

ersion of Chuana-English glossary

appeal for further funds, and how  
collecting new words, is unknown.  
ionary is his annotated copy of the  
7. Plaatje's handwritten comments  
derable interest, and reveal more of  
isting compilation. His remarks in  
e dictionary as a whole: 'Object of  
not Quality'; and 'Hundreds of  
translated, no end of duplications  
boa, the right and the wrong'.<sup>47</sup>  
ry—concerned with the differences  
it with a bold line, and Plaatje has  
margin. And on the blank page  
ary he wrote the following:

ana speech but [unclear] Sechuana  
nce Missionaries first translated the  
w old natives who know of the 13th  
e is interchangeable with one of the

na, but the name used by Plaatje and  
European missionaries, and as here  
had made a similar point in his  
in 1916 when arguing the case for  
e true pronunciation of his language;  
*iphosho-phosho*, stating here that the  
age from what the missionaries were  
ng that book in the first place. This  
ork on the dictionary as well: it was  
e that was being distorted; the words

g work in Tswana and his struggle to  
volvement in a battle over the written  
oo conscious of the tragic effect that  
had had upon the development of  
his more than anything that made it  
lishers for his own work. But he also  
form of orthography that was most  
e Tswana language, and difficult as it  
t he had written, the fact that he was  
t mean he could decide upon the

MABOLELO A GA 'TSIKINYA-CHAKA

(The Sayings of William Shakespeare)

## DIPHOSHO-PHOSHO

(Comedy of Errors)



A fotelecoe mo puong ea Secoana  
ke

SOL. T. PLAA'TJE

Morulaganyi oa "Diane tsa Secoana le Maele a Sekgooa."

(Sechuana Proverbs and European Equivalents)

P.O. Box 143, Kimberley, South Africa.



MABOLELO a maṅoe a ga 'TSIKINYA-CHAKA

MASHOABI-SHOABI,

MATSAPA-TSAPA A LEFELA,

DINCHO-NCHO TSA BO JULIUS KESARA,

Le Buka tse diṅoe gape.



MORIJA PRINTING WORKS.

93 Title page of *Diphosho-phosho* (literally, 'Mistake upon Mistake'), Plaatje's translation of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*—the first African-language translation of any of Shakespeare's plays to be published.



94 David Ramoshoana, friend and fellow Tswana scholar. They shared an intense concern with the preservation of the Tswana language and its literature.

Sol T. Plaatje

acknowledge: Department of Historical Papers,  
University of the Witwatersrand Library,  
Johannesburg.



Sol T. Plaatje

acknowledge: Department of Historical Papers  
University of the Witwatersrand Library  
Johannesburg.



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## Sol T. Plaatje

(9 October 1876 - 19 June 1932)

Brian P. Willan  
Cambridge, England

or does he  
have an  
institutional  
address?

BOOKS: *Native Life in South Africa* (London: King, 1916; Kimberly, South Africa: Tsala Ea Batho / New York: Crisis, 1920);  
*A Sechuana Reader, in International Phonetic Orthography*, by Plaatje and Daniel Jones (London: University of London Press, 1916);  
*Mhudi: An Epic of Native Life a Hundred Years Ago* (Lovedale, South Africa: Lovedale, 1930; New York: Negro Universities Press, 1970; Johannesburg & London: Quagga/Collings: 1975);  
*The Boer War Diary of Sol T. Plaatje*, edited by John L. Comaroff (London & Johannesburg: Macmillan, 1973).

TRANSLATIONS: *Sechuana Proverbs, with Literal Translations and Their European Equivalents* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1916);  
 William Shakespeare, *Diphoso-phoso [A Comedy of Errors]* (Moriija, Lesotho: Moriija Press, 1930);  
 Shakespeare, *Dintshontsho tsa bo-Juliuse Kesara [Julius Caesar]* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1937).

Sol T. Plaatje occupied a central position in South Africa's political and literary history. One of the most widely talented and versatile men of his generation, he was a prolific journalist and newspaper editor, one of the founders of the African National Congress, and a leader in the public affairs of the African people for much of his life. His most significant writings are *Native Life in South Africa* (1916), a powerful defense of African rights, published as a response to the Natives' Land Act of 1913; *Mhudi* (1930), the first

novel in English to have been written by a black South African; and a handful of books written in Sechuana, also called Tswana and Setswana, his native tongue. These Sechuana books did much to preserve the language's literary form and established Plaatje as one of its leading writers and translators.

Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje was born in Boshof, South Africa, on 9 October 1876, into a Tswana-speaking family of Barolong origin, whose ancestors were among the earliest African converts to Christianity in the interior of southern Africa. His parents were Kushumene Johannes Mogodi and the former Kethanecwe Botsingwe. One of a large family, Sol went to school at the Berlin Missionary Society's mission station at Pniel, not far from the then-new diamond town of Kimberley. He owed his education to the Reverend G. Westphal and his wife, Elizabeth, Lutherans who took a close interest in his progress. From an early age he showed an unusual learning ability, in particular a remarkable facility with the various languages—African and European—spoken on the mission grounds. Plaatje's formal education, however, ended when he was seventeen: he left Pniel then (in 1894) to take up employment as a messenger with the post office in Kimberley. Earlier he had adopted his father's nickname, "Plaatje" (Afrikaans for short and stocky), as his own last name.

Over the next four years Plaatje emerged as one of the most active figures in the communal life of the polyglot African community in Kimberley and applied himself—both at work and in his spare time—to the task of acquiring a full command of the English language, one of the two official languages (along with Dutch) of the Cape Colony. In 1898 Plaatje married Elizabeth (Lilith) M'Belle, sister of the writer Isaiah M'belle, his best friend, and later the same year the couple moved to Mafeking, where Plaatje had accepted a job as court interpreter, employed by the Cape civil service. The subsequent siege of Mafeking (October 1899 - May 1900), one of the best-known episodes in the Boer War, inspired Plaatje to his first extended literary venture: his private diary, covering the period of October 1899 to March 1900. Written in English, it provides a lively, detailed, and personal day-to-day account of the siege, demonstrating Plaatje's clearly remarkable facility with the English language, a fascinatingly with the idioms of both African and European languages, and a finely developed sense of

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humor and irony. In addition, Plaatje's account of the siege casts new light on the highly significant African contribution to the defense of Mafeking, an aspect very much underplayed in other accounts.

Although many diaries kept by whites during the siege of Mafeking were published over the next few years, Plaatje's was not, and he seems to have made no effort to get it published. It was only published in 1973, following the discovery of Plaatje's manuscript by John Comaroff, an anthropologist doing research in the Mafeking district.

Frustrated at the lack of opportunities for advancement when the siege was over, Plaatje resigned from the civil service in 1902 in order to assume the editorship of a new Tswana-English newspaper, *Koranta ea Bechoana* (The Tswana Gazette), financed by a local chief, Silas Molema. Over the next decade Plaatje emerged not only as one of the leading African newspaper editors of his day but also as one of the most eloquent spokesmen for his people, arguing that Africans should be properly represented and protected in the new political and constitutional structures being created in the aftermath of British victory in the Boer War.

With the creation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, Plaatje moved to Kimberly to become editor of the newspaper *Tsala ea Batho* (Friend of the People), which achieved a circulation of several thousand for each weekly issue. Increasingly involved in national politics, Plaatje was one of the founders of the African National Congress in 1912. He became its first general secretary and in 1914 traveled to the United Kingdom as a member of a deputation to appeal to the British imperial government to repeal the Natives' Land Act of 1913, one of the most significant pieces of segregationist legislation, which severely restricted African rights to land.

When the other members of the deputation returned to South Africa on the outbreak of World War I, Plaatje stayed on for a further two and a half years, during which time he wrote three books. The first was *Native Life in South Africa*, published in May 1916. In essence a fierce attack on the Natives' Land Act and written as an appeal to the British public, *Native Life* was also a wide-ranging defense of African political rights and an often-emotive account of the steps taken over the years by South Africa's rulers to exclude Africans from political power. The book is nota-

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ble for its moving description of the devastating effects the Land Act had on African peasant farmers in the Orange Free State and for a personal, often nostalgic tone, which bears comparison with William Cobbett's *Rural Rides*, published nearly a hundred years earlier as a response to the enclosure movement in the English countryside.

*Native Life* was widely reviewed in both Great Britain and South Africa. For the most part reviewers concentrated on the political stance of Plaatje and on the fact that *Native Life* was actually the first book-length exposition of African claims to have been written by a black South African. In 1917 both the book and Plaatje himself were the subject of considerable debate in the South African House of Assembly.

The other two books Plaatje wrote during his sojourn in England—his *Sechuana Proverbs* and *Sechuana Reader* (both, 1916)—were of a different kind: both were the product of his intense concern to preserve his native language, which he felt to be threatened by the effects of industrialization and by the predominance of other, more widely spoken African and European languages. The *Sechuana Reader*, written in conjunction with Professor Daniel Jones, one of the foremost linguistic scholars of his day, was an attempt to preserve the precise sounds of the language by applying to it the phonetic alphabet—the first time this sort of project had been done with an African language. Also significant is the fact that the book includes interesting Tswana folktales that Plaatje had collected and recorded firsthand.

*Sechuana Proverbs* is a comprehensive compilation of 732 Tswana proverbs, which Plaatje recorded and put alongside his own literal English translations, together with their English or European equivalents where he could identify them. Both books were welcomed by few scholars in the field, and they remain to this day among the most important books to have been written in Setswana, but they never achieved a wide circulation or readership.

Plaatje returned to South Africa in 1917, but two years later he traveled to Britain as the leader of a second African National Congress deputation, again seeking the intervention of the British government in South Africa's affairs. The group met with no more success than its predecessor in 1914. Plaatje then apparently completed the manuscript of a successor volume to *Native Life* (covering political affairs in South Africa be-

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tween 1916 and 1920), but it was never published, and the manuscript has not survived.

In 1920 Plaatje traveled on to the United States and Canada, seeking to publicize the plight of black South Africans, and he made contact with some well-known black American leaders, such as Marcus Garvey and W. E. B. DuBois (who published the American edition of *Native Life*). Finally, in 1923, Plaatje returned again to South Africa, having achieved scant success in his travels overseas and reconciled to his failure to secure any outside intervention in South Africa's political affairs.

During the remaining years of his life, in Kimberly, Plaatje continued to devote himself to both political and literary concerns. Although he failed to resuscitate his newspaper as he hoped, he wrote extensively for both black and white newspapers, but in the changed circumstances of South Africa in the 1920s he no longer enjoyed the influence he once had. Increasingly he devoted himself to the task of recording and preserving Tswana language and literature. He compiled an English-Setswana dictionary, designed to replace the existing published dictionary, originally compiled by J. T. Brown in the 1870s, which he felt to be wholly inadequate and inaccurate; he compiled a substantial collection of Tswana folk tales and praise poems; and he prepared a second, enlarged edition of his earlier *Sechuana Proverbs*. None of these books was ever published, and only the manuscript of the revised *Sechuana Proverbs* has survived.

Plaatje's other major project in the field of Tswana literature was the translation of several of William Shakespeare's plays, reflecting—as well as his concern to create a body of written literature in Setswana—an interest and fascination with Shakespeare that dated from the 1890s. Plaatje probably completed translations of six of Shakespeare's plays, but only two were published: *Diphoso-phoso* (literally, "Mistake upon Mistake"), his translation of *Comedy of Errors*, published by the Morija Press in 1930; and *Dintshontsho tsa bo-Juliuse Kesara* (*Julius Caesar*), published posthumously in 1937.

The few people in position to judge Plaatje's success in these translations were full of praise for the quality of his work, and the books attracted considerable interest by virtue of being the first published translations of plays by Shakespeare into any African language. Subsequent editions of both books achieved substantial sales to

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*Mhudi* is in the Rhodes University Library, Grahamstown, South Africa. For holdings at the University of the Witwatersrand, see Marcelle Jacobson, *The Silas T. Molema and Solomon T. Plaatje Papers, Historical and Literary Papers: Inventories of Collections*, 7 (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand Library, 1978).

Add to entry for SOLOMON T. PLAATJE:

REFERENCES:

Couzens, "Sol T. Plaatje and the First South African Epic," English in Africa, 14, 1 (1987): 41-65.

Solomon T. Plaatje

Solomon T. Plaatje (9 October 1876-10 June 1932)

Books

Brian P. Willan  
Oliver and Boyd, Longman Publishing Group

The Boer War Diary of Sol T. Plaatje, edited by John L. Comar-off (London and Cape Town: Macmillan, 1973)

Native Life in South Africa (London: P.S. King and Co, 1916; New York: The Crisis, 1921)

Sechuana Proverbs with Literal Translations and their European Equivalents (London: Kegan Paul, 1916)

A Sechuana Reader in International Phonetic Orthography (with D. Jones) (London: University of London Press, 1916)

Mhudi: an epic of native life a hundred years ago (Lovedale: Lovedale Press, South Africa, 1930; London: Heinemann Educational Books [African Writers Series], 1978; Washington D.C., Three Continents Press, 1978).

Diphosho-phosho (Moriija, Lesotho: Moriija Press, 1930)

Dintshontsho tsa bo-Juliuse Kesara (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand Press, 1937)

New York: Negro Universities Press, 1970;

Sol Plaatje occupies a central position in South Africa's political and literary history. One of the most widely talented and versatile men of his generation, he was a prolific journalist and newspaper editor, one of the founders of the African National Congress, and in the forefront of the public affairs of the African people for much of his life. As a writer, his most significant works are Native Life in South Africa, a powerful defence of African rights published as a response to the Natives' Land Act of 1913; Mhudi, the first novel in English to have been written by a black South African; and a handful of books written in Setswana, his native tongue, which did much to preserve its literary form, and which have established Plaatje as one of its leading writers.

Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje was born into a Tswana-speaking family, of Barolong origin, whose antecedents were amongst the earliest African converts to Christianity in the interior of southern Africa. One of a large family, he grew up on the Berlin Missionary Society's mission station at Pniel, not far from the new diamond town of Kimberley. Plaatje owed his early education to the Reverend G. Westphal and his wife, Elizabeth, who took a close interest in his progress. From an early age he showed unusual ability, and in particular a remarkable facility with the <sup>various</sup>~~several~~ languages - African and European - spoken on the mission. Plaatje's formal education, however, ended at the age of seventeen when he left Pniel in 1894 to take up employment as a messenger with the Post Office in Kimberley.

Over the next four years Flaatzje emerged as one of the most active figures in the communal life of the polyglot African community in Kimberley, and applied himself - both at work and <sup>in</sup> his spare time - to the task of acquiring a full command of the English language, one of the <sup>two</sup> ~~ten~~ official languages (along with Dutch) of the Cape Colony. In 1898 Flaatzje married Elizabeth M'belle, sister of ~~one~~ of his best friends, and later the same year they moved to Mafeking where he had accepted a job as court interpreter, employed by the Cape civil service. The subsequent siege of Mafeking (October 1899-May 1900), one of the most famous episodes in the Anglo-Boer war of 1899-1902, inspired Flaatzje to his first extended literary venture: his private diary, covering the period October 1899-March 1900. Writ-

ten in English, it provides a lively, detailed and ~~often~~ very personal day-to-day account of the siege, <sup>demonstrating Flaatzje's already remarkable</sup> ~~It casts new light on the African~~ <sup>facility with the English language, a fascination with the idiom</sup> ~~contribution to the defence of Mafeking, and demonstrates very clearly~~ <sup>of both African and European languages, and a finely developed</sup> ~~Flaatzje's already remarkable facility with the English language. A~~ <sup>sense of humour and irony. In addition, Flaatzje's account of the siege</sup> ~~sense of humour and irony are also very evident, and so too is his~~ <sup>account</sup> ~~Diary casts new light on the highly significant African contribution~~ <sup>to the defence of Mafeking, something very much</sup> ~~fascination with the idioms of both African and European languages.~~ <sup>underplayed</sup> ~~in other accounts.~~

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When the other members of the Congress deputation returned to South Africa on the outbreak of the First World War, Plaatje stayed on for a further two and a half years, during which time he wrote three books. The first was Native Life in South Africa, published in May 1916. In essence a fierce attack upon the Natives' Land Act, and written as an appeal to the British public, Native Life was at the same time a wide-ranging defence of African political rights, and an often emotive account of the steps taken over the years by South Africa's rulers to exclude Africans from political power. It is notable for its moving description of the devastating effects the

Land Act had on African peasant farmers in the Orange Free State, and for a personal, often nostalgic tone which bears comparison with William Cobbett's Rural Rides, published nearly a hundred years earlier as a response to the enclosure movement in the English countryside.

Native Life in South Africa was widely reviewed in both the UK and South Africa. For the most part <sup>reviews</sup> ~~they~~ concentrated on the political stance of the author, and on the fact that Native Life was actually the first book-length exposition of African claims to have been written by a black South African. In 1917 both the book and Plaatje himself were the subject of considerable debate in the South African House of Assembly.

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Plaatje returned to South Africa in 1917, but two years later travelled to the UK as the leader of a second African National Congress deputation, again seeking the intervention of the British imperial government in South Africa's affairs. It met with no more success than <sup>its predecessor in 1914.</sup> ~~the first deputation~~. Plaatje <sup>then</sup> ~~did~~ apparently completed the manuscript of a successor volume to Native Life in South Africa (covering political affairs in South Africa between 1916 and 1920), but it was never published, and the manuscript has not survived.

In 1920 Plaatje travelled on to the USA and Canada, seeking to publicise<sup>z</sup> the plight of black South Africans, and made contact with a number of well-known black American leaders <sup>such as</sup> ~~like~~ Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. DuBois (who published an American edition of Native Life in South Africa for him). Finally, in 1923, Plaatje returned to South Africa, having achieved scant success in his travels overseas, reconciled now to his failure to secure any outside intervention in South Africa's political affairs.

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The few people in any sort of position to judge Plaatje's success or otherwise in these translations were full of praise for the quality of his work, and they <sup>books</sup> attracted considerable interest by virtue ~~also~~ of being the first published translations of Shakespeare <sup>e</sup> into any African language. Subsequent editions of both books published by the Botswana Book Centre and the University of the Witwatersrand Press achieved substantial sales to schools in Tswana <sup>-2</sup> speaking parts of Botswana and the Republic of South Africa, and both remain in print today.

Plaatje's literary endeavours <sup>2</sup> were not confined to the Tswana language. The year 1930 also saw the publication — by the Lovedale

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Press - of Mhudi, sub-titled "an epic of native life a hundred years ago", <sup>the first novel in English to have been written by a black South African.</sup> Plaatje actually wrote Mhudi while in England in 1919-20, and had tried in vain to find a publisher for it in during his subsequent travels in the USA and the UK.

Set in South Africa in the 1830s, Mhudi follows the fortunes of its two principal characters, Ra-Thaga and Mhudi (its heroine), as Barolong, Boer and Ndebele clash in the wake of the mfecane, a series of forced migrations set in motion by the rise of the Zulu <sup>s</sup> kingdom. In this setting Plaatje combines a fast-moving plot in the style of the western novel with a very deliberate use of African oral tradition and idiom. The result is an unusual synthesis reflecting Plaatje's enthusiasm for both African and English literary traditions, and his view that it was <sup>not only</sup> perfectly legitimate to mix the two, <sup>but</sup> ~~that much~~ <sup>creative potential</sup> ~~that much~~ <sup>lay in doing this.</sup>

At the same time Plaatje uses Mhudi as a vehicle for the expression of <sup>many of his</sup> ~~his~~ own beliefs and ideals. In the character of the heroine Mhudi is embodied the notion that women had a special contribution to make to the achievement of racial harmony in South Africa; in the individual friendship of Boer and Barolong is provided a model for the breaking down of personal prejudice which Plaatje believed to be a precondition to the emergence of a just social order; and in the ~~many~~ prophetic utterances about the consequences of continued injustice and oppression Plaatje had in mind the 1930s and the South Africa of his day, not just the period in which the action of Mhudi occurs.

At the time of its publication and shortly afterwards Mhudi was noted more for the fact that it was the first novel in English to have been written by a black South African than for any real

appreciation of its qualities - although the Times Literary Supplement did conclude that the book was "definitely memorable - a torch for some other to carry on!". Very few people were aware of what Plaatje was seeking to do in Mhudi: the book seemed to fall between <sup>African and European,</sup> two traditions, <sup>particularly,</sup> and to be part of neither. It has only been in the 1970s and 1980s - with its publication in the Heineman African Writers Series - that Mhudi has achieved a wider readership, and recognition of its place in the development of both African and South African literature.

Shortly before his death Plaatje was working upon another <sup>book</sup> ~~work~~ in English, based upon the nineteenth-century history of the Baca people of the eastern Cape. Part Only of an early draft of this manuscript survives, and no conclusive assessment of it is possible. Enough of it survives, though, to suggest that Plaatje's future literary plans may well have involved exploring in greater depth the historical traditions not only of the Tswana people, but of other South African peoples as well. As in Mhudi, one of his concerns was to preserve and uphold African historical traditions to counter the misrepresentations of white historians, writers and officials.

Fifty years after his death Plaatje's pioneering role in both political and literary spheres has achieved limited but growing recognition within South Africa. <sup>The enormous range of his activities</sup> ~~When a new political order emerges, and interests, his determination to explore both African and English-accepted by the majority of its inhabitants, a major reassessment of language components of South African literature, a vision that looked a writer who himself anticipated this will be due.~~ forward to a South Africa free from oppression and racial discrimination - all these things have made ~~Plaatje~~ Plaatje a figure who in many ways rose above the <sup>constraints</sup> ~~constraints~~ of the divided, polarized society which South Africa was in his lifetime, and remains today.

Secondary sources

## Biography

<sup>Brian</sup>  
 B.P. Willan, Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist 1876-1932  
 ^  
 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984; London:  
 Heinemann Educational Books, 1984)

## References

T.J. Couzens, "Sol Plaatje's Mhudi", Journal of Commonwealth Lit-  
erature, Vol 8, ~~no~~ 1, ~~June~~ (1973): 1-19

<sup>Stephen</sup>  
 & Gray, "Plaatje's Shakespeare", English in Africa, Vol 4, ~~no~~  
 ^  
 1, ~~March~~ (1977): 1-6.

\_\_\_\_\_, "Sol T. Plaatje's Use of John Bunyan in Mhudi", Communique, 9, 1  
 (1984), 3-13.

## Papers

There are three major archival collections of Plaatje papers: at the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg), the University of South Africa (Pretoria), and the School of Oriental and African Studies (London). An earlier manuscript of Mhudi is also to be found in the Rhodes University Library (Grahamstown). Much other material of biographical and historical rather than purely literary interest is scattered around widely, and most of Plaatje's many published articles are to be found only in their original published form and source. Fullest details available are to be found in the notes to Brian B.P. Willan, Sol Plaatje (see above). For holdings at the University of the Witwatersrand, see Marcelle Jacobson, The Silas T. Molema and Solomon T. Plaatje Papers. Historical and Literary Papers: Inventories of Collections, 7. (Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand Library, 1978).