

“A Member of the Race”: Dr. Modiri Molema’s intellectual engagement with the Popular History of South Africa, 1912–1921

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In reconsidering the history of the African National Congress nearly a century after its founding, many figures stand out. This paper considers the writing life and contribution of an African intellectual who studiously and courageously subjected the concepts of race, culture and nationalism to critical evaluation. Modiri Molema, an intellectual only active politically from the 1920s, emerged as heir to the founding generation. He joined the SANNC in 1914, but did not participate in organisational politics until his return after seven years of studying medicine at Glasgow University. The paper shows how, from 1912–1921, Dr. Molema engaged with the history of South Africa as an intellectual, rather than as a popular politician. In 1920, his lengthy study of black South Africans, *The Bantu Past and Present* was published and took issue with existing, often racist, historical interpretations of the past. This paper examines *The Bantu* as a multi-layered text, voiced by a complex narrator, who moves from first-person to third-person narration, revealing how the author’s own identity was entangled with his subject. Molema used his standpoint knowledge as “a member of the race” whose story he “unfold[ed] to the world” in a form of cultural translation. His methodical collation and interpretation of the history and culture of black South Africans (from Stone Age to early twentieth century) was a controversial critique, being both heir to and conscientiously critical of nineteenth-century conceptions of race. Molema engaged with African culture and history not only as functions of racial heritage, but also as the products of contending ethnic and cultural politics. The paper finds him a progressive thinker, whose identification of urbanisation, migrancy and class division in the African population made his work a subtle, yet complex foundation of the Africanist tradition of history and ethnography in South Africa.