



From Edinburgh to Thaba Nchu – the stories of early black doctors in South Africa

It was in early 1960 when, as a young and relatively naïve first-year medical student, I travelled from Durban to the rural town of Thaba Nchu in the Orange Free State with a group of University of Natal students to attend a conference of the Students' Christian Association. In Thaba Nchu we were chuffed to be invited to the home and medical practice of Dr James Moroka, an iconic political leader and rural general practitioner. Dr Moroka had been president of the ANC from 1949 to 1952, but later fell out with the organisation over its Defiance Campaign of the 1950s, which he denounced as too radical. He was later to testify against his comrades at the trial that followed. Nelson Mandela excused him, saying Dr Moroka's actions were motivated not by malice but by the desire to protect his medical practice.

Two things struck me about this man. The first was his regal presence. He was tall, handsome, and as immaculately dressed as befitted a black Scotsman (Moroka had graduated MB ChB from Edinburgh back in 1918). Dr Moroka was a man of Victorian values and civility who 'cast a very long shadow' (the Zulu word for dignity is *isithunzi*, which literally means 'to cast a long shadow').

A descendent of the Barolong royal house and a proud MoSotho, Moroka nevertheless bore features – light-brown skin, coarse hair texture – attesting to past Voortrekker intrusion into his genealogy, which imparted a subtle if ironic resemblance to Hendrik Verwoerd. Back in the days of the Great Trek, King Moroka of the Barolong (Dr Moroka's ancestor) was a great friend of the Voortrekkers, whom he regarded as allies against the British, and Thaba Nchu soon became a safe haven and a favourite campsite for Boers migrating north from the Cape. It is therefore quite plausible that communion between the Voortrekkers and the Barolong did not remain confined to arms-length social pleasantries.

Dr Moroka was the ultimate raconteur who delighted in holding forth and, as we sat in his garden having tea and biscuits under the shade of a large tree, he soon had us mesmerised with stories of his career from Edinburgh to Thaba Nchu. Dr Moroka had a large white practice drawn from the neighbouring farming community – this at the very height of apartheid – and he made sure we noticed. 'The Boers from all around here all come to me,' he confided somewhat triumphantly, gesturing towards a group of white patients waiting patiently on his veranda benches. 'But don't feel rushed; I make them wait just like everyone else.' We were suitably impressed, but were soon to be deflated when we observed that his practice was segregated, with black patients waiting on their haunches in the blazing sun on the black side of the surgery.

The story of Dr James Moroka is typical of the early black doctors, who all qualified abroad for lack of training

opportunities here at home. Like Moroka, they returned home to be drawn into political leadership by virtue of their unique education and the prestige of overseas exposure, but then found themselves having to wrestle with the choice between political activism and the pursuit of a medical career. While the government, with the self-interested acquiescence of the white medical fraternity, deemed it inappropriate for black doctors to treat white patients, the latter – particularly the Afrikaners – had no such qualms and regularly consulted black doctors, going back to the days of Glasgow-trained Dr Abdullah Abdurahman who practised in Cape Town from 1895 to 1929.

The voluntary segregation of their practices was one dilemma these early doctors had to confront, although they may not have seen it as such. White patients paid higher fees (black patients often didn't pay at all), an ostensibly good enough reason to accord them favoured status. Back in Scotland where they were trained, they would have seen differentiated treatment for peasants and for the upper classes, and might therefore implicitly have come to accept segregation as par for the course.

The Scottish footprint

Starting with this issue and for the next few months, our 'History of Medicine' column will be devoted to tracking and documenting the histories of black South African doctors who qualified overseas in the 19th and early 20th centuries, from the colonial era right through to the early years of the Union of South Africa. The accounts will be more biographical than analytical, and are being published for the enjoyment of our readers as well as for archival purposes for the benefit of future researchers.

It is often said that South African education bears a Scottish footprint, in part because of the role played by Scots and Scottish missionaries in the establishment of educational systems and institutions in South Africa's colonial days. Nowhere is the Scottish footprint more apparent than in the training of early black doctors, most of whom qualified in Edinburgh after completing their secondary education at Scottish mission schools such as Lovedale in the Eastern Cape.

The stories on early black doctors are as much a history of medicine in South Africa as they are a tribute to the University of Edinburgh for its historic role in the making of these pioneering heroes.

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Editor

