

At Language's Edge

By Sabata-mpho Mokae (South Africa)

Arguably, the first African to translate Shakespeare's work into an African language was a South African writer, Sol T Plaatje, when he translated *Comedy of Errors* into the southern African language, Setswana. The title of this translation became 'Diphoshophosho', while the play *Julius Caesar* became 'Dintshontsho tsa bo-Juliuse Kesara'. Plaatje had been exposed to Shakespeare's work on stage in the town of Kimberley and felt that his people, who spoke Setswana, also deserved to be among Shakespeare's audiences.

However, scholars considered his translations to be adaptations rather than translations, which I think is a far better approach than merely transporting a story from one language to another. As 'adaptations', Plaatje's translations conveyed lived experiences, employing Setswana proverbs and idioms that were equivalent to Shakespeare's English phrases. As a result, Plaatje's readers, who lived in the town of Mafikeng in South Africa, would read his Setswana translations of Shakespeare and understand the stories in the context of their own traditions, rather than in Roman or Scottish ones. In fact, Plaatje highlighted how translations are first and foremost the conveyance of a lived experience to a new audience. I think we translate when we believe that a story deserves to reach a wider audience. The decision to translate is an endorsement of the original work.

But it is also a creative process. For example, in cases where Shakespeare used figures of speech, Plaatje would not merely translate them, but seek equivalents in Setswana. He also did this when compiling and translating into English almost one thousand Setswana proverbs. In this way, Plaatje illustrated his creativity through the titles for his Shakespearian translations. Being the first Setswana translator, Plaatje also blazed a new path on which many others later trod. This took place almost a century ago.

As a native Setswana speaker, Plaatje became a shining light to me when I began translating. For this, I picked one of southern Africa's earliest African language novels, Thomas Mofolo's *Moeti wa Bochabela* (Traveller to the East), which was published in the original Sesotho language by a missionary press in Lesotho in 1907. While all other translations of this work were into a European language, including many English versions, I was working on one between two African languages, Sesotho and Setswana.

The similarities between Sesotho and Setswana and my ability to speak both was an advantage when I worked on the Mofolo translation. Sesotho, which is spoken mainly in Lesotho and the Free State province of South Africa, is my father's language. Setswana, on the other hand, is the language spoken in the community in which I grew up. I was also formally taught the language in school. My reason for translating Mofolo's book into Setswana was to allow Setswana speakers access to a great story they had been missing out on. Setswana speakers are numerous, as the language is spoken in five southern African countries.

While waiting for the Mofolo translation to be published, I embarked on another translation project. I started translating George Orwell's *Animal Farm* into Setswana. I decided on this piece because Orwell's metaphor resonates a lot with what I am witnessing in governments around the world today. However, I aborted this project because translations in Africa are more than literary undertakings. They involve decisions regarding which stories deserve which platform.

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For instance, translating Orwell would make the story accessible to Setswana speakers alongside the English version, but since formal education and literature were brought to southern Africa by missionaries, I thought it was about time that translation be done the other way around. Instead of translating an English classic, I decided to identify a Setswana classic and translate it into English with the aim of globalising an African story and consequently, an “indigenous knowledge system”. In fact, the translation of classic African literature into European languages has the potential to facilitate a global understanding of African people’s lived experiences. The translation of stories from African languages could also enable foreign audiences to tap into African idioms and proverbs, which have been used as the bearers of historical and cultural knowledge for generations.