' aggression in the *difaqane* might diminish the amount of land the Rolong received under the Land Act. Silas immediately turned to Plaatje for a "Rolong" opinion on the past. Plaatje insisted, in a lengthy letter, that the Rolong had always been peaceable in the face of Ndebele and Boer attacks:

> We never killed anyone until the Matabele poked us; we fought with them to help the Boers to expel them and come home, today they [Boers] are giving us trouble.[63]

This demonstration of Plaatje's expertise, as well as his known national standing, convinced Silas and other Tshidi councillors that Plaatje could, most adequately, be "their man" on the SANNC's delegation to Britain. They formally charged him to appeal strongly to the "Secretary of State for the Colonies ..., the Aborigines Protection Society, the Native Races Committee, the Wesleyan Missionary Society and all Christian People in England".[64]

Thus charged with the Rolong land claims, and with chiefly support for his version of their history, Plaatje embarked on two voyages in one. Physically, he set forth to pursue both sets of claims. But his memory and imagination made a journey further back, which would lead him to "consolidate"

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61. Willan, *Plaatje*, 158.

62. Plaatje Papers, A979, Da33, 3 Dec. 1913, Plaatje to Molema.

63. Plaatje Papers, *ibid.*

64. Plaatje Papers, Da36, 13 Apr. 1914, "Paramount Chief of the Barolong Nation and Councillors, Mafeking to Plaatje, S.T., Kimberley."

the Barolong past in written form, hoping thereby to "save it from oblivion". Underlying this purpose was his desire to shape Rolong ethnicity into a powerful cultural and political force, such as he saw emerging among the Zulu and the Afrikaners. He continued these largely unrealised efforts in journalism, literature and politics throughout the 1920s.

V. *The Proverbs and After*

Plaatje's dedication to preserving the past for future use continued well beyond *the publication of Sechuana Proverbs* in 1916. He felt increasingly bound to do battle against Afrikaner nationalism's tendency to swallow up the cultural and political efforts of African nationalists. Indeed, he tried to emulate the Afrikaners' runaway success in making their language "literate", and the vehicle of their nationalism:

> The Dutch-speaking people of South Africa have pulled their Afrikaans - a baby among languages spoken in the Union - out of the fire and have launched it as one of the most important languages in the half-continent by writing it in newspapers, magazines and books. Their ablest writers contributed articles, etc., and thus fixed its literary efficacy, and so it now faces the world as a cultural language.[65]

Afrikaner Nationalists were indeed strong in a crowd. Their many hands made Plaatje's virtually lone struggle to achieve mass literacy, cultural and economic progress among the Rolong and Tswana, seem futile. The older Plaatje became, the more clearly he saw the trajectory of Hertzog and his fellow nationalists as a long but direct march to power. In the 1924 election campaign that eventually saw victory for the National/Labour Party pact, Plaatje urged enfranchised Cape Africans not to vote for Hertzog. This gesture too was futile. Once in power, the Pact government speedily unleashed on the African people the "orgy of tyranny" that Plaatje had forseen. He saw the South African Party's land policy, and enactments of industrial discrimination (the Native Labour Regulation Act and Mines and Works Act, both 1911) become, under Hertzog, a more refined and effective system of segregation. The Pact implemented the Smuts government's Industrial Conciliation Act and backed it up with a discriminatory Wage Act (1925). They restored the colour bar to the Mines and Works Act (1926). In the same year, Hertzog introduced his Native Bills, aimed at tightening segregation and removing Cape Africans from the Common Voters Roll. In 1927, the Native Administration Act gave the government massive powers to reshape and co-opt chiefly rule.[66]

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65. This analysis, which Plaatje admired, was that of his friend, the Setswana scholar, D.M. Ramoshoana, in a letter to the Editor, *Bantu World*, 16 June 1934, cited in Willan, *Plaatje*, 326.

66. Willan, *Plaatje*, 300 and D. Yudelman, *The Emergence of Modern South Africa: State, Capital and the Incorporation of Organized Labor on the South African Gold Fields, 1902-1939* (Westport & Cape Town, 1984), chps 5, 6 & 7.

As Willan maintains, Plaatje's politics of polite protest ill equipped him to face this kind of legal onslaught. He found himself isolated from national politics in the 1920s. To an extent, he returned to his earlier interests in history, literature and journalism. State intervention in Tswana politics made Plaatje speak out strongly as a Tswana historian. He gave copious evidence on Tswana history and culture in the trial of Daniel Mokhatle versus the Minister of Native Affairs, at the time, Hertzog himself.

The story illustrates Plaatje's knowledge of chiefly ruldesire for its preservation. During a *lekgotlhe* disagreement among the Fokeng, Daniel Mokhatle, a headman, and senior community members, upbraided the Fokeng chief, August Mokhatle, for mismanaging the tribe and for suspect monetary dealings with a local trader, a Mr. Sichel. When the "dissidents" set up a separate *lekgotlhe* to the Chief's, he expelled them from the tribe, on 24 October 1924. The NAD felt obliged, as they had in the intra-Rolong disputes, to uphold chiefly office. Daniel and his cohort responded by suing not the Chief, but General Hertzog and the Governor General of South Africa, in his capacity as "paramount chief of the native tribes in the Transvaal."[67]

The trial turned on questions much debated among the Western Transvaal and Northern Cape Tswana: how was a tribal entity to be defined? to whom was the Chief more accountable, his councillors in the *lekgotlhe* and the whole tribe (the *pitso*) or the NAD? And, if the latter was the case, in what ways were the NAD intervening in the relationship between chiefs and their followers? The NAD found it it extremely hard to determine how the contumacious Daniel should be judged. The case straddled the uneasy gulf between Roman Dutch and Customary Law, which the NAD was striving to bridge. What most NAD administrators wanted (and the later Native Administration Act aimed at) was the incorporation of African Chiefs into governmental structures as the NAD's salaried servants. They wished to perfect the process, begun under the 1920 Native Affairs Act, of substituting a Local Council system for the chiefly system of ruling by consensus with the *lekgotlhe* and the *pitso*.[68]

As a witness, Plaatje was called to give evidence on the nature and jurisdiction of chiefly rule in Tswana society. The state argued that Chief August's expulsion of Daniel, without consulting his own *legotlhe*, had been justified. The state also argued that, in setting up an independent *legotlhe*, Headman Daniel had revealed the collapse of chiefly authority. Consequently, the NAD needed to intervene to restore law (and democracy) to the Fokeng.

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67. NTS 315 (01), 15/15 1, "Daniel Mokhatle and others versus J.B.M. Hertzog No.25 TPD." [henceforth, Mokhatle], 2-3 of Plaintiff's Declaration. The Plaintiffs argued that they were, as members of the Bafokeng Tribe, entitled "to the rights and privileges attaching to such membership," including "an absolute and indefeasible right to reside during their lifetime upon property belonging to the said tribe."
From 1910 until 1961, when SA seceded from the British Commonwealth, the Governor General (representing the Crown), held the highest political office in the country. The Act of Union (1910) created the theoretical office of "Supreme [rather than paramount] Chief" of SA's African Tribes, in the belief that Chiefly office proceded in an ever-upward and centralising line of authority. No such office had ever existed in the region at any time before Union. The so-called "paramount" chiefs of the Zulu, Sotho, Xhosa, Pedi and Swazi, ruled states of comparatively recent creation dating from the 19th century. Thompson, *Unification*, chps 4 & 5.

68. On the intentions behind the Native Affairs Act, see Dubow, *Racial Segregation*, 107-11.

Plaatje refused to accept this view. He delivered, from the great vault of his memory, a lengthy and very subtle account of Bahurutshe and Bafokeng history and custom.[69] He argued that chiefly rule could still, in the 1920s, be flexible and democratic. Moreover, it was the people's will that the most important institutions of chiefly rule, the *legotlhe* and the *pitso*, be maintained "as they were originally."[70]

The court used Plaatje's evidence, but did not allow chiefly rule the flexibilty that he did. In late May 1925, Justice Curlewis found in Chief August's favour that, in customary Native Law (to which the NAD was partially returning), a "Paramount Chief" could expel from the tribal property a rebellious member of the tribe, without consulting his counsellors or calling a trial. "Such exercise of power", said the Judge, "is not in conflict or inconsistent with the principles of civilisation".[71]

It was after his participation in this trial that Plaatje saw fit to include, in the revised version of *Sechuana Proverbs*, the maxim "*Bogosi bo botlhoko, ke ntho e e sa phungoeng*", meaning "Chieftainship, like an unbroken abscess, is painful." The proverb has as many meanings as the number of situations in which it is used. It may characterise the continuation of chiefly rule under seriously compromised circumstances. Rhetorically, it contains a double proposition and double metaphor. In the first proposition, chieftainship is directly compared to illness and pain (*botlhoko*). The alliterative "bo"- prefix of the abstract noun-class underlines this linkage. In the second proposition, a second metaphor defines the nature of the "illness": an abscess which keeps growing, but is never pierced. The proverb suggests that compromised chieftainship becomes a increasing source of destructiveness in the community.

The "pain" of chiefly rule was, for Plaatje, symptom and cause of the unstoppable decline of Tswana societies. The fact that Plaatje felt so strongly about chiefly rule and could find a proverb to sum up his feelings, illustrates the resilience and adaptability of proverbs. It also shows his perseverance in keeping cultural history alive. He feared, throughout his last two decades, that the symbolic cord tethering the oral form to its cultural and historical meanings, was about to snap. For Plaatje, the relationship between these forms and their historical significance animated an ethnic sense which he desperately wanted to articulate. He sensed that ethnicity had both divisive and unifying powers. If overemphasised, ethnic differences might split the tentative unity that African nationalist politicians were trying to foster. At the same time, he saw that the decline of ethnic memory was a manifestation of the loss of land and resources which his, and most other African communities faced. He saw the recovery of these dying histories as the

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69. Mokhatle, 82:

> I have travelled a lot in this country while editor of the paper [*Koranta ea Becoana*]. The Bechuanas are scattered all over the country, and I have visited my leaders and studied social conditions among them. I have also attended the courts of the Bechuana chiefs in Bechuanaland and other parts of South Africa..."

70. Mokhatle, 65.

71. Mokhatle, 65.

way to reassert right to the land and the cultures practised upon it. Oral history must be written down, he judged, so that a future generation could reclaim for themselves the past that would otherwise be lost.

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