



Native Life in South Africa by Sol T. Plaatje and Sol T. Plaatje

Native Life in South Africa by Sol T. Plaatje; Sol T. Plaatje

Review by: Barbara Celarent

American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 120, No. 2 (September 2014), pp. 626-632

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/679649>

Accessed: 24/02/2015 15:33

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to
American Journal of Sociology.

<http://www.jstor.org>

to surmount our current congressional impasse. As scholars such as Leisy Abrego, Joanna Dreby, Cecilia Menjívar, and Amalia Pallares have also attested, these notions of family still largely privilege white, heteronormative, and middle-class nuclear formations while ignoring transnational realities. Lee makes an indispensable contribution to this growing and increasingly important field.

Native Life in South Africa by Sol T. Plaatje. Pp. 382. London: P. S. King, 1916. *Mhudi* by Sol T. Plaatje. Pp. 190. Francolin: Capetown, 1996.

Barbara Celarent*
University of Atlantis

In the first few years of the Union of South Africa, the warp and weft of apartheid were not yet fully spun. The political, social, and economic groupings that later composed that unstable fabric were themselves not yet enduring social realities. And in different worlds they might have made a different cloth. We must therefore ask when and how apartheid as practiced in the 1950s and 1960s became inevitable.

We ask this question in order to avoid the many teleological narratives of this case: of nationalism and racism, of secret societies and amoral capitalism, of struggle and emancipation. We seek rather the contingencies of social perception and action that swirled in the decades before the momentous election of 1948 and the links and arrangements through which those local contingencies gradually chained themselves together into the phenomenon of apartheid, a phenomenon with its own seeming teleology, which doomed the heirs of its proponents just as surely as those proponents had believed themselves to be doomed without it. To rediscover the contingency from which this inevitability somehow emerged—the contingency that characterizes social life as it is actually lived—we need views from within the ongoing social process. One such is Sol Plaatje.

Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje was born in 1876, sixth son of African farmers of the Barolong people. Since his parents were members of the Berlin Missionary Society's communities at Doornfontein (and later Pniel) on the Vaal River, Plaatje studied and taught in mission schools until he was 17. In surrounding Barolong communities, observing the ways of Native justice, the missionaries introduced him to Western literature. In 1894 Plaatje took a job in the Kimberley post office and began an active social and political life in the city's community of mission-educated Africans. (Since Africans could then vote in the Cape Colony, the politics were real and consequential.) He read Shakespeare, sang solos in concerts, and became active in court challenges to the pass laws, already being used to harass Africans.

In 1898, Plaatje married. The couple came from different tribes and spoke different languages, but the marriage was long, happy, and productive, al-

*Another review from 2053 to share with *AJS* readers.—*Ed.*

though in later years Elizabeth and the five surviving children saw far less of the always busy Plaatje than they might have wished. Also in 1898, Plaatje secured a job as court interpreter, one of the few highly skilled jobs open to Africans at the time. (Fluent in English, Dutch, German, and Tswana, he spoke many other native languages at varying levels.) Plaatje arrived in Mafeking in time to enjoy a year's work as interpreter before the British and the Boers finally drifted into war. In October 1899 the town was placed under siege by the Boers. During the siege, Plaatje was involved not only in administrative and court activities but also in arranging the cattle raids that fed the beleaguered town. His diary provides an African perspective on this much-studied event.

In 1902, the war ended, and Plaatje left the civil service for journalism. He edited *Koranta ea Becoana* and its successor newspapers *Tsala ea Be-coana* and *Tsala ea Batho* until 1914, surviving numerous financial reverses and becoming an important interpreter of political life in a South Africa drifting toward segregation. The war settlement had led to annexation of the Boer republics but had postponed the issue of native franchise to the moment of the republics' return to self-government, in effect guaranteeing that the Cape franchise for Africans would not expand to the rest of unified South Africa. A constitutional convention in 1908–9 in turn produced union-level institutions whose form gave control to the Boers by virtue of their numerical dominance among South African whites. The fading of African political hopes inevitably led to the negotiations—in which Plaatje was deeply involved—that produced in 1912 the South African Native National Congress (SANNC), later the African National Congress (ANC), which would itself become an exiled body, a revolutionary organization, and, eventually, a seemingly perpetual governing party.

For Plaatje, a central moment in this drift toward oppression came in 1913, when the Union Parliament passed the Natives' Land Act (NLA), which forbade the interracial share-cropping arrangements characteristic of much Boer farming and simultaneously prevented the Africans currently in those arrangements from purchasing or renting farm and grazing land except within the already overcrowded "reserves." The act's intent was to create a cheap and docile labor force, both for the mines and for the poorer whites, who hoped to enter arable farming, a business in which Africans had already rapidly advanced. The NLA was rightly regarded as catastrophic by Africans, and Plaatje went with other leaders to remonstrate with the British Parliament about native affairs in South Africa (the British government declined to interfere in what they now regarded as an independent dominion), only to find himself marooned by the coming of the First World War. Undaunted, he pursued his campaign of publicity, documenting the effects of the NLA in the book we here read and addressing hundreds of public meetings around England, many with the support of the then-active Brotherhood movement, which he subsequently introduced to South Africa. In 1917, Plaatje returned to his homeland, turned down the offer to become president of the SANNC, and traveled the countryside to learn more about current conditions. It was in this period that he began

writing the historical novel *Mhudi*, his fictional version of the case for Africans. In 1919 a new SANNC deputation went to England, aiming also to attend W. E. B. Dubois's Pan-African meeting in conjunction with the Paris peace conference. Although Plaatje failed to secure a visa for France, he did travel to England and, with the help of Dubois and others, went on to tour the United States and Canada for two years.

In 1923 he returned again to South Africa. By this time, the Congress had become much more radical. Plaatje's conciliatory and cautious stance was unattractive to younger Africans. Ironically, this new world that rejected Plaatje had been created by the NLA he so strongly opposed. The act had indeed driven Africans off the land and into an absolutely dominated—if not legally enslaved—labor force for the white mines and farms. But the larger result had been African urbanization and proletarianization, and with them had come a newly radical consciousness among younger Congress members. (White strategy had changed too; there was now a Native Affairs Commission.) Plaatje had outlived his political role. His last major public controversy concerned the Hertzog Bills, which stripped Cape Africans of the franchise while promising in return a small amount of virtual representation, an expanded Native Council, and an undefined amount of further land to be set aside for Africans in the future. Plaatje fulminated against the bills in all the major newspapers, speaking for the older, educated, and less radical African class from which he came. As the political horizon grew steadily darker, he turned increasingly to the task of preserving Tswana literature against the eradications of modernity. Translations and other literary pursuits filled his life. Suddenly taken by influenza and pneumonia, he died in 1932.

"Awaking on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African native found himself, not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth" (p. 21). With that clarion call begins *Native Life in South Africa*. The book comprises a prologue, an epilogue, and 24 chapters. It falls into two natural divisions: the first detailing the background and consequences of the NLA, the second telling the story of the 1914 deputation to the Imperial Parliament and of events in South Africa during the First World War.

The first section begins with an overall retrospective, which is followed by two chapters about the bill and its passage, and then by two chapters of ethnographic detail and stories of the NLA's effects in the Transvaal. A short chapter then highlights an ethical white farmer's wife—like a good newspaperman Plaatje dwells on exemplary cases at length—and leads into two chapters on the NLA's promulgation and effects in the Orange "Free" State. (Plaatje never refers to this most conservative of the Boer republics without the quotation marks.) After two transitional chapters (one on the fatefulness of the number 13 [in, e.g., 1913], the other on the great colored activist Abdul Abdurahman), Plaatje turns to the effects of the NLA in the Cape Province. The second of these Cape chapters—"The Passing of Cape Ideals"—is one of the great set pieces of the book: a celebration of the Cape franchise and of the idealistic native policy of Saul

Solomon and similar Cape leaders. (When Plaatje arrived in England in 1914, Solomon's widow was one of his strong supporters; she was then recently out of Holloway Prison after having chained herself to the railings of the House of Commons in the cause of woman suffrage.)

There follows a brief chapter on John Tengo-Jabavu, Plaatje's senior by many years and South Africa's first major African journalist. Tengo-Jabavu had close relations with senior government officials and in particular with J. W. Sauer, who had been the government's proposer of the NLA and who was a longtime Cape Liberal who nonetheless felt that the NLA—although it contravened most of his own principles—was better for Africans than any politically likely alternative. Tengo-Jabavu supported Sauer and the NLA, a support that cost him Plaatje's personal friendship (he was godfather to one of Plaatje's children) and gave him a reputation as a turncoat unchanged until the enduring power of the ANC almost a century later enabled his rehabilitation, a rehabilitation somewhat ironic given that he had opposed the formation of the ANC in the first place. Plaatje's chapter is uncharacteristically bitter, bespeaking what he clearly believed to be a personal betrayal.

Not surprisingly, the formation of the ANC and the creation of the deputation to Britain take up the next two chapters. This is a well-known story, but Plaatje's version of the crucial SANNK meeting at Kimberley is striking for its careful acknowledgement of white allies. The bishop of Kimberley, the De Beers Company (which "provided hospitality"), and the *Diamond Fields Advertiser* are thanked, as are a number of white speakers. But the narration leads ineluctably to the appearance of the secretary for native affairs, who brings the disappointing message that no changes could be contemplated in the NLA until a commission reported on its results and on possible extensions of the reserves. The Africans rightly expected that this report would come to nothing. (About the time *Native Life* was first published, the commission reported, saying that there was no substantial way to expand the reserves. Plaatje added an analysis of the report to later editions.)

The deputation later talks to Lord Gladstone (the governor general) who tries to dissuade them from going to London, and then to Prime Minister Botha, who does the same. Then they go to England and get the same response from the Secretary of State for the Colonies, first in a private interview, then in Parliament itself during the vote on the Colonial Office. In closing the chapter, Plaatje calmly demolishes all of the reasons these white officials give for inaction. He turns in two succeeding chapters to the massive public and press support for the Africans once they take their case to the British newspapers and lecture halls. (Plaatje was a spellbinding lecturer; a later governor general [Lord Clarendon] was to say in 1931 that he might usefully have learned from Plaatje some lessons in English public speaking.)

In the second section, the chapters are more historical and sweeping. They cover such matters as black participation in the Boer War (amusingly,

Plaatje compliments Boer General J. P. Snyman, who agreed to take Sunday as a day of rest from the siege, so that the besieged could visit their families, do some wash, keep the Sabbath, and “make all-round preparations for another week’s bombardment” [p. 284]). They also cover the whites’ reluctance (both in South Africa and in the British empire as a whole) to allow black soldiers to serve in the combat arms in various white wars, despite several African offers to raise substantial forces. These chapters about black willingness for military service set up the following two chapters, in which Plaatje discusses, first, the mass resignation of Boer officers from South African forces poised to enter the German territory of Southwest Africa at the start of the First World War and, second, the subsequent rebellion of those officers against the Union government and their collaboration with the Germans. Indeed the whole book is a setup for its final chapter: a polite skewering of Piet Grobler—Boer politician, nephew of President Kruger of the Transvaal, mover and activist behind the NLA, future Minister of Lands, and, in the First World War, rebel against the Union government.

Mr. Grobler, it is said, was caught red-handed in the treasonable act of leading a force of fifty armed rebels against the Government, and for his breach of his oath [as a member of Parliament; the text of the Parliament oath is given in Plaatje’s preceding paragraph], he was taken prisoner. Last week, whilst his trial was still pending, he applied for bail, and in support of his application, he pleaded that he was anxious to attend to his Parliamentary duties. (P. 392)

Yet at other times, Plaatje is frankly mystified by the Boers’ failure to recognize that their position subordinate to the British was precisely similar to the blacks’ position subordinate to the Boers. He notes that South Africa welcomes refugees from oppression in Europe, but oppresses its own natives (p. 123), or again, that the Boers accepted African help against the Matabele leader Mzilikazi but then reneged on promises made to secure that help (pp. 124–30). Throughout, he underscores the many times that Africans supported the South African government in prior rebellions and difficulties.

Overall, the book is a peculiarly gracious polemic. Powerful without being one-sided, extensively researched but written as lively journalism, it was very successful with the white public in Great Britain, however little its influence on those in power. But Plaatje himself did not think *Native Life* made a sufficient case. He soon began writing the historical novel *Mhudi*, which was completed in 1920, but not published until 1930. *Mhudi* is an introduction to mid-19th-century South African history from the African point of view. The novel is set in the aftermath of the rise and expansion of the Zulu under Chaka in the 1820s, whose consequences led to the general period of migration, conflict, and disorder known as the *mfecane*. One major migration took Mzilikazi—an erstwhile Chaka ally—over the mountains to the high veld, where he and his Matabele created a quasi-Zulu imperial system, placing the local Tswana chiefdoms under tribute. *Mhudi*’s action is set in motion by the murder of two of Mzilikazi’s tribute envoys

by one such chief, a murder that leads to the annihilation of the chief's city, from which hero and heroine make separate escapes and after various adventures find themselves in another Tswana chiefdom when Dutch voortrekkers arrive. The voortrekkers are fresh from a disastrous defeat at the hands of Mzilikazi. Avenging Tswana and voortrekkers then make common cause against Mzilikazi, who is driven from his capital across the Limpopo.

In the foreground of this historically accurate framework are a set of archetypal figures: on the Tswana/Boer side Ra-Thaga the Tswana warrior, his indomitable wife Mhudi, the young Boer De Villiers, and the great chief Moroka; and on the Matabele side Mzilikazi, his brave wife Umandi, and his wise counselor/general Gubuza. The interactions of these characters do not obey the rules of 19th-century literary realism, to be sure. Many are essentially frameworks for the African proverbs in which the book abounds. (Plaatje had published a book of English translations of Tswana proverbs in 1916.) But others are emblems of acute historical conflicts—Mhudi's and Ra-Thaga's horror at the Boers' brutal physical punishments for erring African servants, for example. As in *Native Life*, the whites are divided into the reasonable few and the unreasonable many.

Like many great historical novels (those of James Fenimore Cooper, e.g.), *Mhudi* concerns transiency and loss. Much of this loss is prophesied by one or another of the main characters, who are given to long Shakespearean speeches (Plaatje was a lifelong lover of Shakespeare and translated Shakespeare into Tswana). Indeed, Mzilikazi's great prophecy (in chap. 22) that Africans who collaborate with the whites will be betrayed and enslaved by them is a more bald statement of the African position than exists anywhere in *Native Life*.

But Plaatje himself did not or could not heed the warning he put in Mzilikazi's mouth. Viewed in the light of later history, it is hard to imagine a better example of the futility of liberal and humane politics than *Native Life in South Africa*. On the one hand, the book is a model of restrained polemic. It is witty and thoughtful, fair and scrupulous. Its handling of its enemies is respectful if occasionally bemused or passionate. It praises dozens of white South Africans who defend the Africans' interest, both Boers and Britons. It is filled with common sense, with a willingness to forget the past in a brighter future and an overwhelming optimism about British justice and law. More broadly, it is a hymn to conscientious political activity in a liberal society: to due process, law, civil society, reasonability, and the universal dignity of all people.

But on the other hand, the reader knows what will be the result of Plaatje's restraint, forbearance, and good intentions. The result will be a 30-year descent into something he did not imagine to be possible. We return then to the question with which we began. When did that descent become inevitable? From the 21st century, it is easy to say that the demography among whites guaranteed Afrikaner dominance once the Union of South Africa had been formed, just as demographic forces across the whole society ultimately guaranteed the end of apartheid and indeed of

white South Africa. It is likewise easy to see in the gold of the Witwatersrand a resource that international capitalism could not ignore, whatever its price in human terms and whoever might be the locals in charge of it. But for all those grand historical forces and their retrospectively obvious inevitability, the history of South Africa in the 20th century still had to be lived year to year, month to month, day to day. Plaatje could not take solace in the inevitable eventuality of African control of South Africa, for it was no more obvious to him than to his white countrymen.

So in his work Plaatje committed himself to a normative theory of social life that was careful, passionate, and self-consciously both magnanimous and optimistic. But it was premised on political assumptions that may seem to later readers not just overly optimistic but simply wrong. But do we conclude that he was a fool and should have been more radical, or that in the long run the shining example of his character and work outweighs his political ineffectiveness in the short run? Our answer to that question tells us more about ourselves than about Plaatje.