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The politics of headmanship in the Mokhokhong Valley

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"THE POLITICS OF HEADMANSHIP IN THE MOKHOKHONG VALLEY."

by Paul Davitt

Submitted to satisfy the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Social Anthropology in the University of the Witwatersrand.

December 1969.

In accordance with Rule 4.25 (Faculty of Arts Prospectus, 1970, p. 22) I hereby declare

a) That I have received no assistance in the production of this thesis other than that specified in the acknowledgements and text.

b) That neither this thesis, nor any part of it, has been submitted for a degree in any university.

c) That during the production of this thesis I have been employed by the University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland.

CONTENTS.

	Page.
Acknowledgements.	1.
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION.	
Purpose of the Study.	2
Locus of the Study.	5
How the Research was carried out.	6
Plan of the Thesis.	13.
CHAPTER II. THE SETTING.	
Physical.	15
Resources.	19
1. Arable land.	19
2. Grazing.	21
3. Water.	22
4. Vegetation.	23
5. Building Materials.	24
Historical.	25
The Headmen.	47
The Growth of the Community.	59
CHAPTER III. KINSHIP AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION.	
Marriage and Migrancy.	68
The Position of Women.	74
Descent Groups.	77
Social Stratification.	83
CHAPTER IV. POLITICAL STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES.	
The Headman.	100
The *Lekhotlana*.	105
The *Pitso*.	109
The Judicial Process.	112

page.

CHAPTER V. THE GROWTH OF VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS AND WORKING COMMITTEES.

The Village Committees. 125

The Study Club. 128

The Boiyoge. 132

Innovation. 140

CHAPTER VI. POLITICS AND PROGRESS. 147

APPENDICES

Appendix I Placing. 179

Appendix II Allocating and Acquiring Land. 183

BIBLIOGRAPHY 199

MAPS

Map I. At end.

Map II. Facing p. 15

FIGURES

Figure I Total Arable Land by Crops. Facing p. 19

II The Agricultural Cycle. " 19

III Periods of Absence at Work in South Africa for Three Men. 73

IV Mabatho, Alexis and Martins. 166

GENEALOGIES

Genealogy I 'Mabathoana. 45

II Matumaneng Descent Group. 61

PLATES

The Ox-drawn Sledge. 17

Herdboy and his Cattle. 21

Bringing Home Firewood. 24

	Facing Page
A Stone Mason	25
Mabathe and Jobere.	52
Jobere Conducting a Road Gang.	53
Ha Mapetja.	60
Herbalist.	74
Elders of the Matumaneng Descent Group.	79
Court Hearing at Maqakalaneng.	113
Boipepe and Extension Agent.	135
Boipepe Meeting.	176

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Acting headman Agnes Mabatho 'Mabathoana who succeeded her husband in May 1968.

The community of Maiholehong ha Philipi, some three hundred people, among whom I made some friends which I hope to keep.

Michael Thoahlane'ele who loaned me his best hut and refused to accept any rent or direct compensation, although his need was often great.

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Mr. Gottfried Wellmer, a doctoral student of theology at Heidelberg University, at present carrying out research on the effects of labour migration on family life in Lesotho.

Mr. Joseph Tlhagale, a first year student in my department, who spent two months in the winter of 1969 taking a second census of Mokhotlong and collecting other material.

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION.

1. The Purpose of the Study.

My primary aim was to study the effects of the introduction of a set of agricultural innovations on the political system of a small and relatively traditional rural community. Previous experience in the field of rural development had taught me that the attempt to introduce economic innovations into rural villages is almost invariably resisted by certain local groups, and accepted by others. Although resistance is generally blamed by administrators, and by the people themselves, on party political factionalism, it seemed worth probing deeper to try to discover other sources of division and of unity.

Since local political processes almost invariably concern the headman, though he may not always be at their centre, he becomes a key figure in any study of this aspect of community activity. In addition the headman is still the main channel of communication between the community and the world outside, and as such is the public figure in the community when it deals with the government in matters of agricultural development. This rôle of spokesman has many political implications. For these reasons principally, this study is entitled "The Politics of Headmanship".

A secondary aim has been to contribute to the ethnographic record of Lesotho. I have, however, included only that material which I have considered necessary as a background to my central theme - the micro-political process in

Mokhokhong over the period of study.

2. The Locus of the Study.

Mokhokhong ha Philip comprises four villages in the Mokhokhong Valley and contains about three hundred people. The villages fall under one headman and their residential and arable territory form a continuous block which is bounded by high cliffs on three sides and a river on the fourth. These features provide sharp geographical boundaries to the community. The population is small enough to permit reasonably intensive research and close personal relations, but large enough to form a functioning political unit. Three of the villages have existed since the time of Moshoeshoe I, founder of the Basotho nation, over one hundred years ago, and the original families have remained and intermarried. The fourth village is mainly occupied by the younger sons and relatives of the people living in the other three villages.

Cross-cousin and occasional patrilineal parallel cousin marriage are practised and contribute towards the consolidation of kinship networks. Sons expect to inherit their father's lands and to settle near his homestead. Disputes in the villages may be settled at the headman's court, and a forthcoming session or meeting is heralded by a man with a strong voice, who announces the event to the four villages at sunset from a centrally situated rock.

Ambrosius writes (1967:138),

> "...the simplest solution is to define a community by referring to its spatial and sociological dimensions, as a place which has a clearly defined locality and also some sort of community sentiment. It is the least reducible universe of cause and effect of social relations - if it were smaller, there would be insufficient variables for analysis, and if it were larger it would be unmanageable."

Mokhokhong's boundaries are delineated both geographically and sociologically, and seem to satisfy Brokensha's requirements.

It is not possible to generalise for other communities in Lesotho from this study. I do not know and have no way of telling, other than by doing further detailed research, how far Mokhokhong may be regarded as typical for Lesotho foothills communities. I have tried to prevent this from becoming a study of what might appear to be a unique and isolated enclave by tracing historical ties which connect Mokhokhong ha Philipi with other communities, and also by showing how the community is influenced by the wider economic and political forces at large in Lesotho. Other communities are subject to many of the same influences. Also the relatively uniform traditional Basotho culture and social structure, and comparisons with the few other studies made of the Basotho, now mainly out of date, give me no reason to regard Mokhokhong as very atypic.

3. How the Research was Carried Out.

The selection of my research community was determined by several factors. It had to be near the university where

I work because, not being able to spend long periods in residence there, I had to visit it frequently. But it should not be so near to the centre of employment and cosmopolitan culture in the Roma valley that it had become radically different from other village communities which had not been so influenced. It should be a functioning 'community' and not an artificial segment of one, and yet not too large to handle with my limited research resources. It should be in a relatively stable state, or at least not undergoing unusually rapid change due to some crisis or development project, so that the effect of the introduction of agricultural innovations should not be lost among other uncontrollable influences on the community. It had to have a reasonably promising agricultural potential in order for the intended innovations to take root. And it had to be fairly clearly demarcated from neighbouring communities so that spatial and sociological limitation of the study community should not be too complicated.

I stated these requirements to several local acquaintances and one of them offered to take me to his brother-in-law who was headman of what he asserted would be the ideal community for my purposes. And that is how I came to be introduced to Jobere 'Mabathoana, headman of Mokholchong ha Philipi, whose community was all I had hoped for.

I started work in July 1967 and from the outset was assisted by a number of interested volunteers. Miss Spencer-Smith was waiting to enter a university to study social anthropology. She worked very methodically on the collection

of genealogies. Her interpreter is the daughter of a senior member of the strongest descent group in Nokhokhong, and is therefore very well informed on local matters. They visited about 75% of the families in the community. Later, using other interpreters, she spent about six weeks gathering information on bohali (bridewealth), especially on the economic aspect. On both occasions she used structured interviews supplemented by informal conversation, and, for the bohali work she participated in the marriage negotiations and rites.

Miss Cock arrived in December 1967 to do her vacation project in Nokhokhong. For five weeks she attended all the weekly Club meetings and interviewed all the members at their homes. She used an interview guide and in slightly modified form she used this for interviews with ex-members and non-members as well. Her interpreter, the same person who had worked for Miss Spencer-Smith, was also the secretary of the Study Club. Through her Miss Cok had full access to all the minutes of the Club's meetings, and these provided a mass of information about the Club's development. There were also revealing records in the minutes of conflict and co-operation between groups and personalities, much of which had a direct bearing on the political processes at work in the community.

Mrs. Mormand set out to investigate the domestic economy of representative families in Nokhokhong. She selected twenty five families, distributed among the four villages in proportion to the population of each. Using the more obvious

criteria of wealth such as number of huts, stock, domestic objects, job of husband, etcetera, she tried to include in her sample families of low, middle and high economic status. She interviewed each family at length with a form on which she recorded income, expenditure, debt, credit, capital goods and other possessions. The results of this survey were inconclusive. We had intended to gain detailed and accurate records of the economic life of these families. But very few of the interviewees could provide the information we wanted. Crop yields, quantities of food bought and sold, money received and paid, and so on, were seldom stated in any but the vaguest terms.

Dr. Stevens was looking for a suitable community in which to conduct a land use study. At my suggestion he came to work at Nokhokhong. The headman was pleased to allow him to do so, as he felt that Dr. Stevens's findings, and especially his maps, would be of use in local administration. Dr. Stevens had aerial photos made of the whole valley and from these constructed detailed maps showing every field and every hut. He calculated the area of each field and of each farmer's holding (holdings are normally fragmented into several fields which are not adjacent), plotted soil types, slopes, crops planted, and degree of weed infestation. I had full access to his data.

Mr. Wellmer spent some three months in Nokhokhong interviewing migrants, ex-migrants and their families. He collected approximately sixty five case histories and considerable data on the effects of migrancy on family life, to all

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of which I had access.

Mr. Tlhagale concentrated on the Farmers' Association. He interviewed all of the members individually using a detailed interview guide, he attended all the meetings of the Association and helped people frequently in their agricultural tasks. In this way he acquired a considerable insight into the workings of the Association and into the tensions which obstructed the fulfilment of its original promise of general co-operation among the members.

My own activities were deliberately very diverse in the first six months of the research period. [illegible]cint of visiting virtually everyone at their houses [illegible]s to become acquainted, and attended beer drinks, public meetings of all kinds, gatherings of kin, funerals, court cases, wedding feasts, and so on. I made maximum use of a few informants who were willing to talk, gossip and scandal. I worked in the fields, helped mend broken implements, worked in road gangs under the headman's direction, and generally cast my net as wide as possible. This was the period during which I was searching for ideas, hypotheses, and areas of special interest to concentrate on later.

For the first year other commitments prevented me from staying for more than a few days at a time actually in the village, and most of my work was done on day long or weekend visits. Saturdays became my most important research times. During the week the villages are very often almost deserted as people are either out working in the fields,

collecting firewood, visiting, fetching water, or at various jobs outside the valley. Saturday, however, is the day when most people are at home or gathered at the headman's place to attend a pitso (public meeting) or a court case. The most important events by far from the point of view of gaining information and insight were the court hearings. I attended about thirty and got information from the headman and concerned parties on about twenty more. For the last year a large part of my time was spent in following up leads gained from court hearings. In the winter of 1968 I spent about six weeks resident in Nokhokhong, my longest single period. This was immediately after the death of headman Jobere 'Mabathoana and the succession of his wife to the headmanship. This was a troubled period for her as she strove to pick up the strings of control relinquished by her husband, and she relied fairly heavily on me for advice, initially on domestic economic problems, then on political problems of the headmanship, and finally on the establishment and management of the new Farmers' Association, which was also very largely a political problem. This involvement in the day to day business of conducting the headmanship gave me a fair understanding of the practical issues involved.

The people of Nokhokhong speak very often about their poverty and the economic hardships they undergo. Allowing for the fact that this preoccupation may have been partly a result of their talking to, or in the presence of, a relatively affluent white man, poverty is undoubtedly a prominent feature of life in Nokhokhong. People fear starvation

and although I have known no-one actually to die of hunger, some people, and especially children, are constantly hungry for large parts of the year, and suffer from diseases and conditions which are probably brought on by malnutrition or under-feeding. Accordingly I spent a very large part of my time investigating economic factors: land tenure, farming methods, stock keeping, buying and selling food, the organisation of work, small enterprises, self-employment, the economics of bohali.

For the limited purposes of this analysis, the coverage, the depth and the representativeness of my data seem to me adequate. Much of the data collected I have hardly used because it is not centrally related to an understanding of the 'politics of headmanship', although at the time I, or my associates, collected it, it seemed to be of great relevance. Examples of this are detailed information on the organisation and economics of agriculture and of bohali, and also on witchcraft accusations. In a longer work this material might well have been incorporated, but it can be dispensed with for the purposes of this thesis. On the other hand, the wide coverage of the research has reduced the likelihood that I have omitted any important areas of investigation. Secondly, I would have liked to have pursued the analysis of court cases more deeply than I was able to do. Ideally each of the parties together with their supporters should have been interviewed after the hearing. This would have provided a more detailed insight into the changing pattern of alignments within the community than I have in fact been able to attain. Finally, where I have made generalisations

I have tried to ensure that these are based on adequate samples covering the range of variation in the field. I generally indicate in the text the representativeness of my observations.

4. The Plan of the Thesis.

I have already suggested that the headmanship is a focal institution in the political life of the community and for this reason forms the central theme of this study. But the alignments and the political behaviour of the headman with respect to various groups within the community are often incomprehensible without reference to historical circumstances. I have therefore given a brief history of the major political events in the valley.

The people of Mekhokhong are preoccupied with economic matters. Almost all major decisions are powerfully influenced by economic constraints, and the patterns of most people's lives are determined by their relationship with local resources. Furthermore, given the rather rudimentary development of control over the environment and of transportation, geographical features are also influential determinants of human behaviour. Therefore I have included descriptions of the physical environment and of the major resources. This historical and environmental material is contained in Chapter II.

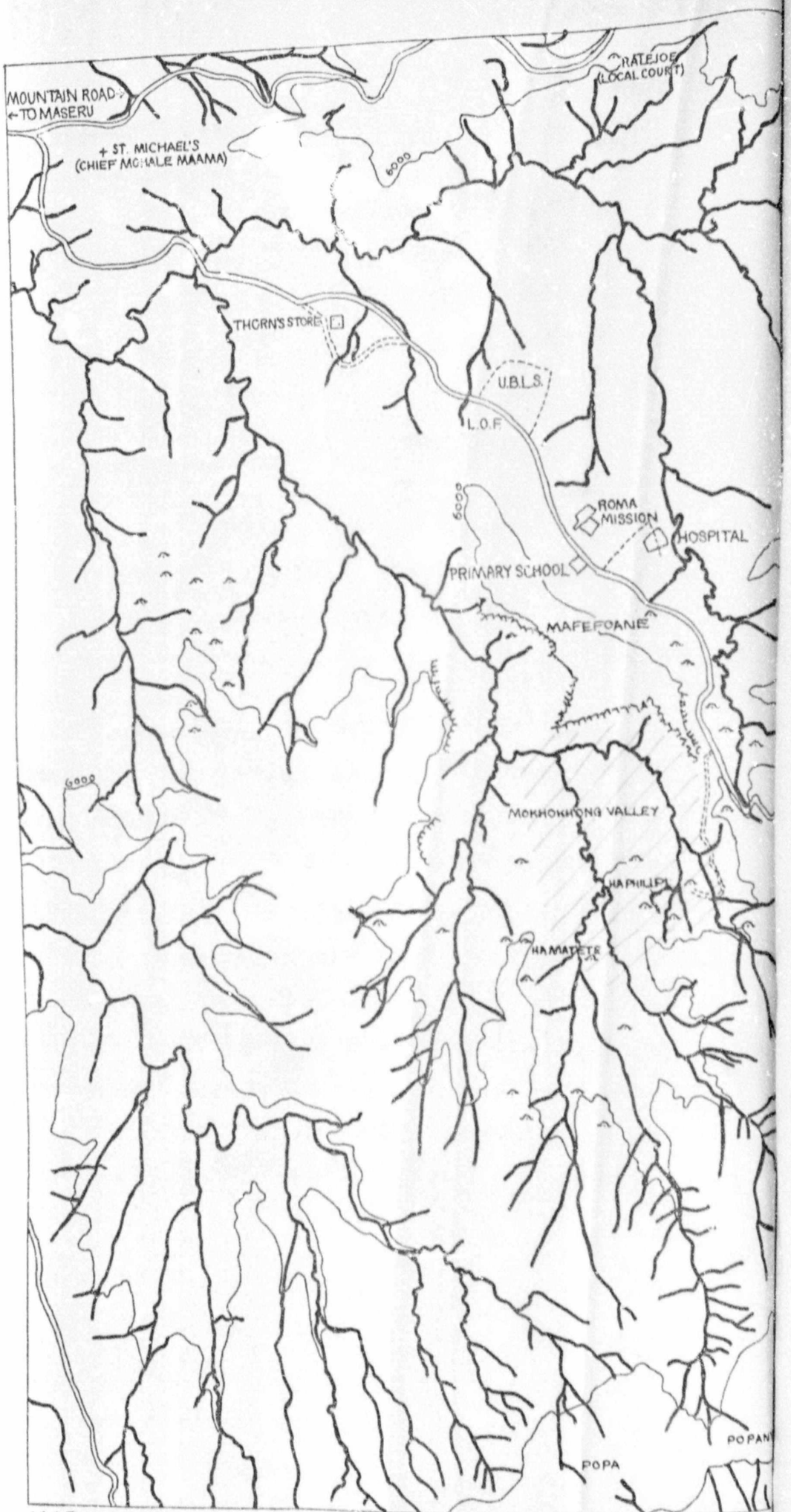
In Chapter III I discuss certain of the cardinal features of the social organisation of the community under the

general headings of kinship, migrancy and stratification. This provides the social and cultural setting which, together with Chapter II, is intended as background to the more specific discussions which follow.

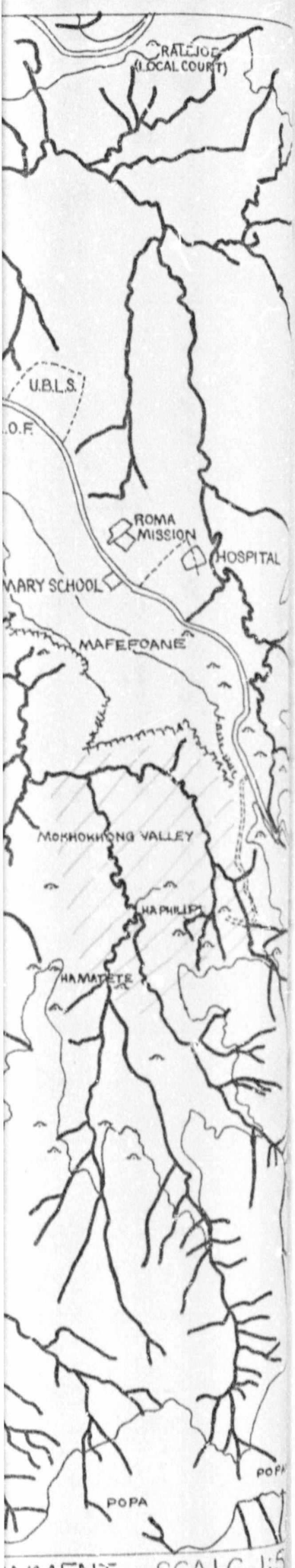
Chapter IV provides a detailed description of the headmanship as an institution, the village council, the working of the headman's court, and kitsos (public meetings).

Chapter V deals with the development of new institutions. Chief among these is the Farmers' Association which was used by the headman as a political vehicle.

Chapter VI is a description and analysis of the new headman's political problems and her attempts to solve them. There is no neat conclusion because at the time of writing the political struggle persists. I have tried to identify the major interest groups in the community and to show how these interact with one another, and how alignments change in differing circumstances.



MAP 2 : MOKHOKHONG AND ENVIRONMENT. SCALE 1:50



CHAPTER II. THE SETTING.

Physical.

Lesotho's 11,700 square miles is entirely surrounded by the Republic of South Africa. Of this area approximately two thirds is extremely mountainous and largely unsuitable for permanent human habitation. The rest of the country comprises 'lowlands' and 'foothills'. Fifty percent of the total population lives on the lowlands, some twenty percent in the foothills, and thirty percent in the more habitable parts of the mountains.

The Mokhokhong Valley is about twenty five miles from the capital, Maseru, and four miles from the univereity. The valley floor is about 5,500 feet above sea level and the cliffs surrounding it rise another 500 to 800 feet. Rainfall is an average thirty six inches per annum, but is extremely erratic. Summer temperatures range up to about 38°C while in winter sub-zero temperatures are not uncommon for short spells and snow is expected every two or three years. The foothills are especially prone to early frosts which may kill off localised patches of crops from late February onwards. Damaging hail is not common but is always feared.

The valley floor contains good alluvial soils but the acute pressure on arable land has forced farmers to plough the slopes. Here the soil becomes progressively thinner, more stoney and weaker in structure, so that erosion is extremely rapid despite numerous contour banks. On the high-

er slopes, where there are no f[illegible]s, erosion is equally serious due to constant overgrazing and cutting of trees and bushes for firewood which has depleted the vegetation cover of the soil. Even on the valley floor several massive donga have formed - sometimes as large as thirty feet deep by one hundred feet wide.

The valley is divided by a perennial stream, the Mokhokhong River, which marks the much-disputed boundary between two chiefs (see page 39). The term Mokhokhong, especially when used by people who live elsewhere in Lesotho, refers to a large area which includes this valley, a part of the neighbouring Roma Valley and a large section of the high plateau to the south of the Mokhokhong Valley. Locals use Mokhokhong to refer to the valley itself, including both sides of the stream: they call the eastern portion Mokhokhong ha Philipi and the western portion Mokhokhong ha Ramane[x], after the sons of the first headman. He divided the valley between his sons, with the river separating them. For the sake of brevity I use Mokhokhong to refer to the eastern portion, which includes the four villages under one headman, where I carried out my research.

---

x This area is also, and more frequently, known as ha Matete after the present chief who resides there. The prefix 'ha' means 'the place of...'. (The suffix '....ng' is also a locative.)



THE OX-DRAWN SLEDGE.

The valley is bounded on all s
stone cliffs or steep rocky slopes.
gives exit to the river and a route f
abuts the road which connects the v
world. Several footpaths from villa
run through the valley and convey a co
way to town or beyond, and to Nkamba.

Transport is becoming increasingly
inhabitants of the valley as their ma
world grows. The road connecting Ba
FT 040
facing page 1+6 with the main road to
built by the people of Ndabibenga and
mabenga. It is possible in a normal
wagons will not enter the valley for f
implements on this road. Under the s
leaders, Johnny Ndambuwa, the road
maintained by voluntary work parties
at an appeal by Johnny. Since this de
little maintenance has been done. The
wooded valley in Ndabibenga to Ndiga
cycle, now defunct, and a few wheelbarrows
2
Outside there is/small shop known locally
once a week or so in the small trade.
mention also visits his farm in Ba Ndab
leaves his car at Kapalalenga.

The normal modes of transport in
for grain and soft builders harvest, i
wooden sledges drawn by oxen, four t

The valley is bounded on all sides by vertical sandstone cliffs or steep rocky slopes. A gap to the north gives exit to the river and a neck in the north-east ridge admits the road which connects the valley with the outside world. Several footpaths from villages to the south-west run through the valley and carry a stream of people on their way to Roma or beyond, and to Maseru.



Transport is becoming increasingly problematic for the inhabitants of the valley as their contact with the outside world grows. The road connecting Ntsekalaneng (see map AT END ~~facing page 203~~) with the main road to the south-east was built by the people of Nokholchong assisted by government machinery. It is passable in a normal car but some tractor owners will not enter the valley for fear of damaging their implements on this road. Under the régime of the previous headman, Jobere 'Nabathoana, the road was reasonably well maintained by voluntary work parties recruited on the basis of an appeal by Jobere. Since his death in April 1968 little maintenance has been done. There is, in fact, no wheeled vehicle in Nokholchong ha Philipi other than a bicycle, now defunct, and a few wheelbarrows. But in ha Matete there is a small shop whose owner brings provisions once a week or so in his small truck. The Minister of Education also visits his home in ha Matete every week and leaves his car at Ntsekalaneng.

The normal modes of transport in Nokholchong are donkeys, for grain and soft bundles; horses, for people and food; and wooden sledges drawn by oxen, for bulky, heavy or awkward

burdens like two hundred pound bags of maize or ploughs. Buses run on the main road and are used by people going to Maseru.

The Roma valley offers many services and amenities which are an integral part of the life of the people of Mokhokhong. There is a modern hospital where people go when local remedies have failed or when the complaint is acute; there are Catholic mission schools from the lowest grade to 'O levels'; there is the Catholic mission, established more than one hundred years ago, which is a major social centre for the predominantly Catholic inhabitants of Mokhokhong; there is the village of ha Mafefoane where many well-stocked locally owned stores, beer shops and other carnal pleasures attract people from the valley; there is a post office, a police station, and the house of the local agricultural extension agent; there is the university where one young man from Mokhokhong is a second year student; and there is the so-called Lesotho Observatory Foundation, from which some people of Mokhokhong have in the past hired a tractor. A little further away is the large European-owned store, Thorn's, where grain is bought, sold and milled, and where virtually all necessities can be purchased. At the northern extremity of the Roma Valley lives the ward chief Ntsama who is responsible for a large region including Mokhokhong. Finally, there is the Local Court at Mafeje, not far from the chief's place, where serious criminal and civil cases may be brought and where judgments are, at least in principle, enforceable by the state.

FIG. I TOTAL ARABLE LAND BY CROPS (MARCH 1968)

(Following Dr. Stevens' measurements)

MAIZE — 144.62 acres

SORGHUM — 50.17 acres

WHEAT (summer) — 2.81 acres

BEANS — 4.65 acres

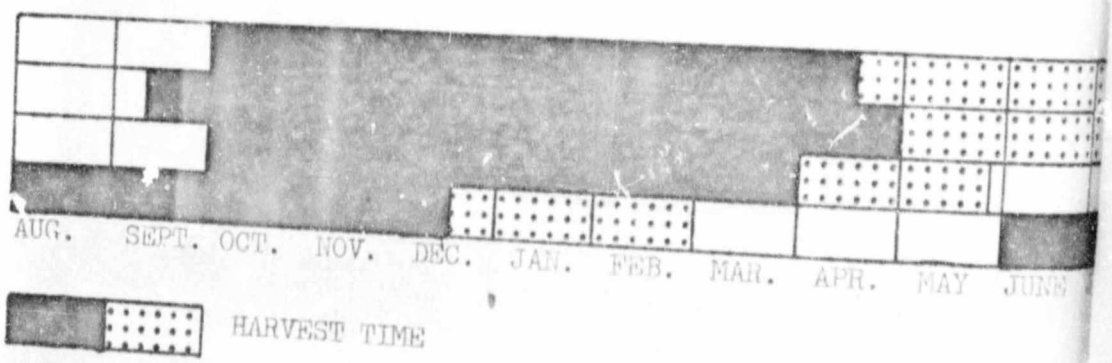
PEAS — 5.81 acres

SUNFLOWER — 2.9[illegible] acres

FALLOW — 14.35 acres

(Fallow does not necessarily mean that the farmer is deliberately resting his land. Some had winter wheat on it, now harvested; some belonged to people who had not been able to plough and plant it in time.)

FIG. II THE AGRICULTURAL CYCLE



Notes:

The growing season, measured from planting to the time when the cr[illegible] are biologically mature, may range from 90 days for some quick gro[illegible] maize varieties to 130 days for some types of sorghum. However, reaping may be delayed by the wetness of the crop. This may be o[illegible] come by reaping the heads of cereal as they mature and drying them home before threshing them.
Green maize is being eaten as early as January and even December i[illegible] crop was planted early.

Resources.

1. Arable Land:[M]

The total acreage under plough in Mokhokhong Valley in January 1968 was 225.35 acres. Of this area 41.61 acres were being ploughed by Matete and his people from over the river. A further 16.85 acres was ploughed by seven men who, although subjects of Jobere 'Mabathoana, did not live in Mokhokhong but in villages on the plateau to the south and east of the valley. Thus 166.89 acres remained for the use of the people of Mokhokhong ha Philipi.

This was divided among fifty four land holders, giving an average of 3.1 acres per land holder. The distribution of land among household heads was, however, by no means even, and ranged from nothing at all to eleven acres per household.

The soils of the valley floor and slopes are highly variable in type. The lowest areas, being adjacent to the river banks are generally comprised of dense black clays which are subject to waterlogging after heavy rains and which bake hard in dry periods. In spite of these mechanical attributes, however, these soils are more productive than other types in the valley since they retain water and do not leach so easily. They are unfortunately difficult to work, while a luxuriant growth of reeds and other water plants compete heavily with the crops. Further away from the

---

M The measurements given here are from Dr. Richard Stevens's land use survey.

rivers are native hoes of good shape
are potentially very productive but are
plotted of loose and mineral constituents.
loose waste, of course, from heavy rain
light near the higher slopes. Portions
the valley's arable land is comprised of
higher slopes on the south and east sides
a light grey sandy soil, which washes
having a very loose structure and consists
light wooden in these areas has rotted
soil from the surface and exposed the
in some places, and it is this characteristic
kittens of a number of farmers fields.
Tukuzung contains light red, dusty soil
and almost purple soils which are very
lately decomposed shales. There are
productive soils of the whole valley,
ding is not out of use. After a year
fallow they may return to more productive
In places they appear to suffer drought
about six inches a year.

The villages, as may be seen from
are situated on the slopes of the
valley. This area is partly swampy,
to enclose a small garden near their
custom also in Lalimba.

Unless a system of terracing
introduced it is not only unlikely



PLOUGHING.

rivers are medium loams of good structure. These soils are potentially very productive but are now severely depleted of humus and mineral content. The density of these loams varies, of course, from heavy near the black clays, to light near the higher slopes. Fortunately a major part of the valley's arable land is comprised of this loam. The higher slopes on the south and east sides of the valley have a light grey sandy soil, which erodes extremely easily, having a very loose structure and scarcely any humus content. Rapid erosion in these areas has stripped the top layers of soil from the surface and exposed the near sterile sub-soil in some places, and it is this wherein the agricultural ambitions of a number of farmers lie. The ridge below Thotaneng contains light red, dusty soils and on the west some almost purple soils which are very recently and incompletely decomposed shales. These are probably the least productive soils of the whole valley. They are continually going in and out of use. After a period of several years' fallow they may return to more productivity after one season. In places they appear to suffer sheet erosion at a rate of about six inches a year.



The villages, as may be seen from the map ~~facing page~~ AT END 203, are situated on the slopes at the southern end of the valley. This area is pretty rocky, but most people manage to enclose a small garden near their houses. The average garden size is 0.1 acre.

Unless a system of terraces for the higher slopes is introduced it is extremely unlikely that the extent of arable

land can be increased, for eventually every
is ploughed. On the other hand, the
is diminishing, both in area and in depth
is advancing rapidly as fuelwood is cut
is cultivated by the community.

1. Grazing

In summer the slopes which are too
used for grazing. The grassy plateaux and
fields may also be used for this purpose
are up. A number of people take their
plateau to the south and graze them there.
owners and their animals stay in different
the mountains.

The grazing in the valley is usually
to graze, especially near the villages
as bush or as above the ground. Grass
extent on the southern slopes of the
that from the villages and houses have
boys. Bushes on the slopes provide
for goats.

The grazing is generally sweet,
winter, but some large areas are
grass which is very unpalatable.
in the next overgrazed slopes near
soil is completely bare over several
these spots erosion is very rapid.



HERDBOY AND HIS CATTLE RETURNING HOME IN THE EVENING.

Author Devitt Paul
Name of thesis The Politics Of Headmanship In The Mokhokhong Valley. 1969

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