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Convening Black Sociability Over a Corpse: Obituaries in the Early South African Black Press

Lesley Mofokeng

Wits Centre for Journalism, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

Correspondence: Lesley Mofokeng (lesley.mofokeng@wits.ac.za)

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Abstract

This article explores the significance of obituaries in the early 20th-century black press in South Africa, particularly focusing on how they served as a medium for memorializing black excellence within a context of colonization and oppression. Through textual and discourse analysis of obituaries that appeared in Solomon T. Plaatje's newspapers *Koranta ea Becoana* and *Tsala ea Becoana*, the study explores how these tributes functioned as sites of resistance against historical erasure and affirmed black agency. This is done, in part, in the context of the global cosmological phenomenon of Halley's Comet in 1910. The research situates obituary writing within the broader framework of memory, oral tradition, and entextualization, demonstrating how editorial choices and narrative structures elevated exemplary individuals as role models amidst systemic oppression. The findings reveal that these obituaries not only preserved collective memory but also actively contested colonial narratives by asserting black subjectivity and personhood. The study concludes by advocating for the inclusion of such commemorative texts in historical inquiry, recognizing their significance in the ongoing struggle for narrative authority and identity formation.

Keywords

black excellence; black press; entextualization; Koranta ea Becoana; obituaries; South African black press; Tsala ea Becoana

1. Introduction

The autodidact and polyglot Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje (1876–1932), or Sol Plaatje for short, expanded his horizons when he leaped from being a court interpreter and clerk into the bustle of journalism in the outpost town of Mafeking, South Africa, in 1901. The town had come to prominence as a result of a bloody siege waged from October 1899 to May 1900 during the South African (Boer) War (with the war itself only ending

in 1902). Plaatje's venture, *Koranta ea Becoana* (hereafter *Koranta*; Bechuana Gazette in English), funded by Barolong (a subgroup of the greater Batswana nation) Chief Silas Molema, was marked as the first wholly black independent newspaper in South Africa (Willan, 2018). This gave Plaatje the editorial freedom and self-determination to fashion the bilingual newspaper, published in Setswana and English, into the form he wished; one that could convene an African public sphere and order conversations and narratives the way he deemed fit as "the spokesman of his people" (Salawu, 2023, p. 10). After ownership changes, *Koranta* collapsed in 1909 when its offices and facilities were auctioned off to cover some of the newspaper's many debts. Plaatje relocated to the diamond mining town of Kimberley and turned his attention to the newspaper *Tsala ea Becoana* (The Friend of the Bechuana) that was launched in 1910 and backed by a syndicate of Barolong. That same year also marked the establishment of the Union of South Africa and a deeper entrenchment of segregation and oppression of the black majority by a white colonial minority rule.

The Union of South Africa spelled doom for black Africans with its "racial intolerance and formalized discrimination" (Remmington, 2013, p. 428), excluding them from the franchise, restricting them in land ownership, the civil service, and participation in shaping a common society. This was an onslaught on the African dignity and psyche where non-whites were barred from voting and the draft constitution made no commitment to legal equality between races (Johns & Gerhart, 2014, p. 18).

Within this hostile environment, Plaatje, who had become the de facto spokesperson of his people through his newspapers, focused on protest and black sociability and advocacy for gender equality (Salawu, 2023, p. 6), but faced a lack of resources, low literacy levels, and exclusion from any backing or subsidy from a state agency or a business conglomerate. Several changes of ownership, an accumulation of business debts, and Plaatje's own financial struggles led to him taking up the role of a labor recruiter in 1909 for the Mines Labor Supply Company (Willan, 2018, p. 210).

Tsala ea Becoana ran into financial difficulties, folded in 1912, and was renamed and relaunched three months later as *Tsala ea Batho* (hereafter *Tsala*; The People's Friend in English), with Plaatje as the sole proprietor (Salawu, 2023, p. 8). *Tsala*, published in multiple languages (initially English and Setswana, later also isiXhosa), played a significant role in covering and critiquing the Native Land Act of 1913 which restricted black land ownership to just 7% of the country and caused wide-scale disruption and devastation. Plaatje's efforts saw the newspaper circulation rise to over 4,000 copies but the publication began to falter while Plaatje was in England in 1914—as part of a political delegation protesting the Land Act—and published its last issue in July 1915. Plaatje continued to work as a journalist for several more years but became better known for his books, particularly *Native Life in South Africa* (Plaatje, 1982; first published in 1916), his novel *Mhudi* (Plaatje, 2021; first published in 1930), and his *Mafeking Diary* (Plaatje, 2023; first published in 1973) which, like some of his works, was published decades after his death.

2. Rationale and Aims

Both *Koranta* and *Tsala* carried obituaries that did more than mark the passing of notable individuals. They shaped a new narrative around black identity and achievement. These tributes captured evolving notions of black excellence, serving as both testaments and catalysts for communal pride and aspiration. By publishing these obituaries, Plaatje's black press actively worked to counter colonial injustice by upholding the names and legacies of the departed as models for future generations.

As Newell (2016) observes, through the biographies and obituaries of prominent individuals, early newspapers created an archive of African heroes, offering role models and anchoring local aspirations to personal accomplishment. These texts are, therefore, crucial for understanding the construction of identity and the affirmation of personhood within the colonial context, reflecting both resistance to erasure and the assertion of black agency.

While obituaries are central to shaping public memory and constructing communal identities (Newell, 2016), their role in the early South African black press remains underexplored in academic literature. Considerable scholarship has examined the press as a platform for political resistance and cultural affirmation in colonial contexts (Couzens, 1976; Limb, 2012; Masilela, 2013; Salawu, 2023; Xaba, 2017). But the specific function of obituaries as texts at the intersection of grief, commemoration, and cultural agency has been given little critical attention. This study seeks to address that gap by examining how obituaries published in a black-owned newspaper not only recorded individual lives but also contributed to the articulation of black excellence and the reimagining of identity under colonial rule.

The aims of this article are threefold. First, it is to examine the role that obituaries in the early South African black press played as sites for constructing, articulating, and commemorating black excellence, success, and identity in a colonial context. Second, to analyze the language, narrative structures, and editorial choices present in these obituaries to show how they functioned as instruments of resistance against historical erasure and as catalysts for communal pride and aspiration. Third, to contribute to the scholarly understanding of how media texts, particularly obituaries, mediate between oral traditions, communal memory, and the written archive, and shape collective memory while affirming black agency.

In the context of early 20th-century South Africa, where colonial policies and the emerging Union systematically marginalized black citizens, the black press became a vital forum for countering historical erasure. In these newspapers, obituaries were more than mere announcements of death but sites where narratives of achievement, values, and resistance were negotiated and preserved. For the black press, by foregrounding exemplary lives and constructing posthumous identities, obituaries in these publications functioned as both repositories and catalysts for collective pride, aspiration, and memory. In telling some of the stories, cosmology also came into play as a natural phenomenon influencing circumstance and time. This article responds to the need for a more nuanced understanding of how media texts, especially in the black press, mediate between oral traditions, communal memory, and the written archive. It situates the study of obituaries within larger debates on identity formation, resistance literature, and the politics of memory (Jamieson, 1995; Mbembe, 2019; Mokoena, 2016; Newell, 2016; van der Geest, 2000). By focusing on the language, structure, and narrative strategies of these texts, the research demonstrates how editorial choices and commemorative practices contributed to the formation of a counter-narrative to colonial domination.

The significance of this study is further underscored by its engagement with questions of representation and personhood. The gendered nature of obituary writing, the valorization of male leaders, and the selective commemoration of certain figures reflect both the possibilities and limitations of historical agency within oppressive systems. This investigation, therefore, illuminates how obituaries became instruments of nation-building, vehicles for affirming black subjectivity, and tools for resisting the silences imposed by colonial archives.

This article contends that the early South African black press, through the medium of obituaries, played a foundational role in documenting, contesting, and commemorating black excellence along with other sections that the newspapers offered. Its findings contribute to broader scholarly conversations about the intersections of black grief, memory, media, and identity, advocating for the inclusion of these texts in our understanding of both cultural history and the ongoing struggle for narrative authority. The idea of black grief is interesting as it evokes expressions not only of personal sorrow but also of communal loss and dignity. The obituary texts provided a platform for black South Africans to mourn publicly, assert their humanity, and honor their dead in a world that often sought to render them invisible. Black grief was intertwined with a spirit of resilience and resistance.

The key questions asked are:

- How do obituaries form part of the historical record?
- What is the role of historical context, class, and gender in practices of memorialization in colonial contexts?
- What are the typical styles, forms, and registers of early 20th-century obituary writing in black newspapers?
- What language is employed and what kinds of connections can be traced to nature and African cosmology?
- How is black excellence represented in the context of racial violence?

3. Black Excellence and the Black Press

The emergence of the black press was nothing short of revolutionary; it was a bold and determined act to confront and counter the oppressive currents of colonial society. Far from being passive observers, black newspapers in South Africa became active agents of empowerment, resilience, and historical preservation. They elevated the voices of their communities, chronicled the triumphs and tribulations of black lives, and, crucially, wrote the names of the departed into the annals of history, ensuring that they would not be forgotten or erased.

This deliberate act of documentation was more than just a service to the grieving; it was a profound declaration of Africanity, as Mafeje (2008, p. 111) describes it: a "historically-determined rebellion against domination by others." Through the act of recording and celebrating black lives and deaths, the press nurtured a collective consciousness rooted in dignity, pride, and resistance. Gewin (2020, p. 320) echoes this sentiment, arguing that "the best way to combat white supremacy is to focus on black excellence."

Calhoun (2020) identifies black excellence as "positive representations" of black people doing great things. This involves highlighting their accomplishments and positive actions that may be successes in athletics, academics, activism, the arts, business, and politics. In addition, she also considers and celebrates the everyday acts that "demonstrate the range of black people's skills and set good examples for other black people" (Calhoun, 2020, p. 58). Sardinha (2022) alludes to the additional quality of resilience and looks to a reading of African folklore in the curriculum in order to understand "our present, our past and our future" (Sardinha, 2022, pp. 46–47). This resonates with the study of the obituary because, by their nature, obituaries provide a past and present perspective and the possibilities of the future.

In the context of the black press, every obituary, every remembrance, became an act of defiance "rejecting racial subordination," as Mafeje (2008, p. 112) puts it. Death, within this framework, was not simply a moment of personal loss. It was a communal event—a rallying point where people gathered, performed rituals of mourning, and found solace in shared memory. These gatherings were fertile ground for storytelling. Tales of perseverance in the face of adversity, devotion to family and education, and unwavering commitment to justice became blueprints for future generations. In remembering the dead, communities drew strength to continue the struggle, embodying the very excellence and resilience that the black press so eloquently championed.

Moguerane (2024) argues that these practices reconstitute and revitalize a weakening solidarity of personhood. She points out that these practices are an "orientation of everyday life because they are essentially involved and concerned with how everyday practice facilitates our mutual recognition as persons, as quintessentially human" (Moguerane, 2024, p. 14). Applying Moguerane's argument, one may look at obituary writing as a practice of nationalism that "confirm personhood" (Moguerane, 2024, p. 15). In a colonial context that privileges one group and dehumanizes others, obituaries tend to restore and confirm the personhood and the sense of community that emerges from the "intimate entanglements of oneself and another" (p. 15). Moguerane holds that, in colonial settings, societies attempt to negotiate their way out of situations that limit them "by assembling a new social infrastructure of personhood" (Moguerane, 2024, p. 17). We observe this negotiation with the establishment of newspapers as well as content such as obituaries of great men.

Throughout the formative years of South Africa's black press, editors played an active role in shaping communal identity, using newspapers as platforms to assert personhood and nationhood against colonial oppression. Rather than maintaining journalistic distance, they became participants and advocates, especially through the writing of obituaries and memorial texts. These tributes went beyond mere announcements, chronicling the lives of elders, leaders, and everyday individuals in ways that modeled virtue and resilience. Drawing from Western and Southern African traditions, editors elevated the deceased as exemplars whose stories encouraged readers to find inspiration in their lives, framing grief as a source of strength and continuity. Obituary writing thus became a powerful mechanism for collective memory, fostering pride and hope while resisting historical erasure and shaping black identity within a colonial context.

This process of memorialization, termed "entextualization" as employed by Newell (2016), involved transforming oral or communal knowledge about death into enduring printed narratives with new social and political significance. Obituaries selectively highlighted achievements and virtues, crafting posthumous identities that aligned with cultural values and challenged prevailing colonial narratives. While there was a tendency to prioritize eminent personalities and elites, these texts also celebrated allies of the black cause—missionaries, merchants, and politicians—whose memorialization helped forge connections between Africa and Europe. Through these enduring textual artifacts, the black press created an anticolonial historical archive of role models, reinforcing communal pride and offering readers reference points for personal achievement and collective progress. As Guyanese historian Ivan van Sertima said, "we are ruled by the dead" (South Carolina ETV, 2025). This statement underscores the long-lasting impact of the deceased on the lives of the living and highlights why obituary writing held such significance for the black press.

4. Methodology

Postcolonial perspectives inform the analysis of obituaries, positioning them as sites of resistance and negotiation between local and colonial discourses. The narratives challenge colonial power structures within an Afrocentric media house, allowing for the reclamation of narrative authority by marginalized groups. The Afrocentricity lens advocates for the agency of the African, placing them at the center of the narrative, being a subject instead of an object in their history (Asante & Ledbetter, 2016). The obituaries then play a role in nation-building and act against colonial erasure, presenting the deceased as a cultural, social, or political legend.

In my analysis of the obituaries, I employ textual and discourse analysis to study the language structure and narrative conventions to reveal how the deceased are represented and cultural norms are reflected. This involves a close reading of the obituary texts, linguistic and thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, rhetorical strategies, or even omissions. The main focus of the article is the interpretation of black excellence as a trait in an unequal colonial milieu. I examine how historical context and class played a role in the understanding of the death of exemplary figures.

The study is further divided into broader themes of identity construction and memory and legacy. Identity construction informs how the posthumous identity is crafted by highlighting and prioritizing certain information about the person's life to align with specific values. Under this theme, exaltation is examined, which is how language is used to elevate the account of lives and accentuate the contours of one's life. Veneration through colloquial language, idiomatic, and totemic expressions central to Setswana culture is also explored. Memory and legacy refer to how collective memory and public record are shaped, impacting how individuals are remembered. In memorializing a life, there are quirks about the deceased that humanize the person, stepping outside the formal mournful tone to engender an air of lightness and celebration. This thematic analysis provides insights into how obituaries serve as a form of historical record, preserving the memory of the deceased for future generations.

Using the Readex-NewsBank digital archive, which contains about 283 issues of Plaatje's newspapers as part of the African colonial press collection, an archival search and selection of obituaries was conducted. Five obituaries, published in *Koranta* in 1903 and in *Tsala* between 1910 and 1911, were identified for analysis. They were chosen based on the prominence of the figures and their importance in the communities. Their lives were identified as exemplary and worthy of emulation. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of how obituaries construct identities and reflect cultural norms.

To analyze the obituaries, I conducted close readings using linguistic analysis and thematic analysis focusing on representations of the deceased and cultural values. I identified recurring motifs, rhetorical strategies, structural conventions, and notable omissions that pointed to social hierarchies (Titscher et al., 2000). Drawing from Gee's (2014) discourse analysis, Riessman's (2008) narrative inquiry, and cultural memory studies (Assmann, 2011; Erll, 2011), I examined how obituaries construct social identities, inspire collective memory, and serve as performative texts reinforcing shared values. My approach also considered the role of the black press in commemorating resistance and dignity, following Newell (2016) and Peterson and Hunter (2016). This integrated methodology explores obituaries as tools for negotiating identity, power, and historical meaning, drawing on growing scholarship that treats commemorative writing as a site for these tools (Dlamini, 2020; Moguerane, 2024; Ngqulunga, 2025).

5. When Beggars Die, There Are no Comets Seen

The five obituaries analyzed are the Chief Jacobus Mamogale, who died in 1903 in Bethane, near Rustenburg in the Transvaal colony, and Joseph Masisi, a wealthy property owner in Thaba Ncho, in the Orange Free State colony, who died in the same year. They are followed by Chief Bathoeng Gaseitsiwe, the leader of the Bangwaketse nation in Kanye, Bechuanaland Protectorate (now Botswana), and Veldtman Bikitsha of the Mfengu people in the Eastern Cape, who both died in 1910. And lastly, Chief Sebele Sechele of the Bakoena in Molepolole, Bechuanaland Protectorate, who died in 1911.

When Chief Mamogale died while seeking medical assistance in the town of Rustenburg, *Koranta* was sorrowful as it announced his passing. It noted that "truly a great man has passed" and further mourned that he was "a kind ruler" of his people. ("Ammaruri go tsamaile," 1903). Mamogale identified only as "monna" (a man), which in totemic Setswana speak would be equal to a hero, was celebrated as a leader who fused staunch Christianity with black development, propelling his people to success by advocating for both academic learning and vocational training. His commitment to education was evident in his decision to send his sons to Lovedale College, a missionary school that played a prominent role in training black intellectuals. Notably, his obituary reports that Mamogale's widow would preside over the affairs of the nation until his eldest son finished his education and could assume leadership—a further testament to the enduring value placed on education and tradition. Plaatje presents this as a model worthy of emulation by other Batswana rulers.

The legacy of businessman Joseph Masisi is equally powerfully evoked. Plaatje eulogized Masisi as a "very wealthy, influential and large-hearted Native gentleman of Thaba Nchu," but notes that Masisi's true greatness lay beyond material wealth. Most admirable, according to Plaatje, was his role as a "thorn in the sight of the newly imported white"—a protest against a system intent on marginalizing black entrepreneurs. Despite the prevailing belief, especially after the Boer War, that a Native could not own property, Masisi was the proprietor of two sizeable farms named Thaba Phachoa and Naauwpoort. In addition, he was the lessor of the Town Hotel site in the district of Thaba Nchu, in "whiteman's territory." Masisi's achievements were a stand against business inequality but they came at a personal cost: He was imprisoned by the British during the Boer War "while carting home his grain" and charged with "conniving with the Federal Forces." The charges were never proven and Masisi survived. Even in that hostile environment, he continued to earn the respect of both Boers and Africans. A supporter of the Wesleyan Church, Masisi was remembered as a good Christian and the tribute concludes with the wish that he might "rest in the bosom of Abraham" ("On Friday last week," 1903).

By 1910, Plaatje was in Kimberley editing *Tsala* and was already seen as the de facto spokesperson of the Batswana (Willan, 2018). Even a traditional African society on the cusp of modernity, in a remote southern tip of Africa, could not escape the widespread panic that gripped the world engineered by the anticipation of Halley's Comet. It was believed that the celestial visitor would collide with Earth resulting in an apocalypse (Clark, 2012). The cosmic phenomenon left a trail of heartbreak in what turned out to be a year of death. No less than eight deaths of historical figures within nine months, who either led nations, brought enlightenment, or simply inspired a people, were recorded in quick succession, triggering a belief that the universe had conspired to wipe out great men of that time. The predicted comet was detected in Earth's skies at an observatory on 20 April 1910 and, in the following day, journalist and writer Mark Twain died. As the comet blazed its trail approaching Earth, King Edward VII of Britain died on 6 May, prompting Plaatje

to note that the Comet played a remarkable part in the King's death and funeral. He wrote: "It illumined the Eastern skies during His Majesty's lying in State and disappeared from view when the funeral took place, to appear again in the Western sky after His late Majesty was laid to rest" ("In view of," 1910). These international deaths were but a taste of things to come.

When a series of deaths hit Batswana society, as the presumed author of the obituaries, Plaatje looked no further than the cosmos to similarly make sense of the unexpected losses of his generation's greatest men.

The comet that Plaatje calls "*naledi ea setlhodi*" (the spying star or the abomination star) in Setswana holds cultural significance in African societies, often viewed as an omen linked to pivotal events and changes in leadership. For Plaatje, this celestial phenomenon was personally meaningful: Not only did he name his son Halley (born in 1910) after Halley's Comet, he also incorporated the comet into his literary work. In *Mhudi*, first published 20 years later as the first full-length novel in English by a black South African, Plaatje used the motif of the comet prominently as a literary device to explore the themes of colonialism and modernity (Plaatje, 2021).

This symbolism is evident when he announced the death of Chief Bathoeng, in July 1910, beginning with the quote: "When beggars die there are no comets seen. The Heavens themselves blaze forth the death of Princes" (Shakespeare, 2011). This line, from *Julius Caesar* (Act II, Scene 2), is spoken by Calpurnia as she warns Caesar of his impending assassination, suggesting that comets signify the death of those in power.

William Shakespeare uses Calpurnia's belief to foreshadow the tragic events of the play and highlight the cultural weight that natural signs can carry. Similarly, Plaatje invokes the comet to contextualize the series of deaths affecting his own community and the greater Empire to which they belonged, suggesting that such celestial events herald significant losses and foreshadow further challenges. The comet becomes a symbol—serving Shakespeare as a dramatic tool in a story of political turmoil and Plaatje as a way to articulate collective grief and foreboding amidst colonial upheaval.

In stark contrast to the later account given by Dr Silas Modiri Molema (1963), a respected historian of the Batswana, who downplayed the importance of Bathoeng as the chief of Bangwaketse, Plaatje offered a rich and celebratory portrait of the chief's leadership and character. While Molema described Bathoeng's reign as uneventful, claiming that "nothing that calls for attention happened in his time" (Molema, 1963), Plaatje instead emphasized Bathoeng's remarkable reputation and influence. He considered him second only to Khama III, the famed leader of the Bamangwato nation and the grandfather of Sir Seretse Khama, the first president of independent Botswana. Plaatje praised Bathoeng for his tact, geniality, and statesmanship, arguing that these qualities allowed him to thrive as a Christian ruler under British colonial oversight, a notable achievement given the complexities and pressures of colonial rule in southern Africa.

It is important to understand that Bathoeng leadership coincided with a period when British colonial authorities sought to reshape local governance and social customs, often using Christianity as a vehicle for change. Plaatje's tribute to Bathoeng highlights the chief's visionary approach to governance especially in matters of environmental stewardship. He recalls Bathoeng's youth among "large herds of heavy horned cattle which formed the wealth of the Bechuana" ("Bathoeng Gaseitsiwe," 1910), underscoring the economic and cultural importance of cattle to Batswana society. Unlike many leaders of his era, Bathoeng recognized the

dangers of overhunting and took concrete steps to protect biodiversity in the Bangwaketse reserve. Under his rule, he curbed the "foolish extermination" of wild animals by his regiments, ensuring that species such as buffalo, eland, zebra, and other large game continued to thrive. This approach was remarkably progressive for its time and counters long-standing stereotypes about African leadership and environmental care.

Furthermore, Plaatje notes Bathoeng's openness to Christianity which was spreading rapidly throughout southern Africa in the early 20th century. The adoption of Christianity was seen by many colonial authorities as a marker of "progress" and "civilization." Plaatje venerates him as peerless; Bathoeng's government, for example, banned certain traditional practices such as circumcision rites, which held great significance among the Batswana. Nevertheless, Plaatje's assessment is nuanced: He acknowledges that "some stubborn boys and girls escaped across the Transvaal and Cape boundaries to undergo these rites with their Bahurutshe and Barolong confreres" ("Bathoeng Gaseitsiwe," 1910). Those who were discovered practicing these rites within Bathoeng's domain risked being fined an ox, a significant penalty in a society where cattle symbolized wealth and social status.

This tension between tradition and change, between the preservation of cultural practices and the pressures of colonial modernity, is at the heart of Plaatje's writing. By celebrating Bathoeng's foresight and adaptability, Plaatje challenges colonial-era narratives that depicted African rulers as either obstacles to progress or passive subjects of history. Instead, he presents Bathoeng as a leader who balanced respect for tradition with a willingness to embrace new ideas for the benefit of his people. This underscores the complexity and agency of African leadership at a time of profound transformation—reminding us that the story of colonialism is also one of local innovation, resilience, and cultural negotiation.

In Bathoeng's eulogy, Plaatje holds up the Bangwaketse people as the ultimate model for Batswana. He notes the docility of Batswana was well known by ethnologists, and it is most prominently observed in Bangwaketse. While the histories of other Batswana nations had "thrilling stories of bloody encounters" with Basotho, Matebele, other Batswana tribes, and the Dutch, "with varying fortunes," the Bangwaketse had not known war. Their peace was disturbed only once by the "ferocious" hordes of Mzilikazi and they retired to the "one common watering place of the Kalahari Desert," where "emaciated by thirst and hunger after marching many days without water" they fell easy prey to their pursuers ("Bathoeng Gaseitsiwe," 1910).

Bathoeng is marked as a tactical diplomat who seldom forfeited any friendship with an opponent. Even when the Bechuanaland Railway Company built a line to the North and expropriated Bangwaketse land, he maneuvered his way to maintain good neighborliness. His skillful diplomacy was also recorded during the Boer War and how it saved the Barolong. When some escaped from the siege at Mafeking, they "found a ready asylum on his peaceful reservations" ("Bathoeng Gaseitsiwe," 1910).

At the end of the South African War, Bathoeng visited Mafeking and witnessed the effects of new education policies. Returning home, he enforced an additional tax of two shillings per hut for the benefit of schools, supplementing missionary efforts. This yielded good salaries for teachers and would attract the best to his towns. When it came to dispensing justice, Bathoeng was also celebrated for his gentle manner and sympathy, his sober-minded judgments dictated in each instance by justice and common sense. At the conclusion of the obituary, Plaatje crafts wishes of a "sweet repose to the Chieftain, the Christian, the gentleman and statesman" ("Bathoeng Gaseitsiwe," 1910).

South of Bechuanaland, in the Eastern Cape, the news of the passing of Veldtman Bikitsha, the chief of the Mfengu people, stunned the black colonial world. Three tributes were penned by a clergyman, a military man, and a journalist in Reverend W. M. Baker, Major D. B. Hook, and Plaatje himself. In the obituary headlined "Death of Captain Veldtman," by Baker, originally published in the English *Daily Dispatch* and reprinted in the isiXhosa newspaper *Imvo Zabantsundu* on 30 July 1910, Bikitsha was identified as "one of the greatest, and perhaps *the* greatest man who has ever lived in the history of the Mfengu people" ("Death of Captain," 1910). Born John Bikitsha but known as Captain Veldtman, Bikitsha had sustained a severe car accident a few months earlier that left him practically an invalid, confined to his bed. Readers were informed of the gradual demise of his health, noting that he died at 89 "having lived 19 years over the space allotted to man" ("Death of Captain," 1910). Having lived a long and full life, Bikitsha is noted to have playfully discouraged prayers for his healing, quipping, "Why do they try to keep me here, why do they not let me go!" ("Death of Captain," 1910). This indicates one who had made peace with their mortality, having contributed to the good of his people. The inclusion of this sentence serves as an achievement to inspire others to live a meaningful life so that when it's their time to go, they will have no regrets.

The life of Bikitsha was particularly interesting because he was only a headman but died a chief. His obituary tells us that he secured the great chiefly position "by the force of his character, by the soundness of his judgment and his constant alertness and endeavors for the welfare of the Native people" ("Death of Captain," 1910). So influential was Bikitsha that he earned the respect of the colonial government and officials in the Transkei region of the Eastern Cape as well as that of the white people. In another tribute by Hook, published along with Baker's, it is said that nothing could be done without him in his capacity as the "principal mounted orderly," scout or intelligence officer for Sir Walter Currie who was the Commandant of the Frontier Armed and Mounted Police in the region. This was no mean feat for a black man at the height of colonial oppression to occupy "a foremost place in native affairs," the newspaper noted (Hook, 1910). It was under Bikitsha's leadership that the Mfengu people encountered stability when they were relocated to a permanent home across the Kei River after their opponents, the Gcaleka people, killed their cattle following a conflict that characterized their troubled relationship.

During the Gcaleka War of 1877–1878, Bikitsha was appointed "Captain of Fingo Levies" and received full captain's pay and allowance. He is noted to have done excellent service and earned a favorable opinion of the government. So impressed were the authorities that in 1873, the Acting Chief Magistrate of the Transkei was authorized by the government to present Bikitsha with a farm in the vacant territory "in recognition of the wise influence he had wielded over the Fingoes" (Hook, 1910).

The Setswana version of the obituary, modified by Plaatje and published on the same page as Hook's, tells more about Bikitsha's worldly feats, including a trip to England where Queen Victoria had elevated him to the position of officer as a leader of the Mfengu people when they dispersed the Xhosa people and the English in the Cape Colony. Bikitsha defended the lands of his people and engendered development from the time he was much younger. He instituted a tax on every man so that he could afford to pay teachers so that the young could be educated, and build roads and vehicles so that they would not be damaged from the bad roads of the Transkei. Once the changes came to his land and the benefits of the taxes started to be seen, some white lawyers influenced the people to stop paying because it was not legal.

Among his most powerful traits was public speaking. Bikitsha was memorialized as a fluent English speaker who had met the future King George of England in Cape Town in 1901. While Batswana chiefs were at the mercy of interpreters to carry on a conversation with the monarch, Bikitsha could hold his own unaided ("Captain Veltman Bikicha," 1910). He embraced Christianity earlier and rose through the ranks as a preacher, a church elder, and a steward of the Wesleyan church. These were wholesome values cherished by black colonial society. His loyalty to the British Government was unquestionable. And the commemoration of the emancipation of his Mfengu people was closest to his heart. "Good old Captain Veldtman!," the tribute concluded somberly.

Again, Plaatje evokes the narrative of Halley's Comet. He declares that the comet will only be seen again after 75 years, in 1985. He reminds the readers of their mortality as he points out that the "majority of the living [in 1910] will no longer be alive" and won't see the comet again. He offers a quick lesson on the celestial phenomenon bookmarking it with Biblical tales of the carnage of Sodom and Gomora, the floods of Noah, and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. He shares these stories to alert his readers to the fact that nothing good will come out of the sighting of the comet as the ages of time have proved even before Christ ("Naledi ea setlhodi," 1910).

Some months after Bikitsha's demise, Plaatje also pinned the death of Chief Sebele Sechele on the comet. By that time, the list of the notable dead had grown to include important missionaries namely: Heinrich Grutzner of the Berlin Mission Society, who advocated for the Native franchise at the South African Native Affairs Commission on 1903 ("Moshui Rev. H. Grutzner," 1910); Canon Crisp, a linguist in native languages who served Barolong from 1868 to 1886 and authored their grammar and orthography through numerous publications ("Death of Canon Crisp," 1910); and Albert Kropf, of the Lutheran Church who compiled the Xhosa–English dictionary during his 65 years of service ("Rev. Albert Kropf," 1911).

Sebele's death followed a long illness. He stood out for his formative years under the guidance of explorer Dr Livingstone at the London Missionary Society school in Kudumane, in the present-day Northern Cape province of South Africa. When his father died in 1892, Sebele took over the reins. The obituary highlights a trip Sebele undertook in 1893 to Cape Town to "see white people in their habitat" as well as seeing the sea. He crossed the same sea in 1895 in the company of Khama III and Chief Bathoeng to see Queen Victoria and her councilors, such as Joseph Chamberlain, Lord Gladstone, Selborne, and the Duke of Westminster. His passing finds Plaatje exasperated as he notes that there were no more words of comfort to share with the readers after the spate of deaths. He added that the deaths marked the end of an era of a cohort of African leaders, with Khama of Bamangwato (Khama III) the only survivor that he prayed would be saved from the slew of deaths ("Moshui kgosi Sebele," 1911).

Sebele was praised for his speaking abilities in local meetings with the whites. When the foundation stone was erected at Tiger Kloof Native Institution near Vryburg, a white newspaper had told the readers that Sebele was an excellent example of people and royalty. Sebele was also a modern, literate man of words, who took up a habit that was crucial in a colonial setting—he read Setswana newspapers, and newspapers in other languages such as Sesotho and English—understanding that to get ahead one had to read and be informed of developments in order to be part of the discussions and debates that shape a response. An astute supporter of Christianity, although he remained a polygamist, Sebele was held up as exemplary and had just completed building a strikingly beautiful church for the London Mission congregation. While sending condolences to his

eldest son, Kealeboga, along with his widows, children, and the nation, Plaatje concludes the obituary with a question: "When will the star (Halley's Comet) disappear?" This marks his exasperation at the loss of life triggered by the unwelcome celestial visitor ("Moshui kgosi Sebele," 1911).

Plaatje's meditation on the comet delves deeply into the interplay between celestial phenomena and the lived encounters of his community. In reflecting on the deaths of prominent figures, he cautions against dismissing the comet as "an idle and meaningless visitor," emphasizing that such cosmic events have long resonated with profound meaning in African societies. In the pages of *Tsala*, he writes that there are "many ominous traditions to stellar movements and cometary visitations in particular" ("In view of," 1910), revealing how these occurrences are woven into the fabric of cultural memory and interpretation. For Plaatje, the comet becomes both a potent symbol and a living presence, a harbinger that both mourns the departed and warns of possible turmoil ahead. By integrating these traditions and beliefs into his writing, Plaatje situates African cosmology alongside Western narrative strategies, suggesting that the heavens themselves participate in the historical cycles of loss and renewal that shape his community's destiny.

While he acknowledges that it is a superstition, he continues to ascribe its power in how it influences the worldview of the Africans. So strong is its pull that "it was by no means shaken by their (Africans) contact with missionaries; and their perusal of the Bible story of the visit of the Magi" ("In view of," 1910).

In the obituary of Bathoeng, Plaatje delivered a lecture about the cosmological developments through the ages that he believes show how inextricably linked Africans are to the cosmos:

> Space will not permit our going as far back as the [1830's] and the [1850's] to record momentous events, in Sechuana history, which occurred synchroniously with the movements of heavenly bodies. The appearance of Halley's Comet in April of this year found them disconcerted by thoughts of the impending Union of the South African States, and the possible inclusion therein of their territories. ("In view of," 1910)

Here, Plaatje attempts to present the evidence of cause and effect over many decades, but the tragedy is that, as the readers of the archive, over 100 years later, we have missed out on the recording of these "momentous events" that would have contributed to our knowledge and understanding of the wondrous spectacle. Also, before the deaths, the comet is seen as foretelling the impending doom that would befall the black races of South Africa with the establishment of the Union that would exclude them from the levers of political power. This can also be interpreted as death. It was tantamount to strangling them to death and reducing them to the "living dead" to borrow the expression from Achille Mbembe's (2019) idea of necropolitics. In this state, the Africans became victims of a contemporary form of subjugating life to the power of death (Mbembe, 2019). In the colonial context, sovereignty held the capacity to control the life and death of citizens by excluding them to the margins and leaving them in a status of social death, the very definition of Mbembe's necropower. It was in the obituaries that this social death was mitigated by the celebrations of exemplary lives.

5.1. A Cup, a Saucer, and a Horse Race

The obituaries studied contained some eccentric information about the deceased that humanizes them. It is recorded that when, on the trip to the UK in 1895, Chief Bathoeng noticed a fair-sized enameled cup and

saucer, he bought a sample and noted the address of the factory. When he was back at Kanye, he preached to his people and shopkeepers on the breakable nature of crockery and China, urging them instead to buy the durable enamel. He showed them the sample and shared the address for his traders to place orders and import stocks of the cup and saucer. As a modern chief who aspired to Western sensibilities, the cup and saucer story reveals a lot more than fashionable kitchen utensils but tells of a sophistication and a newness that, in the eyes of Bathoeng, would put his people on par with the whites in England. Taking tea from a cup and saucer is seen as a mark of superior etiquette and class in African societies to this day.

In Bikitsha's tribute, the reader acquires a sense of the high profile Bikitsha enjoyed. In his capacity as the principal mounted orderly for Sir Walter Currie, Bikitsha had accompanied Currie and Major Hook to Nomansland (Griqualand East) to settle the Griqua people of Adam Kok. While on that trip, Hook remembered how impressed and envious he was when Bikitsha and Currie mounted a special racehorse breed from Grahamstown and the two were in hot pursuit of the wildebeest on the Cedarville Flats with no one able to keep pace with them. Hook says Currie would swear at Bikitsha for being in the way in their escape from a lion which had emerged from some reeds, and "to save his dignity," he would respond in isiZulu which Currie could not understand. This joyous and playful scene depicted by Hook is a testament to Bikitsha's prowess, natural abilities, and talent. Furthermore, it shows off an unusual partnership of equals, instead of the expected superior and subordinate in a society obsessed with racial pecking order. Bikitsha had masterfully negotiated his place as a statesman who could stand shoulder to shoulder with the highest colonial offices in the land.

6. Discussion

These obituaries, written in the context of colonial and racial violence that undermined African indigenous systems, as observed in the concept of the living dead of Mbembe (2019) that privileged Western values at the expense of African practices, reflect a complex interplay between grief, memory, and identity construction. As set out in the aims, the study has examined how the early black press commemorated black excellence and inspired pride and located the obituary as a tool for collective memory and historical record.

The language observed in these obituaries is deeply influenced by cultural and cosmological beliefs. For instance, Plaatje's continued reference to Halley's Comet and its long-lasting effect on earthly living, in the obituaries from 1910 and subsequent years, indicates the connectedness of the African to cosmology even though he admits to it being a superstition. This celestial reference additionally serves to elevate the deceased's status, linking their lives to significant cosmic events and thereby reinforcing their importance within the global community.

The tributes also reveal a pattern of communal mourning and celebration. The communal gatherings around death allowed for the retelling of stories that inspired the living to achieve what the exemplary deceased had managed when they were still alive. This communal aspect of mourning is crucial in understanding how obituaries functioned as a form of resistance against colonial oppression. By celebrating the achievements of the deceased, the black press was able to assert the greatness of black individuals and counter the narrative of colonial injustice and oppression.

Furthermore, the obituaries serve as a form of historical record, preserving the memory of the deceased for future generations. This preservation of memory is not just about commemorating the deceased but also about asserting the significance of black contributions to society. The obituaries often include anecdotes and personal stories that highlight the deceased's unique qualities and achievements. These stories help to create a more intimate and relatable image of the deceased, which can resonate with the readers and strengthen their connection to the community.

The aspects of the texts that create a discourse around black excellence involve how these men managed to retain their influence and agency in the face of a racial onslaught. As chiefs and self-made leaders, they have inspired and set a standard for their people to follow.

7. Conclusion

The obituaries in the early twentieth-century black press were more than mere announcements of loss; they functioned as potent instruments for resistance, cultural affirmation, and the construction of a counter-history in colonial contexts. Through deliberate editorial choices and the strategic highlighting of accomplishments, these texts offered a corrective to colonial narratives, foregrounding black excellence and reinforcing communal identity at a time of acute systemic oppression. The process of entextualization, whereby fleeting oral memories are transformed into enduring printed narratives, is essential in preserving individual legacies and anchoring them within the collective memory.

These obituaries crafted idealized posthumous identities, celebrating moral character and perseverance, and embedding the deceased within a continuum of African achievement. The language employed, rich in metaphor and cultural allusion, served to humanize the departed, inspire future generations, and reinforce the connectedness of the living and the dead. Such memorialization, influenced by cosmological motifs and communal values, offered solace and continuity, situating grief within a broader social and spiritual framework.

However, this study also reveals notable limitations, particularly the gender imbalance in the obituaries examined—most celebrate male figures, and this reflects broader societal patterns of the period and highlights the need for further research. Expanding the scope to encompass a wider array of newspapers, regions, and time periods, as well as focusing on women's obituaries and the intersectionality of race, gender, and class, promises a more nuanced understanding of how black identities are constructed, preserved, and contested in the press.

Ultimately, early black press obituaries stand as crucial archival texts, not only commemorating lives lost but also actively shaping the contours of memory, identity, and resistance in the face of historical erasure. Continued scholarship in this domain is essential for illuminating the dynamic interplay between grief, memory, and the ongoing struggle for recognition and justice. Writing the deceased into history became a restorative act, embedding them in the social fabric and ensuring their achievements were preserved as sources of inspiration.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author

Lesley Mofokeng was a journalist for South African newspapers, namely *Sunday Times*, *City Press*, and *Sowetan*. He has authored several books and holds a PhD from Wits University where he teaches journalism. His thesis is on the form of Sol Plaatje's journalism and how it convened a Setswana public sphere.