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Address

Culture and social environment in the pre-colonial era

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I would like to start with some oral history of my own.<sup>1</sup> I was raised in Brakpan Old Location, where I started school, and in Payneville. An older Mzamane started his medical practice in Daveyton and another brother started his in Vosloorus, Boksburg, and continues to practice in the Kathorus area. My parents, three of my siblings, and some nieces and nephews are buried in KwaThema, where my family homestead stands. No other part of the world has more complete claim on my being than the East Rand (now Ekurhuleni), which constitutes the geography of my heart. I embody several decades of its oral history that I recount in some of my writings. This is a veritable homecoming for me, therefore, and I feel gratified and honoured to be called upon to address you.

The political and economic results of the liberation struggle are relatively easier to attain and to identify than mental liberation. Political and economic outcomes are *overt* and become visible all around us when attained; but the colonial baggage we carry in our minds is often *covert* and, therefore, more difficult to dislodge. We internalise it, along with the coloniser's view of our history; we scoff at indigenous knowledge systems as "unscientific"; we distance ourselves from our people, "their" customs and traditions; we try to pass for people who possess a "civilised point of view", albeit implanted by the coloniser whom we come to admire, emulate and idolise. Such alienation debilitates in other respects as well. All too often we engage in fighting the "enemy" in its physical and material manifestations, whereas the real enemy may be lodged deep in our minds.

The struggle that has the greatest potential to obfuscate and derail people from attaining independence in its multi-fold dimensions is the struggle that is in the main invisible, the struggle for hearts and minds – that is, for the soul of a nation. True liberation, like peace (from which the name "Ekurhuleni" derives), lies in the hearts and minds and souls of people; it entails reclamation of their culture, history, and heritage embedded in their *orature*. Orature encapsulates the oral history, traditions, customs, culture, and heritage of preliterate (and of most former colonised) societies. It employs the perspective of those never attributed with being actors in history; it

reflects their worldview. It shows how if minks wrote the story of the hunt it would read differently, without romanticising violence – indeed, if the history of the world was written by women, for example, it is doubtful if the warrior would emerge as hero over the healer. “Whose perspective?” is a question that matters in narrative. Orature provides a balancing historical perspective.

A useful and analytical approach to “culture, cultural values and the social environment in the pre-colonial era,” the subject of my address, is to examine two novels with which most people in this audience will be familiar. The one novel is Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1959) and the other is Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje’s *Mhudi* (1930). Both novels deploy orature for literary purposes to recreate “culture, cultural values and the social environment in the pre-colonial era.” Other works of fiction (“faction”, really) that also do the same include *Sundiata: Emperor of Old Mali* by D. T. Niane, *Bound to Violence* by Yambo Ouologuem, *Two Thousand Seasons* by Ayi Kwei Armah, *Chaka* by Thomas Mofolo, and *Emperor Shaka the Great* by Mazisi Kunene. These novels (a) are written from oral history sources and (b) provide the perspective of “victims” that is missing from “victor’s” history. They narrate the history of the hunt from the perspective of the hunted and not, as is often the case, of the hunter. They give a historical perspective that is not culturally disembodied. In addition, there are two excellent documentaries on ancient African civilisations (Egypt, Nubia, Kush, Axum, Songhai, Mali, Ghana, Zimbabwe etc.), when Europe still wallowed in darkness. The one, *Africa: A Voyage of Discovery*, is an eight-hour series by Basil Davidson; the other, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*, is a nine-hour series by Ali Mazrui. They trace the origin of civilisation in Africa, also the home of humanity, and discuss various African civilisations before the Age of Europe.

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One envisaged outcome of a workshop of this kind should be to provide the South African nation-in-the-making – for as a nation we are still work-in-progress – a framework for education that accords with our unfolding culture of liberation – education for decolonisation, de-alienation and democratisation. The *toyitoyi* we should be learning to perform is not the *toyitoyi* of nimble feet but the *toyitoyi* of agile minds. It cannot be the *toyitoyi* of liberated minds that demands higher wages however justified their demands, by throwing the future of African children to the winds. That is no different from shooting oneself on the foot. That was the near-fatal blow we dealt ourselves in the liberation-now-education-later era. Clearly what debilitates the nation, the shortcomings of activists of this kind of “gun diplomacy” that holds the nation’s future to ransom, is lack of historical consciousness that breeds amnesia. Those who ignore the lessons of history are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past. But I am not proposing to enter the fray for or against, although my sympathy will

always lie with the children. A nation that destroys its children, like a nation that destroys its women, is a nation without a future. But I digress from my purpose, which is to tell the story of how we became soft in the head, of how some people in South Africa remain in the deep throes of mental colonisation, strapped to attitudes woven by their colonial past, and tied with the shackles of an essentially colonial mentality.

My evidence in this regard is largely anecdotal. Anecdote is orature that enables one, in the words of Es'kia Mphahlele, to tell more of the truth than the orthodox historian's truth. My point of departure is my return to South Africa a decade-and-a-half ago, after an absence of several years. In 1991 I was appointed to teach in the English Department at the University of Fort Hare. When I first arrived the staffing situation at the University left much to be desired. The only Africans in the Department were junior lecturers teaching what was called Practical English, which was of no practical import to anyone. The course was English taught to illiterates by other illiterates – a classical case of the blind leading the blind. The rest of the curriculum was mostly Anglocentric. Our urgent tasks were, therefore, to attend to the staffing situation *and* the curriculum. On the staff side, we did two things simultaneously: (a) recruit reputable scholars from other parts of Africa and from the African Diaspora *and* (b) send junior faculty on staff development to acquire higher degrees. The following celebrated scholars came to teach at Fort Hare: Lokangaka Losambe, a specialist in Francophone and Anglophone African literature who came originally from the Republic of Congo; Dan Izevbaye, a leading authority on African literature of English expression who was from the University of Ibadan in Nigeria; Brenda Berrian, originally from Martinique but teaching at the University of Pittsburgh in the United States with specialisation in Caribbean and African-American literature; Mazisi Kunene and Keorapetse Kgositsile, who in recent times succeeded each other in 2005–2006 and 2006–2007 as the first two poets laureate in independent South Africa; and Es'kia Mphahlele, doyen of African letters who was to become professor plenipoten-tiary. There were few universities anywhere that could boast that kind of line-up in both African literature and literature from the African Diaspora.

On the curriculum side, we introduced a model designed in concentric circles: in the innermost circle, constituting the core of the curriculum, we placed literature from South Africa, in its linguistic and cultural diversity, and from the African continent; in the circle enclosing the first we put literature from the African Diaspora (principally Caribbean and African-American) and from the former colonised world in the LACAAP (Latin American, Caribbean, African, Asian and Pacific Rim) countries; on the next outer circle was literature from the rest of the English speaking world (mainly Commonwealth literature); and on the outside circle was world literature in translation. We also introduced an MA in Pan African Letters, probably the only programme of its kind anywhere (Mzamane 1995).

We did not pay much heed to colleagues in the Department who raised the usual objections about “falling standards.” We did not see how the fall of the British Empire from the literary canon and its replacement by world literature amounted to the collapse of “standards” by which the rest of the world should be judged and by which Africans must gauge their sense of achievement. On the contrary, we felt like patting ourselves on the back when one of our high-flying students in the MA programme said to us:

We appreciate the introduction of African writers from South Africa about whom we may otherwise never have heard. Sol Plaatje, Peter Abrahams, Noni Jabavu, Can Themba, etc. We value the knowledge about other cultures and parts of the world we can't even point out on a map, such as Martinique. When we graduate and start looking for teaching jobs, however, who is going to employ us? There are no schools where such material is taught – unlike the English writers we studied before such as Shakespeare, Blake, Wordsworth, Hardy, and Lawrence!

The student had a point that crushed our spirits and reminded us that the mind of South Africa was far from liberated.

Liberating the African mind from the stranglehold of Western cultural imperialism, the unfinished business of the liberation struggle, is an African renaissance imperative. The challenge of the liberation struggle, past the flag independence post, is the integration of the former colonised to their human stories (history), languages, culture and heritage. Orature has the capacity to restore lost memory, reclaim past accomplishment, implant a liberatory ethos and decolonise people's minds. Chinua Achebe (1976: 58–59) writes in “The Novelist as Teacher”: “Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse – to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word.”

In the same essay, Achebe (1976: 59) spells out his creed in deploying orature for literary purposes as follows: “I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past – with all its imperfections – was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them.” He delves into orature to recreate his people's culture, their cultural values and social environment in pre-colonial times. The process restores his people's voice, where colonial history silences them. The perspective of the Igbo people of what is today the eastern part of Nigeria dominates Achebe's project to correct distortions and misrepresentations from colonial history. He teaches that people are agents of history and not its hapless, helpless victims. They each have distinctive personalities and some of their traits are laudable and others reprehensible. They are not simply part of the exotic African landscape and they do not merely constitute some backdrop to the action, as in colonial novels about Africa

by such writers as Humphrey Rider Haggard. They act rather than being acted upon all the time and from their decisions, and from the kind of individuals they are, certain good or bad outcomes flow.

### 3

*Things Fall Apart* is in three parts: the first part deals with Igbo society in pre-colonial times. The second part deals with their earliest encounter with British colonialism. The third part could have been called "the Pacification of the Native Tribes of the Lower Niger," the title of a book the new British District Commissioner plans to write at the end of his tour of duty.

Okonkwo, the main protagonist in the novel, is an expert wrestler, a sport most valued among the Igbo people for displaying physical prowess and mental agility, passion and reason, in equal measure. His wrestling feats are legendary. At an unusually early age to be as highly accomplished in the sport, Okonkwo fells the champion wrestler Amalinze the Cat, whose back until his defeat by Okonkwo has never touched the ground.

As Okonkwo enters adult life he also proves himself an industrious man and becomes one of the most successful farmers, often reaping record harvests. His yams are larger than a grown man's head and the envy of every farmer. Okonkwo is the polar opposite of his father, Nwoye, a ne'er-do-well who spends his time spinning tall yarns and drinking gourd after gourd of palm wine. In a place like Ekurhuleni, Nwoye would be *umahlalela* of no consequence, a shebeen crawler, a sponger on others, and a social liability. Nwoye produces nothing, borrows everything and owes everybody with anything to lend. But Nwoye poses no threat to anyone and lives by his wits. In Okonkwo's estimate, however, the care-free, fun-loving Nwoye is an abysmal failure. Okonkwo is ashamed of him and works even harder to distance himself further from his father.

Igbo society is a meritocracy and rewards solid achievement above all else. At a relatively early age, Okonkwo is inducted into the secret society of the *egwugwu* spirits, a group of nine masked community leaders. Their function is to preside over ceremonies and festivities, to officiate during ritual functions, and to sit in judgement over major disputes. His ambition is to win the highest title ever bestowed on anyone in the land.

These are all qualities Igbo society values. But Okonkwo also harbours traits that lead to his undoing. One of his weaknesses, for all his display of the warrior spirit, is fear. He is a coward who lacks the courage of his conviction. This often leads him to excesses to showcase his prowess. He is not wise enough to fathom the fact that in some situations inaction is the smarter, braver course. Where a reasonable man would back off, Okonkwo feels compelled to act. When Ikemefuna, a boy entrusted to Okonk-

wo's care to be later sacrificed to the gods, is to be killed, Okonkwo's friend Obierika, a man of substance who commands respect in society, advises Okonkwo not to raise his hand against Ikemefuna, who regards Okonkwo as his father. When the ritual killing takes place, Ikemefuna rushes to Okonkwo for protection. But Okonkwo strikes him dead. Okonkwo is afraid to be thought a coward, even though it would call for greater courage to ask to be excused in all good conscience from taking part in such a dastardly deed.

Okonkwo's other flaw is his temper. Forgetting the lessons he should have imbibed from the art of wrestling, he acts from impulse without forethought, allowing his passion to overtake his reason. During the Week of Peace, when no one is supposed to lay his hand on another, infuriated by one of his wives for bringing his meal late, Okonkwo forgets it is the Week of Peace and strikes her. This is a serious infraction of the social code for which he must be punished severely. The community banishes him for seven years and destroys his fields and property. Okonkwo possesses considerable inner strength, however, and rises to the top again after his exile lasting seven years. But the chinks in his armour have already manifested themselves and destroy him in the end.

Okonkwo is a product of his social environment and is in many respects an embodiment of the solid cultural values of Igbo society. But in other respects he overreaches himself, spurred by fear he might be thought weak or a failure. He is too intemperate to be a reliable leader in a time of crisis that calls for level-headedness. If Okonkwo has certain admirable and some abominable traits, however, society exhibits similar contradictions.

On the positive side, Igbo society is an egalitarian society. The only limit to one's upward mobility is how much capacity an individual possesses to better his lot. In this respect, too, Igbo society is a meritocracy. There is no absolute ruler and there are no prisons, with law and order maintained by a council of elders. In the guise of the masked *egwugwu* spirits, the elders dispense restorative justice – rehabilitation – rather than retributive justice – or punishment. Democracy may be too fanciful a concept to ascribe to a society where women and children are to be seen but seldom heard. In this respect, however, Igbo society is no better or worse than any other advanced or civilised society of the time. Igbo society is, in fact, a patriarchy where the voice of every patriarch carries equal weight. The economy is driven by the work ethic of individuals. Nwoye is a notable exception, but society consumes what it produces. The smallest production unit is the family and a large family naturally yields more field hands. The result is a subsistence economy that, nonetheless, leads to self-reliance. According to the lights of the time, therefore, the society hangs together and is stable.

On the negative side, there are unsavoury elements that render Igbo society vulnerable from within and threaten stability, even before British colonial incursion.

Human sacrifice is one such reprehensible practice, Ikemefuna's ritual murder being a case in point. Another callous practice is leaving newly born twins to die in the evil forest. A third unattractive element is discrimination based on some caste system against descendants of slaves who are called *osu*. We already mentioned male chauvinism and ageism.

It is not altogether true, therefore, what Obierika tells the exiled Okonkwo that: The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one. He has put a knife on the things that held us together and we have fallen apart. (Achebe 1958: 158)

The British capitalise upon existing tensions and divisions. Disgruntlement with their treatment in society leads historically disadvantaged groups – such as the people called *osu* and parents of twins – into the bosom of the Church. At the end of the novel, Okonkwo's death by suicide is indicative of this other propensity in society to self-destruct. The centre no longer holds and, indeed, things fall apart.

Achebe avoids typecasting. He does not fall into the ultra-nationalist trap of glorifying every aspect of tradition. On the one hand, not every custom is worth preserving just because it has been practice since antiquity. Achebe shows some cultural practices as retrogressive and abhorrent. He would find it ludicrous if anyone were to suggest that, because in Zulu culture when a woman arouses a man he must have sex with her, such a custom constitutes defence against rape. Other questions arise about customs such as polygamy and corporal punishment. How defensible is polygamy in a human rights culture that espouses equality between men and women? How much is corporal punishment in keeping with the rights of children? On the other hand, African practices are not savage and uncivilised just because they are African. That dismissive attitude derives from a colonial mentality and its perpetuation is a legacy of cultural imperialism. Achebe encourages a critical, analytical and selective approach.

#### 4

Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, one of the most versatile human beings of his time, emerged as a writer more than half-a-century before Achebe. Plaatje was born on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October, 1876, in Boshoff in the territory that had been incorporated into the Boer Republic of the Orange Free State. His people, Barolong, had become Christians but preserved a "synthesis of African and Christian traditions. Plaatje was thus a representative of that early community of mission-educated proto-nationalist Africans," who became the founding fathers of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC – later the African National Congress). Other members of the "petit-bour-



geois class of mission-educated and consciously 'civilised' Africans of which he formed a part" included John Langalibalele Dube, first SANNC president; Pixley ka Isaka Seme; Alfred Mangena; George Montsioa; S. M. Makgatho; R. V. Selope-Thema; Walter Rubusana; Richard Msimang; Josiah Gumede; and L. T. Mvabaza. Plaatje became the organisation's first general secretary when it was formed in Mangaung on the 8<sup>th</sup> February 1912 (Boehmer).

Before, Plaatje had been a member of Abdullah Abdurahman's African People's Organisation, formed in 1905 by mainly people of mixed race, and of the South African Native Convention, formed in 1909 to protest the formation of the Union of South Africa that came into being in 1910 through a pact between the Boers and the British but excluded Africans from the new dispensation. In 1917, he was offered the SANNC presidency but declined. He agreed, however, to serve as senior vice president (Plaatje, Solomon Tshekisho).

Plaatje, a pan-Africanist and internationalist, "aimed for African self-realisation [...] From the time of the First World War, his vision was expanded into an ideal of brotherhood between nations." He was a renaissance man: a pioneering novelist and journalist; a renowned linguist (writing the first Setswana phonetic reader, *A Sechuana Reader*, and helping Daniel Jones of the University of London to produce a Dictionary of Phonetics); a translator of Shakespeare (including *Julius Caesar* and *Comedy of Errors*, the only two that survive; others were *Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and *Much ado about Nothing*); and a collector of Setswana proverbs and folklore in an effort, as he said: "to save from oblivion, as far as this still can be done, the proverbial expressions of the Bechuana people, who inhabit the Bechuanaland Protectorate, Southern Rhodesia, the Northern Division of the Cape Colony, including Griqualand West, the whole of the Orange Free State and the Western half of the Transvaal." He compiled over 700 proverbs under the title "Sechuana Proverbs with Literal Translations and their European Equivalents" and completed another manuscript in 1929 titled "Traditional Folk Tales and other Useful Knowledge." As a Shakespearean scholar, he contributed an essay to Professor I. Gollancz book, *Tercentenary Book of Homage*, to commemorate the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Shakespeare's death; the *New Statesman* described Plaatje's essay as "the most touching of the 166 contributions." He was also an essayist, a historian, and an anthropologist who wrote biographical essays of two 19<sup>th</sup> century Barolong chiefs and another on the history and traditions of the Bhaca people. His appreciation of orature ran deep and by championing African culture and stressing its uniqueness and contribution, he was fighting colonial concepts of innate African inferiority. He was proficient in nine African (including Koranna) and European languages (including German and Dutch) (Plaatje, Solomon Tshekisho).

Plaatje was an organic intellectual, in the Gramscian sense. He was creative, an incisive political thinker, a profound philosopher, and largely self-educated. He received his elementary education at the Pniel Berlin Mission School, along the banks



of the Vaal River (Lekwa), but dropped out of school after Standard 3 (Grade 5), the highest standard offered at Pniel. "When he outpaced fellow learners he was given additional private tuition by the missionary, Ernest Westphal and his wife. In February 1892, aged 15, he became a pupil-teacher, a post he held for two years" (Sol Plaatje).

In 1894 he settled in Kimberley and took up his first job as a post-office messenger. In 1898 he married a woman of the Mfengu clan, Elizabeth Mbele, in a rare show at the time of cross-cultural alliances. He lived what he preached. He moved to Mafikeng as a clerk and court interpreter. The following year the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) broke out and during the Siege of Mafikeng he became an intelligence gatherer for the British. He wrote the *Boer War Diary* that was discovered more than seventy years later. His diary presents an African perspective on the siege of Mafikeng and the war effort.

Between 1902 and 1908, with financial backing from Silas Molema, Plaatje became founding editor of *Koranta ea Becoana*, written in Setswana and English and modelled after *Imvo zabantsundu*, founded in 1884 by John Tengo Jabavu and written in isiXhosa and English. Plaatje assumed the role that characterised him for the rest of his life as the mouthpiece of Africans who also shaped their opinions. Between 1910 and 1912 he was editor of *Tsala ea Becoana*, financed by wealthy landowners from Thaba Nchu such as W. Z. Fenyang, J. Nyokong, and the Reverend J. Goronyane; and from 1912 to 1915 editor of *Tsala ea Batho*, with articles in Sepedi in addition to Setswana and English. He also wrote a column titled "Through Native Eyes" for the *Diamond Fields Advertiser*; wrote for the *Pretoria News* and *Umteteli wa Bantu*; and, in England, wrote for the *African World*.

Plaatje travelled widely on a bicycle to campaign against land dispossession resulting from the 1913 Natives' Land Act apportioning 7% (increased to 13% in 1936) of South Africa's land area to Africans. From the material he gathered, mainly in the Cape Colony and the Orange Free State, he wrote *Native Life in South Africa*, "a scathing indictment of the Natives' Land Act of 1913 [and] one of South Africa's greatest political books" (Plaatje, Solomon Tshekisho).

He was part of two African delegations to England (1914 and 1919) to protest the Natives' Land Act. The delegations met with no success. In 1919 the *Labour Leader* in England published an interview with him under the title "Homeless! Landless! Outlawed! The Plight of South African Natives." In 1920 he travelled from England to Canada and passed on to the US, where he visited nineteen states between 1921 and 1923. He met Marcus Garvey, President of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, and W. E. B. Du Bois, co-founder of the Pan African Congress and the National Association for the Advancement of the Coloured People. The meeting with Du Bois offered Plaatje the opportunity to contribute a paper, read in *absentia* by Du Bois, to the Third Pan African Congress in September 1921. From the US he published the polemic essay, "The Mote and the Beam: An Epic on Sex Relationship 'Twixt White and Black in British South Africa."

Plaatje wrote the second novel to be published written in English by an African in South Africa, *Mhudi* (1930), after R. R. R. Dhlomo's *An African Tragedy* (1929). The historical context of Plaatje's novel goes back to the reign of King Shaka, arguably the most influential African figure in 19<sup>th</sup> century South African history. Under King Shaka's leadership the Zulu people grew in power and expanded their territory. This expansion was in some measure a response to drought, putting pressure on the Zulu people to find more land. In addition, the encroachment of Europeans into African territory "contributed to a situation of flux of which the Zulus took advantage" (*The Story of Africa*).

The Zulu expansion and the defeat of rival kingdoms are hard to imagine, however, without Shaka's forceful personality and exacting military discipline. In *Emperor Shaka the Great*, following Shaka's victory over the once formidable Ndwandwe army under King Zwibe in 1818 at the Mhlatuze River, Mazisi Kunene (quoted in *The Story of Africa*) writes as follows about the awe in which Shaka and the Zulu people were held:

Great nation of Zulu,

You have shown courage against a superior enemy.

The nations that spoke of you with contempt are chilled by your songs.

Kings and princes shiver in their thrones.

Enemies flee to hide in the mountain caves.

At the zenith of his power Shaka commanded a 40 000 strong army made up of regiments organised into age groups. His soldiers plundered communities they defeated for cattle and grain. Those they defeated caused even more destruction than Zulu forces: "Bereft of all social order, these refugees took to looting and pillaging wherever they went. They reduced the landscape in the Natal [area] and much of the Orange Free State into a wasteland. This period of change became known as the *Mfecane*, which is said to derive originally from a Zulu word meaning 'crushing'" (*The Story of Africa*).

Historians now believe, however, that Shaka's role has been over-emphasised and that Europeans and slave traders, in particular, played an even more devastating role in the plunder and upheavals that were set in motion in the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After Shaka and the Zulu *impis*, Mzilikazi, once a general in Shaka's army turned dissident, and his followers known as the Ndebele people spread much terror and destruction in the region. In *Mhudi* Plaatje (1978: 28) writes:

Mzilikazi's tribe originally was a branch of the Zulu nation which Shaka once ruled with an iron rod. Irritated by the stern rule of that monarch, Mzilikazi led out his own people who thereupon broke away from Shaka's rule and turned their faces westward.

Sweeping through the northern areas of Port Natal, they advanced along both banks of the Vaal River, driving terror into man and beast with whom they came into contact. They continued their march very much like a swarm of locusts;

scattering the Swazis, terrifying the Basuto and Bapedi on their outposts; they drove them back to the mountains at the point of the assegai; and, trekking through the heart of the Transvaal, they eventually invaded Bechuanaland where they reduced the Natives to submission.

Mzilikazi modelled his nation and army after the Zulu. But in those dog-eats-dog days, the Swazi (Nngwane) people and Bapedi were just as much of marauders who profited from the chaos and established new kingdoms. The Basotho under the canny King Moshoeshe were the exception. They retreated to the mountain stronghold of Thaba Bosiu that was easy to defend. They also cultivated the friendship of missionaries as a buffer against European invaders. But they remained in danger of being swallowed by the Afrikaners of Natal. For this reason, they agreed to become a Protectorate under the British, forfeiting some of their land in the process in what is today the Free State.

That is the historical context. Plaatje also sets out to correct the cultural context that is distorted in the work of colonial novels such as *Nada the Lily* by Humphrey Rider Haggard. According to Wendy R. Katz (2003), Haggard provides a context for the later anti-imperialist fiction of Plaatje's *Mhudi*:

In his fictional rendering of the Zulu people, *Nada the Lily*, Haggard removed any trace of British responsibility for the annexation of their Zululand. Dingane, Shaka's successor, and Umslopogaas, Shaka's fictitious son, are portrayed as victims of their sexual attraction to the beautiful – and light-skinned – Nada; rather than white colonialism, women and homosexuality doom the Zulu nation.

Plaatje described *Mhudi* as a novel written in the style of Haggard; nonetheless, he corrects Haggard's erroneous impressions. "Mhudi revises and critiques Nada," Katz notes.

Plaatje focuses not on the Zulu "imperial" nation but on the [Barolong] people, victims of Ndebele imperialism who resisted by allying with the Boers. Plaatje also contests Haggard's idea of women, substituting the active, superior reasoning, and courageous Mhudi, his female protagonist, for the passive Nada. The domestic and the feminine worlds, rather than the world of warfare and masculinity, shape Plaatje's narrative. Mhudi is also [...] a proto-pan-Africanist who urges the Ndebele queen Umnandi to encourage men to "cease warring against their own kind" (Katz 2003: 337).

A possible reading of Plaatje suggests that what moderns call "feminism" is not an alien concept in the African universe. An alternative reading suggests that Plaatje was far ahead of his time in his criticism of patriarchy. Plaatje revises Haggard by portraying, Katz (2003: 338) further suggests, "African women as self-determining subjects of a potential oppositional political culture, one that critiques African patri-

archy and its attendant notions of sexual difference along with white colonialism.”

The message in Plaatje’s novel is two-fold: First, he cites African gullibility as the source of conquest by European invaders. The Barolong are too naïve to believe that the Boers have noble intentions and will return the land of the Barolong once the Ndebele are chased out. Second, the internecine wars among African kingdoms militate against African solidarity in the face of European invasion. Plaatje is less concerned with the past as with the present – that is, he wants to talk about the past as a way of talking about the present. Africans must unite to get back the land and their rights that were lost to European marauders who in their treachery and viciousness are worse than the Ndebele, themselves hapless, helpless victims of greater forces than they can contain. Indeed, the Ndebele moved in 1840 to what is now southwestern Zimbabwe; the Boers continue to occupy land they usurped from the Barolong, however, for which the African majority government in South Africa must now pay exorbitant prices to buy back.

With little financial rewards to show for his work, towards the close of his life Plaatje sold his meagre possessions, including his furniture. The people of Kimberley bought him a house at 32 Angel Street in recognition of his services. The house has been declared a National Monument and is home to the Sol Plaatje Museum and Library. The Plaatje of the 1920s, however, had largely run out of political steam. This coincided with the rise of Clements Kadalie’s Industrial and Commercial Workers’ Union (ICU) and the decline in influence of the ANC that in the 1920s was eclipsed by the ICU. Plaatje took up social, educational and religious issues – such as temperance work under the auspices of the Independent Order of True Templars, which he joined in 1927 and whose journal *Our Heritage* he edited. He also travelled around showing educational films brought from the US, which became known as “Plaatje’s bioscope.”

He died in Johannesburg on the 9<sup>th</sup> of June in 1932 from pneumonia and bronchitis and was buried in West End Cemetery, Kimberley. In the 25<sup>th</sup> June 1932 edition of *Umteteli wa Bantu*, a newspaper whose editorship Plaatje had that same year been offered but declined, H. I. E. Dhlomo, brother to R. R. R. Dhlomo, eulogised Plaatje as follows:

A great intelligent leader; a forceful public speaker, sharp witted, quick of thought, critical; a leading Bantu writer, versatile, rich and prolific; a man who by force of character and sharpness of intellect rose to the front rank of leadership notwithstanding the fact that he never entered a secondary school [...] Never have I found him autocratic, contumacious, or narrow of outlook. Whatever he touched upon [...] was treated with a brilliancy, humour, ability and finish that at once surprised and captivated, inspired and humbled me (Sol Plaatje).

On his tombstone is inscribed the following: *Khutse Morolong: Modiredi wa Afrika* (Rest in peace Morolong: Servant of Africa).

Orature is a window into people's formative years and their worldview, unmediated by ventriloquists originating from alien lands and possessed of alien perspectives but passing for authentic historians. Orature embraces people's "culture, cultural values, and social environment." Novelists often put the resources of orature to better use than orthodox historians. But how familiar are African parents, educators, learners and the general public with the resources of orature or African literature and the traditions they propagate?

The traditions encapsulated in orature are not static; they are capable of incorporating new forms of consciousness and thus infusing a qualitatively new and humanising ethos. The curriculum in South African schools must increasingly privilege the quest for such an African ethos as *ubuntu* to fuel the African renaissance. My frame of reference is not the same as some *mashonisa* in Bloemfontein's run-down central business district advertising his business as "Ubuntu Loans." *Ubuntu* eschews the practice of reaping off people. Reaping off people and acting in a humane manner are contradictions in terms. (Perhaps I should come another time to talk about what this most useful but much abused African concept really means.) Africans have a value system that colonialism, segregation, and apartheid could distort and suppress but never eradicate. Their value system underpins South Africa's unfolding culture of liberation, a resilient culture that withstood over three centuries of brutal repression. Unlike colonial and apartheid culture that was exclusive, unaccommodating, life-denying, and even incestuous and, therefore, moribund; the unfolding culture of liberation about which we must all learn more is inclusive, accommodating, and life-giving. It is capable of transplanting itself into a new environment. It is already laying the foundations for far-reaching social change in South Africa by defining the new parameters of our nationhood without discrimination.

These are the main ingredients for curriculum renewal to foster a new philosophy of education for decolonisation, de-alienation, and democratisation that accords with our unfolding culture of liberation. Otherwise we shall be unable to answer even the simplest question such as: what is South African about South African education? A school child in America is immersed from preschool in American values as found in the dominant version of American history. A Japanese child or a Jewish child is steeped in Japanese or Jewish culture and values. It always makes me sad whenever I talk about the past to young people in South Africa to be asked the dismissive question: what has all that stuff to do with us?

In closing I quote from "The Revolution of the Aged", by Njabulo Ndebele (1980–1981: 2), himself a product of Ekurhuleni: "It is a blind progeny / that acts without indebtedness to the past."

## Notes

This address was delivered at the inaugural Ekurhuleni Oral History Workshop, held under the auspices of the Sport, Recreation and Culture Portfolio (SRAC) of the Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality, Gauteng, South Africa on 8<sup>th</sup> June 2007.

### Addendum – *Suggestions and recommendations from the Workshop*

The following suggestions and recommendations came from discussions at the workshop:

- 1 The workshop recognised that no literary tradition ever flourished without a vigorous magazine tradition such as *Staffrider*, which used to carry oral history accounts from interviews conducted by Miriam Tlali. The workshop recommended that to create interest in oral history SRAC-Ekurhuleni must *invest in a regular publication* – in language and format accessible to the majority of the reading public – that will be devoted to the subject and invite people to submit accounts of local historical significance.
- 2 The workshop was also of the view that in conjunction with a reputable publisher SRAC-Ekurhuleni must establish a book series – the Ekurhuleni Oral History Series – that will *publish book length accounts of the people of Ekurhuleni*.
- 3 The workshop noted that many South Africans with stories to tell require to be taught the craft of story-telling. This in turn, will require SRAC-Ekurhuleni to *mount writing clinics for skill's acquisition* that can be run by professionals in the field.
- 4 The workshop suggested that SRAC-Ekurhuleni could arrange to *train teams of interviewers to collect people's accounts* who otherwise have little literary skills. The transcriptions would be edited for publication.
- 5 SRAC-Ekurhuleni should also *encourage making documentaries and facilitate training* people in the format – as in the “Script to Screen” project run by the Newtown Film and Television School (NFTS) – to introduce the widest variety of people to the craft, in all official languages.
- 6 The workshop recommended that SRAC-Ekurhuleni *establish an open grant system* – along the lines of and to augment National Arts Council grants – to promote projects related to oral history in the region (such as documentaries and local history accounts).
- 7 The workshop also suggested that SRAC-Ekurhuleni should *consider the economic spin-offs of the Oral History Project* – especially in cultural tourism – such as unearthing material for museums to showcase local histories, unsung heroes and heroines, and figures of national significance associated with Ekurhuleni (such as Oliver Tambo, Nadine Gordimer, etc.).
- 8 The Centre for African Literary Studies (CALs) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN-Pietermaritzburg) offered SRAC-Ekurhuleni partnership to develop and run training programmes to realise the objectives outlined (1–4) – with *writes associates* providing administrative back-up and project coordination.

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