

‘The People and their Paper: Congresses, Classes, Chiefs, and Solidarities: a political and intellectual history of Abantu-Batho, 1912-1931’

Peter Limb¹

¹Michigan State University, History/Africana, East Lansing, United States

limb@msu.edu

The inaugural organ of the African National Congress, *Abantu-Batho* (‘The People’), was a major African newspaper in the period from the foundation of Congress in 1912 to the demise of the paper in 1931, and yet it is the most under-studied of all African newspapers of the day. In part, this reflects its **multi-lingual content** and its lost or hidden archive, only two successive years (1930-1) of which appear in libraries, the rest scattered in archives around Southern Africa and the world. My paper brings together many of these hitherto dispersed fragments to better chart the intellectual and political history of the newspaper and its editors. Established in 1912 by Congress convener, Pixley Seme, with the financial assistance of the Queen Regent of Swaziland, Labotsibeni, it attracted as editors and journalists the best of the rising African elite, including leading figures such as Saul Msane, Richard Selope Thema, Mwelik Skota, Cleopas Kunene, Robert Grendon, Daniel Letanka and Levi Mvabaza. In its pages, important themes of the day were articulated and new African solidarities explored and pronounced. South Africa was the focus of *Abantu-Batho* but it also had a regional and even international focus; it was supported in Swaziland, circulated in neighbouring countries such as then Rhodesia, and reported on wider movements including Garveyism in other African countries and the United States, and on nascent African nationalism, as in Kenya. I explore the complex intellectual, cultural, and political movements, individuals and identities that emerged across these spaces to provide clearer insights into South African political history and intellectual life. I link global-national-local forces by analyzing how elites and radicals absorbed, adapted and re-cast new ideas and forms of discourse and also networked with “ordinary” people to forge new social, ethnic, and political identities and African solidarities that strongly defended the rights of black people, from African traditional rulers to African women and workers.

