

**OF "DISINCLINED TRAINS AND CLEVER ACTORS TO BE ADMIRER  
AND NOT FOLLOWED": SOL PLAATJE, WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE  
AND THE DILEMMA OF THE AFRICAN INTELLECTUAL 1894-1920'S.**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the dilemma of the emergent African intellectual, activist or modern leader by focusing on Sol Plaatje's experiences. It shows that by acquiring Western education and values, the African intellectual occupied a position of in-between-ness, forcing him or her to promote and oppose both western and African values and beliefs, resulting in a split identity. Consequently, his or her relationship with both the foreign culture and what he or she believed to be his or her people, was bound to be problematic, leading to frustrations and disappointment. In dealing with such frustration Plaatje employed Shakespeare's text to lash out at his fellow Africans, and Tswana speakers in particular, for their reluctance in supporting his political and cultural projects. I conclude by showing that blaming his people for what he perceived to be their lackadaisical and cavalier attitude towards projects intended to uplift their status was somewhat misguided because it failed recognize the dynamics of adopting and imbibing Western values.

**Keywords:** African intellectual, split-identity, leadership debate, disillusionment, translation, Shakespeare

**Introduction**

In 1894 Sol Plaatje left his birth place of Pniel to take up a job as a letter-carrier or messenger with the Kimberley Post Office. This was his second job after being employed as a temporary teacher at the local school, and the first to ever remove him from the somewhat "secure" family environment. His departure to Kimberley was not without opposition from his family and the Westphals, who regarded "the mining town of Kimberley as a den of vice and iniquity, full of pitfalls for the unwary" (Willan 1984:26). They were concerned that the rural-born might fall victim to such vices. But Plaatje was determined, and justifiably so, to leave in spite of these anxieties. This journey, both physical and symbolic was a maturing process that he had to undertake.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the journey Plaatje undertook from Pniel to Kimberley landed him into what I will call, for purposes of this paper, *the dilemma of the emergent African intellectual*<sup>1</sup>. At the heart of this dilemma is the intellectual's position of in-between-ness brought about by missionary education he or she had obtained on the one hand, and his or her African identity on the other. By virtue of having received western education, the

African intellectual simultaneously belonged to and imbibed western culture as well as being African in terms of birth, cultural beliefs and political convictions. Thus, he or she constantly had to “re-brand” or re-define him or herself depending on the exigencies of the moment. Consequently, he or she at times opposed his or her African values in order to remain consistent with the expectations that went with modern elites.

To accomplish the task at hand, I begin by describing the conditions Plaatje found in Kimberley to create a backdrop against which the dilemma could be appreciated. This will culminate in a discussion of the leadership debate of the 1920’s, an issue on which Plaatje wrote extensively. I will then show how Plaatje’s frustration and disappointment with what he thought to be ‘his people’ finds mention in *Diphoshophosho*, his translation of Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors*. I conclude the paper by showing Plaatje’s flaw in wanting to place the blame squarely on his people.

### Background to the Dilemma

Before examining Plaatje’s attack, the following remarks on the relationship between the elite—to which Plaatje belonged—and the people, for whom the elite spoke, are necessary to create a foundation on which to appreciate not only Plaatje’s outrage, but the complexity of that relationship as well.

Often, the connection between the modern leader and those s/he leads is not clear in a society where at least two forms of leadership exist: the traditional and the modern. Plaatje’s modern leadership traced its origins to Kimberley. When Plaatje came to Kimberley to join the postal services as a messenger, he landed amongst a group of Africans, known as the African intelligentsia<sup>2</sup>. The group had several ambitions other than aspiring to prove that Africans were worthy of the privileges the political and legal institutions of the Cape Colony offered. As Willan (1984:34) states, “their personal ambitions were tempered by an often deeply felt sense of responsibility towards their own societies as well, towards the people they had left behind, as it were, and whose interests they claimed to serve and to represent.”

Willan’s remarks gesture to some of the inherent problems in this leadership, particularly when contrasted to chiefly rule. Several questions are hinted at by these remarks: did this new leadership have the mandate from the people they wanted to lead? Did they know their people’s interests? Did their education not create a barrier between them and their less educated countrymen? What was the organic relationship between the new leadership and its people? These questions problematize this kind of leadership and point to its failure and frustrations. Willan (1984:34) notes this inherent danger:

For some it appeared as a contradictory and at times confusing responsibility. On the one hand they were faced with constant pressures to reject and disown many of

the features of their own societies in order to 'prove' their worthiness of entitlement to equal treatment with whites. On the other, there was sometimes widespread suspicion of them on the part of their less well-educated countrymen for appearing to do precisely this; it was not always easy to find the right course to steer, socially or psychologically.

The African intelligentsia was therefore caught between two worlds, capable of identifying with what they thought to be their people on the one hand, and aspiring to middle class values to which their education qualified them on the other. This conferred on them a split identity<sup>3</sup>.

While Willan imagines that among the Kimberley group such tensions were not a problem, the difficulty of finding the right course to steer was a foreshadowing of what was to come given the on-going political changes. To illustrate Willan's observations, let me mention that the Christian faith of the intelligentsia put them in conflict with some of the cultural practices of their people. Plaatje's (1996: 71-73) unsympathetic remarks on *bogwera* or boy initiation are worth pausing over for illustration.

In some pity we record that during this, the fourth month of the third year of the twentieth century, the Barolong have revived the ancient circumcision rites which had long since gone down beneath the silent prayer of Christian civilisation. Scores of young men have during the week been taken away from their profitable occupations into the veld to howl themselves hoarse and submit to severer flogging than is usually inflicted by the judges of the Supreme Court.

The fact that in the year A.D. 1903 the sons of Monstioa can safely solemnise a custom the uselessness of which was discerned by their fathers, and which the rest of Bechuanaland has for years relegated to the despicable relics of past barbarism, shows that someone has not been doing their duty. A startling state of affairs is that there are still to be found such a large number of youths who, being accustomed to dress like Europeans and live on three meals every day, and other who have again been living under luxurious circumstances behind shopkeepers' counters and in white men's kitchens, willingly surrender their contentment and volunteer to expose themselves to all kinds of weather, in the open air, besides the thousand and one other tortures forming part of this ceremony, the nature of which ex-pupils of the weird hedonism are not permitted to tell us [emphasis added].

I quote this passage in full because it brings into sharp focus the native intellectual/activist's split identity and its effect on the relationship between the elite and the people they hoped to lead. While Plaatje considered himself a leader of those people for whose interests he stood, the passage reveals him more of a spokesperson for the new culture. Dazzled by the institutions of the new culture, he is a 'translated'<sup>4</sup> and 'dislocated' man who in Macaulay's words is an intermediary between colonial authority and its subjects<sup>5</sup>. As a result, his

<sup>3</sup> See Natasha Distiller (2003) for a detailed discussion.

<sup>4</sup> Salman Rushdie (1991) *Imaginary Homelands* for details on "translated men".

<sup>5</sup> See Homi Bhabha (1994:87). *The Location of Culture*.

leadership is bound to be problematic. His enthusiasm for this culture is clearly marked by the language he uses in reference to its institutions and symbols: the enunciation of the period in which this ceremony is being revived makes it an anachronism; "prayer of Christian civilisation"; "profitable occupations"; "judges of the Supreme Court"; "dress like Europeans"; "live on three meals a day"; "luxurious circumstances behind shopkeepers' counters"; "white men's kitchens". This vocabulary contrasts sharply with the one used to describe the ceremony and its associated activities: "ancient"; "taken away"; "gone down under"; "veld"; "severer flogging"; "uselessness"; "relegated"; "despicable relics"; "barbarism"; "howl"; "submit"; "hoarse"; "tortures"; "weird hedonism". The litany of terms, reminiscent of Lakunle's<sup>6</sup> confused adjectives reflects Plaatje's contempt for *bogwera* among his people.

It is clear from the passage that the modern leader had a superficial understanding of both his and the foreign culture. He mistook 'shopkeeper's counters, dressing like Europeans and white men's kitchens' for 'profitable occupations and contentment'. Neither did he understand why people find joy in a custom he called weird. His conclusions on this custom are based on insufficient information as "ex-pupils are not permitted to tell us". The large number of volunteers belied the presumed "uselessness" of the custom. In fact, he was overwhelmed by this majority, implying that he was out of touch with the reality of what he presumed to be his people. Further, his shock at the revival of this ceremony revealed his assumption that his people had advanced significantly as to do away with such ceremonies. He was therefore shocked to discover that the ceremony had in fact not died out as he thought. More forcefully, it created a foundation on which later gulfs are to be appreciated. In brief, the passage opens up the ironies of this relationship both in terms of interest, mandate and the general effectiveness of the intellectual's projects.

Reference to Montsioa introduces the other form of leadership. Montsioa, one of the Rolong chiefs, represents traditional leadership based not necessarily on education, but more on heredity. Plaatje traced his ancestry to several Rolong chiefs, making him straddle both forms of leadership. But while that is the case, he, in Starfield's (1991:7) words, "belonged to a newer, more modern style of leadership emerging among the small, but vocal, educated elite. His schooling and entrance, as a young man, into urban cultural (*sic*) and life made him receptive to the modern style".

Further reference to Montsioa invites us to assess the relationship between modern and traditional leadership. According to Chanaiwa (1980:27), "the relationship between the educated elites and the traditional world of chiefs and masses was full of contradictions, ambiguities, and surprises". Modern leaders, despite their education, continued to revere and support chiefly rule for various reasons. Plaatje's association and correspondence with Chiefs Silas Molema and Tshekedi Khama are testimony to this reverence. Plaatje felt that chiefly rule deserved preservation; hence he became the spokesperson of Rolong chiefs.

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<sup>6</sup> Wole Soyinka (1963). *The Lion and the Jewel*.

Starfield (1991:7) notes: "He continued to revere chiefly rule as the backbone of his own and (by extension) every other ethnically-based community. He held that the cultural practices of chiefly rule should be the basis of the new nation and a new nationalism that gave equal respect to all South Africa's ethnic groups". To this extent, the political institution of chiefly rule was commensurate with the democratic principles enshrined in the institutions of the Cape Colony.

The respect and desire to preserve chiefly rule was also motivated by the need for patronage from traditional leaders. Starfield (1991:8-9) again writes: "The desire to preserve these chiefs' achievements for posterity was underscored by the new elite's practical dependence on the older leaders. Lack of material affluence rendered some of the new leadership more reliant than others on the resource of chiefs and ethnic communities". For example, the birth of *Tsala ea Becoana*, a newspaper Plaatje edited in Kimberley after 1910, must be understood against this background as it was financed, according to Willan (1984:143ff), by "a syndicate of wealthy landowners from the Seleka Barolong settlement in Thaba Nchu--most notably Chief J.M. Nyokong, head of the Matlala section of the Seleka; Jeremiah Makgothi, an elder brother of Isaiah"

The elite's dependence on traditional leadership and the ambiguous relationship between the elite and the people they thought they led are symptomatic of impending problems. While traditional leadership also faced challenges visited upon it by political and economic changes, modern leadership was more vulnerable because it seemed to lack an organic foundation in the lives of the people it hoped to serve. The split identity or bi-cultural nature of its leaders opened them to suspicion. Hence, the elite aligned itself with chiefly rule not only for material support, but also by way of establishing a firmer foundation for its type of leadership. Attacking chiefly rule therefore amounted to the proverbial folly of killing the goose that laid the golden egg or biting the hand that fed you.

In spite of all these problems and ambiguities, the elite continued to articulate what they felt were the needs of their people. Plaatje, more than many of his colleagues, excelled in this regard. The introduction of the Natives' Land Act and the orthography debate, are eloquent examples of Plaatje's excellent leadership on behalf of what he perceived to be his people. The publication of *Native Life in South Africa* (1916) and *Diphoshophosho* (1930) respectively is 'ocular proof evidence of his opposition to these two issues and signs of his service to "his people". He was also part of the two deputations sent to England to campaign against the Land Act. On each of these deputations he remained behind to continue the campaign single-handedly.

While differences between the leader and the led seemed inevitable, matters came to a head after the second deputation. Remaining behind to continue the campaign as far afield as Canada and the USA, Plaatje returned in 1923 to a changed South Africa in which his influence had been swept from under his feet. His family was living on close to nothing, the congress, was in Willan's words, "dead", constitutional means of addressing grievances were now replaced by the militancy of working classes, what Plaatje (1996:237) disapprovingly called the "black Bolsheviks of Johannesburg", he had been displaced in his brotherhood

movement, the *Tsala ea Batho* printing press had been sold, and new political alliances had been formed. Willan's (1984:294 ff) characteristic reference to him as "a leader without a people" is a fitting label. So the leadership to which Plaatje had committed himself and dedicated his life, was waning and could no longer pretend to be anything but precarious.

As Willan (1984:294 ff) tells us, during this time Plaatje focused his efforts on other ventures to earn a living. He contributed to other papers such as *Umteteli ua Bantu*, continued with his political campaigns but not as before, and was involved in temperance work, which he felt was a basis for self-empowerment. Increasingly he felt alienated and disillusioned with "his people". One of the issues on which he wrote, a topical one at the time, was the question of leadership. In 1925 Plaatje (1996:347) came to the conclusion that "Natives recognized only one form of leadership--the hereditary chiefs--and no other". About three years later Plaatje (in Willan 1984:317) wrote:

It would be impossible for any one to lead a train that is disinclined to follow. Natives as a race recognize only one leader, namely, their hereditary prince; and there being so many chiefs, all independent of one another, individual leadership even by one of royal blood, is impracticable. *A man may be a genius but the Native population will regard him very much like a clever actor on the stage--to be admired, not followed.* This admiration--like the popularity of a new jazz tune--will last until its novelty has worn off, when the people look for fresh excitement in the shape of a different 'leader'. But, be he ever so faithful and self-sacrificing, they will desert him at the first sound of the call of the tribal chief, even if the latter implied nothing but a tribal chief and clannish tyranny.

I have always forestalled this fickleness by declining any position they offered me, such as the presidency of the Native Congress, preferring to serve-not lead-the sufferers among them, whose name is legion, and let the rest take care of themselves. The failure is not on the part of the leaders of whom we have had several of outstanding ability; the fault lies with the Native masses who by nature object to follow one who is not their tribal chief. [emphasis added].

Clear from this passage is a deep sense of frustration as a result of betrayal by the people he thought he had given everything. We can also detect subtle bitterness towards tribal authority and its tyrannical hold on the people. Plaatje registered his frustrations with tribal authority for its delayed and rather unenthusiastic assistance (if any) in his projects.

### **What has Shakespeare got to do with it?**

The above remarks provide a framework within which to understand Plaatje's frustrations with his Batswana people in their failure to support his political and cultural projects. His despondency with his people is one of the many uses to which he appropriated Shakespeare's drama. The leadership issue became topical in the 1920's, years after *Diphshophosho* was translated, albeit not yet printed. This begs the question of how this translation could be said to participate in the debate. It is not certain where and when this translation was completed. It is

probable that it was done during his sea travels between South Africa, England and the USA between 1917 and 1920. In a letter dated 19 December 1920 to Dr. Du Bois, Plaatje (in Willan 1984:262) informs him in part that "I have with me translations of Shakespeare's 'Merchant of Venice' and 'Julius Caesar' and 'Comedy of Errors' which will be very readable to the South African Natives".

The point to underscore is that the leadership issue was not an *event* of the 1920's, but a *process* that had its roots in the initial stages of adopting symbols and institutions of western modernity such as education, urbanization, and the concomitant emergence of an urbanized, indigenous class of intellectuals or activists. The 1920 debate on leadership was therefore a culmination of a long and complex process. 'Prior' to translating *The Comedy*, or any Shakespearean text for that matter, Plaatje had already been overseas, from where he wrote desperately to his people appealing for financial assistance. His (in Willan 1984:184) frustration with his people's lack of support is for example evident in a letter to Chief Lekoko dated 12 December 1914.

Please help Morolong. I sometimes even regret having ever come here all the way from home to these foreign countries. The seed of fighting for the land, and of stopping the Union from the Protectorate, that I have sown; the only trouble is that I can't get my way back home. I am in very difficult situation, and it seems to worsen every day. Right now I owe £13 for board and lodging for the past few months, and I will not be able to come back home even if the money comes. I'm terribly stuck in the quagmire. Please help me, my Chief, before I go even deeper beyond redemption.

Clearly, by the time of *Diphoshophosho*, Plaatje was sufficiently despondent with the Batswana's general lack of support for his projects.

The Batswana to whom Plaatje dedicated his career, did not contribute (not even to loan him the money) to the printing costs of *Diphoshophosho* and other books, and this is a window into the problematic relationship between modern leaders and the people they lead. Plaatje (1996:384) viewed it as something of a scandal that "a foreigner, who could not even speak Setswana, had contributed money towards the printing of the manuscript". In the Introduction to *Diphoshophosho* Plaatje (1930:iii) expressed his frustration, bitterness and attack on his people through the metaphoric language of proverbs thus:

*Bongoma jo bo kalo, joa go rata go direloa fela jaka nama (le fa thipa e bile ele ea bone) ke jeone bo kganelang coelelo-pele ea Becoaria.*

(Literally he is saying: Batswana are very lazy, always wanting everything to be done for them like meat (even if the knife belongs to them). It is too much laziness that has prevented Batswana from progressing).

Willan's English translation (in Plaatje 1996:384) "the lack of self-reliance on the part of Batswana is what is responsible for their backwardness", lacks emphasis, punch and venom because it ignores the materiality of proverbs in Plaatje, for the

venomous part of his attack is a proverbial expression: *A u tla direloa fela u se nama?* "Are you going to be served (up) just like meat?/Do pigeons fly ready roasted into one's mouth?" (Plaatje 1916: 20). Plaatje wished to express in the most forceful way the dependency syndrome of his people. To appreciate Plaatje's scathing attack, it is necessary to pay close attention to his use of figurative language. This will also illustrate the richness of his language as a literary medium<sup>7</sup>.

On the surface, the grammar of the Setswana version seems senseless, especially the statement in parenthesis. "*Bone*" is a second or third person plural pronoun "them". The reader might have expected the pronoun to be *yone* "it" in order to agree with *nama* "meat" to read *lefa thipa e bile ele ea yone* "even when the knife belongs to it/to the meat". Plaatje shifted from the singular pronoun *yone* "it" to the plural *bone* "them", thus specifying the object of his attack. That is, if the singular pronoun was subtler and indirect in its reference, the plural is more direct. Two images stand out, 'meat' and 'knife'<sup>8</sup>. Meat conjures associations of inactivity, lifelessness, and helplessness even in the face of available resources. It is therefore an appropriate metaphor for laziness. The knife invokes associations of sharpness, incisiveness, a tool or technology of survival, defense, and self-advancement. The two images imply that the meat (Batswana) cannot prepare itself even when it/they has/have the knife/resource or technology to do so. The Batswana are therefore so lazy and dependent that even with the technologies of self-advancement at their disposal, they fail to utilize them. The technology of the knife is an allusion to Plaatje (and his completed translation of Shakespeare's play) whose expertise on matters of language and literature, politics and oratory, equals the sharpness and incisiveness of a knife. The knife is therefore a metaphor of the African intellectuals who are frustrated by the very people they wanted to serve, because this constituency (un)consciously fails to utilize available and informed native<sup>9</sup> opinion on matters pertinent to their problems. In short, they 'refused' to be guided. The imagery therefore conveys a great sense of frustration and despair. To Plaatje and others, this was a matter of grave concern because by failing to utilize available human resources for self-advancement, the natives were playing dangerously into the hands of racist opinion, which, as seen earlier, maintains that natives knew nothing and so schemes had to be devised for them<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, they would be openly endorsing their disenfranchisement, and this was contrary to

<sup>7</sup> One of the reasons why Plaatje translated Shakespeare was to show the Setswana language's capacity as a literary medium capable of expressing Shakespeare's meaning. It therefore was worthy of preservation (see Willan 1984:331; Shole 1990/19991).

<sup>8</sup> If 'meat' refers to 'food that is ready for consumption', and 'knife' as the tool needed for cutting or eating that food, Plaatje's point that his people are lazy and dependent remains potent. That is, even when food is ready, his people are unable to simply stretch their hands to consume it, but would rather expect somebody to cut it for them and literally feed them while they do absolutely nothing.

<sup>9</sup> I use the term native to mean "local or indigenous" and not in its offensive and pejorative sense associated with racial politics.

<sup>10</sup> In his opposition to a homogenizing orthography spearheaded by white academics and their institutions, Plaatje remarked: "it is to be regretted that at this end of the continent the scheme was attacked along real South African lines, i.e., the natives know not what they need. So, let university professors lay down a scheme, in light of science; and Native schools will have to adopt it or do without government grants" (Plaatje 1996:398).



Plaatje's vision of a society of equals. Plaatje also feared that the sense of pride he was generating in his people would come to naught and consequently, the moral degeneration of his society would continue unabated. He therefore sought to continue to empower his people by using the proverb form as a means of critiquing them.

The Batswana's cavalier attitude towards their language was perhaps demonstrated more poignantly by the old man whom Plaatje and his friend Ramoshoana approached for help over a puzzling Setswana language matter. The old man's question to the duo makes the point: "What is it that you gain from your witchery, that after long and tedious journeys by train and lorry, you still spend sleepless nights with the lights on, working tirelessly on your books, when the rest of the people are asleep?" (Plaatje 1996: 385). Ramoshoana's (in Plaatje 1996:385) rejoinder is an appropriate justification for the labour: "There are presently about 300 African languages which have their own printed books. If I were to die having translated one of Shakespeare's plays into Setswana I shall rest in peace, because I will have done something for you".

These passages are a forceful reminder of the tension between oral and print cultures. While the elite continued to revere and be fascinated by print culture and modernity, the old were sceptical about this "witchery". The metaphor of "witchery" implies power, mystery, fear, temptation and suspicion. To think that the old man represented the elite's potential readership and beneficiary, we can begin to appreciate the benign neglect Plaatje's translations and other writings have suffered. These passages also reflect the tension between modern leadership and the led and more significantly, the potential failure of the schemes the leadership hoped would uplift their constituency. In brief, the old man's remarks undermined the effectiveness of Plaatje's (elite) projects.

## Conclusion

Using Plaatje as a case study, this paper set out to discuss the dilemma of the emergent African intellectual, elite or modern leadership. It demonstrated that by acquiring western education and values, the native intellectual or activist found himself or herself in a position that at times conflicted not only with his or her African identity and expectations, but also with the very values of western modernity he or she was embracing and promoting. Consequently, he or she found himself or herself alienated from both cultures, resulting in frustration and near despair. As a translator, Plaatje found Shakespeare's text as means of dealing with such frustration and "betrayal" at the hands of his people. Through the translation, he was able to pour scorn on his people for failing to support his cultural and political schemes. With this attack he hoped to garner their support by bringing them back on the "path of righteousness". But putting the blame squarely on the people, with all the Shakespearean<sup>11</sup> echoes in it, was to miss the finer points of the

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<sup>11</sup> Plaatje's statement "The failure is not on the part of the leaders of whom we have had several of outstanding ability; the fault lies with the Native masses who by nature object to follow one who is not their tribal chief" (in

leadership issue. While Plaatje claimed to have studied this matter, he continued to show the same superficial knowledge of his people as he did in his attack on initiation. The native's - whoever this is - support of traditional leadership is grounded in the historical foundation which had given society stability and meaning. By endorsing it as we have seen, Plaatje contributed to its entrenchment and continued tyrannical hold on the people. He thus failed to appreciate the complexity of his split identity in explaining the problems faced by the black intelligentsia.

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Willan 1984:317) echoes Cassius' conspiratorial statement to Brutus "the fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, / But in ourselves, that we are underlings" Lii. 139-140.









