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The inaugural Plaatje festival, Mahikeng: A watershed event

The first Sol Plaatje festival, Mahikeng, November 5 and 6, 2010, planned by the Sol Plaatje Educational Trust of Kimberley and hosted by the North West Department of Sports, Arts and Culture and Department of Education, drew learners from a local secondary school, young and aspiring performance poets, interested citizens, language practitioners, Plaatje scholars, and importantly, Sol Plaatje and Modiri Molema family members. Together attendees, numbering around 200, from as far as Botswana, Limpopo, North West, Northern Cape and Gauteng, paid tribute to Plaatje, learned more and carried forward his legacy. As participants and “next generation” Plaatje scholars, we share a few reflections on the festival as marking a watershed moment in Plaatje scholarship.

Festival presentations signalled the end of the hegemony of English literary criticism in Plaatje scholarship. In recounting the restoration of Plaatje’s *Mhudi* – a kind of textual archaeological endeavour to uncover Plaatje’s original intention which had been obscured and distorted by Lovedale missionary editing in the 1930s – one could not help but feel that veteran Plaatje scholar, Prof. Stephen Gray was handing the baton over to the “next generation”. Specifically, the question and answer period following his talk became a public space for animated and impassioned remarks – a child of 10 years of age having the last word that settled an academic debate about the pronunciation of “Mhudi,” and implicitly reproached intellectual gymnastics. Significantly, the speaker never in fact resumed ‘the mike’ to give answers—in a very real sense, the public and ‘a little child’ had taken ownership of their *Mhudi* and their Plaatje. The professor yielded to the organic process and the African spirit, “I participate, I share, therefore I belong”, as articulated by Desmond Tutu.

It is fitting that Plaatje scholarship should be moving out of the narrow realm of English literature and indeed out of the elitist realm of the academy into the broader public space. In 2010, at the request of a living descendant, the Sol Plaatje Educational Trust arranged for Dr. Seetsele Modiri Molema’s biography, *Sol T. Plaatje, Morata Wabo* (*Sol T. Plaatje: Lover of His People*) to be translated into English.¹ As part of the proceedings of the annual Sol Plaatje Memorial lecture, held on the first evening of the festival, there was a symbolic handing over of the book to the Plaatje/Molema family and a short reading from the foreword. This biography is the earliest and the

sole biography written by someone who knew Plaatje and in Plaatje's own language, Setswana. That it has been languishing in the archives of the University of the Witwatersrand since around 1965 but never published in South Africa (though it was published in Botswana), speaks volumes of the underestimation of works produced by African intellectuals, and in African languages, even in the academy. Thus the festival signalled a watershed moment in Plaatje being returned to his people, by his people, in his own language; also in African scholarship receiving the long overdue recognition it deserves. Of all the biographies –and by now they are many² – this one alone brings Plaatje alive. At times erudite with historical knowledge, at times intimate with details of the physical traits, temperament, habits and character of Plaatje, it describes and narrates, rarely becomes explicitly analytical. Whereas subsequent biographies have written about Plaatje's humanity, one can feel in Molema the humanity and spirit of the man – it is in effect, a living memorial.

It is fitting that the festival should become a living memorial, especially given the presence and participation of Plaatje family members. Just as Molema's biography holistically merges accounts of Plaatje's personal with his public and political life, so Dr. Mcebisi Ndetyana cogently and sensitively addressed Plaatje in the political (public) memory vis-à-vis Plaatje in the private (familial) memory. He argued that the political elite chose to remember him as a revolutionary and militant figure and simultaneously to forget the South African Native National Congress' (SANNC) betrayal in his lifetime. By contrast, Plaatje's family chooses to remember Plaatje the intellectual and the writer and to downplay his political role, in all likelihood, because of the painful memories this evokes. The SANNC who had promised to support Plaatje's family during his overseas travels on behalf of the oppressed and suffering Black nation, in fact reneged on their promise of support, resulting in his wife and children being evicted from their home. The descendants of political giants, such as Steve Biko and Robert Sobukwe, like the Plaatje descendants, Dr. Mcebisi Ndetyana argued, are compelled to ensure that the sacrifices of their loved ones still matter. The dialogue which followed this presentation, though emotional, was candid, restrained and moderate. Thus it reflected the character and spirit of Plaatje in the restraint and moderation displayed. Disappointingly, however, the South African politicians did not participate in the dialogue nor the festival more generally.

On the other hand, upcoming talented youth, such as Mpho ya Badimo and David wa Maahlamela, chose to fully participate and engage, performing electrifying poetry that punctuated the entire proceedings, unified the festival and acted as catharsis. The poetry, which celebrated Plaatje and other icons, related the history of South Africa's struggle and gave equal space to English and Setswana, as did the discussions following each talk. Some presentations were entirely in Setswana. Kabelo Duncan Kgatea, an award winning Setswana novelist spoke on the characteristics of a good novel. He reminded the audience that creative work could be tapped from their own experiences as in the case of his novel *Seipone* (Mirror) that reflects his own

upbringing and the challenges he faced as a child. He lost his parents while still a child and had to leave school to take care of his siblings. The message of his creative work *Seipone* is that whenever people are distressed in life they should look in the mirror and see how good they are. This is what the protagonist in *Seipone* does always when the idea of committing suicide comes to his mind. Thus we learned of the modern Setswana novel as catharsis, as a restorative for a people so long downtrodden and who frequently internalised inferiority. As the festival progressed it became apparent that despite the odds and the seemingly intractable obstacles such as disagreement over Setswana spelling and the financial viability of publishing in African languages, there were in our midst those who are actively composing, writing, publishing and performing Setswana creative works, the ultimate homage to Plaatje “our first Motswana man of letters”.³

The festival thus epitomised not only the possibility but the inevitability of Plaatje scholarship being rooted in Setswana, with English being used for purposes of reaching non-Setswana speakers and a wider audience. Moreover the effectiveness and immediacy of the poetry urged upon attendees the reality that the time has come for Plaatje scholarship to draw on oral and performance modes that are the most relevant in reaching the South African public and teaching learners. The future of Plaatje scholarship in fact depends upon knowledge being produced and disseminated in multimedia and in African languages, upon engaged and restrained interaction and participation, upon catharsis, and upon Plaatje festivals constituting a living memorial.

Though inauguration of this event is almost 100 years in coming, and though this festival began, like an infant on very wobbly legs, there being eleventh hour confirmation of its happening, last minute cancellations by presenters, delays by caterers and more, its humble beginnings will go down in history, certainly in the hearts of those who felt the spirit of Plaatje pervade the proceedings, inform interactions and democratise and africanise the modes for carrying forward his legacy.

Notes

1. Dr. Seetsele Modiri Molema, the first black surgeon on the African continent, is best known for his landmark historical work *Bantu Past and Present: an Ethnographic and Historical Study of the Native Races of South Africa* (1920).
2. Willan, Brian, *Sol Plaatje (1876-1932): A Biography*. Johannesburg: Ravan, 1984; Pampallis, John, *They Fought for Freedom: Sol Plaatje*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1992; Midgley, Peter. *Sol T. Plaatje*. In Paul A. Scanlon, *South African Writers (Dictionary of Literary Biography: 225)*. Detroit, Gale, 2000, 346–357; De Villiers, G. E., *Servant of Africa. The Life and Times of Sol T. Plaatje (1876-1932)*. Pretoria: Stimela, 2000; Rall, Maureen, *Peaceable Warrior. The Life and Times of Sol T. Plaatje*. Kimberley: Sol Plaatje Educational Trust, 2003; Mokae, Sabata-Mpho, *The Story of Sol T. Plaatje*. Kimberley: Sol Plaatje Educational Trust, 2010.
3. Shole, J. S., Foreword to *A Setswana Reader (Folk Narratives) Padi Ya Dinaane Tsa Batswana*, by D Jones and Sol T. Plaatje. Kimberley: The Sol Plaatje Educational Trust, 2004: ii.