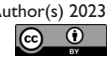
Original Research Article

JAAS

Journal of Asian and African Studies
1–14



DOI: 10.1177/00219096231218447
journals.sagepub.com/home/jas


Press and Politics: Contributions of Sol Plaatje to South African Journalism

Abiodun Salawu
Indigenous Language Media in Africa, North-West University, South Africa

Abstract

The article looks into the journalism of Solomon Thekisho Plaatje (popularly known as Sol Plaatje) and his contributions to the early South African black press and politics. Sol Plaatje remains one of South Africa's most important political and literary figures. He was a pioneer of black press in South Africa. He was a spokesman of his people and an opinion leader among them. He was the first Secretary of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) which later became the African National Congress (ANC), the current ruling political party in South Africa. His services to war correspondents as secretary, typist or interpreter and 'liaison officer' (to war correspondent Vere Stent) laid the foundation for his careers in journalism and writing. Plaatje edited/published a number of Setswana/English newspapers such as *Koranta ea Becoana* (*Bechuana Gazette*), *Tsala ea Becoana* (*Bechuana Friend*) which later became *Tsala ea Batho* (*Friend of the People*) and *Our Heritage*. He also wrote regularly for English language newspapers such as *Star, Pretoria News, Cape Times, Cape Argus* and *Diamond Fields Advertiser*. The study seeks to find out the interplay between Sol Plaatje's journalism and politics and his contributions to South African journalism as a pioneer of the black press. The study adopts the historical research method. Data gathered for the study were qualitatively analysed. Sol Plaatje's kind of journalism was developmental as it was geared towards defending his people and re-orientating them to better ideals while at the same time trying to build cohesion with the white populace. The study is a contribution to the reconstruction of media history in the post-apartheid South Africa.

Keywords

Sol Plaatje, black press, journalism, nationalism, anti-apartheid struggle, Setswana

Introduction – Sol Plaatje: 1876–1932

Solomon Thekisho Plaatje (Sol Plaatje) was born on 9 October 1876 at Doornfontein, a farm in the Boshof district of the Orange Free State (Willan, 1996: 6). The father was Johannes Kushumane Plaatje while his mother was Martha Lokgosi. The family were of Barolong ancestry and they were Christians. Plaatje was a direct descendant of Modiboa, the last Morolong king to rule over a united

Corresponding author:
Professor Abiodun Salawu, Indigenous Language Media in Africa, North-West University, Mafikeng Campus, Corner of Albert Luthuli/University Drive, Mmabatho 2735, South Africa.
Email: salawuabiodun@gmail.com

Barolong nation (Midgley, 1997: 11). The Barolong are a branch of the Batswana nation; and their language is called Setswana.

The name Plaatje is a Dutch word which means 'flat' and it started with his great grandfather, Selogilwe. The history of the name is traced back to the *mfecane*, or scattering of tribes during the 19th century (Midgley, 1997: 11). During this time, the Barolong territory was occupied by Mzilikazi's troops, and many of them fled to the safety of mission stations. Among them was Selogilwe who arrived at Thaba Nchu during the early 1830s. It was here that the name 'Plaatje' was given to Selogilwe by a Dutch-speaking farmer, on whose land (in the Philippolis district where there were Griqua (Dutch-speaking) landowners) the family lived. Midgley (1997) wrote,

> Oral tradition has it that the name was derived from the shape of Selogilwe's head. The name stuck and was retained by Kushumane and his descendants. (p. 12)

At the time of his birth, the family were living in one of the main stations of the Berlin mission at Bethanie in the Orange Free State, but within a few years had moved to another mission station at Pniel, near Kimberley in the British colony of Griqualand West. Plaatje spent most of his early years at Pniel, attending the mission school run by the Reverend Ernst Westphal.

In the school, he demonstrated a particular talent for music and languages: he learnt English, Dutch and German and several African languages in addition to his native tongue, Setswana. After finishing Standard III – the highest class in the school – he started work as a pupil teacher in the school. He did this for 3 years. During this time, he was also taught informally by Marie Westphal, the missionary's wife. Willan (1984) quoted Erna, Marie's daughter thus,

> I believe Solomon himself came to mother one day. He found her in the kitchen. There was an English lady with her. Solomon stood just outside the door listening. Mother looked up and saw him. She asked him in Dutch . . . what he wanted and he said: 'I want to be able to talk English and Dutch and German as you do'. Mother then recognized him and told him to come the next day. That is how his lessons began. (p. 21)

Mrs. Westphal did not only teach him the languages. She also taught him to play the piano and violin. Erna introduced him to William Shakespeare, some of whose works he later translated to Setswana.

Plaatje later got a job as a messenger in the Post Office at Kimberley. In 1898, he moved to take up a job as the clerk and court interpreter in Mafeking.[1] The linguistic dexterity of Plaatje came in handy with his work as a court interpreter. He was able to put into practice the six African languages and three European languages that he knew. He also within the period taught himself typing and shorthand. He subsequently studied for the Cape Civil Service Examinations. Unfortunately, he could not write the examinations as on 11 October 1899, Mafeking came under siege. He took the examination after the siege instead. During the siege, he continued his work as a court interpreter and as secretary and typist to Vere Stent, the Reuters war correspondent. During that period, he also wrote a number of articles for the *Mafeking Mail* special siege slip. Midgley (1997: 14) also recalled that during the siege, Charles Bell, the magistrate and Civil Commissioner, asked Plaatje to type his diary for him. He had, before now, started writing his own diary of the siege. The manuscript was discovered in 1969 by a social anthropologist, John Comaroff, and was published in 1973 as *The Boer War Diary of Sol Plaatje*. A substantially re-edited version of the work was published in 1989 as *Mafeking Diary: A Black Man's View of a White Man's War*.

Sol Plaatje died in 1932 but he remains one of South Africa's most important political and literary figures. This paper looks into the journalism of Solomon Thekisho Plaatje (popularly known as Sol Plaatje) and his contributions to the early South African black press and politics. The study

seeks to find answers to the following questions: (1) What was the role of Sol Plaatje in the early black press in South Africa? (2) what was the nature of the journalism of Sol Plaatje? and (3) in what ways did Sol Plaatje's politics affect his journalism and writings? The next section considers the context of the pioneer black press in South Africa.

The context of the pioneer black press in South Africa

Sol Plaatje was not alone at this time in the pursuit of liberation for Africans using the instrumentality of journalism. In the colonial period, it was not easy to separate journalism from politics as the former was a tool of the latter. So, it was that the first president of the African National Congress (ANC) known then as the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), John Langalibalele Dube, was a journalist. He was equally a teacher and a clergyman but perhaps his most brilliant contribution was as a journalist, and founder of South Africa's first indigenous Zulu newspaper, *Ilanga Lase Natal* in 1903 (Paramoer and Tshabalala, 2014; Switzer and Switzer, 1979). The newspaper's contents spanned land controversies, laws and acts such as the poll tax as well as political and social developments. Paramoer and Tshabalala (2014) recalled that the newspaper was widely circulated beyond the borders of Natal and Zululand. It was well received across the nation, South Africa, in that it served as a new *ibandla* (a public sphere). Paramoer and Tshabalala (2014) further noted that the newspaper became an important tool for Africans to respond to oppressive laws passed by the colonial government. According to them, the pages of *Ilanga* in the 1930s were filled with translations of these laws into Zulu, in an attempt to encourage Zulu-speaking Africans to make their input. The newspaper provided a means for political education in Natal and beyond. Dube also fought and won freedom of expression for the Africans and the press (Couzens, 1984).

Sefako Mapogo Makgatho was the immediate successor to John Dube as SANNC president. He was also a pioneer of black press in South Africa. He was involved in the establishment of Abantu-Batho in 1912, one of the newspapers that claimed to be the mouthpiece of SANNC. He worked with Pixley ka Saka Seme in this effort. Seme said the purpose for the newspaper was to help Africans move away from their ethnic and local identities and see themselves as Africans first and foremost (Mokoatsi, 2015). Writings in the newspaper were done in English, isiXhosa, isiZulu and Sesotho (Saunders, 2012: 121–122). Contributors to the newspaper included DDT Jabavu, SEK Mqhayi, ZR Mahabane, SM Bennett Mcwana and Samuel Makama Masabalala. The editors were Daniel Letanka (who edited the Sesotho and Setswana sections), C Kunene (isiXhosa and isiZulu), TD Mwelo Skota, RV Selope Thelma, Jeremiah W Dunjwa and Saul Msane (Switzer, 1997: 31, cited in Mokoatsi, 2015). *African Leader*, established in 1932, succeeded *Abantu-Batho* as ANC's mouthpiece. It had sections in isiZulu (*Umholi we Africa*), isiXhosa (*Inkokheli ye Afrika*) and Sotho (*Moetapele ka Afrika*). The newspaper was edited by Mweli Skota and Gilbert Cika. ANC stalwarts who contributed to the newspaper included Seme, H Selby Msimang, Halley Plaatje (Sol's son), Joel Ndumo and SH Mbulawa. The newspaper collapsed in 1933, having lasted a year and 4 months (Switzer, 1997: 32).

Other pioneers of black press in South Africa included Francis Zaccheus Santiago (FZS) Peregrino, Tiyo Soga, John Tengo Jabavu, and SEK Mqhayi. Some women were also among the pioneers of black press in South Africa. Among them were Nontsizi Mgqwetho, Helen Nontando Jabavu and Joyce Sikhakhane Rankin (Xaba, 2016). There was Joyce Dube who was a gender activist in the media. She was detained under the Suppression of Communism Act spending 18 months in solitary confinement. One other important pioneer female journalist in South Africa was Ruth Herloise First who, though a white woman, used her journalism to fight black cause. She was born in 1925 to Lithuanian and Latvian Jewish immigrants and communists (Beukes, 2014). Her interest was social and labour journalism and she contributed 15 stories per week on poverty in the townships and gang violence. Beukes (2014) recalled that when she covered the women's anti-pass campaign and the march of 20,000 women on the

Union Buildings in 1956, she was not merely recording the events, she was raising awareness of the struggle, building heroes and educating people on more effective campaigns. Among her most important journalistic efforts was the farm labour abuse reporting she did in 1947. She reported that black labourers were bound with chains, beaten with sjamboks and forced to sleep naked and chained together in a cramped and filthy room (Beukes, 2014).

Ruth was among the 156 defendants at the Rivonia Trial of 1956–1961. She was in the process detained for 117 days. She was also exiled to London in 1964. While in Mozambique where she held a faculty position at the Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, she was assassinated by the apartheid government on 17 August 1982 through a letter bomb (Webb, 2015; Xaba, 2016). The concerns of Sol Plaatje were similar to those of these early South African early black and black-oriented journalists. The concerns revolved around seeking independence, equality, better life and justice for black people. Salawu (2016; 14–16) documented the nationalistic contents of African journalism in other parts of the continent during this period.

Secondary sources for historical research

Historical research 'attempts to systematically recapture the complex nuances, the people, meanings, events, and even ideas of the past that have influenced and shaped the present' (Berg and Lune, 2012: 305).

Data are gathered for historical research through primary and secondary sources. This study majorly used secondary sources of books and journal articles to source information. The study adopted this approach because a good collection of data already exists. More so, the study covered an extended period which may take a long time to cover if primary sources are going to be scoured.

Besides, the main subject of study in this paper has been covered in a considerable amount of extant literature. What this study did was analysing the various but similar accounts and synthesise them. Again, unlike the previous studies, this study was particularly interested in the journalism of the subject, Sol Plaatje; and tangentially how it influenced or was influenced by his politics. It was not another attempt to deeply study the biography of the subject, his genealogy, the politics of the time in which he existed and how he played it. It was also not really an attempt to study his literary works.

The authors of the secondary sources fulfil the requirement of consistency. The major source, Brian Willan, fulfilled internal consistency as he did not contradict himself in all his works on the subject. His reports are also consistent with accounts of other authors. The sources together are also consistent with general knowledge I gathered about the subject. Publishers of the main secondary source are also reputable scholarly publishers as evident in the references compiled at the end of this work.

Primary sources used in the main secondary sources are germane. They include private papers, diaries, newspapers, institutional records and government documents. Willan is a reputable professional historian. The data obtained from the various secondary sources were also able to answer the (research) questions that this study set out with.

All the same, this study takes the interpretivist approach to all the documents consulted. The documents were seen in their social contexts and attempts were made to make sense of the contexts. The study deviates in a way from the positivist approach which sees facts as existing independently of interpretation, and documents as an objective reflection of reality. Data were thematically analysed and reported along the following sub-headings.

A pioneer of black press

Sol Plaatje was a pioneer of black press in South Africa. He was also a literary prodigy with prodigious linguistic talents. He wrote extensively in English and Setswana, his native language; and on

occasions in Afrikaans, isiXhosa and in several other languages as well. The Anglo-Boer war of 1899–1902 (some historians call it South African war because of the involvement of the natives in it) provided a wonderful opportunity for Sol Plaatje to practise and develop his many skills and talents (Willan, 1996).

His services to war correspondents as secretary, typist or interpreter and 'liaison officer' (to war correspondent Vere Stent) laid the foundation for his careers in journalism and writing.

Plaatje edited/published a number of Setswana/English newspapers such as *Koranta ea Becoana* (*Bechuana Gazette*), *Tsala ea Becoana* (Bechuana Friend) which later became *Tsala ea Batho* (*Friend of the People*) and *Our Heritage*. He also wrote regularly for English language newspapers such as *Star, Pretoria News, Cape Times, Cape Argus* and *Diamond Fields Advertiser*.

Koranta ea Becoana

As a result of him not being promoted due to the colour of his skin and the meagre salary he was earning, Sol Plaatje left the civil service in 1902 (Willan, 2018: 157–159). While he was still in the civil service, he had been writing articles for *Koranta ea Becoana. Koranta* did not have its own printing press, and it was printed on the press of *Mafeking Mail*. The resignation of Plaatje from the civil service coincided with the arrival of the long awaited printing press of *Koranta ea Becoana*. Now, being out of the civil service, he could take up the editorship of the newspaper.

Koranta actually started in April 1901 as a one-page Tswana language newspaper. It was then being managed by Silas Molema and George Whales, 'editor of *Mafeking Mail*, the local "white" newspaper' (Rall, 2003; Willan, 1996: 16). In September of that same year, Molema took full control of the newspaper from Whales and it expanded to two pages, still in Setswana. The arrival of the printing press and the appointment of Plaatje as full-time editor of the newspaper made the newspaper to expand its number of pages while it became bilingual, publishing in Setswana and English. The first issue of the expanded *Koranta ea Becoana* (*Bechuana Gazette*) appeared on 16 August 1902. Willan (1996: 16) recalled that it was 'launched with the good wishes of the magistrate and civil commissioner, and of prominent representatives of Mafeking's white and black communities, at an impressive ceremony outside the *Bechuana Gazette*'*s office in Main Street, Mafeking*'.

Just like other African newspapers of that era, it was poised to serve as the mouthpiece of its community and present the perspectives of the local people through the prism of the educated African who ran it. *Koranta* proclaimed its dedication to 'the amelioration of the Native', and its commitment to the four principles of 'Labour, Sobriety, Thrift and Education'. It was a weekly newspaper with a weekly circulation of 1000–2000 copies per issue, predominantly in the Tswana-speaking areas of the Bechuanaland Protectorate, the Cape Colony, Transvaal and the Orange Free State (Willan, 1996: 17). Willan (2018: 168) broke this coverage area down to Johannesburg, Bloemfontein, Kimberley, the Seleka Barolong settlement at Thaba Nchu and Mafeking.

On the newspaper masthead was a motto taken from the Bible:

> I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, and the curtains of Solomon.
>
> Look not upon me because I am black for the sun hath looked down upon me; my mother's children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but my own vineyard have I not kept. (*Song of Solomon* 1: 5–7)

Apart from the fact that he was a namesake of the biblical personage credited with this song, these biblical verses must have meant something to Plaatje as they remained the mottos of the two other newspapers that he subsequently managed and edited.

Koranta appeared on Saturday mornings and sold for 3d per copy. It was often printed on brightly coloured newsprint. Contents of the newspaper included reports from local correspondents who also doubled as the agents, 'extracts from the local and international press selected for their interest to an African readership, as well as editorial comment and original articles upon the issues of the day' (Willan, 2018: 168). There were also letters from readers and 'an occasional column entitled "Mma-Maitisho" ("fireside tales"), a light-hearted review in Setswana' (Willan, 2018: 168). Advertisements took up about half of each issue, including the first page. Willan noted that 'usually there were eight pages, but this varied and was eventually reduced to four when the page was doubled' (p. 168).

Plaatje was responsible for writing editorials of the newspaper. It was this he used to influence opinions and advocate issues. His editorials were about political and social issues, and the purpose was to project the African perspective and, in particular, the Batswana perspective. He wrote on equal rights for both the African and the European populace. An example was the editorial in the third issue of *Koranta ea Becoana*, 13 September 1902. In one of the editorials, he expressed his belief in the interdependence of black and white in a future South Africa: 'The white race can no more do without the black, and the black without the white, than the right hand can do without the left' (quoted in Willan, 1996: 19).

He used his editorials to champion the cause of the black people and protest against injustice. For example, there were editorials on the treatment of Africans on railways in the Orange River Colony, the operation of the pass laws in the Transvaal and the discrimination against African Christians. His editorials were also used to champion and protect the political interest of his people. It was to the credit of his editorial that African support could not be secured for the annexation of both the Bechuanaland Protectorate and the Mafeking district of the Cape Colony to the Transvaal (Willan, 1996: 18, 2018: 175–178).

A second major theme of Plaatje's editorials in *Koranta* centred around the advice to fellow black people to conduct themselves properly. His reasoning was that if Africans must lay claim to 'equal rights for all civilised men', they must be seen to be 'civilised' in their conduct. He criticised alcohol abuse among his people. He, at times, had to engage with clergymen for their wrongdoings.

Another important theme in his editorials was advocacy for gender equality. His belief was that just as racial discrimination had no place in comity of humans, gender discrimination should also not be condoned. He inveighed against the South African Native Convention in Queenstown in November 1902 for not accepting women as delegates. He was particularly miffed that someone like Charlotte Maxeke, the only university degree holder in that gathering, could not be allowed into the meeting. Plaatje would write, 'Just as strongly as we object to the line of demarcation being drawn on the basis of a person's colour, so we abhor disqualification founded on a person's sex' (Molema, 2012: 92–93).

Things started getting difficult for *Koranta* after the end of 1904 as it ran into financial difficulty. Willan (1996: 19) surmised that the basic difficulty it faced was the very low level of literacy among its potential readership. Print media are media for the literate and if the literacy level is low, it will definitely and negatively affect on the readership and the market of the newspaper or magazine. Debts were accumulated as a result of the venture not doing well financially. This led to several changes of ownership. Few issues were produced between 1905 and 1908. Personally, for Plaatje, it was a difficult time. He also ran up personal debts. When the newspaper finally folded, he was forced to look elsewhere for a means of survival. In 1909, he became the 'Bechuanaland Representative' of the Mines Labour Supply Company Limited, recruiting labour for work on Rand (Willan, 1996: 19, 2018).

Tsala ea Becoana

Plaatje went through a difficult patch in his life at this time. His labour agent licence was not renewed because of some infraction. He was in financial straits and he became bankrupt. The people he was indebted to were not making life easy for him. The Tshidi Barolong in Mafeking were also no longer able to support his ambitions for them, for himself and for Batswana as a whole (Willan, 2018: 216). For all these reasons, he left Mafeking with his family sometime around May or June of 1910.

The family left for Kimberley where Plaatje had found backers for a new newspaper. Plaatje knew the importance of having a newspaper to use as a platform if he was to play any meaningful role in the affairs of the new Union of South Africa.[2] This new newspaper was *Tsala ea Becoana* (The Friend of the Bechuana), founded with the backing of a syndicate. Willan (2018: 218) gave their names as Chief J.M. Nkoyong, Jeremiah Makgothi, Chief W.Z. Fenyang, Moses Masisi and Rev. Joel Goronyane. They were regarded as relatively wealthy landowners from Seleka Barolong settlement in Thaba Nchu. They had been involved with Plaatje and *Koranta* before then. They had contributed to the newspaper and acted as its agents.

Other members of the syndicate were Thomas Mapikela of Bloemfontein and John Tengo Jabavu, editor of *Imvo Zabantsundu* based in Eastern Cape. Jabavu had been involved in the enterprise ever before the syndicate was formed as his company, Jabavu & Co., was the first registered proprietor of the newspaper. Plaatje was the editor while Jabavu & Co. were the proprietor, printer and publisher. At inception, the shop (printing press) of the newspaper was in King William's Town in Eastern Cape, Jabavu's place and nearly 400 miles away from the office (where the editorial work was done) in Kimberley, Plaatje's base. It was not exactly a tidy arrangement.

Tsala ea Becoana was first published on 18 June 1910. It had four pages and was published in both English and Setswana. The composition looked much like the defunct *Koranta* while it also maintained the 'Mma-Maitisho' column from the previous newspaper. The earlier issues of *Tsala ea Becoana* focused on the new circumstances of the Union, the forthcoming first general election which happened on September 1910 as well as the composition and character of the new government led by General Botha's South African Party. Plaatje's early editorials in the newspaper sounded hopeful as several of those he considered Cape liberals and 'friends of the natives' were included in the first Union cabinet (Willan, 2018: 221). They included F.S. Malan (minister of education), J.W. Sauer (minister of railways and harbours) and Henry Burton (minister of native affairs). Burton, particularly, was well known to Plaatje. He used his closeness to the leaders of the Union administration in Pretoria to obtain interviews from them about the state of the nation, particularly as it concerned the natives (Willan, 2018: 223–225). These interviews were published in his newspaper and they helped in raising the profile of the newspaper among the native populace.

Although, *Tsala ea Becoana* existed for above 2 years, they were not particularly rosy years for Plaatje and the newspaper in financial terms. In 1911, Jabavu withdrew from involvement with the newspaper and the printing contract with his company terminated. This meant the printing of the newspaper was moved to Kimberley, 'resulting not only in more efficient and more timely distribution in its main area of readership but a much-improved printed page' (Willan, 2018: 226) due to the use of a new linotype typesetting system.

It was not a good time for Plaatje in financial terms and he had a number of creditors from Mafeking still pursuing him. To make ends meet, he took on some extra work, initially as an insurance agent and later as a stringer for other newspapers such as *Pretoria News* where he maintained a column, called 'Through Native Eyes' and *African World*, a London weekly. He also contributed articles to *Diamond Fields Advertiser* in Kimberley. The issues he dealt with in his writings then included the discriminatory treatment of Africans on the railways, the question of the future of the

High Commission Territories (Bechuanaland, Swaziland and Basutoland), and the landholding rights for the Barolong of Thaba Nchu. An overriding issue at the time was the question of segregation which was the key element in the comprehensive 'native policy' the new government in the Union of South Africa was formulating (Willan, 1996: 123–124). The Natives Land[3] bill was very upsetting for Plaatje and it was to dominate the next few years of his life.

Tsala ea Becoana stopped publication with the issue of 8 June 1912. This was due to financial problems and Plaatje's time being taken by his involvement in the affairs of the SANNC of which he was the (first) Secretary. SANNC was the precursor of the present-day ANC.

Tsala ea Batho

Three months after the last publication of *Tsala ea Becoana, Tsala ea Batho* (The People's Friend) was launched. Sol Plaatje was the sole owner and proprietor. He also acquired his own printing press. The new newspaper appeared in Sepedi, Setswana and English. The new title reflected the union of Tswana and Pedi peoples (Willan, 2018: 241). The first issue appeared in the middle of September 1912.

The printing press of the newspaper formally opened on 7 September 1912, the very day Plaatje's wife, Elizabeth, gave birth to a son. He was promptly named Johannes Gutenberg (Willan, 2018: 241–242) after the German who introduced the mechanical movable type printing to Europe. He did not have any qualms naming his son after an European. This again underscored Plaatje's view of race. The newspaper appeared regularly with generous dose of advertisements. These made up for the cessation of monetary contributions from the native peasants of the Free State and Transvaal due to the disruptions caused by the Natives' Land Act. The coverage of this Act was a major pre-occupation of *Tsala* and it raised its circulation so much that by 1914, the figure had increased to 4000.

Tsala was preeminent among the black press then. It was getting information ahead of its peers; and at times, competing favourably with daily newspapers in news gathering and dissemination. By April 1913, *Tsala* started publishing regular news and comments in isiXhosa, 'thereby providing an alternative to Jabavu's *Imvo*' (Willan, 2018: 255). This appealed so much to the isiXhosa-speaking people outside of Eastern Cape. Most of the comments were about Jabavu and his stance on the Natives' Land Act.[4]

Plaatje easily became the most widely read black journalist of the time as his extensive writings on the Act and other acts of injustice and misrepresentation for *Pretoria News* were reproduced in other newspapers such as *Cape Argus* and *Diamond Fields Advertiser*.

He resigned from his position as the Secretary of the SANNC when he realised it was taking much of his time and it was affecting his attention for the newspaper business. He was allowed to abdicate the position at the time of the Congress delegation's departure to England to protest the Land Act in 1914. He was a member of the delegation. He personally stayed in England even after the work of the delegation, during which he completed *Native Life in South Africa* and some other works. Unfortunately, his absence meant *Tsala* could not get adequate attention. So, the newspaper stopped publication in 1915. It was last published in July of that year.

Plaatje embarked on a second voyage overseas between 1919 and 1923. He was again in England, and to Canada, the United of States and back to England again. Seven years after he returned to South Africa, he edited *Our Heritage*, the newspaper of the Independent Order of True Templars (IOTT), of which he was a member. The newspaper did not however last more than a few months, principally because of the controversy over which language(s) to use and also because of the friction between the desire of Plaatje to reinvent *Koranta* and *Tsala* in the newspaper and the objectives of the Order. *Our Heritage* was the last publication that Plaatje edited. He had offers to

edit *Umteteli wa Bantu* and the *Bantu World* but he rejected them because he wanted his independence and to remain in Kimberley. It is also important to mention that he edited *Imvo Zabantsundu* for several months during Jabavu's absence in Europe (Couzens, 1984; Willan, 2018).

Plaatje's non-journalistic writings and his commitment to Setswana

For the early black journalists in South Africa, literature and journalism were intertwined. It is for this reason that we cannot discuss Sol Plaatje's journalism in total isolation of his literary (and other) writings. Importantly, the themes in Plaatje's journalism were also reflected in his other writings. It is equally expedient to appreciate the fact that Plaatje used his journalistic (and literary) writings to promote Setswana as he wrote extensively in the language and also crusade for the standardisation of its orthography.

Plaatje's *Mafeking Diary* (Plaatje, 1973b) depicted, for the first time in relation to the siege, the black population's role, a perspective all too often overlooked in the narratives and reportage of the colonial and apartheid eras. In the struggle for Mafeking during the war, a siege was laid on the town by the forces both of the British and the Boers between 1899 and 1900 (Willan, 1984: 77–103; Willan, 2018: 133–161). His other books include *Native Life in South Africa* (Plaatje, 1916a), *Mhudi* (a historical novel; Plaatje, 1930b), and *Sechuana Proverbs* (Plaatje, 1916b). Couzens (1984) remarked that, for early black journalists in South Africa, it was almost impossible to separate journalism from literature because a good number of them were involved in both.

He played a key role in the preservation of Tswana language and the furtherance of its literature. He translated a number of Shakespeare's plays into Setswana but sadly only his translation of *Comedy of Errors* (*Diphosho-phosho*, 1930a) was published in his lifetime. His translation of *Julius Caesar* (*Dintshontsho tsa bo-Juliuse Kesara*) was published posthumously in Plaatje (1973a). Manuscripts of other translations (*Much Ado about Nothing* and *Merchant of Venice*) were lost.

Matjila and Haire (2015) emphasise Plaatje's commitment to his African and Batswana sensibilities. They stress that 'his worldview, ideals, character, multilingualism, values, and lifework were informed by deep-rootedness in the Setswana culture' (Matjila and Haire, 2015: 16). According to them, he was intensely proud of his Black skin and elevated his Setswana language, literature, history and culture. The authors wrote,

> While his journalism represents a commitment to informing and enlightening his people, his other Setswana writings represent a commitment to teaching and developing the language, and to preserving history, the oral tradition, and the Setswana language itself from extinction. His bilingual Setswana-English newspapers were financed by Batswana dikgosi (chiefs) who constituted his core readership. (Matjila and Haire, 2015: 46–47)

Perhaps, the authors realised the error in their assertion that Plaatje's journalism did not represent, like his literary writings, the commitment to promote the language. So, on page 48 of their book, they wrote, 'His tenacity and endurance in pioneering Setswana journalism, and his persistence with Setswana research, despite negligible funds, betray deep attachment to his language and literature, his culture, and his history'.

Plaatje was also particularly concerned about the inconsistency in the orthography of Setswana. There were a variety of Setswana orthographies, depending on the dialect being used. Plaatje called for the standardisation of the orthography in his editorial. When the missionaries finally decided to attempt the unification of the orthographies, they left out Plaatje because of their resentment at the influence he was exerting on native opinion (Midgley, 1997: 14; Willan, 2018).

Press association

Plaatje was also involved in the black press association of the time in South Africa. He and F.Z.S. Peregrino, editor of *South African Spectator*, based in Cape Town, were instrumental to the formation of the association – SA Native Newspaper Press Association. Plaatje was the Secretary. Though the association did not exist for long (1904), it represented a pioneering effort to bring editors and journalists of the time together for their common interests. Other officers of the association were A.K. Soga, younger son of Tiyo Soga and editor of *Izwi ya Bantu* in East London as president; Peregrino as vice-president; and Silas Molema as treasurer.

The motto of the association was 'defence, not defiance'; and according to Plaatje, the purpose 'was to improve the press of the Natives generally' (see Willan, 2018: 185). The association laid out its principles thus,

> The principles of this association will be, to encourage and to seek to aid all who are engaged in the laudable work of diffusing knowledge and in legitimate educational work among the Natives of South Africa, to seek to cooperate with the Government in the solution of the many difficult race problems by which they are confronted, and to help to bring about understanding, and to establish amiable relations between the various Governments of South Africa, and the Native population. (see Willan, 1996: 82)

Curiously, membership of the association was not limited only to those who worked in the press. Eligibility for membership included 'any teacher in a recognised school, any regularly ordained pastor, of a recognised church, evangelists, or others engaged in the promotion of educational work, and in the propagation of religion . . . ' (Willan, 1996: 82).

The association did not last long because there was divergence of political convictions by the editors. For instance, Tengo Jabavu, editor of *Imvo*, did not identify with the association because of political differences. Another reason was financial difficulties plaguing the black press, so it was difficult running a national association of newspaper editors and journalists scattered across the country.

Press and politics: an encapsulation of Sol Plaatje's political journalism

This paper so far has attempted to provide answers to the posers around the role of Sol Plaatje in the early black press in South Africa, the nature of his journalism as well as how his politics had affected his journalism and other writings? This summary is therefore a way to crystallise the submissions above and bring them into bold relief.

Plaatje was a spokesman of his people and an opinion leader among them. He was the first Secretary of the SANNC which later became the ANC, the current ruling political party in South Africa. Setswana language newspaper, *Koranta ea Becoana* (Bechuana Gazette) first appeared in April 1901. The newspaper actually gave Plaatje the opportunity to act as the spokesman of his people (in the political, social and economic spheres).

As editor of the *BG*, Plaatje was responsible for writing editorial matter (and much else besides) and it was in these that he made the greatest impact on the world around him. Mostly, Plaatje's editorials were concerned with the political and social issues of the day, and his aim always was to provide an African – and on occasions a specifically Barolong – perspective on events as they unfolded. A major theme in Plaatje's editorials was the social and political issues of the day and the formulation of a distinctive African response to them.

On a number of occasions, he drew attention to what he perceived to be obvious injustices.

A second major theme was the advice he gave to his African readers on how they should behave. Plaatje was perhaps the best known African journalist and political spokesman of his day.

A variety of concerns were evident in the published writings and correspondence of Plaatje in the immediate aftermath of the formation of the Union of South Africa (the coming together of the SA's four colonies). The overriding issue at the time was the question of segregation, the key element in the comprehensive native policy which the new government began to formulate.

As the Secretary of the SANNC, Plaatje was very much involved in the struggle against the new legislation to separate Africans from white landholding, 'and thus to implement a major plank in a segregationist solution to the so-called "native problem"' (Willan, 1996: 124). He used his writings majorly as a weapon to campaign against the legislation.

Plaatje and race relations

Meanwhile, since Plaatje lived and operated at a time when race relations was a serious issue in South Africa and was an active participant in the struggles of the black people to resolve it, it is deemed apposite to see how he handled the matter with his journalism and other writings.

The focus of Plaatje's race relations was racial justice and harmony. His newspaper, *Tsala ea Becoana*, was self-styled 'independent race newspaper' (Limb, 2003: 41). In pushing for racial justice, Plaatje, for instance, criticised the retrenchment of African interpreters and postal workers in favour of less-skilled white employees. Writing about the 1913 Rand strike, Plaatje drew a parallel between the withdrawal of charges against white workers and the harsh sentences given to 'native accomplices'. Limb (2003: 41–42) noted that his plea for clemency was 'indicative of a greater interest in race justice than worker solidarity'. Plaatje reasoned that 'just grounds' existed to imprison black striking workers if 'white agitators' were jailed (Limb, 2003: 41–42).

Plaatje's opposition to strike actions could have been because of the (perceived) role of white (often racist) unionists whom he regarded as injurious to black interests. Limb (2003) noted,

> This 'Friend of the People' may have been firstly a friend of Africans as a race, rather than as workers, but he sought to mitigate the suffering of African workers. (p. 42)

Plaatje's role in mediating the racial tension in South Africa could be seen to be ambivalent. Despite his efforts to seek racial justice for the black, he was yet regarded as a British Empire enthusiast (Limb, 2003: 33). His position on racial issues could have been influenced by the fact that he lived much of his life in Kimberley, 'a colonial mining town replete with race, national and class contradictions' (Limb, 2003: 45). As earlier noted, Plaatje wrote on equal rights for both the African and the European populace. In one of his editorials, he had expressed his belief in the interdependence of black and white in a future South Africa.

Plaatje's belief was that all human races share common humanity and therefore should be able to live in harmony. He saw similarities in, for instance, African and European cultures. In his study of Setswana and certain European proverbs, he observed that the African and European races were paremiologically similar (Makhudu, 2018; Plaatje, 1916b, 1924). He pointed out overlaps and equivalences in the proverbs of European and the Batswana peoples. Makhudu (2018: 149) remarked that Plaatje's search for unity in the linguistic and cultural diversity of the two races provided instructive lessons which present-day South Africa could appropriate to resolve the social cohesion challenges the nation faces.

Plaatje's (1916b) book, *Diane tsa Secoana le Maele a Sekgoa a a Dumalangnang Naco* (Sechuana Proverbs with Literal Translations and their European Equivalents) is a compilation of 723 Setswana proverbs with equivalents in European languages of Danish, Dutch, English, French,

German, Italian and Latin. He made his intention clear in the book: to show 'equivalence' between Setswana and European language proverbs. Makhudu (2018) gave the purpose for this:

> Plaatje sought to draw out the similarities between various cultures and languages. He highlights the linguistic commonalities in proverbs in order to signal the similarities and the equality of nations. Plaatje's mission in . . . *Diane* is to hold up paremiological study as a pathway, first into one's own cultural identity; second, as an avenue towards comprehension of other cultures to attain social harmony and cohesion among divergent cultures and people. (p. 151)

The European proverbs that Plaatje juxtaposed with Setswana ones are semantically in agreement with one another, probably in the wisdom and philosophical outlooks that the proverb pairs appear to convey (Makhudu, 2018: 158).

Plaatje moved from paremiology to onomastics when he found equivalents for Batswana names in Hebrew, Greek, Roman and other European for both genders.

He similarly made efforts to build bridges across racial divide in *Native Life in South Africa* (Plaatje, 1916a), *Mhudi: An Epic of Native Life a Hundred Years Ago* (Plaatje, 1930b) and in *A Sechuana Reader* (Jones and Plaatje, 1916). He similarly attempted same in his translations of Shakespeare's plays such as *Comedy of Errors* (*Diphosho-phosho*; Plaatje, 1930a) and *Julius Caesar* (*Dintshontsho tsa bo-Juliuse Kesara*; Plaatje, 1973a). Makhudu (2018) specifically wrote this about *Mhudi* and *Native Life in South Africa*:

> *Mhudi* and *Native Life in South Africa* contain sufficient evidence of his tendency to communicate across ethnic, racial and cultural barriers in order to forge greater understanding, self-respect and mutual regard among human beings all over the world. (p. 161)

Conclusion

It is expected that this recollection will make present-day South African journalists appreciate their heritage as represented by Sol Plaatje and other pioneers of black press in South Africa. It will also make the current crop of journalists to further appreciate development journalism both in theory and praxis. Development journalism is constructive and geared towards development ends. Sol Plaatje's kind of journalism was developmental as it was geared towards defending his people and re-orientating them to better ideals while at the same time trying to build cohesion with the white populace. There was an interplay between his journalism and politics as he used his journalism as a tool for his politics in highlighting the plights of his people and voicing out against their oppression. The publishing of his newspapers in Setswana was also a contribution to the promotion of the language and for the empowerment of his people who could only be effectively communicated with in their language.

Other past African leaders who used journalism to further the goal of liberation of their peoples included Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, Nigeria's Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo as well as Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta. In this present age, development journalism is still along the continuum of the social responsibility of the media and journalists.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: I acknowledge the fellowship granted me by the Oppenheimer Fund – Academic Exchanges at the University of Oxford, United Kingdom which made it possible for me to work on this article. I also acknowledge funding received from the North-West University, South Africa towards carrying out this research.

ORCID iD

Abiodun Salawu https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1687-4621

Notes

1. Originally called *Mahikeng*, meaning 'the place of rocks' in Setswana language. It was however called *Mafeking* under the colonial administration. In 1980, the name changed to *Mafikeng*. In the year 2010, it reverted to the original name, Mahikeng. Though that is what it is called in the official circle, the common name is still Mafikeng.
2. What is known today as the Republic of South Africa used to be known as the *Union of South Africa*. It came into being with the unification of the Cape Colony, the Natal Colony, the Transvaal and the Orange River Colony on 31 May 1910. It was a self-governing dominion of the British Empire.
3. The Act, subsequently named the Bantu Land Act 1913 and later the Black Land Act 1913 (Act No. 27 of 1913) was aimed at regulating the acquisition of land by the natives. It was meant to take land from the natives and force them to become permanent labourers of the Boer farmers in the Northern Provinces. The Act apportioned only 12% of all land available in the Union of South Africa to the 4.5 million blacks while reserving the remaining 88% for the 1.25 million whites. It was a major cornerstone of the Apartheid system until the 1990s when it was replaced.
4. Jabavu supported the Land Use Act, and this was seen as a betrayal of the native South Africans because of what he stood to benefit from his white sponsors.

References

Beukes L (2014) *Maverick: Extraordinary Women from South Africa's past*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Oshun Books.

Berg BL and Lune H (2012) *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. Boston: Pearson.

Couzens T (1984) History of the Black Press in South Africa 1836–1960. In: *Paper presented at the African studies seminar series*, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa, September.

Jones D and Plaatje ST (1916) *A Sechuana Reader: In International Phonetic Orthography (With English Translations)*. London: University of London Press.

Limb P (2003) Sol Plaatje reconsidered: rethinking Plaatje's attitudes to class, nation, gender, and empire 1. *African Studies* 62(1): 33–52.

Makhudu K (2018) Sol. *T*. Plaatje's paremiological quest: a common humanity in cultural diversity. *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* 55(1): 149–165.

Matjila DS and Haire K (2015) *Bringing Plaatje Back Home: Ga e Phetsolele Nageng. 'Re-storying' the African and Batswana Sensibilities in His Oeuvre*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

Midgley P (1997) *Sol Plaatje: An Introduction*. Grahamstown, South Africa: National English Literary Museum.

Mokoatsi T (2015) Pixley ka Isaka Seme: a strong advocate for justice and a shared identity. *The Journalist*, 17 March. Available at: www.thejournalist.org.za/pioneers/pixley-ka-isaka-seme (accessed 5 December 2017).

Molema SM (2012) *Lover of His People: A Biography of Sol Plaatje* (ed. DS Matjila and K Haire). Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press.

Paramoer E and Tshabalala S (2014) John L. Dube: a complex, bright sun of Africa 11 February 1871 – 11 February 1946. *The Journalist*, 12 August. Available at: www.thejournalist.org.za/pioneers/john-l-dube-complex-bright-sun (accessed 5 December 2017).

Plaatje ST (1916a) *Native Life in South Africa*. London: P.S. King and Co.

Plaatje ST (1916b) *Sechuana Proverbs with Literal Translations and their European Equivalents*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Trubner.

Plaatje ST (1930a) *Diphosho-Phosho (Comedy of Errors)*. Morija, India: Morija Printing Works.

Plaatje ST (1930b) *Mhudi: An Epic of Native Life a Hundred Years Ago*. Lovedale, India: Lovedale Press.

Plaatje ST (1973a) *Dintshontsho Tsa Bo-juliuse Kesara (Julius Ceaser)*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Witwatersrand University Press.

Plaatje ST (1973b) *The Boer War Diary of Sol T. Plaatje*. Cape Town, South Africa: Macmillan South Africa.

Rall M (2003) *Peaceable Warrior: Life and Times of Sol. T. Plaatje*. Kimberley, South Africa: Sol Plaatje Educational Trust.

Salawu A (2016) Indigenous language media and democracy in Africa. In: Salawu A and Chibita MB (eds) *Indigenous Language Media, Language Politics and Democracy in Africa*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.13–27.

Saunders C (2012) Pixley Seme and Abantu-Batho. In: Limb P (ed.) *The People's Paper: A Centenary History and Anthology of Abantu-Batho*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press, pp.117–127.

Song of Solomon. *The Bible*. King James Bible, 1769/2017, Song of Solomon 1: 5–7.

Switzer L (1997) Introduction: South Africa's alternative press in perspective. In: Switzer L (ed.) *South Africa's Alternative Press: Voices of Protest and Resistance, 1880–1960*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.1–54.

Switzer L and Switzer D (1979) *The Black Press in South Africa and Lesotho: A Descriptive Bibliographic Guide to African, Coloured and Indian Newspapers, Newsletters and Magazines 1836–1876*. Boston, MA: G.K. Hall & Co.

Webb C (2015) Fighting talk: Ruth first's early journalism 1947–1950. *Review of African Political Economy* 42(143): 7–21.

Willan B (1984) *Sol Plaatje: South African Nationalist, 1876–1932*. London: Heinemann.

Willan B (2018) *Sol Plaatje: A Life of Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje 1876–1932*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Jacana Media (Pty) Ltd.

Willan B (ed.) (1996) *Sol Plaatje: Selected Writings*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Witwatersrand University Press.

Xaba P (2016) Female voices in the South African media: Nontsizi Mgqwetho, Ruth First, Helen (Noni) Jabavu. *The Journalist*, 30 August. Available at: www.thejournalist.org.za/pioneers/female-voices-in-the-south-african-media (accessed 5 December 2017).

Author biography

Abiodun Salawuis Professor of Journalism, Communication and Media Studies and Director of the reserach entity, Indigenous Langauge Media in Africa at the North-West University, South Africa. He has to his credit well over a gross of scholarly publications in academic journals and books. H ehas also edited/co-edited eleven books and authored one.