

Books & the Arts

Thomas Mofolo and the Sotho hero

O. R. DATHORNE

THOMAS MOFOLO (1877-1948), the greatest Sotho writer, was a product of Morija and even worked for the Paris Evangelical Mission there at one time. Perhaps Mofolo's work more than any of his contemporaries shows what Jahn has called "the synthesis of Sotho tradition and Christianity." The New Testament had been rendered into Southern Sotho as far back as 1868, a Southern Sotho-English dictionary had been produced at Morija in 1876, and an anonymous collection of folklore had been published at nearby Platberg in 1850. It is therefore no cause of surprise that Mofolo published *Moeti oa bochabela* (The Traveller to the East) in 1907.

In the story Fekisi is disgusted with the life round him. He begins to ask certain questions about the source of cloud and rain, the origin of the sun, the nature of God. He finds that the world of nature seems by contrast to be happy and more pleasant. An old man, Ntsoanarsatsi, tells him that men formerly originated from the place where the sun rises every morning, and in a vision he sees a man rising out of a pool, brighter than the sun. It is this he decides to seek.

Mofolo's form is the familiar hero-quest story found in the tale. But the impetus for the hero's departure is never the disgust that Fekisi feels; this alienation is a direct result of the Christian presence which had driven a wedge in tribal society and divided kinsmen on the question of ideology. It is interesting that to seek the Christian ideal Fekisi has to leave the familiar haunts of his tribe and his gods and to travel far away across open fields and deserted lands. It is as if the thoughtful, honest Mofolo were telling the reader that Christianity was far removed from the African plane of realism and was an elusive, insubstantial phantom which had to be sought. But his hero up to the time of setting out remains very much a Mosotho; appropriately he sings a praise-song to his father's cattle before he finally departs.

The first stages of his journey are disappointing; the people he encounters are no better than those he has left behind. It is

with relief that he leaves all human company and treks across desert until he reaches the sea. There he meets three white elephant hunters who convert him and incidentally return to him some of the happiness he had lost. Mofolo adds that his hero "accepted all they told him, he believed them." On the occasion of receiving the first sacrament he sees Christ at the altar and rushes forward. He is found dead.

MOFOLO HAD ALTERED the hero-quest tale in an important way, not only was there little link with nature but, as has been shown, there was an abomination of man. In addition the whole allegorical interpretation was centred on the protagonist; it was *his* search, for *his* needs, for *his* boon. Nothing like this had existed in traditional oral literature and perhaps Mofolo was really visualising this as the only possibility for the new emerging individual consciousness, that it should bear the consequences of egocentricity. The burden of the responsibility of the tribe could be carried by one man in the oral tales, because behind him and ahead of him there was the *wholeness* of the tribe. It was from where he had come and it was the place to which he was returning. His adventures only made him more loyal, more readily able to appreciate what he had left behind; they confirmed the superiority of the tribe. But Mofolo's hero is alienated because he has lost the ability to pivot within the consciousness of the tribe which is itself disintegrating. His death confirms his pointless vacillations and the illogicality of alienation.

By contrast *Pitseng* is a disappointment. All his life Mofolo had to choose between the amiable offerings of Christian camaraderie and the set diet of an uncompromising art. The difficulties of the situation were made even more emphatic especially as he was an employee of Morija. It is only by taking this into consideration that one can accept the second novel at all; it was an attempt to pacify his teachers, employers and publishers. For his third, *Chaka*, the world had to wait until 1925, owing to its outright rejection by the missionaries. Another, *Masaroa*, still remains unpublished.

THE SECOND NOVEL IS NAMED after the village of Pitseng in which it is set. Mr. Katse has brought Christianity to the village and soon has a very large following, including Alfred Phakoe and Aria Sebaka. Katse, rather arbitrarily, dispenses the benefits of the good life and he decides that the two children should in time marry. Alfred goes off to a training school and Aria becomes an assistant at the school. Alfred withstands all temptations and returns to marry Aria. This is the bare bones of the highly moral story and it is not really possible that the author of *Moeti oa bochabela* was capable of seeing the world in such unequivocal and obvious terms.

What however seems to deserve some mention in the book is the relationship that the hero has with nature. It is a relationship that is to become more evident in *Chaka*. The rejection of nature that had been noticed in the first novel, as well as in the work of Mangoela, Segoele and Motsamai was part of the rejection of their tradition. In the oral literature there is rapport between man and nature and therefore nature is never rhapsodised nor objectified. It is intrinsic, whole and consummatory. After the initial rejection, Mofolo's return to nature is to do with its rediscovery through Europe; it is now seen with European eyes. For instance as Alfred journeys to Aria's home:

The finches again flew up in a swarm and passed by quite close to them, but a little distance away they wheeled and rushed past them and settled in the reeds. It was as though they were trying to greet him in this manner.

The hesitation "as though" is important; in the world of oral literature they would have greeted him. Mofolo hesitates because, like his hero of the first novel, he had journeyed away from his people's ethos on a voyage of repudiation.

debunking of legend, but in Noni Jabavu's words "it becomes the apocalyptic vision of a monstrous beast, consumed by an all-destroying blood-lust." The historical Chaka is only the impetus for Mofolo's psychological study of the nature of repudiation. Mofolo reverts to the theme of the first novel — and this was his testament — the individual could not survive. Both Christian and pagan needed the props of tribal security. It is no accident that both Fekisi who saw Christ, and Shaka who connived with the devil, had to die.

Chaka is forced into individuality; he is the illegitimate son of Senzangakona, chief of the Ifenilenja tribe, and Nandi. Hated by his jealous brothers he is forced to flee from home. He grows up quite alone but brave and his mother wants to ensure that her son inherits the chieftainship. She has him anointed by the great serpent of the deep and he is put in the care of the evil Isanusi. His brothers never let up against him and finally his own father orders that he should be killed. This marks the turning point in Chaka's alienation:

When Chaka left his home in flight he left it as Chaka, a man like other men with the weaknesses of his kind. But now he was returning entirely changed. It was his body only that returned, his outward appearance; his inner nature he left in the place from which he had come. He returned with a different spirit and a different soul. Even before Chaka had been a man of extraordinary endurance. He persevered, however difficult his heart's desire: nothing could stop him from carrying out his intentions. But he was still only a man, he was not quarrelsome, and did not know what it was to be the aggressor. But after seeing his own father's sons trying to kill him without a cause and his father himself taking their part, he had fled away, and when he was in the desert his inner nature died, and this was the spirit with which he now returned: "I will kill without a cause him whom I wish to kill, be he guilty or be he innocent,

for this is the law upon earth. I will hearken to the entreaties of none."

Isanusi then sends Chaka to Dingiswayo; here Chaka manages to win the admiration of the king and after successfully helping him in a war, Chaka becomes betrothed to Noliwe, Dingiswayo's favourite sister.

When Chaka's father dies Dingiswayo makes Chaka chief. Soon on the king's death, he takes even Dingiswayo's place on condition that he marries Noliwe. It is she whom Isanusi demands as a sacrifice if Chaka wants to dominate the world. Chaka consents and kills her. After this murder upon murder follow; he kills his child, his soldiers and finally his own mother. By then he is completely insane and is killed at the end by his half-brother Dingane.

CHAKA HAS SUFFERED from being too closely regarded as historical reconstruction and too little as a great novel, apart from its melodrama. A *Times Literary Supplement* review in 1931 thought it was a partly accurate and partly imaginary account and Mphahlele sees Chaka as a king given the moral problem of choice. But *Chaka* is neither pure history nor ethics; it is part of the tradition of the praise-poem and the hero monomyth but both of these have undergone a startling blend and a unique transformation. The catalytic effect of the missionaries had caused a renewal of concepts; a new melancholy has entered the African soul and no longer can the natural world, gods and man be accepted *in toto*, without question.

To say that Mofolo's two great novels belong to the *genre* of *Pitseng* and are mere exercises in the complacency of missionary teaching, is to misunderstand them and Mofolo. They are above all the quests of befuddled individuals, catapulted from the security of tribal consciousness into the personal uncertainty of metaphysical speculation. What should concern the reader of today is not the individual enquiry but the tragic necessity for it.

Our own affairs

Suzanne Cronje

Dan Bana: *The Memoirs of a Nigerian Official* by Stanhope White (Cassell, 36s)

SOMEWHERE TOWARDS THE END of his remarkable book Stanhope White states with regret that too little notice was taken in colonial days of the Emir of Gwandu and the way in which relations between his administration and the District Officers had developed. "Gwandu might have become the model for many other places . . ." — a conclusion which probably reflects a previous conversation:

"What will you do when I am replaced

by a Nigerian District Officer?' I asked the Emir on one occasion. 'As long as I am alive and Emir,' he replied, 'no Nigerian will come to Birnin Kebbi as District Officer . . . When we Nigerians are able to run our own affairs, the need for District Officers and Residents will have passed. I and my Council will be the sole agent of the Central Government in Gwandu . . .'" Stanhope White thought that the position that had been reached in Gwandu was "the first and correct step; in due course the District Officer must cease to be responsible to the Resident and must become the employee of the Gwandu Native Administration . . . That was surely the goal . . ."

It surely was. One cannot say with certainty whether Stanhope White's approval of the Gwandu trend actually covers the Emir's vision of himself and his court as the sole representative of the central government, but it probably does. After all, it was one of the tenets of indirect rule that the institutions of local administration should be developed to form the basis of self-government at some distant and nebulous future date. What this meant in Northern Nigerian terms must be obvious to all who are familiar with conditions there, both then and now. It meant the entrenchment of autocratic rulers in positions of absolute or near-absolute power: a policy which came so near to succeeding that it almost wrecked independent Nigeria — which may yet wreck the young republic.

STANHOPE WHITE'S BOOK is so remarkable because it shows him to be such a splendid and

robust representative of that peculiar brand of men who applied British colonial policy in Northern Nigeria: efficient, devoted and often compassionate. He is an excellent raconteur, and as long as it is realised that some of his anecdotes are based on the prejudices of his day rather than fact, the book can be recommended as fascinating reading. It is irritating in that it never questions, even in retrospect, the values which he and his fellow officials represented: "We who served there did more for our charges than do the idealists in the Voluntary Services of today." If this is a misconception of the role which today's Volunteers are meant to play, his suggestion that colonial officials "should have donned a United Nations badge" and stayed in their former posts shows him to be even more estranged from the spirit of this age. For instance, he suggests that it was American pressure — "almost one might say, American subversion" — which contributed towards Britain's loss of confidence in Empire "as part of the order of things." Not once does he mention the deplorable British policy which deprived Northern Nigeria of Western education: it was this, and the upholding of the emirs which brought Nigeria to the brink of disaster.

Stanhope White's conclusion that, as a result of last January's military coup, "it will be long before the name of Nigeria is again strong and respected in the councils of the world" shows a remarkable lack of discrimination in apportioning blame, and convicts him of that disagree with his views on the benefits of colonialism.

Honour and dishonour

A. B. Ngcobo

The Washing of the Spears by Donald R. Morris (Schuster & Schuster, New York; Jonathan Cape, London, 55s).

ON THE TRAIL of such books as Ritter's *Shaka Zulu*, Binns's *The Last Zulu King* and Oliver Walker's *Proud Zulu* comes a work substantially the same as these: the difference is in emphasis. Lieut. Commander Morris has more interesting details than the rest. He appears to have had more material than they had and to have used what he had to better advantage.

It is rare enough for naval officers to write such meritorious works, at least with no mention of storms and starboards, and Morris has done it. Judging from the vast and diverse material he has collected he must have monumental energy; and he has used it with masterful tact. His book is delightful to read. He has been singularly able to knit together his material, be it from front-line despatches, official reports or private correspondence, into a beautiful organic whole. A very vivid picture is created for his readers. His description of battles is masterly.

One cannot, of course, fail to observe that the type of materials he used came from one source only. I mean the settlers or colonists or Britain itself. He seems to have regarded the information at his disposal as final and has based his arguments on it alone. What a pity that he gathered no facts from the Zulus themselves during his two visits to South Africa. There are still people who know this story and have a vast array of facts at their finger-tips. They would tell you who killed Durnford, let alone the Prince Imperial. The failure to get more from all sides may not affect the narrative as such but it does weigh heavily on the conclusions the writer makes. I am not saying that he is biased against the Zulus but that with all the will in the world having got only one side of the story it would be difficult to come to a fair and unbiased decision. This comes from the erroneous idea that only the written record is able to give account of past events. If that were so, research in societies that had not evolved writing would be well nigh impossible.

THE CONSTANT USE by the author of the very provocative and insulting word "kafir" freely and without quotes is puzzling. However one swallow doesn't make a summer. We let him off on that. But his opinion on page 151 is shocking, to say the least. He says of Mpande: "Mpande was intelligent and more capable than Shaka or Dingane of relating cause to effect." He goes on "He had an almost European sense of honour. He would in fact have

been more successful in European society than he was in his own." This is astounding. I cannot pretend to understand the author here. He doesn't tell us of this special European sense of honour which Mpande shared. Why Mpande should have been more successful in European society is referred to but not elaborated upon. This passage reveals who the author is and what he thinks on such a vital matter as human relations. The passage presupposes that honour is divisible. It presupposes European honour and other (inferior) forms of honour. I find very little honour in Sir Bartle Frere, an honoured Knight of Britain, and the same could be said of Shepstone. It is fortunate that there aren't many such sweeping statements. However, the author himself has also endeavoured to expose certain attitudes prevalent among the colonists and settlers, such as that of the officer of the British army who said of Langalibalele, King of the Amahlubi: "I merely call him Longbelly." The name is admittedly as long as Cholmodeley and other English names that are similarly mistreated, but people like this mispronounce, misspell and even rename not because they fail but because they do not care.

MORRIS HAS TRIED, I think successfully, to show how reluctant the Zulus were to have a showdown with the British. This reluctance did not stem from fear or lack of valour but was consistent with the policy of the Zulu regime at the time to live in peace with their neighbours. Sir Bartle Frere was the chief spokesman of that group which sought the blood of the Zulus. He reminds one of Cato of ancient Rome who sought the destruction of Carthage whenever he ended a speech. Bartle Frere was obsessed with his grandiose idea of Federation of Southern Africa. This he was prepared to pursue irrespective of obstacles such as the ownership of the land he sought to Federate. Everyone who appeared a hindrance or obstacle to this arch-imperialist scheme was to go.

And he was to be removed soon with all the ruthlessness of an imperialist power. The only fault of Cetshwayo was that he was not interested in this scheme and it was even feared that he would thwart it. So he had to be crucified. Sir Bartle Frere and Shepstone sought every excuse to intervene in the affairs of Zululand. In fact one wonders what the author thinks of the sense of honour of these worthy knights. With Shepstone it was even more than that, for he was not interested in the Federation idea but merely carried it out as a protégé of Frere. He was annoyed with the order, organisation and discipline he saw in Zululand. To him these virtues were the preserve of the Europeans and any poachers had

to be dealt with severely and without mercy. This was the fate of Cetshwayo and the Kingdom of Zululand.

The burning issue at the time and the one that they sought to use as *casus belli* was the land question. This has been an eternal issue in Africa and it still is so today. The diversity of systems of land tenure was responsible for this. Our people never held that any man in his right mind could call a piece of land his own. On the other hand the Whites sought to teach by example the system of individual tenure. They grabbed chunks of land for themselves and nobody took them seriously until they started fencing the land. Then the trouble began. The Boers had been allocated land near Blood River. But because of their avarice for land they exceeded their bounds. This was negotiated and they started claiming the whole area. But what was crucial is that in their proof of their claim they produced papers purporting cession of land, merely signed at the end *Boer and Zulu*. Even the law of the White man could not admit this. The British who were called upon to arbitrate failed to do so in time, arguing that it would set a bad example for the White man to be found guilty when the other litigant was a Black man. On this cross Cetshwayo and the Zulus were crucified. The arbitration Commission took very long to give its report and the day it gave it was the day of the ultimatum. This was the gloomiest chapter in the history of the Zulus. Perhaps as a people who had not entered the industrial revolution they were not used to such conspiracy and intrigue. Intrigue won the day and hostilities were an inevitability.

The ultimatum of 1878 was the most humiliating piece of paper ever written by men. No man proud of his people could have ever accepted it. It was one of the most shameful acts of blackmail ever perpetrated in international politics. Cetshwayo decided to fight and die in honour rather than to live in shame. In the first encounter of Zulu and British arms the latter were disgraced. In fact throughout the whole campaign there was no British victory: wherever they appeared to win it was because the Zulus had sustained setbacks of their own. Given equality in arms the British would never have won the Battle of Ulundi.

Disraeli when Prime Minister remarked of the Zulus that "they defeat our Generals, they convert our Bishops and they have put an end to a great European dynasty." It is only Colenso, the Bishop, who vindicated human conscience in all these intrigues that were perpetrated in the name of Christian civilisation. The story Morris tells shows up clearly all this intrigue and conspiracy. The British came to Zululand and proffered a hand of friendship to the Zulus. These accepted it in good faith but were cruelly betrayed in their unsuspecting belief. What is the moral of this?

HISTORY HAS STILL to decide whether the Zulus have fallen as the author postulates in his subtitle. For us they have, in accordance with the laws of social dynamics, adapted themselves to the greater force of African nationalism and the African Nation. This is the metamorphosis of today. Things are being transformed to be other things, so let it be with the Zulus. We are waiting to see if a century will pass from 1879 without their being vindicated. Even a watched pot boils in the fullness of time.

The book is worth reading. It might have gaps here and there historically, but it remains the most conscientiously written of its type. ●

Momentous years

Anne Darnborough

Five Years: An Experience of South Africa by Deirdre Levinson (Andre Deutch, 21s).

THIS BOOK IS GOOD for a gossip — and that's about all. But even a good gossip is only of interest to those who know the people under discussion, and though one or two of the characters here transparently are, or were, well-known figures in the Cape Town anti-apartheid scene, for the most part they arouse little concern in the reader.

How can they? For they are the victims of pretentious characterisation — of French, Miss Levinson writes: "He's their lord of the nimble wits, their Odysseus with his teeming brain. It's only then that you can truly hear his mind and the full orchestration of his thousand hearts" — shallow description, where real people are irritatingly disguised by phoney names, and of the endless, carping and largely irrelevant political talk in which they indulge.

Nevertheless for those closely acquainted with the Non-European Unity Movement in the period Miss Levinson writes about, the momentous years around 1960, this book will doubtless be of interest.

For anyone more generally concerned with South Africa, with the politics of opposition: particularly in the era before the Congress organisations were banned, and with the chronicling of that country's political history, what a sad book this is.

We see Miss Levinson and her characters adopt the sour and negative attitudes of their group towards the activities organised in opposition to apartheid at a time when legislation was growing increasingly more repressive, and when opposition was still legal.

We see them carping at each protest demonstration, mass meetings, boycott or strike designed to oppose each step of repressive legislation on the grounds that the legislation was passed anyway, so the protest was worthless — "there was a Defiance Campaign in 1952 against Group Areas, which failed and was dropped, and today we all live in group areas".

We see them sanctimoniously reviling one of their revered leaders, the beloved colleague of Miss Levinson, Boris Duma, lecturer in African History at the University of Cape Town, because he took part in a University protest at the Government's legislation to close the universities to African, Indian and Coloured students.

Throughout the book, the strong impression is received that the group, and the author with it, were more interested in opposing the anti-apartheid force at work in the country in those times, than in fighting Verwoerd, Vorster and the whole system.

THIS POLITICAL IRRESPONSIBILITY is the serious criticism one must make of the group and therefore necessarily of the book. The gossip,

the style — crossbred between novel, history and autobiography — the strained prose, the author's ponderous self-revelations, are unimportant beside the often malicious references to the work of the major opposition groups, as instanced in the remark quoted above about the Defiance Campaign, of 1952, which was organised by the African National Congress and was a vital demonstration of the people's opposition to the White Nationalist government and its policies. The campaign first stirred millions of South Africans to an awareness of what was happening to their country and was one of the first actions there to arouse the overseas interest in South Africa which has today reached intense proportions, with incalculable value to the struggle going on there.

Miss Levinson's political analyses are also often contrary to fact. She frequently ascribes to the Liberals the organisation of demonstrations which were the work of the Congress Alliance, in which the Liberal Party never was.

Mythologizing

Mutumba Bull

Murder for Magic by Alastair Scobie (Cassell, 21s)

Kidnap at Kiunga by David Hurd (Robert Hale, 21s)

Beyond the Cape of Hope by Robert Browne (John Murray, 18s)

MYTHOLOGIZING ABOUT AFRICA is rapidly becoming out of date. Africa is no more a dark continent. It's true that the African values and way of life are different from those of Western Europe, but only in the same sense that the Chinese, Japanese, and American ways of life are different, for instance, excluding the influences of modern technology.

Alastair Scobie has chosen an infinitely intriguing subject with an undying fascination to all mankind, a subject which also highlights some of the values which are peculiarly African. If only Scobie had stopped there his book might have made a real contribution to the understanding not only of the African, but the working of the human mind as a whole. For as he points out at the beginning of his book, "human beings have a vast capacity for believing the unbelievable." However Scobie goes on to judge and grade the African people, and in so doing his personal bias, or ignorance about the people he claims to understand so well, shines out brilliantly. Consider statements like: "Kraalman in Africa lives a life not only brutal, short and savage but utterly cynical . . ." or ". . . for the smarter politicians are anxious to establish themselves as 'Ministers of State,' which is always the reality behind the 'Freedom now!' shouts in any African State . . ."

Political opinions of any kind are the prerogative of any writer, but they rarely help an understanding of the situation they refer to when they obscure its unfolding, as here. It is doubly sad when they have no power to sustain the person holding them, and she is annihilated in face of the inexorable grind of apartheid and the fight against it.

The author's description of the ultimate effect her five years' experience of South Africa had on her is obscure — "South Africa brought me nearest my bone. I belong to my own dialectic — my source and the protest it engendered — and only therefore belong anywhere. It was South Africa that made this the most absolute reality for me, by providing the means for its real expression." But that the country and its people moved her deeply is undeniable. It so moves many, both native to it and strangers. Therein lies the hope for its future and, we may pray, for its future literature. ●

The overall results are that to those who do not think like Scobie, his book is revolting, and to those who do not know anything about Africa the book is misleading and as to the African himself, reading through Scobie's book calls for a great achievement in self control.

DAVID HURD on the other hand succeeds in doing what Scobie failed to do. He gives a narrative of his hair-raising experiences as a prisoner of Somali bandits without passing judgment on his captors. If he does so it is on them as individuals and not as Somalis (or Africans, as Scobie would do it.) Hurd is more concerned with recreating the whole sequence of events and the atmosphere of his whole experience. Another thing that comes through in Hurd's book is his close acquaintance with the people he is writing about, be it when he writes about his experiences on a farm in the White Highlands of Kenya or his long acquaintance with Kibanja Kenga or the Safari to Lamu. The book makes very interesting reading indeed.

ROBERT BROWNE'S *Beyond the Cape of Hope* differs from the first two in style and approach. The reader cannot help feeling that this is really a confrontation with the author's personality and spirit which are projected through the places and people he describes. His description of his grandparents' home, or the Transvaal highveld, or the mountain slopes of Malawi stand out vivid and clear, but this is as they appear through the author's inner mind and not just as they are.

Similarly, it is the author's acute powers of observation at a much deeper level which gives life and fascination to the scene in his parents' living room the night before his departure, and to the scene at the dock while he stands on the ship's deck. The same is true of the scene where he is lying seriously ill expecting death any moment on a station on Lake Nyasa.

The book has no single plot, the author lets his mind wander freely forwards and backwards both in terms of time and place, using the excuse of a sea voyage along the East Coast for plunging into numerous reminiscences. Since certain experiences are more fascinating than others, and some places more interesting, it does put off the reader a bit not to have a plot to follow, however beautiful the author's style. ●