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## Sol T. Plaatje's paremiological quest: A common humanity in cultural diversity

### **Sol T. Plaatje's paremiological quest: A common humanity in cultural diversity**

Having written and compiled, from memory, over 700 Setswana proverbs when he was resident in London during the second decade of 1900, Sol T. Plaatje exhibited unusual ethnographic knowledge and remarkable, creative translation skills in diaspora-like circumstances. While most literary researchers attest to those achievements, few have been the theories to account sufficiently for Plaatje's multilingual proverb renditions. The view propounded here is that Plaatje's paremiological enterprise was probably never only an exercise of his polyglot abilities. Rather his quest apparently was to assert the similarities and convergences between African and European people's cultural histories. Deep pride in his Setswana identity seems to have propelled a need to highlight the ethnographic bonds Northern and Southern nations share. For Plaatje, seeing overlaps and equivalences in the proverbs of European and the Batswana peoples, firstly validates orality as the bedrock of modern literary expression. Secondly, the relationship of the two appears to recapitulate the communicative connections of people, across time and space. Lastly, the point is made that Plaatje's search for unity in linguistic and cultural diversity, as exhibited in the *Diane tsa Setswana* collection (1916) and *A Sechuana Reader* stories (1924), provides instructive lessons which present-day South Africa would ill afford to ignore considering the social cohesion challenges the nation faces. **Keywords:** cultural identity, diversity, equivalence, orality, Setswana paremiology, social cohesion.

### **Introduction**

Over the years, Sol T. Plaatje's better known publications like *Native Life in South Africa* and the epic novel *Mhudi* have been regularly researched, critiqued and reviewed by largely English-speaking British and South African scholars such as John Comaroff, Brian Willan, Tim Couzens and Stephen Gray.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, literary investigation of Plaatje's Setswana works and Shakespeare translations like *Diphosphoso* (*Comedy of Errors*) and *Dintshontsho tsa bo-Julius Kesara* (*Julius Caesar*) has been rather scanty. Indeed, critical or scholarly inquiry into two of Plaatje's multilingual publications, namely, *Diane tsa Sechuana le Maele a Sekgooa a a Dumalanang Naco* (*Sechuana<sup>2</sup> Proverbs with Literal Translations and their European Equivalents*), and *A Sechuana Reader*<sup>3</sup> (further: *Diane* and *Reader*, respectively), could be taken as almost non-existent. Several literary critics, ethnographic researchers and historians (Chrisman 148; Comaroff, *Mafikeng Diary* 7–10; Couzens and Willan 3; Doke, "Diketa-pele" v; Giliomee and Mbenga 107–12; Rall 214–25; Willan 124–6) confirm that Plaatje wrote, particularly *Diane* and *Reader*, from memory while he was in London around 1915.

The observation foreshadows one of the main concerns in this article: that the latter predominantly Setswana texts are products of recollection under conditions that can be termed 'diaspora-like' (Brah 445).<sup>4</sup> The recreated oral forms like traditional stories and proverbs.

The first text *Diane*, is a compilation of 723 Setswana proverbs with equivalents in European languages like Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Italian and Latin. In the preface, Plaatje points out that writing the book "in England alone, without any native speaker's advice or input" was an arduous task (Plaatje, *Diane* x). By this, he presumably was alluding to the kind of challenges commonly associated with translating memorized "oral forms into graphic and written material" (Ong 12–24). In a sense, Plaatje might have been urging for the native speaker's authentication of the recollected Setswana proverbs, which idea contrasts directly with the already established and "published European proverb equivalents" that he cites.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, it seems that the transformation of oral expression into printed form while daunting, was an endeavour Plaatje strove to complete. As to why he sought to achieve that, is the other major issue in this discussion.

The second text *Reader*, a collaboration with Daniel Jones, introduces the first Setswana phonetic orthography meant to assist in reading Setswana-Serolong and to promote teaching young Batswana and English people appropriate pronunciation (Jones and Plaatje v–xiv).<sup>6</sup> The pedagogic goals are seemingly enhanced by extensive interlacing of every fable and story with at least one Setswana proverb. Thus, the *Reader* text reaches fruition through regular insertion of a proverb, towards the story's end, to derive some 'didactic message' or to present a moral instruction, as Mpe (22–43) asserts. On another level, according to Couzens (*Mhudi* 183–5) and Gray ("Sources" 12–4), Plaatje deploys the proverb in texts like *Mhudi* to underline, not only his familiarity with Setswana cultural resonances in "folk tales", but also to "elaborate" on the ethnographic tradition of oral forms like myth, fable, legends, riddles and the proverb itself. My theoretical view is, therefore, that Plaatje's device in writing novels, folk tales and stories interwoven with proverbs seeks to attain specific and articulated ends, be they literary, linguistic, pedagogic, didactic and/or socio-political. Indeed, at the heart of Plaatje's enterprise there appears to repose the quest for what he terms: the authentic linguistic roots and identity of a Motswana or "*bonontlho joa medi ea Secoana [...] sa Mocoana*" (Plaatje, *Diane* 6–7) realized through understanding one's own cultural identity encompassed in the paremiology heritage.

### **Theoretical approaches and analytical methods**

Specifically regarding *Diane*, the compiler-author's intentions could be interpreted as graver than what he plainly states as: to show "equivalence" between Setswana and European language proverbs.<sup>7</sup> In this article, the almost intuitive or automatic

question arises about Plaatje's aim: What lies behind or is the real purpose of showing the equivalence? The answer would be that 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 *Reader* and *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. Considering the context of writing *Reader* and *Diane*, it should not be far-fetched to contend that the multilingual texts resemble the "socio-political commentary" in other Plaatje publications (Couzens, *Mhudi* 182). Indeed, three of those, namely, *Native Life*, *Mhudi* and *Reader* are seen to employ the "paremiological" and "narrative style", in order to address the land question and racial contestations in the South Africa of the time (Mieder, *Proverbs* 2–4; Obiechina 203–7). As such, literary and sociolinguistic readings are adopted, since they underlie the content, structure and innate form of the texts being analysed here. The practice, commonly associated with the oral traditions of diverse nations, of using proverbs to, for example, give advice, instruction and share wisdom (Mieder, *Behold* 4–8), and/or to verbally transmit myths, folk tales, stories, and riddles (Possa and Makgopa 1–2), seems to lend itself to sociolinguistic and ethnographic investigation, as propounded by researchers like Hymes and Fairclough.

The tools of literary analysis, pragmatics and discourse analysis are utilized herein to uncover the layers of semantic overlapping, as well as, to explore ethno-linguistic patterns occurring especially in various *Diane* proverbs and *Reader* stories. To accomplish that, the word "equivalence", while containing notions related to the conventional translation processes (Baker 4–9), is defined as linguistic parity, broad similarity and equality in cultural practices and ethnographic outlooks. The actual process of comparing and contrasting Setswana and European proverbs is conceived, in the manner that Plaatje suggests (*Diane* 4–6), as leading ideally to some sort of "convergence" and/or "social cohesion" within a society in conflict.

The other analytic angle relates to instances of Plaatje using proper names and place names in publications like *The Boer War Diary of Sol T. Plaatje* or *Mafikeng Diary* and *Mhudi*. The necessity for this derives from the themes in *Reader* and *Diane*, and the context that presumably contributed to their production. According to Comaroff (12) and Willan (14), the *Diary* is the first and only one diary about the Anglo-Boer War, published by an African. The predominantly English text, replete with words, phrases, epithets, place and personal names of languages as divergent as Dutch, French, Koranna, IsiZulu and Setswana, is relevant for two reasons. Firstly, Plaatje's employ of different languages raises questions about his purpose for doing so. The unconcealed reason of demonstrating his multilingual skills and polyglot abilities, has a semblance of superficiality; hence the argument is presented that

sizeable socio-political implications lie parallel with Plaatje's onomastic venture for the analytic arguments pursued here. Secondly, the multilingualism of *Diary*, can rightly be taken as an indirect product of, not diasporic, but martial conditions. Suffice it, therefore, to assert that Plaatje's diverse expressions probably reflect the confusing battles of the war and bring out the idea that it was no clash of merely two cultures: English and Boer. In fact, various nations engaged in the 'bloody [...] frightening contest', as Comaroff (14–6) points out. This strongly implies the reign of a multilingual atmosphere during the war. What Plaatje diarized is most probably a metaphoric recreation of some Babel-like disharmony among various contestants and people. On the other hand, the epic novel *Mhudi*, while ostensibly articulating the dislocation issues brought about by Mzilikazi's rampant *impi* or army attacks on Afrikaner, Batswana and Koranna people, also seems to explore the complexities of human interaction in conflict circumstances (Chrisman 124; Couzens, *Mhudi* 188; Willan 305). These views underpin the key issue interrogated here, namely, how Plaatje proposes that human relationships should be handled within a colonial and racially hostile environment.

### Proverbs and cultural identity

The beginnings of an answer seem to lie in first establishing Plaatje's ultimate purpose in compiling, translating and writing stories interwoven with proverbs in *Reader* and *Diane*. His paremiological quest would probably have been set in motion by a desire to assert the Batswana cultural identity within an unfriendly, Eurocentric milieu (Couzens, *Mhudi* 183; Plaatje, *Diane* ix, 1). Through this, Plaatje would perhaps have wanted to uphold his people's humanity or *botho* and *ubuntu*, pride of place, as explained by Chaka (64–5), prove their rootedness in Setswana language, folkways, customs or mores, and consequently for them to claim equality in the inimical colonial space. Self-identity having been asserted, rendered Plaatje and his people open to accessing and understanding the cultural identities of other nations. Thus, he became a non-parochial ethnographer who expounds similarities of Setswana to the diverse cultures of nations, while extolling the wisdom, virtues and values in European proverbs. This latter self-assertion and cultural validation is attested for by *Diane's* engagement with of literary adages, aphorisms, maxims and folklorist, European sayings that Plaatje contends overlap with that of his own people's language and culture: *Becoana [...] [ba] bua puo e e tsamayang mmogo le teme tsa merafe [...] ebile o nale maele a a dumalanang le maele a Sekgowa* (Plaatje, *Diane* 8).

The three Setswana proverbs in the paragraphs below, should serve to illustrate as well as confirm Plaatje's deep familiarity with the Batswana ethnolinguistic identity. In addition, the examples appear to symbolise the centrality of autochthonous folkways, associated practices, mores and beliefs commonly accepted as the bedrock and shapers of a people's philosophical being and wisdom (Obiechina

122; Possa and Makgopa 2; Wanjohi 22–45). The particular community’s ethos and philosophical reflections are first verbally signalled through songs, dance, riddles and proverbs (Mieder, *Proverbs* xi–xii). Those forms then become transformed through translation into ‘physical artefacts,’ and literary art pieces such as printed books (van Haute 26–7). The forms, thereafter, come to represent the unique cultural identity of those same people and/or community like the Batswana people or a European nation.

[123] *Etlare ke tlare “ke dipitse” ke bone mebala ya cone. (Re tla re re re ke dipitse re di bone ka mebala.)*<sup>8</sup> (Only by their colours will you know that they are zebras. / One’s true identity can be revealed by one’s cultural habits/apparel.)

[304] *Loare go bona sesha lo se eka-eka lo latlhe segogolo. (When you are attracted by the new, you are enticed to discard the old. / Young people are admonished not to neglect their own cultural traditions in pursuit of the flashy and modern.)*

[340] *Makoloanyane lo tla nna lo mpheta fela, lo ba lo mphitlela ke ntse fa. (Young initiates will keep walking past an old person, but they will return to find the old still seated. / Youth who persist ignoring old ways and will lose out since the old traditions remain steadfast, unshaken and unchanged.)*

The three *Diane* proverbs highlight the points made earlier about an assertion of one’s cultural identity and pride of place, but more especially [123]. They also go some way in the signalling a person’s status vis-à-vis other members in the community, particularly [304]. While the last two are mildly censorious of youth’s impetuosity or negligence of traditions [340], all three illustrate Plaatje’s belief in upholding one’s cultural identity and valuing one’s true being by maintaining national pride. In doing that, one stands a better chance of gaining respect, understanding and appreciation of the foreign and/or different cultures (Plaatje, *Diane* 6–8). It therefore appears that Plaatje’s quest begins as a journey towards understanding the self, then follows self-assertion which continues as cultural introspection and ends with an unravelling or unfolding of the initially antithetical European system. Plaatje further expands this view by quoting Archbishop Crisp’s assertion that, while the Setswana cultural identity is essentially rural and pastoral: *Mocoana ko madisho*, it relates crucially to a pastoral life resembling that of ancient, Biblical nations like the Jews (Plaatje, *Diane* 6–7, 11–3; Peters and Tabane 21–4). Again, the statements strongly suggest Plaatje’s quest to reveal and expose the similarities or bonds shared by the Batswana people and other nations. The former’s life of herding and hunting: *bogolo joa diane tsa Secoana bo thaegile mo madishong le ko lecomong*, is asserted as part of a southern African identity ultimately residing in Setswana proverbs and yet bearing strong resemblances to and/or similarity with the pastoral life, cultural practices and proverbs of the English, northern Europeans and the Jews: *moagi oa ... Enyelane; ... ko Kgoeng; maele a Sekgoota ...; dico tsa Ba-Juta ...* (Plaatje, *Diane* 6–8 and 11–3).

### Pastoral life, orality and printed texts

The foregoing *Diane* quotations associate Plaatje's cultural roots and innate identity tightly with a pastoral lifestyle in which a non-literate and an orally-driven outlook has ascendancy. Exploration of the implications of this could probably bring us to a deeper understanding of Plaatje's paremiological quest. To begin with, the statement about a life of herding and hunting or *madishong le ko lecomong*, is connected to the rustic world of wild animals and brutish beasts. Hence, Plaatje remarks that many stories, fables and proverbs make regular reference to and are based on creatures of the wild like, buffalo (*nare*); springbok (*tshepe*); sable (*kukama*); eland (*phofu*) and other game (*Diane* x). For Plaatje therefore, the *diane* and *maele* forms essentially occupy, within a fluid and unitary cultural field, the same folklorist space as an overarching verbal and oral tradition that resides in every culture and language. The proverbs and idiomatic expressions are imbedded, not in "typographic, chirographic, literate and/or written mediums" (Ong 36–45), but rather in and through oral, verbalized, spoken forms of expression. The articulation of that orality is often encouraged, learned and nurtured in the home and community, as where Plaatje states that Setswana is, like other languages, learnt from birth when suckling at one's mother's breast: *oa ba a se anyile mo letseleng ja mosadi* (Plaatje, *Diane* 7). In *Reader*, he adds that he was taught Setswana by his mother and his aunts: *ke etleedicoe ke thuto tsa ga mme le bo rakgadi* (Jones and Plaatje 4–8). Indeed, like other children or young ones, Plaatje was brought up, developed and fed by his mother's breast milk, his grandmother's attention, his aunt's care and words spoken in the closeness and intimacy of family as the natural unit in a human community (Couzens and Willan 3–4).

Implicitly, the knowledge of both flora and fauna is transmitted to younger generations through verbal and oral means which in turn require the ability to recollect and retell. "Orality" can, therefore, be seen to involve far broader capacities than speaking because, in both Ong's (10–4) and Brown's (197) estimation, the sharing of knowledge naturally demands "creative memory" skills within the recalling and retelling process. In other words, familiarity with one's cultural expressions is based on an intimate understanding and expert reproduction of forms like, myths, fables, stories and proverbs that are usually taught and learnt orally. This point once again brings into discussion Plaatje's enterprise and purpose to recall and weave several proverbs into the *Reader* fables and stories. While the matter could evoke the assumption that Plaatje produced *Reader* largely for artistic and literary ends, each story's structural organization is sufficient evidence of his moral or didactic purposes. For instance, every one of *Reader* fables and stories concludes with the expression of a warning, admonition and/or advice to animal protagonists like, the hartebeest or *khama/kgama*; ratel or *magogo/magogwe*; scaly anteater or *kgaga*. In the first story about a hunting man after wild game then chasing after a hartebeest, the admonition given is: "Be careful that you not mourn for both the hartebeest and the hide", or rather, *O se lelele kgama*

*le mogogoro*. The implication of the proverb is that one should never neglect what is one's direct concern in pursuance of something else, lest one should lose both. The next fable in *Reader* is about young shepherds taking honeycomb from a molehill whereon a ratel or honey badger had placed it. The animal returns from the beehive several times and notices that the piles of honeycombs do not increase. As such, the proverb issues a warning about having suspicions about one's earnings like the ratel was about the piled-up honeycombs: *Magogo o belaela lomepa/lomepe* [332].

Underlying the discussion above, is the argument that oral expression and/or orality is an important communication mode and the bedrock of literary works, as is asserted by Rosenberg (82) and Ong (32–38). The notion of communicative ability as verbal-spoken action, in the way expounded by Ong (20–28), infuses a language with vitality and immediacy rarely captured in print or hard copy. Indeed, at the heart of such communication systems repose dynamic, epithetic expressions like riddles, aphorisms and proverbs or *diane* and *maele/mafoko* or idioms.<sup>9</sup> As various scholars indicate, the latter forms are dynamic, and get universally created and delivered through oral performances of folktales incorporating metaphoric, narrative songs, riddles and proverbs (Brown 41–52, Possa and Makgopa 9, Obiechina 215). Plaatje's passion for language or *manyama a puo*, and deep pride in his cultural roots or *bonontlho joa medi ea Secoana*, is thus detectable in the verbal dexterity that he ascribes to the Motswana herder or *modisa oa Mocoana* of his day. Secondly, at the level of communicating the *diane* and *maele* graphically, Plaatje exhibits unusual ethnographic and semantic comprehension of the "truth", "wisdom" and "considerable authority" embodied in idioms and proverbs (Mieder, *Behold* 6–9). In other words, *Diane* could be erroneously seen as a culmination of his preservation of his native Setswana's oral and poetic expression in written form. Since he makes that very point in the *Diane* preface, one could argue that the orally conceived proverbs were literally and figuratively being transformed from their verbal essence into "printed text", in the manner that Rosenberg (77–82) argues. The written or codified proverbs would, in turn, become comparable to "texts" serving purposes similar to proverbs in the five European languages equivalents, that is, Dutch, English, French, German and Latin. It is to such language contexts that Plaatje sought convergences and overlaps between Setswana proverbs and the cultural maxims of different European nations. By comparing and contrasting maxims in diverse languages to the adages of the Batswana, Plaatje's paremiological *Diane* constructs the basis for intercultural understanding and exhibits or configures translated oral material as transformed literary texts. Thus, the overall translation exercise consisted in a radical change of audio-aural communication into silent graphic images that were probably a stern test of his literary and polyglot abilities. The latter perspective is crucial for a close scrutiny of Plaatje's motives for pursuing the *Diane* paremiological work and for a larger comprehension of his reasons for stitching narrative proverbs into the *Reader* fables.

Where proverbs are concerned, Plaatje quite directly points out that even though the Batswana people might appear crude, rustic and backward owing also to their heavy dependence on “cow dung”, Setswana is equally capable and is definitely “civilized” enough in the exquisite employment of metaphoric sayings and aphorisms similar to those of European nations. He expresses those sentiments as follows:

*Se se gakgamatsang bogolo ke go bona morafe o o tshelang ka boloko joa kgomo jaka Becoana o o bua puo e e tsamaeang mmogo le teme tsa merafe e e tlhabologileng, ebile o nale maele a a dumalanang le maele a Sekgooa. (Plaatje, Diane 7–8)*

(Translation?)

The statements should not be interpreted as plaintive cries or a mere hankering for Europe’s acceptance. The similarities cannot be construed as mere imitation of northern hemisphere expression. In actuality, Plaatje appeals rather to far larger “spiritual connection” among southern climes people and the nations of the North. The stance, not widely popular in his day, is abundantly evident in the statement Plaatje makes in the introductory passages of *Diane*. The introduction, called “*Mafoko a Pele*”, starts off with the following metaphoric explanation that resembles a story verbally delivered and that incorporates an extended proverb:

*Fa o tlogela dilo tsa lenaga tse di bonoang ka matlho, jaanong u tla go tlhahuna maitlthomo le megopolo e e sa bonoeng, u tla choga mecoedi ea puo ea Sechoana e phaphalala, jaka seane se se reng ‘Tlhale di fedile morutsheng. (Plaatje, Diane 8)*

(Putting aside worldly things visible only to the eye, one will perceive the non-material enterprise, and appreciates the great insights considered through, Setswana as its fountains pour forth even in sayings and proverb: “The string on the bobbin is spent/has expired.”)

Plaatje’s elevated tone underlines the momentous import and gravity attaching the proverb, as well as, the philosophies interlaced with the subtle nuances of Setswana terms. Seemingly, Kunene’s analysis of ‘meaning’ (iv–vi) attained by “transcending” the limitations of familiar words and concepts, has useful application in Plaatje’s paremiology (Kunene iv–vi). This implies that accepting the “reality” of “non-words” encountered in forms like proverbs, creates unrestricted access to African philosophies imbedded within such oral communication systems, as Bandia (76) would have it. Thus, proverbs like “*Tlhale*”, in both Kunene’s and Plaatje’s estimation, carry innate, non-word components which can probably be appreciated more at a non-material, higher and spiritual level.

### **Pastoral knowledge and onomastic similarities**

As already indicated, Plaatje informs us of his upbringing in a rural, pastoral environment where he had to mind and herd the family’s sheep, goats and probably a



few cattle. There, nurtured and influenced by parents, extended family members and the larger community of his Batswana age mates, he gains the herder's mastery and knowledge *kico ya modisana* of his native language, its mores and folkways (Plaatje, *Diane* 6–8). While such knowledge and abilities acquired him the expertise that stood him in good stead as a court interpreter, journalist and translator *tirong ea kgatisho le ea botoloko*, that hardly rendered him parochial, insular and isolated from European languages and culture. In fact, it imbued him with the desire to uncover similarities and convergences between southern African and northern European ways. Several literary scholars and critics, such as Mazisi Kunene, Tim Couzens and Mbulelo Mzamane together with Stephen Gray and Brian Willan found it remarkable that Plaatje reproduced as many Setswana proverbs from memory, unaided or single-handedly, in exile and under diaspora-like conditions. However, no great mystery hinders consideration of Plaatje's own explanation about the large store of Setswana expressions, words, phrases, names and making up the proverb collection in *Diane* and in the stories of *Reader*. His delving into onomastics by citing Setswana toponyms with European map-name equivalents for South African place names like, Mafikeng, Thaba Nchu, Thabachoeu, Kolobeng, and Rochefort, Monte Negro, Wittenberg and Zwijndracht, respectively (Plaatje, *Diane* 9), underlines Plaatje's search for connections and similarities among nations of the world. As if that were not enough, Plaatje searches to find resemblances between the lifestyles of the Batswana and Jewish people that he refers to as the fruits of his labour: maungo a tlhotlhomisho eaka (Plaatje, *Diane* xii). His description of the discovery of the likenesses and similarities of even personal names, is carried across in the paragraph below. The words communicating pleasant surprise, wonderment and delight at the cultural resemblances among divergent people or *merafe-rafe* beyond time and space, is brought out this way:

(Is the following the original or a translation, if the latter please insert the original here)

The similarity between all pastoral nations is such that some passages in the history of the Jews read uncommonly like a description of the Bechuana during the nineteenth century [...] In the Psalms the similarity is so emphasized that it seems difficult at times to persuade oneself that the writer was not a Mochuana, e.g. Psalm 144:11–14. (Plaatje *Diane* 10–1)

Elsewhere, Plaatje gives examples of patronyms or personal and family names that Batswana people have in common with the Hebrews, Greeks, Romans (Latin names) and other European appellations for men and women (Plaatje, *Diane* 9–11). A few examples of such names will clarify the point: Agnes, Amanda, Bosman, Boulanger, Chloe, Cordelia, Dieudonné, Grace, Pasteur and Phillipa. The Setswana equivalents for each of the latter are: *Bori, Ratanang, Mosaroa, Kapei, Majang, Pelonyana, Thusho'a Modimo, Choaro, Modise* and *Mmadipitse*, respectively. Thus, in dabbling in the field

of onomastics, Plaatje demonstrates a willingness to search, identify and thereby, establish the connections human beings have with one another, not just between the English names, *Senyese mane* and Setswana ones, but also among the Danish, Greek, Portuguese and Spanish people, as he indicates (Plaatje, *Diane* xii). In the domains of lineage, family or kinship names and what he calls “patronyms” lies the implicit truth any people’s cultural identity and lifestyle resembling those of other nations. Also, the names themselves reflect much of a community’s innate being in their references to where they live or geographic location, the environment on which they depend, how they live and behave, what they do for a living, who they are and what their cherished beliefs and values appear to be. It is clear, therefore, that for Plaatje, the topographic and onomastic epithets of a community, people or nation get encapsulated in proverbs as shortened forms of large elements of their geo-physical identity, historical and cultural narrative. By translating and identifying Setswana proverbs together with their European equivalents, he underlines his quest for mutual understanding or the present-day South African conception of *botho* and/or *ubuntu*, or regard and respect among southern and northern nations (Chaka 72–80). It further demonstrates that the belief that the quest can culminate in acceptance of humanity’s similarity and common bonds, even within the diversity of languages and cultures.

### **Translative equivalence, diversity and culture-bound themes**

In this part of the discussion, the notion of ethnolinguistic similarity in an international sense, is extended to merge with “equivalence” in a seemingly narrow sense Plaatje uses it in the longish Setswana title for *Diane*, that is, in the phrase: *dumalanang naco*. Literally, the latter words carry the simple meaning of equivalence, similarity but, more specifically “agreement” or “agree with”. As such, the European proverbs he juxtaposes with Setswana ones are semantically in agreement with one another, probably in the wisdom and philosophical outlooks that the proverb pairs appear to convey. The understanding of the concept of equivalence in this context therefore, should not be taken as categorical exactness or mirror-image likeness, since the Setswana and European proverb examples in each case, originate in their own, unique cultural and linguistic environments. These implicit differences seem to indicate Plaatje’s awareness of the classical translative axiom that no two languages have one-to-one meaning equivalent words (Baker 45–8). In this context, therefore, the word equivalence apparently amounts to the approximate semantic meaning that the two proverbs share. How this explanation relates to whether each proverb is an effective and acceptable translation of the original Setswana one is potentially complex and controversial and will not add to understanding Plaatje’s purposes. To begin with, Plaatje’s quest in writing in such culturally diverse languages Setswana proverb equivalents raises the matter of his own translation abilities in this arduous

undertaking. The totals given in the next few sentences illustrate the size of Plaatje translation task: 732 Setswana proverbs paralleled by about 692 English literal translations. The actual proverb numbers in various European languages can be broken down as follows: Dutch (10), English (534), French (46), German (35), Italian (5), Latin (52) and Spanish (1) (Makhudu 102–4). In addition to this, Plaatje provides English transliterations for Danish, Spanish and Portuguese proverbs. The fact that, in the volume, Plaatje did not give European equivalents for approximately 37 Setswana proverbs and idioms implicitly conjures up questions about the challenges he faced in translating “culture-specific and/or culture-bound concepts” in both Setswana and the eight European languages, as Sebotsa (105) defines those. The discussion, as such, arrives at notions like: equivalence, functional equivalence, disparity in semantic range and cultural knowledge, as authors like Ricard (56) applies them in the literary translation domain. However, the theoretical minefield could detract from focus on what proverbs represent semantically in *Diane* as a paremiological product. Research conducted on Plaatje’s Shakespeare translations: *Comedy of Errors*, *Julius Caesar*, and excerpts from *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, broadly established Plaatje as an able translator (Couzens, “Introduction” 12–14; Couzens, *Mhudi* 160–2; Doke, *Dintshontsho tsa bo-Juliusse Kesara* vi–vii; Willan 210–1, 308). To accomplish the accurate inter-translation feat of the *Diane* multi-ethnic proverbs would certainly have required understanding European languages and utilizing fluent, transcultural skills. Combined with that, would be translation techniques to mimic and/or match culturally bound meanings across the different languages. The following proverbs in various languages should serve to illustrate the linguistic diversity of that probably would have demanded Plaatje’s more than basic or superficial comprehension of culture-bound themes and accurate translation ability of metaphoric concepts that are universally common in proverbs, according to Mieder (*Behold* 4–8).

On sleep as the imitator of death:

Setswana: [56] *Boroko ngoana 'ra losho.*

English: [56] Sleep, the antechamber of the grave.

Latin: [56] *Somnus est imago mortis.*

On unity and friendship:

Setswana: [55] *Boraro ke bobedi, bobedi ke jone bongoe fela.*

English: [55] One man’s company is no company.

Setswana: [150] *Ga ke thata ke ke le nosi, ke thata ka ba bangoe.*

English: [150] Show me the man who would go to heaven alone, and I will show you one who will never be admitted.

On kinship, family ties and relations:

Setswana: [29] *Bana ba tadi ba itsioe ka mereto.*

English: [29] Like mother like child.

Latin: [29] *Qualis avis, talis cantus; qualis vir, talis oratio.*

Setswana: [50] *Bongoe fela ke bobedi, bojosi losho.*

English: [50] Two heads are better than one, or why do folks marry?

#### On illness and doctors:

Setswana: [63] *Botlhoko bo bonako go tsena, bo bonya bo coa.*

English: Agues come on horseback and go away on foot.

French: *Tout mal arrive avec des ailes, et s'en retourne en boitant.*

Setswana: [109] *Eare ngaka e retelecoe go alafe ngakana.*

English: When a clever doctor fails, try one less clever (literally).

French: [109] *C'est une petite pluie qui mouille.*

#### On kingship, subjects, wealth and poverty:

Setswana: [133] *Foko ja kgosi lo ageloa mosako.*

English: [133] The king can do no wrong.

Setswana: [260] *Kgosi ke kgosi ka morafe.*

English: [260] The wealth of kings is in the affections of their subjects.

Setswana: [271] *Khumo le lehuma di lala mmogo.*

English: [271] A fat kitchen is next door to poverty.

German: [271] *Aus derselben Ackerkrume wächts das Unkraut wie die Blume.*

Afrikaans: *Ryk gesaai, bankrot ge-oes.*<sup>10</sup> Great inheritance given, easily bankrupt (literally); Huge fortune and riches lead to poverty (figuratively).

#### On humanness/humanity and humility:

Setswana: [122] *E senang meno e lomeloa ke mogolo oa eone.*

English: [122] Helping lame dogs over the stiles.

French: [122] *Il faut attendre le boiteux.*

Setswana: [235] *Ke motho ka ba bangoe.*<sup>11</sup>

English: [235] Through other people, I am a human being (literally).

Setswana: [279] *Lecogo le tlhapisa je lengoe.*

English: [279] One hand washeth the other and both the face.

Setswana: [430] *Mongoe ga ipolele, o boleloa ke ba bangoe.*

English: [430] Brave actions never want a trumpet.

German: [430] *Eigenlob stinkt, Freundeslob hinkt.*

For Plaatje to have produced at least one European language equivalent for each of approximately 90% of Setswana proverbs, is a noteworthy achievement. In its wake questions arose about Plaatje's ability to speak and write not only French, German and/or Latin but even English, which from all accounts, was widely used in

late 19th century, British-ruled South Africa (Lestrade, "European Influences" 108–10; Schapera, "Western Civilization" 235; Willan 320). However, Plaatje partially answers the queries by citing sources he had "profitably consulted" for what he names the "continental language equivalents" of the proverbs (Plaatje, *Diane* xi–xii). Probably the last word on the matter is that of researchers who aver that Plaatje had learnt to speak and write Dutch, French and German from his teachers, the Westphals, at Pniel missionary station, near Boshoff in the Free State Province (Chrisman 128; Rall 154–66; Couzens, "Introduction" 3–12). It is as such, safe to assert that, with the exception of Arabic, Danish, Portuguese and Spanish, Plaatje could acquit himself well orally and in written translation, through several African and European languages. It is therefore reasonable to argue that Plaatje would never have produced any of the Dutch, English, French and German proverbs in *Diane* if he could make no semantic sense of them.

### **Diversity not division**

That linguistic and cultural cosmopolitanism is displayed fully not only in *Diane* but in *Mhudi* and *Native Life in South Africa*. The latter is replete with rather longish quotations, paragraphs and song verses that underline Plaatje's socio-political polemic about land dispossession, injustice and human rights (Couzens and Willan 4–6). Thus, both texts 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. Those inclinations are directly expressed in the *Diane* introduction and preface on place names and personal names (Plaatje, *Reader* 8–11). The similarities and parallels he perceives occurring between Setswana and European proverbs seemingly extend beyond personal and place names, cultural identity and native folklore. Since human beings all over the planet express their being and identity through ethnolinguistic oral forms like songs, stories and proverbs (Lestrade, "Traditional Literature" 295), for Plaatje the resemblances in northern and southern hemisphere languages and nations manifest larger and spiritual affinities. His search for correspondences expressed through the *Reader* stories and *Diane* proverbs were most likely meant to recover and re-assert the spiritual bonds humans share. The denial and undermining of that connection had been precipitated, among others, by colonial imperialism and racially reprehensible laws like the 1913 South African Land Act.

### **Conclusion**

It therefore appears to be evident that Plaatje's ultimate mission in compiling and producing *Diane* and *Reader* was to increase comprehension of the rich diversity inherent in ethnolinguistic expressions like the proverbs of the European north and African south. In that way, he hoped for that sensitivity around the unity of the human

species would be enhanced and appreciated more than before. Hypothetically then, that would help prevent the rampant injustices and abuses of imperial, colonial rule and the accompanying racism of his time. To assert, therefore, that Plaatje's vision has application to modern problems of widespread religious intolerance, racial violence, xenophobic hatred and rabid social dislocation would not be far off the mark. In a sense, Plaatje's quest was no mere exercise of his literary and polyglot inclinations. Rather he called, not for diversity that causes division, nor contrast taken to signify conflict, but a new and common humanity. In present-day South Africa, more than ever before, Plaatje's undertaking bears massive socio-economic significance largely because the society cries out for remedies to racism and apartheid ills. His vision of social cohesion that does not countenance indignity and disrespect, unfair discrimination, artificial divisions, homophobia and the inequalities of poverty, is central to his socially conscious writing. Indeed, from the *Comedy of Errors*, *Julius Caesar*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Othello* translations to *Native Life* and *Mhudi's* employ of proverbs, the things antithetical to humanism and *ubuntu/botho* are implicitly condemned (see Ricard 57–59; Chaka 72–80). As such, Plaatje's stance should be viewed as expressing an appreciative understanding of the culture and folklore of others manifested through their songs, stories, riddles and proverbs. That appreciation seems bound to creating a more compassionate and humane society. The rediscovery, across diverse cultures, of the deep wisdoms and spiritual truths inhering proverbs is most probably Plaatje's chosen pathway towards peaceful co-existence among the planet's inhabitants. Thus, the *Reader* and *Diane* author was convinced that understanding the philosophical and spiritual values imbedded in the semantic spaces of stories and narrative proverbs, could have efficacious and humane effects on a society in conflict.

#### Notes

1. The mentioned scholars have over the last 85 years cooperated with several other academics, ethnographers and writers like J. T. Brown (1926), Guy Butler, John Comaroff, C. M. Doke (1940), G. P. Lestrade (1967), Richard Rive and Malvern Smith to research and publish articles and books on Plaatje. The joint efforts with many of these academics yielded a special issue entitled "Plaatje Centenary Issue" of *English in Africa* (vol 3, no 2, September 1976).
2. In Plaatje's time, the name for the Setswana language was spelt in two different ways: *Sechuana* and *Secoana* (Lestrade, "European Influences" 109). In the original *Diane* title, Plaatje employs the spelling version preferred mainly by English missionaries, *Sechuana*. The second version *Secoana*, seems to resemble the spelling introduced to the Basotho people by French missionaries. It looks to have gained currency when Setswana newspapers began to be published in the early 1850s (Couzens, "Mhudi" 168; Peters and Tabane 12–18). *Setswana* is the modern spelling for the variety used mainly in central and western parts of Southern Africa.
3. In the *Reader* text, the Setswana variety known as 'Serolong' forms a significant part of Plaatje's idiolect. It was employed to teach Setswana grammar and pronunciation to the English people that Plaatje met, around 1914–6 in London, through Prof Daniel Jones and other university lecturers.
4. The conditions can also be described as "diasporic", to use Brah's term (445), largely because Plaatje himself bemoans the fact that he wrote and published *Diane* on his own and without any feedback, criticism or input from Setswana native speakers. Since Plaatje and his fellow South African Native National Congress (SANNC) leaders were in London to negotiate the rights of black South Africans within the British imperial set up of the day, those trying socio-political conditions and pressures,

could be seen as diaspora-like. As SANNC delegates they were to make a case to the British government for the repeal or rescinding of the South African Natives Land Act of 1913. This law had just been promulgated to deprive Africans the right to acquire land outside of that which they were already occupying (Mzamane 198–9). Plaatje was SANNC's first General Secretary and became one of the senior members of the five-man deputation tasked with convincing the English Imperial Office to intervene in the South African land question. This political organization established in 1912 to champion the rights of black South Africans, was in 1923 renamed the African National Congress or ANC (Giliomee and Mbenga 208–10; Willan 124–9, 303).

5. There is no dispute over Plaatje's recollection and writing of the 723 Setswana proverbs and that this is largely because he confirms it in the *Diane* preface. Rather what has often been in dispute is his ability to speak Danish, Dutch, French, German, Italian and Latin, i.e. the northern European languages in which he provides proverb equivalents for the Setswana ones. In the preface, Plaatje indicates and lists several sources that he "searched" for European proverb equivalents and which he "profitably consulted" to write the collection (Plaatje, *Diane* xi). Extant research referenced by Willan, Couzens and Mbulelo V. Mzamane informs us that Plaatje could speak, at the most, nine languages including Koranna, Setswana, isiXhosa, Dutch, English, French and German.
6. The Setswana variant spoken predominantly in the Northwest Province around rural villages and towns like Lichtenburg, Coligny, Ventersdorp, Sannieshof, Vryburg, Mafikeng, Wolmaranstad, Schweizer-Reinecke, and the central country areas of Kimberley, Bloemfontein and Thaba Nchu, is known as Serolong, where 'Setswana' is the general name for the language. One key difference between general Setswana and Serolong is illustrated in variations in articulating the [f] versus the [h] sound, where the place name 'Mafikeng' /mafikeng/ is pronounced as /mahikeng/, in Serolong. See: note 3 above.
7. As shown throughout this article, evidence of Plaatje's intentions exists in most prefaces and introductions to his works. Even though accompanied by a disclaimer about purpose, the *Diane* text is different in that it is not a continuous, thematically cohesive unit like the *Mhudi* novel, the *Diphosho* drama or the *Native Life* treatise. Each Setswana and European proverb stands on its own and is listed without explanation about social, communicative applicability and/or guidance on its actual use. At another level though, and in the manner that Obiechina (203) expounds the concept, most proverbs in African languages can be treated as stand-alone oral forms that tell a story and/or have "narrative" configuration. Examples of the phenomenon abound in the *Diane* text.
8. In modern Setswana, as is also the case in English, the distinction between proverbs (*diane*) and idioms (*maele/mafoko*), is often difficult to make or is unclear. In *Diane*, the differences are quite inexact and fairly blurred (see Makhudu 58–60).
9. Numbers in square brackets are those Plaatje uses to list the original Setswana proverbs in the 1916 *Diane* publication. The European proverb equivalents are also enclosed in square brackets.
10. The Sepedi equivalent of this proverb is the metaphorically rich one given by Rakoma (212): *Motho ke mo mohwanosi ga se mosikanosi*. Roughly translated it means: "No human being should be alone, though he/she can die alone"; or "No man is an island"; etc. The Setswana proverb [50] is closest to the Sepedi one given here.
11. This Afrikaans proverb from Kritzinger and Sabbagha (230) can be interpreted both literally and figuratively, as the glosses between brackets indicate. Plaatje's proverbs *Khumo ea pena*; *Khumo kgolo ea rama*; *Khumo le lehuma di lala mmogo* [269; 270; 271] respectively, have close equivalents that he cites in Latin and Italian: *Fortuna magna, magna domino est servitas*, and *Assai basta, e troppo quasta*, respectively.

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