

“A Member of the Race”: Dr Modiri Molema’s intellectual engagement with the Popular History of South Africa, 1912–1921

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The position of the writer and the possibility of new engagements after 1910:

In 1920, Modiri Molema, a Motswana¹ doctor from Mafikeng, a small town on the outskirts of the British Empire, once the site of a memorable siege in the South African War, began his first book with these words: “[t]his work is no production of art. It purports to be a simple portrayal of the life of the Bantu (or Native Peoples of South Africa)” (1920, vii).¹ Using terminology a little in advance of the official parlance of the day, he called it *The Bantu Past and Present*.² This humble statement belied the narrative complexity of the four-hundred page work it prefaced. *The Bantu* (henceforth) is a work of remarkable vision and design, through which Molema sought entry into two highly problematic discourses that represented Africans to the world – history and ethnography. He also hoped that his work would serve as a popular account of African history and culture.

In the white-dominated dispensation of power created in and after 1910 by the shapers of the Union of South Africa, black intellectuals struggled to write and then publish their views, whether in financially besieged newspapers or in texts that sought entry into established intellectual disciplines. As Thandika Mkandawire emphasises, “[f]rom the earliest days of independence, African intellectuals have clamoured for autonomous spaces for their thinking” (2005, 9). However, the repressive circumstances in which black intellectuals in South Africa endeavoured to develop their thinking in the early twentieth century were severely limited by the dialectics of nation, time, language and space, as this

ⁱ One aspect of Dr Molema’s ethnic identity is mentioned here, because of its importance to him. The linguistic and cultural group to which he belonged, at Mafikeng, were the Barolong, members of the broader collection of communities known as the Batswana and speakers of a dialect of Setswana: Serolong. See Jones (2002, 47 and 61) for more on Setswana and the Serolong variant, respectively.

paper will show. Interestingly, during this period writing *about* the ‘nation’ quite often occurred – or at least began – *outside* that nation. During periods of temporary exile from the country, several black intellectuals began to elaborate their ideas. Seemingly, the double liminality of this position – being, on the one hand, outside, yet part of, the people being described and, on the other, being one of the people included within the geographical boundaries of the (incipient) ‘nation,’ yet deliberately excluded from its body politic. The grounds of exclusion overlapped with that intransitive boundary between colonist and colonised.³

As one of the first published texts in which a black author presents a discursive treatment of history, culture, self and community, *The Bantu* is an important articulation of the difficulties that black intellectuals encountered when attempting to analyse the position of black people in the ‘South Africa’ inaugurated on 31 May 1910. A decade later, the Glasgow-educated Dr Seetsele Modiri Molema, began a remarkable alternative career as historian, ethnographer and biographer, with the realisation that the very discourses he wished to enter, were – largely – the preserve of white colonial writers. They were colonial in perhaps two ways: either as part of the white settler community in South Africa or as part of the assemblage of historians and ethnographers (some amateur) who traversed Africa, helping to define its boundaries, its indigenous peoples – and to entrench the differences between them – and broader distinctions among the ‘races’ of the early twentieth-century world.

Entangled as he was in the cultures of African and colonial societies in South Africa as well as in Scotland, where he studied medicine, Molema set out – ostensibly – to tackle the ways in which the discourses of history and ethnography represented black South Africans. However, the problematic – not to say troubling – relationship of the author to his text should give us pause. That relationship is broached in the Preface, a two-page paratext that establishes the generic complexity of *The Bantu*.

The Prefatorial Revelations of Molema:

Although it is the first part of *The Bantu* that Molema entitled “A Revelation,” it was the Preface that would prove most self-revelatory. A preface, according to Gérard Genette,

consists of “[...] a discourse produced on the subject of the text that follows or precedes it,” yet (he also observes) identifying the “sender” of a preface is more difficult (1987 and 1997, 161, 194). Were Molema’s text an autobiography, one might term his Preface “actorial,” when the “author of the preface may be one of the characters in the action” (179). However, Molema’s liminal position as author of a text that is autoethnographic makes his prefatory claim that he writes as “a member of the race” challenge the reader to question the narrative personae he creates, firstly to narrate the preface (first-person) and, secondly, to narrate the main text (pages 1–388 and appendices). This paper suggests that part of the unaccountable difficulty that readers and critics have encountered with *The Bantu* lies in the underexplored relationship between its author and his text, which, he claims, is *his* history as well as that of his people. His race, the Preface emphasises, is vital: it authenticates his account of the people whose history he writes, because he is one of them. Race is not the sole focus of his work; he is concerned, in a writerly way, with the act of writing and with the construction of the discourses in which he writes. The layered history of his people has personal meaning for him, as the allegorical structure of the main text reveals. It has a four-part structure, implicitly divided into two ‘testaments.’ Parts I and II (“The Revelation” and “The Past”) form an “Old Testament,” chiefly concerned with migration and the establishment of well-developed settled cultures in southern Africa, as well as conflicts between competing societies. His New Testament (Parts III, “The Present,” and IV, “Possibilities and Impossibilities”) hailed the new faith which, he ardently believed, transcended the subcontinent’s old ways. He celebrated the arrival of missionaries, literacy, humanism, modernity and – more cautiously – industrialisation in southern Africa, and the futures that black South Africans might enjoy if not prevented by governments and racism.

The chronicling of time was on his mind and, as Genette reminds us, time is important in determining the nature of the preface and the attitude its writer (“sender”) conveys in it (1987 and 1997, 174 ff). Molema states that the time at which he wrote is significant at least in part because of his situation as a young black South African seeking to explain the participation of black troops from the colonies in the armies of both ‘sides,’ “but particularly on the Allied side” (1920, vii).⁴ Also significant, but mostly undescribed in this “incipit” (Genette 1987 and 1997, 168), is the intense period during which he wrote *The Bantu*, when, temporarily exiled from home, he studied medicine in Glasgow and Dublin. The details of his identity are largely sublimated in the main text of *The Bantu*, with very few

references to self after the Preface and opening chapter. Instead, his argument about the need for an explanatory text such as his moves from the particular (self) to the general (community):

So I have hoped that my presenting to the public some facts about my people, the Bantu, would not be out of place, and that it might increase the public interest in them.

(Molema 1920, vii)

Artless as this may sound, his complex narrative strategy revealed the way in which the young intellectual, who later managed three careers (doctor, writer and politician) at once, sought to make available to the reading public an account, at once popular and academic, of past, present and future. Before considering other implications of the Preface, we should consider not only the time at which Molema wrote it, but also the place of his book in the history of South African writing.

The Bantu marks an important stage in the history of the book, as one of the earliest discursive texts by a black South African intellectual, also remarkable because it was published outside the country of its author's birth. W. E. Green & Son published *The Bantu* four years after *Native Life in South Africa*, by his mentor, Sol Plaatje, was published by P. S. King in London and a year before *Native Life* was republished in America by W. E. B. du Bois's newspaper, *The Crisis* (Parsons 1999). Both texts have, over the years, enjoyed somewhat more public life than the cultural writing of Walter Benson Rubusana: *Zemk' Inkomo Magwalandini* ("There go your Cattle, you cowards" (1906 and 1911)), a collection of Xhosa writings and "a peerless collection of praise poems" (Opland 1999, 93).⁵ While one source records that he compiled this collection while accompanying King Dalindyabo of the AbaThembu to the coronation of Edward VII,⁶ Opland (1999, 93) states more reliably that Rubusana printed his anthology independently in 1906. It would appear that his period in London overseeing the publication of the Xhosa Bible may have afforded him time to write a book concerned with the preservation of historical culture (see Andrzejewski et al., 2010, 603). Conserving popular memory was the intention of all three writers.⁷

These three writers, each of whom may have conceived his work in South Africa, took time to write it while in temporary exile from the land of their birth. While, on 20 June 1913, the "South African Native" had awakened to find himself "not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth," the period of enforced exile that Plaatje (1916 and 1982, 21)

spent in London from 1914 to 1916 gave him the relative freedom to imagine his country politically, culturally and creatively.⁸ How much longer was Molema's temporary exile from April 1914 to early 1921, a period of fascinated engagement with his medical studies and passionate longing for home, as letters to his father and siblings confirm.⁹ Molema's seven years in Glasgow were devoted to his studies. While he could have tried to return after the Armistice (November 1918), passages for civilians were limited, as the demobilisation of the troops took priority. So, World War 1 and his desire to specialise in surgery and obstetrics after graduating in April 1919 kept him on Clydeside and in Dublin, as a writer in exile.¹⁰

McClennan argues that "[e]xile either causes creative freedom and reflects a global aesthetic or it results in heightened provincialism and literary regionalism. Exile writing is either global or it is national" (2004, 2). How much more problematic are the practices of writing in a temporary exile, when – for a time – the only links with home are letters (rendered more sporadic by intermittent postage during warfare), occasional newspaper articles and the infrequent visits of friends.¹¹ The Spanish writer Claudio Guillén, among others, represented an earlier understanding of exile writing as being polarised between the positions of exile as "(nostalgic)" and "counter exile [as] (creative)." McClennan argues that exile writing is far more complex:

[...] the literature of exiles contains a series of dialectic tensions revolving around central components of the exile's cultural identity: nation, time, language, and space. Understanding the exile's experience of nation as dialectical allows us to account for the tensions between nationalism, transnationalism, globalization, counternationalism, and anti-nationalism present in exile texts.

(2004, 2–3)

This paper posits that, for the writer in temporary exile, the same dialectical components remain in tension within his cultural identity, yet are influenced in particular ways by plans to return home to re-shape the world along 'modern' lines. Molema's representations of "nation, time, language, and space" are further moderated by his hope that the 'implied readership' of *The Bantu* will be multicultural. His delineation of this putative 'reader' is broad, yet defined by language: "[t]his, then, is a story designed for the average English-speaking person, without any great acquaintance with South African people and affairs." The book would, he trusted, cross the racial divide to appeal to black (specifically 'Bantu') readers: "To members of the Bantu race I hope this small book may be an incentive to many

to collect and record the history of their people” (1920, vii). Chapter I of his book, which also has a prefatory function, provides a linguistic, historical and geographical definition of the term ‘Bantu.’

Why write a history and ethnography while studying towards one of the most time-consuming and challenging (intellectually and physically) courses in the Glasgow University repertoire? His letters home do not offer an answer to this question, so it is to the Preface that we must look for his motivation and his identity as the writer of this text:

The Great War is quoted to explain everything. It may be quoted as a reason for this work also. There are black races participating on both sides, but particularly on the Allied side. Among these latter are the Bantu, on behalf of Great Britain. So I have hoped that my presenting to the public some facts about my people, the Bantu, would not be out of place, and that it might increase the public interest in them.

(Molema 1920, vii)

He uses these words assertively, claiming a rightful space for Africans in a war that would change the political face of Europe. This observation was also about a *post-colonial* turn in which a member of a colonised race seizes the power of narrating African history and culture and tries (not always successfully) to drag it from the grasp of negative interpretation.¹²

Time, space, nation and history encounter each other in this statement. The prolonged experience of World War I brought ordinary citizens of Britain into contact with members of the peoples colonised, whether in their own towns and cities or in photographs, newspapers or early newsreels. While it was known that colonial troops were serving in active or in auxiliary roles, “European views of colonial troops shaped how and where those troops were used during the war, and colonial peoples in turn came into contact with a world much broader than most had previously known” (Dowling 2006, 55).

Encounters with people from the colonies – particularly black or Indian people – were, Molema observed, unusual in Glasgow, despite its being a city that had long played host to medical students from abroad (see Collins 1988, and Cronin 1948, 14–15). In August 1915, he wrote to his father, Chief Silas, that the only time he and James Moroka (future ANC president) heard “their Tswana language [was] when we meet as we are the only two Batswana here in Scotland.”¹³ Attempting to explain the origins and culture of black people was, in a sense, an attempt to explain his own strangeness, as a young and unenlisted man

in a city of cold glances. He told Chief Silas that his class was emptying out: “As you know, now six nations are at war namely the French, English, Russians, Belgians, Serbians, Italians are all fighting the Germans, Austrians and Turks. The men are all gone to war, only a few are remaining with women.” He explained that many refugees had “fled the wrath of the Germans who have destroyed their cities. It is said there are ten thousand here.”¹⁴ He wrote to explain his sense of what might appear to others as his singularity as a smallish, light-skinned black man in a city of white people. His first letter home in 1914 noted that he was one of just seven ‘coloured’ students in the whole university (presumably his own calculation).

The Bantu would, he tells readers of the Preface, define its author for them:

Finally, I may say that I am a member of the race whose life I have described in the following pages, kith and kin of the people whose story I am unfolding to the world. This has given me the advantage, as it were, of telling the story of my own life, relying much on my personal observation and experience, and more correctly interpreting the psychological touches which must be unfathomable to a foreigner

(Molema 1920, viii, my emphasis)

Molema features in three ways in this extract: implicitly, as the writer, and then as the Prefatorial “I” (instances one, three and four), linking the significance of his identity to the account he narrates; he is also the “I” of “a member of the race,” and so a character in this account – an object of narration. Where is *he* in the text, you may ask? At this juncture, the writer places his textual self in view briefly before using the phrase “kith and kin” to merge him into the ethnic and racial identities later explained in *The Bantu*. “Kith and kin” are “country and kinsfolk” (*OED*, “kin” and “kith”), those to whom one is related and one’s friends and countrymen.¹⁵ The merging of self into a communal and, indeed, national, identity also precipitates the fusion of character into narrator. Although he pronounces the ensuing text “the story of my own life” (my emphasis) and other personal pronouns underline underscore this claim, “I,” “me” and “my” bow out at the end of the Preface to make way for the more authoritative third-person narrator of autoethnography. In this genre, the third person may be likened to a theatrical mask, shielding the liminal self that hovers “in the wings of the first-person” (“*les coulisses de la première personne*” (Lejeune 1980, 7)), never quite appearing in his own right.

He made the claim, found in many prefaces that the novelty of his work resides in his own identity and powers of observation, but this important 'auto-' assertion moves *The Bantu* beyond both history and ethnography into autoethnography (Genette 1987 and 1997, 198, 200; Starfield 2007, 18). Here, he is no longer the lone Motswana of the cloisters and lecture halls, in the houses where he lodged and on the Byres and Dumbarton Roads bordering on the Gilmore Hill campus. This individual, he asserted – the first-person 'I' – was part of a community. The powerful term 'race' and the ties of kinship bound him to a social structure that, he claims repeatedly in *The Bantu*, was analogous to societies found in contemporary and historical Europe.

In Chapter XV, he cites the depiction of German savagery in the days of Roman historian Tacitus, as re-told in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, to show how it was possible for a people deemed 'savage' and 'primitive' to develop – admittedly over some centuries – into opponents who could almost outmatch the British Empire.¹⁶ To draw this parallel, he momentarily suspends "linear time" in order to create "a sense that time is cyclical and primordial (linking exiles across the ages) and a sense that time is relative and fractured (casting the exile out of meaningful/monumental time)" (McClellan 2004, 2). His ability to imagine back from the present moment into tranches of 'other time' allowed him many forms of historical and ethnographical exploration. These reconstructions are given his personal imprimatur through the allegorical meaning he makes of them: so this instance from Gibbon becomes an allegory of survival, part of the larger narrative of African ('Bantu') potential that he builds into his text.¹⁷

Re-imagining a national past

A period of exile, however temporary, may invite the writer to re-imagine his or her relationship to time in his or her country of origin. As McClellan observes:

Regarding time, writing about exile experience reflects the fact that the exile has been cast out of the present of his or her nation's historical time. This causes a series of dialectic tensions between different versions of linear/progressive/historical time and the experience that exile is a suspension of linear time.

(2004, 2)

The case of Modiri Molema suggests that in this “suspension of linear time,” the writer is assailed by the desire to recapture his nation’s historical time, or by writing a narrative with a teleological purpose, to suture together the disparate histories of the African peoples of South Africa to form one national narrative. To understand the process of writing, one must imagine the young Molema in one of his three Glasgow lodging houses, in the university library or even in the Students’ Union, escaping from the ‘real time’ of medical studies or ward rounds at the Western Infirmary, into the imagined history of the homeland he missed so much.¹⁸

The tension between historical time and linear time is evident in Molema’s reference to cultural and philosophical debates. Quite frequently, he invokes European philosophy as one of several metanarratives in *The Bantu*: he upholds Machiavelli (on government) and Montesquieu and Rousseau (on freedom and the equality of all humankind) as universal or transhistorical standards. In a sense, the ideas that they put forward, as well as the Christian principles that he invokes, belong in a form of eternal time to which he attaches considerable moral force. Writing in transhistorical mode to narrate history and ethnography may result in what James Clifford terms an “allegory of salvage,” which may become a highly problematic idealisation of the past, indeed – an “ethnographic pastoral” (1985, 114–15). As in the writing of exile, “ethnographic pastoral” may involve lamenting the lost or vanishing past in ways that idealise and romanticise its social organisation. Thus, Molema elegantly paraphrases the Bantu into Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*:

“Each of the Bantu puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will, and[,] in their corporate capacity[,] they recognise each member as an indivisible part of the whole.” [. . .] Anyone acquainted with the Bantu social state will be struck by its approximation to Rousseau’s conception of the ideal social compact.¹⁹ [Rousseau’s words appear in italics in the original]

Here, as in much of *The Bantu*’s discursive strategy, Molema relies on parallelism or the use of equivalents. He literally gives equal value or force to the state that Rousseau describes and the precolonial Bantu polity. Implicit in his adaptation of Rousseau is that the grammatical representation of time is also significant in the writing of history and ethnography, particularly when writing occurs during a period of exile. The question that arises is this: did intellectuals like Molema experience writing about the precolonial world, as a distancing from an earlier or anterior ‘self’ – in short, as ‘exile writing’? One tendency in

writing the pastoral is to characterise the present (especially an urban present) as dystopic, whereas the timeless past may feature as a pastoral utopia, which this quotation implies. Perhaps this is what Raymond Williams terms “a *critical nostalgia*, a way [...] to break with the critical, corrupt present by asserting the reality of a radical alternative” (qtd. in Clifford 1986, 114).

While aspects of Molema’s re-imagined past are idyllic in their nostalgia, this is countered by his critical depiction of Zulu and Ndebele communities, which are characterised as intrinsically violent: “Whole tribes were exterminated on one side by Tshaka’s Zulu impis, and on the other by Moselekatse’s Matabele hordes” (1920, 58). Tempting as it may be to dismiss this essentialist division of African ‘tribes’ into the militant (more masculine) Nguni and the peaceable (more feminine) Sotho-Tswana as the influence of conservative historian George McCall Theal, another autoethnographic element appears to govern Molema’s interpretation, as it did Plaatje’s in *Mhudi*. As Stephen Clingman (2004) states, it is vital to see the intrinsic interconnectedness of “identity (the inner) and the social (the outer),” and to question the relationship between “self” and a “concept of the ‘nation.’” Molema’s identity was subtly calibrated: not only was he a “member of the race” (nationalist, rather than ‘nation’), closer to home he was a Morolong, descendant of the royal house of the Barolong boo RaTshidi, one component of the Batswana community. While African nationalist leaders encouraged groups like the Rolong, Tswana, Zulu and Xhosa to subsume their ethnic identities into the larger term “African,” Molema the exile wrote at some distance from this nationalist impetus and often felt the competing pull of ethnic allegiance.²⁰ This is particularly clear in Chapter V, Part 1, on the Batswana, where he devotes substantial space to the intricate history of the Rolong. Here, he offers one of few autobiographical moments in the text, by introducing Chief Molema, first Christian leader of the Tshidi Rolong and also considered the first African evangelist in the country’s interior:

Molema was the grandfather of the author, and perhaps the reader will pardon us if we say one or two words about him. It is not, however, solely from the feelings of loyalty and love due to one’s forebears that we make a slight digression, but also and mainly because Molema was, and his sons after him have been, are, the corner-stone of the Barolong, as anybody, black or white, who knows aught of Mafeking will tell.

(1920, 43)

“The author” is as close as he comes to saying “I” outside the Preface. This oblique reference barely touches on his inner identity (Clingman) but deflects the reader to his authorial self. Yet he creates a genealogy for himself and with it, again, the authority to write as one with an indigenous knowledge of Africa that, his claim suggests, exists outside of the many published sources which he also wove into the fabric of the text. While he claims particular knowledge of Africa because of his standpoint as an African, he does not fall into the essentialism of some proponents of Standpoint Theory, which “assumes that identity is somehow ‘there’ before experience” (Gray 183).

Thus, historical time, overlaid with personal time, and his desire to represent “the birth of a nation” are united in his desire to create a history that is, on the one hand, intellectual, and, on the other popular and ‘usable.’ When discussing “the birth of a nation” in and after 1910, he was one of the first black intellectuals to state very clearly in a historical work that the struggle over nationhood was racial – and by that, he meant ‘between black and white.’²¹ He remembered how, during the South African War, and, later, the run-up to the first national elections, “the cry ‘South Africa for the Boers [was] heard’” and the struggle to control the nascent state seemingly took place between Afrikaners and English citizens (1920, 259). In the next statement, he cements the Prefatory claim to write “as a member of the race” to the increasingly organised struggle for the inclusion of black people within the body politic and against “race prejudice”:

The Union is supposed to have been the birth of a new nationality, the amalgamation of Boer and Briton, to work for the common end of white South Africa. So far for the first part of the South African racial struggle. Now we turn to consider the second part, which we call a colour problem, to signify that it is a struggle between the white and the black, and not merely between two nationalities like the Dutch and the British.

(1920, 259)

For Molema, race and its visual manifestation, colour, was the vital element of personal and community identity in South Africa. From this passage on, Molema’s tone shifts from the politeness used up to this point to a strategically rationed rhetorical anger.²² Yet his engagement with popular politics remained thoughtfully intellectual. Not for him the volcanic eruptions of R. V. Selope Thema, journalist and SANNC official, who wrote in the Congress newspaper *Abantu Batho* in February 1920:

“[t]he Caucasian has no Divine right or mandate from heaven, to keep us in slavery or subjection. We have a distinct place...in God’s Scheme of Creation. Consequently we cannot allow ourselves to be exploited for the enrichment of the European Capitalists without invoking the wrath of Heaven upon us”
(qtd. in Starfield 1988, 18)

Molema’s anger was less polemically voiced; he diverted his anger into formal rejections of what he regarded as Boer “racialism”: “Generally, [...] the British imitate the Dutch as little as possible, and because racialism is the atmosphere in which the Boer breathes, the British try to be as little prejudiced as possible” (1920, 271). In the latter chapters of *The Bantu*, the rhetoric of anger mounts, as the narrative voice transmutes into the plural and personal, speaking on behalf of the African nation he imagines as united in their opposition to Boer domination:

We have shown how the Boers have won for themselves among the blacks a *notoriety for repression, inhumanity, and injustice*. How, from first to last, *the Bantu have shunned the Boer overtures as they would pestilence*. [...] Altogether it may be summed up in a few words the Bantu have lost all respect for the Boers (if ever they acquired any). *Perhaps the Boers did not think it counted, whether gaining or losing the respect of such an ignoble folk*; but cruel deeds as well as noble deeds, even to such a folk, have far-reaching effects. (*My emphasis*)

(359)

In the first sentence, the italicised terms contain a version of ‘double-voicing,’ in Bakhtinian terms (1981 and 2004, 348), in which the “persuasive discourse” of African nationalism is heard in the barely veiled violence of verbs, nouns and epithets in Molema’s text. The first-person (plural) narrator appears to speak on behalf of the irate Bantu, thus affirming the ties that this intellectual sought to cement with the increasingly popular ideology of nationalism. Still dealing in the generalised ethnicities that nationalism encourages, the narrative persona briefly inhabits the consciousness of the ‘Boers.’ The dramatic irony of the italicised third sentence is that Molema is a member of the “ignoble folk” by whom this set of colonial masters would not mind being despised. The irony reverberated beyond the pages of the text, as in 1920, the white, largely ‘Boer’ government of Louis Botha and Jan Smuts had little notion of the powerful African intellectuals who were articulating an oppositional discourse against their rule.

Again, unlike the more populist wing of the Congress, Molema was trying to synthesise an inclusive account of the African past that might help to overcome ethnic divisions among black South Africans. Like Rubusana and Plaatje before him, he wanted to

preserve an African account of a past that was rapidly being overwritten, literally by the urbanisation and industrialisation, and figuratively, in the narratives of settler and colonial historians and ethnographers (Saunders 1988, 108; Smith 1988, 132; Starfield 2007, 3). This aspect of his endeavour was achieved only in part, as Saunders and Smith have observed. Like most historians (professional and amateur) writing in the 1920s, Molema relied extensively yet not exclusively on the work of conservative Settler historians, but began distancing himself from Theal towards the end of *The Bantu*.²³ One should not minimise Theal's presence in Molema's work, but it is well to remember that he also employed a considerable array of sources, from Herodotus to W. E. B. du Bois (with Hume, Herbert Spencer and Nietzsche in between).

*“Go bua gase go dira”: The Preface to an Engagement*ⁱⁱ

In focusing largely on the Preface to *The Bantu*, this paper has explored the role that Molema defined for himself at the outset of his literary career. Just a decade after the Act of Union (The South Africa Act, 1909) had declared that black South Africans would not be able to participate in the governing of their country:

44. The qualifications of a member of the House of Assembly shall be as follows –
He must, etc.
(c) Be a British subject of European descent.

(1920, 384)²⁴

By identifying himself as an African writer of a history and ethnography – until then powerful discursive tools in the armoury of colonial domination – he was making a statement that not only introduced his first work, *The Bantu*, but that would also preface a remarkable political and cultural engagement that endured until the last day of his life (see *Mapanya Interview*). In terms of the former, he pursued a political career in the local Mafikeng ANC, and represented his community on many local bodies. In December 1949, he was elected onto the executive of the national ANC and served under his old friend James Moroka, as Treasurer-General. At the same time, he wrote prolifically, publishing two

ⁱⁱ Plaatje (1916a, 38, Proverb 176): the literal translation is “To speak is not to act.”

biographies, while other manuscripts remained unpublished at the time of his death. His many essays are now mostly archived at the University of South Africa.

By making the courageous decision to identify his writing self as “a member of the race,” he assumed an authority he believed other historians of South Africa did not have. This enabled him to create what is regarded as the first full-length history and ethnography of Black people in South Africa by an African writer. He wished to make it a history that would have relevance for the emergent nationalist movement, and joined Plaatje’s *Native Life* in opening a vein of sustained rhetorical anger against racial oppression in South Africa. This paper has also gone some way to examining the effect that writing in exile may have had on this and other works by African nationalist writers during this period of fascinating engagements between intellectuals and popular politics in early twentieth- century southern Africa.

**Chief Molema Tawana of the
Barolong boo RaTshidi**



**Chief Silas Thelesho Molema,
father of Dr. S. M. Molema**



**Dr. Seetsele Modiri Molema, son of Chief
Silas and grandson of
Chief Molema Tawana**

¹ For Dr. Molema's account of the Siege, see S. M. Molema, [1949]. "Fifty Years Ago," (Draft), p. 6. Unisa Archives, ACC142, Molema Varia, Essays: "[o]n the 17th May 1900 the relieving force arrived. Col Mahon with a flying column of 1,000 men from Kimberley joined Col Plumer with his force from the north [...] forced the besiegers to withdraw eastward from whence they had come. Thus ended the siege which wrote the name MAFEKING in capital letters of gold across the page of history [...] which was celebrated in London with untrammelled enthusiasm which added the word 'mafficking' to the English language."

² In official and popular terminology, African South Africans were termed 'Natives' during this period.

³ A relatively small number of black property owners in the Cape Colony and Cape Province could vote (until 1936), among them Dr Molema, his father and uncle. However, the ironically named Representation of Natives Act (1936) removed African voters from the Voters' Roll. Molema attended the formation of the All Africa Convention (Bloemfontein, 1935), an organisation formed to protest against the increasing marginalisation of Africans from public life. See Beinart (1994, 118) and Walshe (1970 and 1987, 111–118, 128).

⁴ Molema's footnote on p. vii states that he had written the book by 1917 and that his publishers had wanted to publish it the following year, but that wartime paper shortages prevented them. He revised it before its publication in 1920.

⁵ This translation is from Opland (1999, 64). Professor Sizwe Satyo's new edition of *Zemk'iinkomo magwalandini* was published by New Africa Books in 2002.

⁶ The dating in this source seems unreliable. Potgieter et al. assert that Rubusana accompanied King Dalindyebo to Edward VII's coronation in 1904, whereas this event had taken place on 9 August 1902. Potgieter, D. J. et al., eds. (1971). *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa*, NASOU: Cape Town. v. 3, p. 620. Sidney Lee. *King Edward VII: A Biography, Part 2*. 1925. Kessinger Publishing, p. 158. *Zemk' Inkomo Magwalandini* was reissued in 1964 by Lovedale Press and again in 2002 by New Africa Books.

⁷ See Plaatje's statement that "[t]he object of this book is save from oblivion [...] the proverbial expressions of the Bechuana people [...]" (1916a, 1).

⁸ Plaatje wrote *Native Life* while compiling his *Sechuana Proverbs* (1916), *A Sechuana Reader* (1916), and his novel *Mhudi* (1930). S. M. Molema. *Morata Wabo* [Unpublished Biography of Sol Plaatje], *The Silas T Molema and Solomon T Plaatje Papers* [MPP] (1965, 35).

⁹ This correspondence is housed in MPP Ad section. Modiri Molema was the first-born son of Chief Silas Thelesho Molema, fifth son of Chief Molema of the Barolong boo RaTshidi [henceforth Tshidi Rolong]. See Starfield 2007, Chapters 1 and 2 for biographical accounts of the two chiefs' lives.

¹⁰ See Glasgow University Archives, GUA32166, 4 April 1919, Dr S. M. Molema's MB & ChB Degrees. Having registered in the summer term of 1914, he had completed his degree in less than five years. Also MPP A979 Ad1, 1 Sep 1919, Modiri Molema, Dublin, to Silas Molema, Mafikeng, which attempts to convince his father he should stay on in Britain to study further. In MPP A979 Ad1, 16 May 1920, MM, Glasgow, to SM, Mafikeng, uses interesting terminology to thank his father for educating him and his siblings:

I can safely say that no son loves and honours his father more than I love and honour you, and I shall ever be deeply thankful to Providence for such a father, and to you for the excellent and rare education you have given me — *education which makes me today one of the foremost men of my race and one of the best educated among black and white in South Africa.* (My emphasis)

¹¹ During his time in Glasgow, Molema received occasional letters from Plaatje, parcels and visits. MPP A979 Da61, 11 July 1920, Plaatje, London, to SMM, Glasgow, commented on *The Bantu*. Ad1, 30 Nov 1919, SMM, Dublin, to STM, Maf: Modiri planned to meet Plaatje in Glasgow in January 1920. Plaatje, in London with the second SANNC Delegation to Britain, had already sent Modiri a parcel of clothes from the Molemas. Ad1, 18 June 1920, SMM, Glasgow, to STM, Maf, reported that he and Plaatje visited Edinburgh together in May

¹² Saunders (1988, 108) correctly makes the point that Theal's influence is clearly present in Molema's work, but does not take note of his critique of Theal in *The Bantu* (357) and later works (1951, 50–51).

¹³ MPP A979 Ad1, 27 Aug 1915, SMM, Glasgow, to STM, Maf. Plaatje's newspaper, *Tsala ya Batho*, (22 Nov 1913), noted that "Mr James Moroka ... sailed for England a couple of years back after studying some years in Lovedale. He passed the Matriculation Examination in October and...entered the Medical College in Edinburgh as a medical student. It would have taken him five years to matriculate in this country, which shows that there is something wrong with native education out here."

¹⁴ MPP A979 Ad1, 9 July 1915, SMM, Glasgow, to STM, Mafikeng. [Original in Setswana, translated by myself and Prof. Stephen Maphike.]: in Mafikeng, Silas would have been able to follow the war in *Tsala ea Batho* and *Mafeking Mail*. On 12 Sep 1914, *Tsala* carried at least three long Setswana articles on the war, one by Silas himself! Modiri called Germans "Ma-Toistera"; *Tsala* used "*Maduistere*" (from "Duits," Afrikaans for German). The article "*Ntoa ea Europa*" ("The War in Europe") used "*Majeremane*," and "*Manyelesemane*" for the English. The article reiterated "*Modimo Boloka Kgosi*" ("God Save the King") several times.

¹⁵ Molema's used an English that some readers may find old-fashioned. Even his good friend and colleague, Victor Mapanya, made this observation, *Victor Mapanya Interview with Jane Starfield, 1992*. Mapanya referred particularly to Molema's last published work, *Montshiwa, Barolong Chief and Patriot*. Johannesburg: Struik. The *OED* links are: <<http://0-www.oed.com.ujlink.uj.ac.za/view/Entry/103759?rskey=y9UxQj&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>> and <<http://0-www.oed.com.ujlink.uj.ac.za/view/Entry/103433?rskey=3m4QoJ&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>>.

¹⁶ Molema (1920: 201) cited Edward Gibbon [1806: Chapter XXXVII, "The Reign of Clovis," with notes by Rev H. H. Milman. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext96/3dfre10.txt>>.

¹⁷ Clifford comments on the importance of allegory: "[...] I treat ethnography itself as a performance emplotted by powerful stories. Embodied in written reports, these stories simultaneously describe real cultural events and make additional moral, ideological and cosmological statements. Ethnographic writing is allegorical at the level of both its content (what it says about cultures and their histories) and of its form (what is implied about its mode of textualisation) (1986, 98).

¹⁸ Molema (1891–1966) would have been 23 on arrival in Glasgow and 29 on leaving.

¹⁹ Molema (1920: 134) cited Jean-Jacques Rousseau [1762]. *The Social Contract*. [Book I, Chp. VI, p. 14]: the passages in regular type show Molema's adaptations from the original and are, respectively "Each of us" and "they recognize." The commas found in Rousseau's original are inserted in square parentheses."

²⁰ Plaatje wrote in a 1913 article: "Tribalism and clan[n]ishness is melting away under the heat of our bungling misgovernment, and a bond of sympathy and co-operation is being automatically weaved amongst the coloured races of South Africa." Plaatje (23 Dec 1913, "Along the Colour Line." In Plaatje, 1996: 168)

²¹ I do not know whether Molema managed to see D. W. Griffiths' *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), though two phrases "the birth of the nation" (6) and "the birth of a new nationality" (259) suggest that he may have.

²² His rhetorical anger differs markedly from the more volcanic approach of another intellectual of his generation, journalist and SANNC official R. V. Selope Thema, whose volcanic eruptions who wrote in the Congress newspaper *Abantu Batho* in February 1920: "[t]he Caucasian has no Divine right or mandate from heaven, to keep us in slavery or subjection. We have a distinct place...in God's Scheme of Creation. Consequently we cannot allow ourselves to be exploited for the enrichment of the European Capitalists without invoking the wrath of Heaven upon us" (Starfield 1988, 18).

²³ Molema (1920, 357) labelled him "the champion of the Boers." His antipathy towards Theal deepened in his later biography, *Chief Moroka: His Life, His Times, His Country and His People* (1951), where he charged that Theal (*History of South Africa, 1828-1846* [1888], p. 286) "...and many others before and after him, have wasted much ink and time in trying to belittle the African contribution" to the 1837 defeat of the Amandebele. The Barolong contribution to this defeat was often ignored.

²⁴ This act was Act 9 of 1909 in the reign of Edward VII (c 9) (Loots et al. 2009, 6). Molema was citing a far older source, one of the few sets of documents available to him in Scotland: George von Welfling Eybers. *Select Constitutional Documents Illustrating South African History, 1795–1910*. London: G. Routledge & Sons. Select documents from Eybers were included in the Appendix to *The Bantu*, pp. 368 ff.

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