

Lover of His People: A Biography of Sol Plaatje.

Seetsele Modiri Molema. Translated and edited by D. S. Matjila and Karen Haire. Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2012. 122 pp. ISBN: 978-1-86814-601-7. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/tvl.v50i2.33>

Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje was one of the outstanding South African intellectuals and men of letters of the twentieth century. He was one of the leading lights of the New African Movement, a political, cultural and social and literary renaissance that eventuated in the country between 1860 and 1960 wholeheartedly engaged with the transformation of European modernity into New African modernity. In an obituary notice published within a few days of Plaatje's death in 1932 at the age of 53, H. I. E. Dhlomo, a brilliant New African intellectual in his own right of a succeeding generation, wrote these remarkable words which posterity has assented to their correctness in estimating the genius of this extraordinary man: "A great, intelligent leader; a forceful public speaker, sharp witted, quick of thought, critical; a leading Bantu [African] writer, versatile, rich, and prolific; a man who by force of character and sharpness of intellect rose to the front rank of leadership notwithstanding the fact that he never entered a secondary school; a real artist, passionate, assiduous, alert, keenly sensitive". Subsequent scholars, intellectuals, political leaders have concurred with this high estimation from Brian Willan's magisterial biography *Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist, 1876–1932* (1984) through the *Reader's Digest Illustrated History of South Africa: The Real Story* (1989, 1994, 2006: with Christopher Saunders as the Consultant Editor and Colin Bundy as the Historical Advisor) to Nelson Mandela's autobiography *Long Walk To Freedom* (1995). Other South African writers and intellectuals such as Ezekiel Mphahlele, Richard Rive and Njabulo Ndebele have had

much to say about Solomon Plaatje over the last three decades.

The first person to devote a whole book to the historical importance of Solomon T. Plaatje was Seetsele Modiri Molema (1891–1965) who knew him politically and intellectually perhaps better than anyone else who was his protégé, being fifteen years younger than his Master. Molema, a medical doctor, was a major New African intellectual in his own right within the New African Movement having published in 1920 a major historical work *The Bantu: Past and Present* as well as other books in later years. Molema knew him as a boy because his father, Modiri Molema, a member of the Molema Chieftaincy among the Setswana Nation, financed Plaatje's first newspaper *Koranta ea Becoana* and later partly assisted his subsequent newspaper ventures such as *Tsala ea Sechuana* and *Tsala ea Batho*. The book under review is an English translation of Molema's *Sol T. Plaatje: Morata Wabo* which was published in Setswana in 1965.

Molema begins *Morata Wabo* by portraying Plaatje's intersubjectivity as that of a child prodigy which was constantly in search for knowledge to explain the order of things or the state of forms. This preternatural curiosity explains why he never felt the historical necessity for formal education. This social and intellectual awakening occurred at a very critical moment in the historical development of the territory that was to be designated as the Union of South Africa of 1910: the momentous defeat of African traditional societies by the triumphant European modernity that had violently entered African history several centuries earlier. Among the preeminent agents of European modernity were the missionaries who paradoxically played an equally debilitating and enabling role in African history.

In the particular instance of Plaatje's personal formation this was the violent encounter between Barolong history and European history in adjacency to San history, Griqua history

and Khoe history. From the Berlin Lutheran missionaries Plaatje learned the importance of languages in the formation of a modern sensibility: hence his remarkable self-empowerment in acquisition of many languages: English, German, French, Dutch, Herero language, Afrikaans and other African languages.

From Barolong history Plaatje learned the necessity of resistance, resilience, fortitude and self-empowerment: this led him to an awareness of the necessity of forging a national consciousness with other African Nations in order to construct a counter-narrative to the hegemony of European modernity. This awakening to the necessity of forging a modern consciousness led Plaatje to engage himself with *new* newspapers, *new* political organizations, *new* associations, *new* translations, new literary forms, new politics and *new* links to the African Diaspora.

This acute awareness of the necessity of modern consciousness without necessarily rejecting or forsaking traditional forms led Plaatje to be at the forefront at the formation of the African National Congress, the New African Movement, the Black Press Association, and participant in the extension of Pan African connections to the African continent. It is with the multiplicity of these undertakings that made Plaatje a leading participant in the transformation and transfiguration of European modernity into New African modernity in South Africa.

His great articles, essays, analyses and meditations contributed to many South African, American and British newspapers were part of the forging of New African modernity contra European modernity. The novel *Mhudi* (1930), the milestone book of political philosophy and analysis *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), *Sechuana Proverbs with Literal Translations and Their European Equivalentents* (1916), and numerous major essays were part of an enormous undertaking in constructing a

'new' modernity. Yet his adaptations of William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado About* and *Othello* into Setswana seem to say that although New African modernity should disengage itself from European modernity, British history and South African history were inseparable from each other.

In writing this brief yet superb biography of Solomon Tshkisho Plaatje, Seetsele Modiri Molema was following in the footsteps of S. E. K. Mqhayi who wrote biographies of New African intellectuals such as Elijah Makiwane and Walter Benson Rubusana. Like the great Xhosa poet, Molema was one of the early cultural historians of the New African Movement.

The translators and editors of *Sol T. Plaatje: Morata Wabo*, D. S. Matjila and Karen Haire, have succeeded magnificently in their undertaking. They provide a wonderful intellectual sketch of the author of the book as well as a sample of Plaatje's incomparable writings. All in all Wits University Press deserves commendation for such an exemplary effort.

The greatest South African scholar in the twentieth century, Clement Martin Doke (1893–1980), would have admired this book.

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