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UNRAVELLING SOME CONTRIBUTIONS OF MAJE SERUDU (1935-2021) TOWARDS THE NORTHERN SOTHO LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE: A HISTORICAL-BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The year 2021 shall be marked as mournful for the Northern Sotho language family as a whole. Emeritus Professor Majelele Steven Serudu's passing has indubitably left a major void in the language. His enormous contributions as a language teacher to full and emeritus professor are hard to overlook and should thus be documented in studies of this nature. In this article, we unravel some of his contributions to the development, recognition, and growth of the Northern Sotho language and literature. We do so by examining his work as a radio broadcaster, examiner, teacher, author, lecturer, translator, reviewer, and professor, as well as his membership in numerous language-related boards and committees. The article adopted a qualitative research approach to provide a comprehensive compilation of his works, and data were collected using the document analysis method. The data collected were analysed thematically. We conclude the article in two ways: by revealing Serudu's last concern about the death of language and by bringing to light the names of Northern Sotho language giants who share Serudu's line of work.

INTRODUCTION

Professor Maje Serudu has undoubtedly made significant contributions to both the Northern Sotho language and literature. His contribution was initially recognised when he began working as a presenter and producer at SABC (Radio Bantu) Northern Sotho Service until he retired as an emeritus professor. In the words of Nkomo (2015:11), his contribution is well expressed:

In 1975, UNISA offered him full-time employment in the Department of African Languages, and he focussed on developing and promoting Sesotho sa Leboa in both language and literature.

In our culture, we say “*Motho o tšerwe ke phiri*”, as a euphemism to politely say one has passed on. Maje Serudu passed on Monday, June 7, 2021 after a short illness at his home in Mamelodi, Gauteng Province, South Africa.

Who is Professor Maje Serudu

In tracing his originality, we are fortunate enough to read from his auto-biographed obituary, which read thus:

I, Mogwasha, Majelele, Steven Serudu was born on 30 July 1935 at the Village of Magatle’a Dikhungwane in the Sebetiela District of the town of Mokopane. I am the last child of Letsholo Nadinadi Maesela and Nkeko Raisibe Mahlase Sophie Serudu. I grew up in an environment in which most of children of my age had never attended school. I was already 11 years old when my father sent me to the local primary school, named Magatle Public Primary School, to go and learn about the art of reading and writing.

This is a short biographical information of Serudu. However, it will not be a talking point in this discussion. Our main objective in writing this paper is to convey our heartfelt gratitude to Prof Maje Serudu for his unsurpassed intellectual influence on our language and literature. We decided it was appropriate to honour his influence in the language with this type of output. Essentially, this is our tribute to the fallen literary and academic icon. Even though Serudu contributed significantly more to our literature than the language component, the two cannot be separated because literature is constructed on language. On the link between the two, Ratau (2021:17) asserts that literature and language are inseparable, like the nail and the finger.

It means that studying literature through the lens of language is more relevant, and vice versa. It is no surprise that we chose to honour Serudu's contributions to both language and literature in this work. Similarly, Sol Plaatje made significant contributions to Setswana linguistics (Makhudu, 2012). Makhudu reflects Plaatje's proverbs, translations, and other works, as well as language planning and development. Overall, this researcher widely examined Plaatje's linguistic contributions. This is what the present paper does as well, highlighting Serudu's linguistic and literary contributions to the Northern Sotho language.

Paper Structure

This paper will follow this structure: Introduction, Significance of the Study, Theoretical Framework, discussion and analysis, conclusion and list of references.

Significance of the Study

This article unravels the significance of Prof Maje Serudu towards the Northern Sotho language and literature. In doing so, we hope that the study will be immensely beneficial to anyone learning, teaching, studying, or researching the language. Future researchers will undoubtedly benefit from this article to fully comprehend the contributions made by this literary icon to the linguistic and literary fields.

Theoretical Framework

When reviewing a literary work, it is critical to consider the author's historical and biographical life to gain a complete grasp of their art. This will pave the way for understanding the relationship between the author's real life and their texts. The Historical-Biographical Approach as popularly endorsed by Guerin et al. (1966) is used to bring this type of study to its full potential. The theory emphasises the author's life and history, and in a nutshell, "the relationship that exists between the writer and his creations" (Boshego, 1998:26). According to Guerin et al. (1966:5), this approach takes into account "the author's life and times." This theory underpins the study in a way that the review of both Serudu's language and literature works speaks his real life and history. Mogoboya (2011:33) in this case asserts thus:

Through the texts, the author makes a contribution to the literary tradition of the time. Texts consolidate the author's life experiences in print. However, one of the key reasons we have chosen this approach is that Serudu made more contributions to literature than to linguistics. Serudu wrote about his real-life experiences in greater detail. The events in his texts reflect his own life, society, and nationality. His debut text is a striking depiction of how Black men were treated during South Africa's apartheid rule *Naga Ga Di Etelane* (1977).

Some of Prof. Maje Serudu's contributions towards the Northern Sotho language and literature

This section seeks to explore the works of Prof Maje Serudu. Since Serudu is like an elephant that is hard to bring down, this work does not, in any way, attempt to cover all of his contributions. However, attempts are made to unravel some of his literary and linguistic contributions which are difficult to overlook. It accomplishes this by demarcating the discussion into three parts: (a) what sparked his initial interest in the language, (b) his authorship outputs, and (c) how he contributed to academia.

His initial interests in the language

Serudu's early contributions to the Northern Sotho language may be traced back to his time as a teacher and at Radio Bantu. After receiving his teaching diploma at the then University College of the North (now the University of Limpopo) in 1960, he began working as a teacher at Wallmansthal High School in 1961. When one begins working as a teacher, they begin to feel the pressure to develop a passion in their specialised teaching area. We can convincingly argue that

Serudu's fondness for this language stems from his work as a language teacher. Serudu was employed at Wallmansthal for four years, until December 1965.

Nonetheless, his eager passion for language grew to a new level when he joined Radio Bantu on January 1, 1966, as an announcer, producer, and translator all at the same time. His work at SABC played a significant role in his realisation of the importance of language development. This is undoubtedly true because, among other things, he was tasked with reviewing, translating, and editing radio drama manuscripts. It was there that he discovered his talent and enthusiasm for writing and translating. This is demonstrated by the fact that he later in his life produced several plays and translated notable texts such as former President Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom (Leetotelele go ya Tokologong)*, Nigerian famous author Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart (Di Wele Makgolela)*, and the Republic of South Africa's Constitution, to name a few. Serudu at SABC was also reviewing Northern Sotho works prescribed for schools. This provided him with first-hand experience of how different authors produce their works to a better level of comprehension. The Northern Sotho Language Board saw fit to appoint him as a board member after he edited drama scripts and school books.

The Board's main function was to ensure the language's development and sustainability by editing manuscripts of emerging writers, developing rules guiding language, and orthographies, among other things. Serudu's interest in language expanded as a result of the various duties he performed at the Language Board. Serudu had undoubtedly gained and learnt a lot about language and literature by the time he left the SABC in 1973 to study Radio, Television, and Film studies in England (University of Bristol). This is undoubtedly why, upon his return from London in 1975, the University of South Africa did not hesitate to appoint him to the Department of African Languages, where he was teaching Northern Sotho.

The two things that shaped Serudu's first interest in language and literature are being a teacher and Radio duties. Regarding the latter, we can deduce that his contributions first appeared there (SABC). It is no surprise that when he returned from England, he began his authorship activism.

His authorship activism

Serudu primarily wrote plays and collected anthologies of poetry in his lifetime. His authorship advocacy began in 1977 when he first jotted his outstanding play, *Naga Ga Di Etelane* (Places Don't Visit Each Other). *Naga Ga Di Etelane* is without a doubt the play that has stood the test of time in the history of the Northern Sotho language. Serudu demonstrated all of his writing abilities in it, employing literary techniques such as complex plot, suspense, irony, satire, characterisation, symbolism, and escapism, to name a few. Among the literary texts produced in the language to date, this is without a doubt one of the most widely read.

However, it is important to note that many readers misunderstood the play's main theme. Many people see it as a text that addresses xenophobia as the main

theme, although this does not appear to be the case when seen through a critical lens. Makgopa (2013), writing about this play, reveals the factors that were propagating xenophobic attacks during the apartheid era and their effects, comparing them to current factors. He does not, however, elaborate on the underlying message. The truth is in it Serudu exposes the South African regime during the apartheid age. The time period in which he wrote the text is an important consideration. At the time, the apartheid regime banned texts that criticised its rule. Being cognizant of the phenomenon of the apartheid regime, authors resorted to 'camouflaging the message and smuggling it to their readers' (Mogale, 1993:76). In our case, Serudu is one such writer who was able to successfully conceal his message from publishers and critics. His main concern in *Naga Ga Di Etelane* was the apartheid regime's education system under the Bantu Education Act (Act no.47 of 1953). Poor education, which was systematically designed for the Black man, did not sit well with him. He says this through Mphaka's voice:

*Bana ba ka bona ke be ke tla ba lesa bjang
Ba enwa meetse a tsebo sedibeng se fatilwego ke bangwe?* (Serudu, 2011:13)

(How could I leave my children,
Drinking water from the fountain dug by OTHERS?)

In the extract above, Serudu criticises the curriculum, which was intentionally designed by Whites to colonise the Black child. This is reflected by the expression "*Sedibeng se fatilwego ke BANGWE*," which translates as Whites designed the education. According to Serudu, the Bantu education system was designed to capture and damage the Black man's psyche. Mphaka has the following to say about it:

*Ke tšhaba go šilaganywa le go fofatšwa kgopolo ke itebeletše
Ke boifa go hupetšwa sehutamoya sa moya wa ka;
Go hlalana le dikgopolo tša ka tše nanana.*

(I am terrified of being intellectually annihilated and blinded while conscious
I am frightened of being dispirited;
To be divorced from my little ideologies).

This is what Serudu was concerned about, the Bantu education system. The system compelled Mphaka to flee to other countries with the hope of receiving a better education. The underlying message of this play cannot be deciphered unless the time period in which it was written is carefully considered. Xenophobia serves as a subtheme in this text. It was done to blind-eye the critics while smuggling and presenting the main theme to the readers. Serudu went on to pen four more plays after *Naga Ga Di Etelane*. He wrote *Kelelagobedi* (1983), which also addresses the apartheid regime injustices. *Šaka la Pelo Ga Le Tlale* (1989) and *A mo swina ngwanana' thakana* (1991), which focus on love matters. Lastly, *Jo! Ke Morwaka!* (1993), reflecting and predicting the democratic successes and challenges.

Nkomo (2015) classifies Maje Serudu's other collections as follows:

- Matšwela* (1983), An anthology of poetry.
Sešegotheto (1989), An anthology of poetry.
Koketšatsebo (1989), A handbook of Sesotho sa Leboa.
Thagaletswalo (1989), A series of anthologies of poetry.
Ditšwamaphotomoyeng (1993), Radio plays broadcast by Radio Lebowa.
Direto le Meretelo ya Baswana (1994), A series of anthologies of poetry.
Mphufutšo wa bomakgona (1997), An anthology of one-act plays.
Dikgodišakgopolo (1997), An anthology of short stories.

Apart from these works, Serudu was fortunate to be given the opportunity to complete O.K. Matsepe's last novel, *Mahlatsa a Madimabe* (1981). He was the only person who thought Matsepe's text needed to be completed because he had read and studied more about him. Matsepe passed on before completing the novel in 1974. Serudu exhibited his literary prowess by finishing such a voluminous novel with a complex plot and characterisation. Serudu says in its introductory remarks:

Re lekile ka moo re ka kgonago go sekamolla mo le mola moo e bego e sekame, gomme re holofela gore le tla kgona go ipshina ka yona bjalo ka dipadi tše dingwe tša gagwe (*Mahlatsa a Madimabe*, 1981). (We have tried our best to make amends in areas that needed improvement, and we hope you will enjoy it like his other novels).

One aspect not to overlook is Serudu's efforts towards translating texts from English into Northern Sotho. He and his colleague Dr L.P Boshego were given a task to translate the English version of the Constitution of South Africa into Northern Sotho. This is where the two have shown their knowledge of law terminology. More notably, in 2001, Serudu translated former President Nelson Mandela's autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom* into Northern Sotho "*Leetotelele go ya Tokologong*". On that mammoth task, he was assisted by Boshego. Kanyane (2018) in her doctoral thesis investigated strategies used by Serudu when translating Mandela's autobiography. She found that Serudu used various figures of speech to domesticate the translation. This, we can certainly assert, shows Serudu's linguistic and cultural richness in the language.

Serudu further translated several texts into Northern Sotho, including Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*. In his obituary, he mentions having translated sixteen books from both English and Afrikaans into Northern Sotho. This reflects his knowledge of being multilingual, which is one of the recommended qualities for a translator or interpreter. Thus, Serudu was certainly "a translator in good standing". The government also asked him to translate *The Batho Pele* principle into Northern Sotho. This shows that the government also valued Serudu's experience and knowledge in the fields of linguistics and literature. Letlapa Mphahlele's autobiography, *Child of this Soil*, was also translated into Northern Sotho by Maje Serudu in 2010, titled "*Ngwana wa Mobu Wo*". Before he could meet his death, Serudu was looking at the translation of O.K. Matsepe's *Megokgo ya Bjoko* into English, *Tears of*

the Brain. We were awaiting his report on how he sees things, unfortunately, that could not happen.

Serudu also made a name for himself in the editing world. Although he quietly edited multiple literary volumes by both novice and experienced authors, he is best known for editing the final version of the Northern Sotho translation of the Bible, *Taba ye Botse*, in 2000. This could be one of the reasons he understood Matsepe's Biblical works so well.

His academia contribution

According to Lekgoathi (2009:584), Serudu left broadcasting for university lecturing; however, he does not specify the years or the cause for Serudu's movement. We learn that Serudu left the broadcasting industry in 1974 upon his return from England. In 1975, he joined the Department of African Languages at the University of South Africa. He lectured on both undergraduate and postgraduate studies, although his focus was on the latter.

About his professorship, he has the following to say about himself:

Ka 1991 ke ile ka hlatlošetšwa maamong a moporofesara. Maamong a ke hlahlile baithuti ba bantši kudu ba bongaka le ba MA bao e lego boratšhatšha bjale mafelong a bona a thuto (2011).

(In 1991, I was promoted to professorship. In this position, I supervised many doctoral and masters students who are now seniors at their academic institutions.)

In his obituary, he mentions that he supervised ten doctoral students. Among others are D.M Kgobe, M.L Bopape, N.S Mogale, L.P Boshego, and S.N.C Mokgoatsana. Some of these scholars are full professors at their institutions of higher learning and training. During his lecturing career, Serudu also served as an external examiner for various universities. He published extensively in several international academic journals, eventually serving as both a reviewer and an ombudsman for the *South African Journal of African Languages*. When he retired, the University of South Africa elected to recognise and honour his scholarly contributions by awarding him Emeritus Professorship status.

CONCLUSION

The paper emphasised the significance of Prof Maje Serudu in the development, recognition, and growth of the Northern Sotho language and literature. This paper will undoubtedly pave the way for future researchers to closely examine his works. In his words, Nkomo (2015:4) notes:

It is regrettable that very little has been written about Serudu besides being a prominent playwright in Sesotho sa Leboa. One can sometimes be tempted to argue that the Northern Sotho language is incomplete without Serudu. Serudu's last public appearance was in 2019 at The Ranch Hotel in Polokwane, when he was asked to give a presentation on the O.K. Matsepe Memorial Lecture. During

his presentation, he expressed concern about the relation of today's youth to indigenous languages. His outcry:

I wonder whether the children we are KGOWAFATŠING by kombing, minibusing and vanning to white schools in town will ever know what a proverb is in Sepedi... **Eja!** We are fighting a losing battle. Our efforts to change the mind-set of our people is fruitless (2019:15).

Serudu's most recent concern about the extinction of language came when he sent an email to one of Sepedi's authors, C.L. Mokwena. He told Mokoena that since he retired from UNISA in 1999, it seems he left with the language keys but no one is coming to take them. Period! This appears to be true to its sense. The reading of our African Indigenous Languages is drastically dying. This is shown with the recent publications in our languages wherein no youth seems to be interested in reading them. This article discussed some contributions made by the late Emeritus Professor Maje Serudu towards the development and growth of the Northern Sotho language and literature. As our people's saying goes "*motho ke sethokgwa, o ka se mo tsebe ka moka*" (A human being is like a forest, you cannot know him all), we hope we touched some of the important contributions he has made. The name of Maje Serudu reminds us of notable names like E.M Ramaila, P. Mamogobo, C.P Senyatsi, M.J Madiba, P.H.D Mashabela, P.C Mokgokong, O.K Matsepe, P.S Groenewald, S.A Makopo, A.M Motimele, H.M Lentsoane, M.J Mojalefa, S. Mokgoatšana, N.S Puleng and many more whose names have shaped the Northern Sotho language at all costs. The names of these giants, along with others, have helped shape Northern Sotho into the language it is today and will be in the future. As a result, we hope that their legacy, as well as that of Maje Serudu in our case, will be preserved by conducting significant research and extensively writing about them. Finally, we would like to culturally utter our last respect, *Tselatšhweu Pebetse'a Thomo le Mošopšadi!* (Go well, Pebetse of Thomo and Mošopšadi).

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