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Plaatje, Solomon Tshekisho (1876–1932)

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Solomon Tshekisho “Sol” Plaatje was an African intellectual, publisher, and prominent early nationalist. Like many other early African leaders, he was born to a Christian peasant family at Doornfontein, near Boshof in the independent Afrikaner republic, the Orange Free State (OFS). His father, Johannes Kushumane Plaatje (1835 – 96), was a Lutheran deacon, and Sol grew up on the Lutheran Berlin Missionary Society’s station at Pniel in Britain’s Cape Colony. Christianity would leave a deep imprint upon him, as would the example of the qualified franchise system in the Cape, which allowed a significant minority of Africans and Coloreds access to the voters’ roll. A talented pupil, he received additional private tutoring and assisted the missionaries as a teacher at the age of 15. A Tswana-speaker, he would eventually speak eight languages fluently. Nonetheless, with only three years of formal schooling, Plaatje lacked the impressive qualifications of many other members of the African elite.

At the age of 17, in 1894, Plaatje left to work in Kimberley as a postman, where he married teacher Elizabeth Lilith M’belle

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(1877–1942) four years later. Typical members of the small African elite, they looked to inclusion in a larger British world based on equal rights. Moving to Mafeking, he became a clerk and court interpreter. During the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902), British-held Mafeking came under siege. The African elite were generally supportive of the British, and Plaatje was no exception, preparing intelligence reports with African spies. In 1902 Plaatje established a bilingual paper, the *Koranta ea Bechoana* (Bechuana Gazette), which ran until 1908. In 1903 he played a key role in forming a South African Native Press Association. *Koranta* was succeeded by *Tsala ea Bechoana* (Friend of the Tswana) in 1910. *Tsala ea Bechoana* closed in 1912, but was quickly followed by *Tsala ea Batho* (Friend of the People), which ran to 1917.

Plaatje also worked as a labor contractor for the mines from 1909. The African elite's hope that the British victory in 1902 would lead to the extension of the Cape system to the neighboring colony of Natal, and the defeated Afrikaner republics of the OFS and Transvaal, was dashed by the Union of South Africa Act (1909) which merged the four territories. The Cape franchise was not extended to other provinces, nor could any person of color sit in the national parliament. Subsequent state policies were as devastating, with the 1913 Land Act placing African peasant and commercial farmers under enormous pressure.

Plaatje and others were impelled to act. While he did not attend the 1909 South African Native Convention, he did attend the 1910 convention, and was a founding member of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC, from 1923 the African National Congress) (ANC) in 1912, serving as its first general secretary. The SANNC was founded by the embattled African elite; its first executive included 12 ministers of religion, a building contractor, a teacher, and a labor recruiter and interpreter; an "upper house" of chiefs was also established. Nor did it initially advocate universal suffrage. Figures like Plaatje generally viewed major capitalists as potential sponsors of the African cause, not as foes (the De Beers

Company did, indeed, donate Plaatje a meeting hall in Kimberley in 1918). When the state crushed the militant strikes by white workers in 1913, 1914, and 1922, the SANNC applauded its actions.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to dismiss men like Plaatje as unconcerned with the African working class, or to see their declarations of loyalty as unconditional. Plaatje stressed loyalty to the Empire and the Crown while criticizing colonial discrimination against Britain's loyal black subjects; he repeatedly raised labor issues in his press, even if he rejected class struggle "rowdism." When the Transvaal SANNC developed a radical tendency – centered on African militants like Reuben (Alfred) Cetiwe, Hamilton Kraai, and T. W. Thibedi, all members of the syndicalist International Socialist League and Industrial Workers of Africa – Plaatje viewed the emergence of such "black Bolsheviks" as lamentable. Yet he conceded that such syndicalists were "the only people from whom we have any sympathy and support." Likewise, following the passage of the Land Act, he toured the OFS and Cape to document its impact on ordinary Africans, later compiling this material into a damning indictment, *Native Life in South Africa* (1916).

Plaatje's political style was typical of the early SANNC and the early African nationalists in South Africa more generally: appeals to reason and Britishness, delivered through deputations, the press, and petitions. This moderate approach was shared by contemporaries like Abdullah Abdurahman, leader of the Colored-based African Political Organization. In 1914 Plaatje was part of a SANNC deputation to England to protest the Land Act: this was cut short with the outbreak of World War I, upon which SANNC resolved in "patriotic demonstration" to "hang up native grievances ... till a better time" and meanwhile to "tender the authorities every assistance" (Rall 2003). Plaatje stayed on in Britain at his own expense, writing *Native Life* and compiling books of Setswana proverbs and folklore, which were published in 1916. En route to South Africa in 1917, Plaatje, a great admirer of Shakespeare, translated *Julius Caesar* into Setswana, the first

of several such translations. He was subsequently offered the SANNK presidency, but declined the post, partly due to family pressures.

In 1919 SANNK sent a second delegation to Britain to plead the Africans' case to the king and the Versailles Peace Conference. Plaatje was again included. He spent his time completing his novel (the first in English by an African from South Africa), *Mhudi: An Epic of South African Native Life a Hundred Years Ago* (published in 1930). The deputation was not a success.

Plaatje visited North America from 1920. One stop was the Tuskegee Institute (he was a great admirer of the late Booker T. Washington); he also met W. E. B Du Bois and Marcus Garvey. Nonetheless, much of his time was spent with the interdenominational Christian Brotherhood, a section of which he had established in Kimberley in 1918. He returned to Britain in 1922, where he was involved in some sound recordings and film production, and came back to South Africa the next year. Here he worked as a journalist, writing for the white and black press, including *Umteteli wa Bantu* (Mouthpiece of the People), and was a prolific writer of letters to the press. He became vice president of the Cape Native Voters' Association, joined the Independent Order of True Templars, visited the Belgian Congo, and was offered the editorship of *Umteteli*. Nonetheless, while he remained very well-respected and continued to publish and translate substantial works, he was no longer an important leader.

Plaatje died in 1932 of pneumonia and bronchitis. His funeral in Kimberley was attended by 1,000 people. Today, Plaatje is considered a quintessential early African nationalist leader, as a talented intellectual hemmed in by racial inequalities, and, above all, as an important novelist, historian, and journalist. In 1992 his house and grave were declared National Monuments, while Kimberley itself is today part of the Sol Plaatje Municipality.

References and Suggested Readings

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