

https://dspace.org/

No chief, no exchange, no story

Hofmeyr, Isabel

1989-09
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/8773

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

A F R I C A N S T U D I E S I N S T I T U T E

African Studies Seminar Paper
to be presented in RW
4.00pm SEPTEMBER 1989

Title: No Chief, No Exchange, No Story.

by: Isabel Hofmeyr

No. 261

NO CHIEF, NO EXCHANGE, NO STORY[1]

When God blessed Noah and made a covenant with him, he was bringing to an end one of the more famous interregnum narratives we know. Such stories of communities in life-threatening predicaments are, of course, commonplace. If, however, one wants examples nearer home, then the nineteenth-century Transvaal would be a good place to start. In addition to the ever-present aggression of natural disasters came waves of conquerors, first Ndebele, then Boer, then British each wielding an increasing military might. Under these circumstances, many societies experienced deepened demographic disaster as well as crises of leadership. It is such situations that stories of interregna classically envelop.

If one agrees with Levi-Strauss,[2] that certain oral forms do not store information so much as methods of knowing, then these interregnum accounts are indeed remarkable human testimonies. In the face of annihilation, they aver agreement and covenant-making. In the face of disaster, they affirm the possibility of prestation. At bottom, then, they hold that there can be no knowledge without exchange. However, most interregnum narratives append one crucial precondition to these ideas of prestation. Meaningful exchange, they maintain, only becomes possible under a principle of

---

[1] The raw material used in the first section of this paper formed the basis for part of a previous paper, "Narrative and Oral History", delivered at the African Studies Institute Seminar last year. The interpretation offered here is, however, a very different one which, I hope, remedies the manifest problems of the earlier paper.
My thanks to Edwin Nyatlo, Felix Malunga, Debra Nails, Samuel Makhama, Caroline Mashao, Ulrike Kistner, Hannah Schulze and Tim Couzens who all helped to set up interviews for me. My thanks as well to Peter Lekgoathi both for his meticulous transcription and translation and for undertaking interviews.

[2] C. Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966), p. 16.

patriarchal authority that organizes the world of these stories. Or as a Tswana proverbs puts it, "In a country without a chief, chaos prevails."

Now in one sense Noah had it easy. Unlike nineteenth-century Transvaal communities, he had only a cantankerous Old Testament God to assuage. Those in the Transvaal had the Boers and an entirely novel situation with which to deal. Those societies that felt the brunt of Boer incursions most heavily confronted a predicament in which the ideas of chieftancy and exchange appeared to be in jeopardy. Here after all was another 'lineage' that had scant regard for chiefs and thought nothing of flogging them in public.[3] Exchange of any kind with these "murderers and robbers"[4] also at times seemed impossible.

The implications of such a situation are, of course, far-reaching not least of all for oral history itself. The very marrow of all 'traditional' history involves the type of patriarchal exchanges that can be contracted between lineages or other types of social groups imagined in their image. Its most basic "explanatory cell",[5] its irreducible unit of plot consistently explores the range of possibilities by which such groups may be linked. Much as contemporary history cannot be imagined outside a rise-and-fall model, so 'traditional' history was unthinkable beyond the template of patriarchal exchange. If such exchange between 'lineages' comes into question, so too does much storytelling. Without exchange, there is nothing to tell.

---

[3] The praises of chiefs often record the memory of such episodes. See, for example, the praises of Kgamanyane in I. Schapera, (tr. and ed.), *Praise Poems of Tswana Chiefs* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 65-78.

[4] Phrase from *Berliner Missionsberichte* (BMB), 6, 1865, p. 103. My thanks to Syrith Hofmeyr for this and subsequent translations.

[5] C. Levi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (London and Harley, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 39.

The people to whom this problem would have appeared most acute, would he those whose business it was to know and create chiefly history. Operating in a predicament of decreasing reciprocity and unequal exchange, these men had to sharpen the craft of narrating defeat with dignity. It was a craft often outstripped by circumstances. What after all does one say of a situation in which a native commissioner, appropriately named King, despatches the incumbent chief to a Pretoria lunatic asylum and then takes up residence in the chief's courtyard proclaiming, "Kgoši ke nna."?(I am the chief.)[6] How does one narrate a world in which the thread of chieftancy, a key metaphor of civilization itself, could be snapped with apparent ease? Much oral history that talks of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century can be read as a response to this question and not surprisingly much of this oral history stands as a series of retrospectives on near apocalypse.

It is with the oral account of one quiet apocalypse that this paper is concerned. This micro-upheaval involved the cave of Gwaša or Makapansgat siege of 1854 when the Boers and their Kgatla allies besieged an Ndebele/Sotho community in a cave. The three week siege, during which several thousand people died, had been precipitated by the murder of several Boers. In outline, it is a story which forcefully foregrounds the issues listed above in so far as it ineluctably poses the question: what possible forms of exchange can one enter into with people who bury others alive?

In some senses it is still this question which animates contemporary tellings of the story which differ little from the accounts of the episode that have been recorded at various intervals since 1854.[7] But by talking of nineteenth-

---

[6] A.O. Jackson, *The Ndebele of Langa*, Republic of South Africa, Department of Co-operation and Development, Ethnological Publication No. 54, (Pretoria, Government Printer, n.d.), p. 59.

[7] Shortly after the episode, various accounts of the incident began to appear in the Free State and Transvaal press. See for example, "Latest

and twentieth-century oral history in one breathe, I am not implying that what we hear today has come down to us through an agentless and unproblematic transmission. As Cohen and others have pointed out, oral 'traditions' are

> less arcane survivals of an oral past than the lively and ever-functioning intelligence upon which society and man rest. The transmission of historical information is not along orderly chains of transmission but across and through the complex networks of relationship, association and contact that constitute social life.[8]

Intelligence from the South African Republic" and "Transvaal Proceedings" both in *The Friend*, 23/12/54 and 21/7/1855 respectively. From the 1860s, travellers and missionaries began to produce accounts that were extremely critical of the Boers. In 1868 a German missionary, T. Wangemann visited the cave and wrote up an account of the incident in *Ein Reise-Jahr in Sud-Afrika* (Berlin, Missionshauses, 1868), pp. 455-60. At much the same time, J.M. Orpen travelled through the Transvaal and wrote his view of the cave siege in his *Reminiscences of Life in South Africa from 1846 to the Present Day* (Cape Town, Struik, 1964), pp. 250-6. In the late 1870s, John Noble produced *South Africa: Past and Present* (London, Longman, 1877), pp. 173-173B in which he attacked the Boers. Another traveller to discuss the incident, this time in fairly brief and neutral terms, was Sarah Heckford, *A Lady Trader in the Transvaal* (London, Sampson Low, 1882), p. 289. At the turn of the century, missionaries, often at the behest of the British authorities, began to collect oral history. One such missionary was C.A. Knothe whose account of the history of the chiefdom includes an account of the siege. It is preserved in Transvaal Archives, Transvaal Archives Depot (T.A.D.), GOV 1088, PS 50/8/1907 (60), History - Valtyn Makapaan (Mokopane). In the early 1900s, Gustav Preller began collecting evidence on the siege and from this constructed a story "Baanbrekers", in *Oorlogsoormag en Ander Sketse en Verhale* (Cape Town, Nasionale Pers, 1925). This ushered in a fashion of similar stories that began to appear in popular magazines in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. See, for example, D. Nel, "Die Drama van Makapansgrot", *Die Huisgenoot*, 24/3/1933, N.C. Acutt, "Makapaan se Gruweldade", *Die Huisgenoot*, 6/5/1938, T. Gerdener, "Grotte Wat Mense Geëet Het, *Die Brandwag*, 18/7/1952 and H. Potgieter, "Die Moord in Makapansvallei", *Die Brandwag*, 3/9/1954.

[8] D.W. Cohen, *Womunafu's Bunafu: A Study of Authority in a Nineteenth-century African Community* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1977), p.8. Other voices who have stressed similar points include J.C. Miller, "Introduction", *The African Past Speaks: Essays on Oral Tradition and History* (Folkestone and Connecticut, Dawson/Archon, 1980) and E. Tonkin, "The Boundaries of History in Oral Performance" *History in Africa*, 9, 1982, pp. 273-84; "Investigating Oral Tradition", *Journal of African History*, 27, 1986, pp. 203-13 and "Steps Towards the Redefinition of 'Oral History': Examples from Africa", *Social History*, 7, 2, 1982, pp. 329-35.

One such network has been a set of people outside Ndebele society who for a variety of motives have conspired, often unwittingly, to keep the memory of the siege afloat. Some people, including myself no doubt, have been motivated by a curiosity for catastrophe which has prompted them to inquire into the siege and write down their opinions and since the episode itself, travellers, missionaries, academics and journalists have produced a steady if inconspicuous stream of material.[9] In addition, during the first quarters of this century, the cave story and the Boer deaths that preceded it became the focus of an Afrikaner nationalist mania for monuments. Much at the same time, significant fossils finds in and near the caves made it a site of international attention.

But a story cannot live by external curiosity alone, and for a long time there were a series of factors internal to Ndebele society that ensured the memory of the story and the style of its telling. Today the memory of the story is tenuous and in a community of 30 000 that occupy the area of the original chieftancy, only a handful of people still know the story and can exercise the skill of historical narration with any flair.

In telling the story of a declining literary form, I do not intend to imply that all oral genres inevitably wither before the onslaught of white settlerdom and the literacy and bureaucracy that it brings. In other situations, such circumstances can encourage the perpetuation of certain oral forms.[10] Also what I outline here is the demise of one particular form. Others, particularly the *nonwane* (folktale) have not been similarly affected, perhaps because the *nonwane* is a cultural form of the household, unlike historical narration which belongs to the realm of chieftancy. And as with most Transvaal societies,

---

[9] See note 6 above.

[10] L. White and J. Mapanje, "Introduction", *Oral Poetry in Africa: An Anthology* (London, Longman, 1985).

this particular chieftancy was to be substantially refashioned. Concomitantly, its ability to sustain the kind of exchanges that gave it its character was curtailed, as were some of the cultural forms that defined the institution of chiefship. It is with such issues that this paper is concerned. The paper will begin by examining a few 'expert' tellings of the Gwaša story with a view to understanding how their craft works. Thereafter we will turn to the role that such historical narration may have played in the past. The final section will examine in broad outline how some of the conditions upholding this form of storytelling have shifted.

I

Within the Ndebele chieftancy, relatively few people, as I mentioned above, still remember the story of the cave of Gwaša. In brief outline, this event and its surrounding circumstances, stretch back to the arrival of the Boers in the north-western Transvaal in the 1840s. By the end of the decade there was growing tension over land, labour and allegations of Boer slaving. One society that felt the impact of these changes severely was Mokopane's chieftancy that lived in close proximity to the major highway that lead to the northern Transvaal. When a Boer settlement emerged in Pietpotgietersrust in the 1850s, Mokopane's *mošate* (capital) lay a mere two hours away by horseback. Mokopane responded to these new circumstances by calling on his neighbour, Mankopane and together they mounted a campaign against the Boers in the hopes of scaring them back to Pretoria. In September 1854, in three separate incidents several Boers were murdered. One of the murders took place at Moordrift, the site of much Boer-Ndebele trading. However, far from persuading the Boers to decamp, the murders prompted them to call up a commando and Mokopane and his followers soon holed up defensively in a cave 15 km. further north. Few survived the ensuing three week siege in caves that the Boers subsequently came to call 'Makapansgat'.

While many people in the Potgietersrust area know about the story, referring to it as "general or popular knowledge",[11] few can narrate it in any detail. Those that do are invariably closely associated with the chieftancy.[12] The analysis that follows relies generally on three such tellings, from an ex-regent, a praise poet and a senior member of the chiefly family.[13] It is the ex-regent's account that will form the basis of much of this analysis. As instances of oral historical 'tradition' that invariably comprise a loose constellation of themes and episodes strung by tellers in various combinations, these three accounts differ slightly. They do, however, share one distinctive episode that makes this version peculiar to the Mokopane chieftancy and the Kekana lineage dominating it.[14] This event tells how the besieged Ndebele

---

[11] Phrases from interview with Tshwane Mvundlela and Ledile Kekana, interviewed with Debra Nails and Caroline Mashao, Mošate, Valtyn, 1/10/88 and interview with Obed Kutumela, interviewed with Hannah Schulze and John Kutumela, Sekgakgapeng, Valtyn, 7/1/89.

[12] The issue of how the versions of commoners differ from chiefly tellings cannot be addressed here. Very briefly, one important point of comparison would be the degree of skill involved. As the second part of this paper attempts to show, the chiefly class exercises subtle forms of control over cultural skills and resources. However, the issue is not as simple as that in so far as oral historical narration has roots in popular forms of storytelling which are more widely accessible.

[13] The details of the three interviews are as follows: John Madimetša Kekana interviewed with Mr. Maaka and Mr. Malunga, Mokopane Education College, Mahwelereng, 10/8/1988; Patrick Mahula Kekana, interviewed with Edwin Nyatlo and Peter Kekana, Mošate, Valtyn, and Madimetša Klaas Kekana, interviewed with Edwin Nyatlo and Peter Kekana, Mošate, Valtyn, 28/11/87. I interviewed the last informant again with Caroline Mashao and Debra Nails, Mošate, Valtyn, 1/10/88. This selection is drawn from a total of twenty interviews which encompass about thirty informants. Fourteen of these interviews have been done within the area of the chiefdom itself. The remaining have been with other Ndebele groupings. One interview was with informants from the Langa Ndebele at Bakenberg (the area that was originally Mankopane's chiefdom). Three interviews have been with informants of the Ledwaba, a group who once lived near the cave. Two interviews, kindly done for me by Peter Lekgoathi, were with people from the Zebediela area.

[14] This paper does not attempt to address the issue of how true the story is. Given the limited extant evidence existing only of military reports despatched by the besieging commando, this question is difficult to address with any certainty. In so far as the story records crucial historical themes of slavery and indenture there is much in it that its 'true'. However, the possibility also exists that the key episode discussed here may indeed be the account by which a usurping chief

hand over the only child heir to the chieftancy to the Boers, to whom he is indentured. Sometime later, members of the chieftancy recognize the child and in return for a ransom of sheep and ivory, the heir returns to his rightful place.

Like all stories, this one concatenates its events around the idea of exchange: in return for sheep and ivory, the stolen chief is restored to his rightful station. Superficially such an exchange fashioned around war and trade, would seem to summarize the major kinds of interactions that for a long time bound Boer and Ndebele societies. However, beneath this more obvious plot flow others concerning more subtle forms of exchange that have to do with a kind of commerce more cultural and intellectual than economic and military.

Let us turn first to one telling of the story to trace through these ideas of cultural commerce in more detail. In this particular account, the controlling intelligence of the story resides in the agency of chieftancy and while the Boers with their military superiority may appear to direct events, it is the chieftancy that shapes the real plot. Holed up in the cave and faced with the possibility of extinction, the chief decides to give up his heir to the Boers. Like many motifs of oral historical narration which depend on deception, this event is not quite all it seems since the Boers are to be duped by being used for a purpose of which they have no knowledge. The young chief along with some other children will be left in the "forest" near the cave. The Boers will capture them and indenture them, as they have others. Or as the teller says, phrasing the words of the chief in the direct speech on which all oral tales rely for much of their dramatic impact, " 'When we know that he is matured and when these wars are over, we will go and look for him and ask for him back.' "

---

covered up his unorthodox origins. But in light of the thin evidence, such an idea can remain only a tantalizing possibility.

The Boers, then, are to take part in a story of which they have no knowledge and along with the child chief are in a state of ignorance. Both have no idea of the plot in which they unwittingly feature. The Boers do not know they harbour a chief and the child is unaware of his true status, coming to believe his name to be Klaas. Both Boers and child are ignorant of the key institution of Ndebele society and so must both be ignorant of civilization itself. Or as the storyteller puts it, "...they (the Boers) did not have any friendship with (us)...because they did not know us."

As this is a story, both the Boer and the child exchange their ignorance for insight in two parallel sets of recognition scenes that are woven into the loose episodic structure of this style of narrative. Let us turn first to the Boer's enlightenment which is set in motion when the aging incumbent chief who has apparently survived the siege sends his men to find the heir. After some time, they locate him on a farm situated significantly near Middelfontein, a mission station that from the 1860s catered mainly for ex-indentured labourers or slaves.[15] Initially the men are afraid to approach the Boer. One brave individual offers to speak to the farmer. His comrades are amazed: " 'You are going to negotiate with a Boer? Impossible!' " However, with the aid of a 'coloured' foreman who acts as intermediary, the man approaches the farmer. At first the farmer rejects any notion of exchange. "The Boer entered the house. He grabbed a gun." In an episode with a strong sense of climactic moment in which such tales specialize, his wife intervenes.

> When he rushed to the wagon with the gun, the woman said, 'Hei, pa! Nee, nee, nee. Nee, nee, nee. Don't do that. You must never do that. My husband, set aside the bias of your people, man. You (i.e. the Ndebele man) isn't it you are saying that this person is a chief?' He said, 'Yes.' She said, 'You(i.e. the Boer) would prevent wealth from entering this house? Look for the wealth so that it can enter into this

---

[15] Transvaal Archives, Central Archives Depot, (C.A.D.), NTS 3452, 88/308, Sub-Native Commissioner, Nylstroom to Native Commissioner, Nylstroom, 10/2/21.

> house, man! Because he is the chief!' Indeed the man returned and put down his gun.

In this passage the Boer, through his wife, comes to recognize that the erstwhile labourer is a chief and that chieftainship may hold out certain benefits. The Boer agrees to release the child in return for "as many sheep as you can get." He continues, " 'Do you see how big he is? I fed him, I spent a lot on him. I brought him up, you hear. Now you should also wash my hands.' "

The chief's men duly collect "kraals and kraals of sheep" and for good measure throw in some ivory. It is this ivory that lays the preconditions for certain cultural forms of exchange to occur. The Boer, entirely delighted with the tusks, says, " '...you know what ivory means in our culture? They said 'No.' 'You have offered me eternal wealth with these things. With this wealth, I'm completely a chief.' " The Boer has not only accepted Ndebele goods, he has, through a symbol that in other stories represents both the links between Ndebele chiefdoms as well as the male activity of hunting, come to recognize the value of chieftainship as a social institution that establishes the precondition for exchange to be made. Having been ignorant of Ndebele society, he has now unwittingly partly 'Ndebeleized'. Indeed the state of absorbing Ndebele/Sotho cultural ideas, has been implicit in the story all along. By capturing the child, the Boer not only recalls the historical memory of indenture, he also enacts a motif that in other Transvaal 'traditions' symbolizes notions of cultural transfer.[16]

If the Boer has 'Ndebeleized', then the child chief is 'ReNdebeleized'. In his particular set of recognition scenes, he comes to remember his name and

---

[16] R.K. Scully, *Phalaborwa Oral Traditions*, Ph. D. thesis, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1978, p. 167.

identity. In what is probably the mnemonic core or core cliche[17] of the story, the child when initially asked his name, simply replies, " 'My name is Klaas.' " This phrase, encapsulating as it does, the catastrophe of loss of identity and chieftancy, economically records the story's core concerns. However, within the realms of magical causation which control such stories, the child heir miraculously overcomes his amnesia so that he can pick up the thread of chieftancy. The possibility that the child could be reluctant to leave the comparative familiarity of the farm to go off with a bunch of strangers, as one nineteenth-century version indicates,[18] is something that this style of story will not contemplate. The child chief is rigorously subordinated to the design of the story. Similarly, all individual chiefs, like characters in a story, become simply "poor passing facts"[19] subjugated to the controlling authorship of chieftainship.

If chiefship is a kind of authorship, then these accounts, not surprisingly for a form of storytelling, equate themes of political authority with questions of the conditions under which words might be exchanged. One central prerequisite for dialogue, these stories suggest, is that words be channeled through and exchanged via the chief. For dialogue with outsiders to occur, those sending the messages must have some understanding of the meaning and significance of chiefship.

So much for words. What of that other key object of exchange - women? While contemporary tellings of the story do not explicitly address this theme,

---

[17] The term core cliche has been extensively discussed by H. Scheub, *The Xhosa Ntsomi* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975). See, also Miller, "Introduction", *The African Past Speaks*, p. 7.

[18] Heckford, *Lady Trader*, p. 289.

[19] Phrase quoted in C. Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 124.

earlier accounts do. One such version, recorded by a missionary in 1906, held that part of the ransom package given to the Boer included, in keeping with practice at the time, a woman.[20] Such an episode obviously strengthens the theme of unwitting cultural absorption. In a more muted form, this notion of exchanging women and the culture they embody, crops up in several contemporary tellings. I quote one such account which tells how the Boers are killed, ironically enough at Moordrift, the site of many previous trade exchanges.

> Then (the Ndebele) planned how they were going to get rid of (the Boers). They took sheep and displayed them so that the Boers would come and look. One Baas said, 'Verkoop jy die skaap?' Then the Boers came out of their wagons and came to look at the sheep, leaving their guns behind. Then the Ndebele fell upon them killing everyone except one women whose breasts they cut and shaved her head. They dressed her in Ndebele clothes. Then they told her to go and report to the other Boers what had happened.[21]

Through a strategy of deception, the Ndebele lure the Boers into a false exchange. However, as becomes clear, the actual object of barter is the woman. First of all, she is 'degenderized' in order no doubt to neutralize her as a signifier of Boer male authority. In mutilating her, the Ndebele also inscribe their male authority on her body and along with the clothes, she becomes a bearer and a messenger of Ndebele authority and intention.

While contemporary stories recognize that conditions for exchanging women are limited, it is nonetheless important that these tellings acknowledge the theoretical possibility of such an exchange if the notion of chiefly power is to be salvaged. One key feature of chiefship is, after all, its maleness whose

---

[20] Knothe's version is in Transvaal Archives, T.A.D., GOV 1088, PS 50/8/1907 (60), History, Valtyn Makapaan (Mokopane). The detail of women being exchanged as part of peace settlements comes from D.R. Hunt, "An Account of the Bapedi", *Bantu Studies*, 5, 1931, p. 293.

[21] Extract taken from the account of Madimetša Klaas Kekana.

meaning depends on the ability to circulate women. If, as one level of the story suggests, Boers come to appreciate some of the meanings of chiefship, then they must be seen to accept women as tokens of chiefly, patriarchal authority, just as the Boer accepted the ivory.

It is not only in its thematic concerns that this story keeps alive the epic ideals of chiefship. In its styles and techniques of telling, this story and others like it, reproduce and so preserve one of the many rhetorical forms through which chieftainship is defined. As others have pointed out, these forms include short praises, praise poems, genealogies and other specialized languages surrounding the office of chiefly authority.[22] In many respects this style of loosely-structured historical narration appears less elevated than these lofty forms particularly because it relies heavily on the techniques of popular storytelling, most notably the *nonwane* (folktale). These techniques include repetition, the use of direct speech, humour, dramatization, a strong sense of moment and a complete absence of any comment or interpretation, a quality that Benjamin has usefully called "chaste compactness".[23] However, in terms of its objectives, historical narration with its emphasis on giving imaginative substance to the epic business of chiefship, sees itself as more noble than folktale. Tellers as well see their story as intimately tied to the institution of chiefship and in some instances such stories are seen as the exclusive possession of the nobility. Most people do, however, identify the

---

[22] L.. White, "Power and the Praise Poem", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 9, 1, 1982, pp. 8-32; H. Scheub, "Oral Poetry and History", *New Literary History*, 18, 3, 1987, pp. 477-96 and I. Schapera, *The Handbook of Tswana Law and Custom* (London, Frank Cass, 1970), p. 63.

[23] Points extracted from I. Okpewho, *The Epic in Africa: Towards a Poetics of the Oral Performance* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1978), Chpts. 2 and 5; M.P. Makgamatha, "The Language and Style of the Nothern Sotho "Nonwane" Production", in eds. E.R. Sienaert and A.N. Bell, *Catching Winged Words: Oral Tradition and Education* (Durban, Natal University Oral Documentation and Research Centre, 1988), pp. 122-33 and W. Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Lekov" in *Illuminations* (London, Fontana, 1977), p. 91.

story as having a wider constituency, notably the male world of the *lekgotla*, the forum that is most frequently identified as the place in which such stories are properly told.[24] While the story could easily 'bleed' from such a forum into more popular locales, the evidence does seem to suggest that oral historical narration is the sacred version of the profane folktale, a comparison that also extends to their places of performance. The folktale resides in the household, while historical narrative gets used in political arenas, like the *lekgotla* and the circumcision school.

This issue of how and where stories are told leads us to our second section. Thus far I have spent some time indicating how, in their conceptual presuppositions, these stories specify certain conditions for the survival of chiefship and the cultural world that it upholds. It is time now to turn to the world beyond the stories in order to understand firstly how such storytelling may be located within a wider community and secondly how the conditions underwriting such storymaking have shifted.

II

Most attempts to understand the role of oral history in 'traditional' societies have stressed its non-institutional, informal and hence implicit nature. In terms of these analyses, oral history, or the range of forms it comprises like praises of various kinds, genealogies, oral historical storytelling ('traditions') and historically-based folktales are embedded in the practice of everyday life and seldom generate self-conscious analysis. It is only when the secular and religious agencies of colonialism inquire about oral history that such

---

[24] Points extracted from interview with John Madimetša Kekana; Tshwane Mvundlela and Ledile Kekana; Obed Kutumela and group interview with Moses Ledwaba, Matthews Hlanga and Amos Ledwaba, interviewed with Madimetša Ledwaba at GaLedwaba.

knowledge is 'objectified'.[25] While such arguments have some value, they are almost invariably descended from particular theories of orality. Such theories[26] posit a huge divide between oral and literate worlds and in terms of this distinction, oral knowledge is said to be 'presentistic', context-bound and so without self-conscious reflection. By contrast, writing allows the comparison of different versions and so permits scepticism and reflection. In terms of these ideas, writing and orality become technologies that are primary in determining styles of thought.

Recent studies have refuted such monolithic divisions by stressing that in most societies orality and literacy are never primary 'movers' but are subject always to wider forces of social stratification and struggles. Furthermore, both orality and literacy exist as resources that can be used in various combinations and contexts. In addition, both share a range of similar cognitive properties whose use is determined by the context in question.[27] While the implications of these ideas for oral literature have not been fully debated,[28] one could safely maintain that all oral genres, like all literary forms, are self-reflexive, in so far as they always reveal something of their conceptual presuppositions and sense of wider function. In these terms, the

---

[25] J. Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: The Culture and History of a South African People* (Chicago and London, Chicago University Press, 1985), pp. 10, 80, 125-6.

[26] See, for example, W.J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York, Metheun, 1982) and J. Goody and I. Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 5, 1962-3, pp. 304-45.

[27] See, for example B.V. Street, *Literacy in Theory and in Practice* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984) and Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1988).

[28] For one work that probes some of these issues, see P.J. Esterhuysen, *Patterns of Confluence: Developments in Selected Novels in English by Black South African Writers*, M.A. thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1988.

Gwaša story directs us to consider chieftancy and correct political hierarchy as preconditions of storytelling. Taking our lead from these points, it seems worth considering oral historical narration more generally as tied to the networks of rank, lineage, status and power that shape 'traditional' societies.

However, before beginning our discussion, it is worth noting that oral historical narration is not a free-standing genre and there is for example, no exact Sotho or Ndebele word for this style of storytelling beyond the fairly general *tiragalo* (occurence, happening, episode) or *taba* (story, affair, incident). As a weakly-structured form of narrative that deals with 'true' accounts of the past, it can be classed with forms like praises, genealogies and historically-based folktales which are concerned with 'pastness'. However, content is only one aspect of oral literary form. Another crucial dimension concerns performance and in this respect, oral historical narration would most often occur as part of a wider continuum of speech genres that include *lekgotla* oratory, 'beer-talk' and ritual pronouncements.[29] In the account that follows, based largely on ethnographies and histories of neighbouring and related polities, I shall attempt to draw a general picture of the place and role of such oral and cultural performances, highlighting where possible those with specific historical concerns.[30]

---

[29] See, for example, M. Bloch (ed.), *Political Language and Oratory* (London, New York, San Francisco, Academic Press, 1975) and for a comparative perspective P.A. McAllister, "Political Aspects of Xhosa Beer Drink Oratory", in *English in Africa*, 15, 1, 1988, pp. 83-98.

[30] I have relied on Jackson, *The Ndebele*, as well as his "The Langa Ndebele Calendar and Annual Agricultural Ceremonies", in (eds) Ethnological Section, *Ethnological and Linguistic Studies in Honour of Dr. N.J. van Warmelo*, Republic of South Africa, Department of Bantu Administration and Development, Ethnological Publication No. 52, (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1969), pp. 233-41; Comaroff, *Body of Power*; H.O. Mönnig, *The Pedi* (Pretoria, van Schaik, 1978); C.L. Harries, *The Law and Custom of the Bapedi and Cognate Tribes* (Johannesburg, Hortors, 1929); Schapera, *Handbook*; P. Delius, *The Land Belongs to Us: The Pedi, The Boers and the British in the Nineteenth-Century Transvaal* (Johannesburg, Ravan, 1983); C.J. Coetzee, *Die Strewe tot Etniese Konsolidasie en Nasionale Selfverwesenliking by the Ndebele van die Transvaal*, Ph. D. thesis, University of Potchefstroom, 1980; J.L.

While the opportunities for oral cultural performance were many, their contexts, meaning and significance derived from the social hierarchy in which they took place. Each social level - the household, family group, ward and chieftancy - provided a set of formal and informal occasions for the recollection, enactment and performance of historical recollection. So, for example, the household provided a range of storytelling milieux. Here women predominated and in the main specialized in imaginary, rather than 'true' stories although in some instances stories were historical.[31] This relegation of women's creativity to the imaginary casts an interesting light on their wider exclusion from the weighty languages needed to discuss the 'real' world built in turn on the ability to circulate cattle, women and words.[32] Men's storytelling in the household was not so extensive but there is evidence to suggest that at least some fathers enjoyed telling stories regarding war and the deeds of the past.[33] In addition the household had its own ritual activities and some of these, like dealing with the dead, featured a range of rhetorical

---

Comaroff, "Chiefship in a South African Homeland: A Case Study of the Tshidi Chiefdom of Bophuthatswana" in the *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 1, 1, 1974, pp. 36-51; J.L. Comaroff, "Talking Politics: Oratory and Authority in a Tswana Chiefdom" in Bloch, *Political Language*, pp. 141-61; J. Comaroff and S. Roberts, *Rules and Processes: The Cultural Logic of Dispute in an African Context* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1981); D. James, *Kinship and Land in an Inter-Ethnic Rural Community*, M.A. thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1987; N.J. van Warmelo, *Transvaal Ndebele Texts*, Union of South Africa, Department of Native Affairs, Ethnological Publication No. 1, (Pretoria, Government Printers, 1930) and his *The Ndebele of J. Kekana*, Union of South Africa, Department of Native Affairs, Ethnological Publication No. 18, (Pretoria, Government Printers, 1944); C.V. Bothma, *Ntšhabeleng Social Structure: A Study of a Northern Sotho Tribe*, Republic of South Africa, Department of Bantu Administration and Development, Ethnological Publication No. 48, (Pretoria, Government Printers, 1962) and his "The Political Structure of the Pedi of Sekhukhuneland, *African Studies*, 35, 3-4, 1976, pp. 177-205; A. Kuper, "The Social Structure of the Sotho-speaking Peoples of the South Africa" Part I and Part II, *Africa*, 45, 1, 1975, pp. 678-81 and 45, 2, 1976, pp. 139-49.

[31] H.A. Junod, *The Life of a South African Tribe - Vol. II: Mental Life* (London, MacMillan, 1927), p. 214.

[32] Point drawn from Comaroff *Body of Power*, p. 71.

[33] Interview with Job Kekana, Westdene, Johannesburg, 5/3/89.

forms including genealogies, praises and prayers. Within the household, then, there were a number of opportunities for those with the talent and predilection to absorb a range of storytelling, oratical and mnemonic skills.

While female storytelling seldom penetrated beyond the household, the family group, ward and chieftancy provided a range of oratical and ritual forums in which men negotiated the politics of status and rank "in the language of agnatic seniority."[34] In these political locales, the elegant and persuasive expression of cultural, legal and historical knowledge was practised and it was often one such forum, the *lekgotla* that provided an important locale in which people would mobilize oral historical narration as part of their disquisition.[35] The use of oratory cannot be stressed strongly enough since for many, the exercise of political authority was inseparable from oratical ability.[36] As others have pointed out, the Babel theme of disorder as linguistic confusion is particularly strong in many African societies where the images of unclear speech and garbled messages inevitably portend great chaos.[37] While there was no formal oratical training, it was a skill that could be picked up informally and those with exceptional talent in this regard were often given special recognition.[38] However, it was, in the long run, those who had to speak most often who obtained the most practice and so became most deft.

---

[34] Comaroff, *Body of Power*, p. 44.

[35] C.A.D., NTS 314, 12/55, Minutes of Tribal Meeting held on 5 September 1949. Also Comaroff, "Talking Politics" and Comaroff and Roberts, *Rules and Processes*.

[36] Comaroff, "Talking Politics" and Comaroff and Roberts, *Rules and Processes*, pp. 237-8.

[37] M. Jackson, *Allegories of the Wilderness: Ethics and Ambiguity in Kuranko Narratives* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 123.

[38] Schapera, *Handbook*, p. 32; Mönnig, *The Pedi*, p. 270; Junod, *The Life: Vol. II*, p. 282 and van Warmelo, *The Ndebele of J. Kekana*, p. 19.

In addition to these oratical forums where speakers used historical knowledge, there were a range of offices and institutions that also traded in historical expertise. One such institution was the initiation ceremony at which initiants, as part of their wider political induction, learned about local history.[39] According to Monnig and Schapera, the incumbents of certain positions and offices required historical resources to do their jobs. These people included very senior diviners, intermediaries between polities and the chief's "remembrancers" (*bakogolodi ba kgosi*).[40]

Wherever the narration of pastness occurred, it, no doubt, involved a degree of oral performance and drama ranging from the gesture and intonation of oral speech to the costumed spectacle of song and dance that accompanied certain ritual occasions.[41] Needless to say the higher up the scale one went, the more grandeur one encountered. While commoners and mere mortals could mount only small-scale productions, those higher up would field more lavish displays until one reached the unsurpassable performance of chieftancy itself, the very acme of grace, taste, culture and civilization.

All of this spectacle, as others have pointed out,[42] was intimately tied to the exercise and definition of lineage and chiefly power. Furthermore, given that the distribution of authority was classically patriarchal, power on each level was 'rented' from above. Notions of rank for example, stretched both up and down in a hierarchy headed by the chief himself who claimed his might from the royal dead. In this arrangement of descending mimesis, the ordinary

---

[39] Mönnig, pp. 62, 117, 119; Schapera, p. 104-8 and Bothma, "Ntšhabeleng", pp. 7, 53.

[40] Mönnig, *The Pedi*, pp. 84, 299 and Schapera, *Handbook*, p. 283.

[41] For a comparative discussion of gesture as a performance resource see, P. Thuynsma, "Xhosa *Ntsomi*: The Language of Gesture", *The English Academy Review*, 4, 1987, pp. 77-89.

[42] White, "Power and the Praise Poem".

household head embodied a diminished and perhaps coarser version of chiefly power and in so far as the higher levels exemplified the lower, the chief represented the people's greatness.

Such a dispensation is, of course, an exercise of political power whose driving ambition is toward display, spectacle, and grandeur. Such "theatre states", as Geertz has elegantly described, work toward the "public dramatization of the ruling obsessions...of social inequality and status pride." Like all political drama, the "theatre state" attempts to make "inequality enchant."[43]

However dazzling such performance might have been, its intention was never to make power inaccessible. Instead power was always something that could be addressed and bargained with in the hope of securing some exchange or reciprocity. This ideal of exchange and prestation affects cultural performance largely by providing the enabling convention of much cultural activity. So, for example, in addressing one's ancestors "the prayer is in the form of a normal conversation between two people who know one another well."[44] Rather than being a monologic ceremony of supplication and obedience, such occasions are envisioned as complex dialogues of bargaining, understood not in a narrow contractual sense. Instead such exchanges approximate phenomena "at once legal, economic, religious, aesthetic."[45] Such ceremonies form part of what Mauss has called "total prestation", a concept that usefully traps much of the rich simultaneity of social relations. Embedded in webs of obligation to give and receive, people circulate not only

---

[43] Geertz, *Negara*, p. 13.

[44] Mönnig, *The Pedi*, p. 60.

[45] M. Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, tr. I. Cunnison (London and Henley, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p.76.

goods and wealth, but "courtesies, entertainments, ritual, military assistance, women, children, dance and feasts."[46]

If one is to make any sense of oral history as performance, it is crucial to grasp the points set out above. Without them, oral history or the forms subsumed under this label are impossible to conceptualize and can fall from analytical view completely. This is largely what has happened in the field of oral literary studies. Scholars working in this area have tended to focus on forms with a sharp generic outline and visible, predictable performance context, like praise poetry and folktales. However, because of this situation, much that is weakly structured or has less visible performance contexts - like oral historical narrative, ritual rhetoric, and beer-talk - has fallen beyond the field of definition.

Within the realm of oral historical studies, on the other hand, most people, following Vansina, have concerned themselves more with the historicity of stories which are presumed to have passed agentlessly and mysteriously through time. Again, such an approach submerges questions of the craft and context of telling. Thus far, I have attempted to bring such questions to the surface by examining something of the craft involved in a telling of the Gwasa story and something of the contexts in which such a story might have been told. However, the contexts in which such stories used to be learned and transmitted have shifted. In the final section we turn to sketch in broad detail what these changing contexts might be. Within the confines of this paper, such a discussion can be no more than a speculative budget of possibilities.

III

---

[46] Mauss, *The Gift*, p. 3.

As with all near-apocalypses, enough people survived to tell the tale which soon became an important marker in Ndebele history. The cave site itself became feared terrain around which mournful ancestors maundered. So severe was their suffering that the pleasant, rustling sound (*gwaša*) that the caves used to emit, stopped.[47] From time to time, sacrifices were made, but only the bravest would enter the cave itself. With the fencing off of the cave which was declared a national monument in the 1930s, such sacrifices fell away. So, too, no doubt, did the historical memories they evoked.

While the cave siege was catastrophic, it did not signal any enduring defeat for the chiefdom. By most accounts, the majority of the people in the cave belonged to the dominant Kekana 'lineage'. These Kekana survivors, who in some versions included the chief, sought refuge with another lineage, most probably the Lekalakala, who had not sought refuge in the cave.[48] After some time, however, the visitors unseated their hosts and the Kekana once again became dominant. By the 1860s, missionaries reported that Mokopane and his followers "remained a free people in spite of the Boers attempts to conquer them."[49] A decade later, the chieftancy was said to number about 10 000 of whom one-third were Sotho-speakers. To the west and the east, the chiefdom was neighboured by two powerful and populous Ndebele-dominated polities. About six hours ride to the east lay Zebediela's chiefdom, the grouping from which Mokopane's polity had originally broken away. Close by, to the west lay the territory of Mapela whose reputation as a redoubtable military force was widely feared.[50]

---

[47] Information drawn from interview with John Madimetša Kekana.

[48] While Madimetša Klaas Kekana held that the Kekana unseated the Mashishi, John Madimetša Kekana maintained that the Lekalakala originally unseated the Mashishi. Thereafter the Kekana ousted the Lekalakala.

[49] *BMB*, 1, 1865, p. 4.

[50] Paragraph drawn from *BMB*, 7, 1865, pp. 99-109 and T.A.D., SN 2, 296/79, Report on Native Tribes within the Transvaal, 24/11/79.

In terms of regional politics, these chieftancies, with the partial exception of Zebediela's polity, fell just outside the limits of Pedi control. On one or two calamitous occasions, both Mokopane and Mapela were overrun by Pedi military might, but otherwise, the Ndebele chieftancies were able to order the regional world around them as they saw fit, often looking southwards as far as present-day Hammanskraal for their hinterland of domination. Amongst themselves, these chieftains frequently jostled for sovereignty and in these contests, it was mostly Mapela who dominated. Mokopane chiefly history does, however, proudly record the occasions on which, through wit and cunning, they outdid Mapela's successor, Masebe.[51]

With regard to the Boers, the chieftancy, up until the 1880s remained free of any significant interference, although to maintain this state of affairs, the Ndebele chieftain had often to go to war with the people of Pietpotgietersrust. Indeed, during the 1870s, the chiefdom could claim a significant victory when the Boers suffering from a combination of Ndebele resistance and fever, temporarily abandoned the town. At much the same time, the Ndebele chief also took action against the German missionaries who had first established a station, Lekalakala or Makapanspoort, in 1865. On two occasions the missionaries were evicted and they only returned permanently in the 1890s.[52]

The animosity between Boer and Ndebele continued to characterize the relations of town and chiefdom, separated always by only a whisker of land. From the 1880s, when commercial agriculture began to take off in this reasonably arable part of the world, Potgietersrust progressively filled up

---

[51] Paragraph drawn from Delius, *The Land Belongs to Us*, p. 19, Hunt, "An Account", p. 283 and Jackson, *The Ndebele*, p. 34.

[52] D.W.van der Merwe, *Die Geskiedenis van die Berlynse Sendinggenootskap in Transvaal, 1860-1900*, M.A. thesis, UNISA, 1975, pp. 124 and 207.

with landless Afrikaners. By the 1930s, its numbers swelled by those whose land had been acquired as Trust farms, it had the reputation of a rural slum. And as the town filled up, the clamour for removal mounted. In the end the chiefdom was never moved. The urban location abutting the town was 'relocated' in the 1960s to become the township of Mahwelereng which now adjoins a chiefdom substantially refashioned by reclamation and betterment schemes and Bantu Authorities.[53]

However, back in the 1860s and 70s, as an independent political unit, the chieftancy could still claim that it dealt with the world on its own terms. The moment was, of course, not to last long and by the 1880s and 90s such claims would have been difficult to sustain, largely because what had up until then been an independent chieftancy became a rural location. The body to bring about this radical alteration of status was the Z.A.R. Native Location Commission, the first of many such land commissions that were to trundle through this part of the world. In making their deliberations, the commission penned Mokopane's location into about 15 000 morgen. For a chiefdom that had at times claimed that its area of control stretched to Hammanskraal, the loss was considerable. At the time, however, such boundaries probably made little difference to peoples' everyday lives. As white company land surrounded much of the location, there were few voices calling for fencing and so for a long while, the unfenced boundaries remained entirely theoretical.[54]

---

[53] Paragraph based on T.A.D., MPT 131, 44/19, District Surgeon, and HKN 37, 42/15/1, Reclamation - Potgietersrust, Vaaltyn's Location.

[54] Paragraph based on T.A.D., GOV 1085, PS 50/8/1907/9, Location Commission, (History of Native Tribes) and GOV 1088 PS 50/8/1907 (60), Location Commission (History of Native Tribes).

This situation was not, of course, to last long. By 1904 an outbreak of East Coast Fever presaged a mounting call for effective fencing.[55] It was perhaps for this reason that the second Native Location Commission that came trundling by in 1906 with its circus-like entourage of wagons, mules and drivers, received a considerably less cordial reception. In an episode so spectacular that it reached parliament, the incumbent chief Lekgobo (Vaaltyn) Mokopane humiliated the commissioners by firstly refusing to see them and then arriving with he and his headmen so egregiously drunk, that none could give evidence.[56]

Eventually testimony was taken from one sober headman, Frans Nuku who said wrily: "In former days we used to own all the land round about here, down to and including the town of Pietpotgietersrust and the farms surrounding it, which of course no longer belongs to us."[57]

Nuku, one of Lekgobo's most able headman and clearly a major spokesman for the polity on historical affairs, spoke with a map of Ndebele territorial control intact his head. And it is essentially on such an imaginative map that much oral historical narration depends. While, in keeping with the style of the folktale, oral historical storytelling has little interest in precise spatial setting or detail, it does presuppose a broad epic map on which the events of chieftancy unfold. This map in turn overlays a particular region so that memory of the past is plotted on the earth and so partly stored in the landscape. In chiefly memory, then, an area is imagined as being criss-crossed with paths of secession, migration and the battles that make

---

[55] See, for example, T.A.D., KPT 14. Most of the files in this volume deal with fencing but for the specific detail here see file 2/54/3/2.

[56] Paragraph based on early sections of T.A.D., NTS 314 12/55.

[57] T.A.D., GOV 1085, 50/8/1907/9, Location Commission History of Native Tribes: Valtijn Makapan - Minutes of Native Location Commission, Potgiersrust, 2/11/06.

up the official history of the polity. Or as Tswana historians envision it, a 'map' is constituted by an intricate pattern of 'ruins' that records the passage and migration of polities across an area.[58] Today much dominant memory 'traps' the Transvaal in a mesh of farm boundaries. Similarly, last century, chiefly memory 'trapped' the same area, but with a net of a different weave.

As long as such 'maps' had meaning on the ground, the imagined world could remain in orbit. However, the difficulties of sustaining any epic imaginings in a rural location are, of course, self-evident. Apart from the imaginative alienation that land loss dictates, it also has more material implications for storytelling. These would include changes to the rhythms and patterns of work around which storytelling take shape.[59] Furthermore, with regard to migrancy which in this community dated back to at least the 1860s, the tempo of departures certainly increased from the 1890s. Most oral forms presuppose an ideal audience with a particular gender and generational mix and the craft of many folktales, for example, involves a dramatization of particular kinship and generational relationships. One of the less studied aspects of migrancy has been the way it alters audience structure and so tampers with another precondition of storytelling.

Alongside land alienation, another theme that has shaped the changing of cultural forms is the decline of chieftancy. While this is not the place to investigate the intricate story of chieftancy, it is worth raising some broad points with a view to understanding how the cultural institutions of chieftancy were affected. As Schapera has pointed out, the story of chieftancy can be told as the winding down of independent ruler to bureaucratic functionary.

---

[58] Testimony of M. Mathware, collected in Bessie Head, *Serowe: Village of the Rain Wind* (London, Heinemann, 1981), p. 10.

[59] For a comparative discussion of this complex topic see T.O. Beidelman, *Moral Imagination in Kaguru Modes of Thought* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 86-98.

Gradually stripped of both executive power and material resources, his ritual authority substantially dented by *inter alia* the missionaries, most chiefs as Schapera puts it, "cared more about asserting the rights that remained than about (their) corresponding duties."[60] Bolstered by colonial authority, the chief was cushioned from the demands of popular opinion which ceased to carry the force that it had in the past.

In this regard, Mokopane's chiefdom and its neighbours produced a line of typically dissolute chiefs who with giddy frequency, squandered tribal money on items like Model T Fords, liquor and the very latest clothing from Johannesburg and Pretoria outfitters. When not on these expeditions, these chiefs turned to performances of power based more and more on drunken bravado. Lekgobo Mokopane specialized in such displays in which he invariably used women and fire as his props. Known to the Native Affairs Department as an habitual "incendiarist",[61] he frequently burned down huts, particularly of his wives. Such burning has always been the traditional way of dealing with those suspected of plotting against the chief.[62] Women often became the objects on which he practised his dwindling authority and spectacular temper. On one occasion, he humiliated a constable messenger from the native commissioner's office by accusing him of committing adultery with his principal wife. As punishment, he tied the two together for the night.[63]

---

[60] Schapera, *Handbook*, p. 86.

[61] C.A.D., NTS 314 12/55, Undated typescript, "Valtyn Makapan".

[62] Schapera, *Handbook*, p. 274.

[63] For an account of the event see early parts of C.A.D., NTS 314, 12/55 and in particular Sub-Native Commissioner, Waterberg District to Resident Magistrate, Waterberg District, 7/8/05 and 9/10/05.

Moving away from these details, the broader process that is important for our purposes concerns the creeping bureaucratization of the institutions of chiefship, most especially of the *lekgotla*. In the past, this forum had been an arena of oratory, dialogue, and the complex ventriloquism of chiefly politics. By the 1920s, the *lekgotla* had been reduced to a sullen forum of the unwillingly governed. This battle to impose 'orderly government' on the performance politics of the "theatre state" was mostly waged by the native commissioner's office. In joyless campaigns centred around issues of protocol, grammar, procedure and etiquette, numerous native commissioners devoted their careers to enforcing the literate bureaucracy they hoped would make people governable. In endless letters and meetings, various commissioners at the Potgietersrust office nagged and threatened on how to give speeches and compose letters (*always* with a date, *never* in pencil). Vexed by the apparent flexibility of customary law, native commissioners frequently requested that laws be codified and printed. In the end, many chiefs themselves came to request such law books which along with things like date stamps and letterheads, were the few risible performance accoutrements that literate power allows.[64] Living as Mokopane's chiefdom did, just under the nose of the native commissioner's office, escape from such changes was not always possible.

Another set of changes that assailed the *lekgotla* was that the agenda of issues habitually discussed in it, shrank. As others have pointed out,[65] in such situations of imposed authority, the political centre of gravity sinks.

---

[64] Paragraph based on the KPT archive, the commissioner's archive for Potgietersrust which carries all the documentation passing through the native commissioner's office. See, for particular examples used here T.A.D., KPT 31, N2/8/2, Special Justice of the Peace, Zebediela to Native Commissioner, Potgietersrust, 6/5/31; KPT 12 N1/15/4, Pitsu (sic) of Native Chiefs and Headmen Held at the Native Commissioner's Office, (Potgietersrust), 16/2/34 and KPT 32, N2/8/2, Moses Kgobe to Native Commissioner, Potgiersrust, 6/12/29.

[65] Comaroff, *Body of Power*, p. 47.

Under an unpopular chief, it was generally the headmen who attempted to take control and much crucial discussion was kept away from the commissioner's ears. Of necessity, such discussions were often concealed and so one forum for the display and transmission of a whole array of oral genres literally sank from view.

What these conflicts around the *lekgotla* make clear is that one major set of political struggles in the countryside has to do with words and the forms in and rules by which they are exchanged. While the medium of these words - spoken and/or written - has been central to such a cultural politics, the baroque complexities of this topic have never really been broached within the context of Southern African studies. Neither is this the place to attempt such a task but it is worth noting in passing that the interaction of orality and literacy produces ambiguous and often novel political possibilities. Using remoteness to their advantage, many rural communities could wage a moderately successful style of "footdragging"[66] politics that exploited the nature of both the spoken and the written. In such a scenario, written letters and messages could be endlessly mislayed, oral ones strategically misinterpreted.

However, such a politics can only last until the complex, viral alterations that writing brings, start to take effect. One well-documented effect of writing is its ability to rot memory, but this process is by no means automatic. As far as oral historical narration is concerned, it is not writing *per se* that starts to rot memory, it is rather the presence of a written version of history that people feel they can trust. Once such a version appears, produced usually by some member of the chiefly family, many old men feel freed of the

---

[66] Phrase from James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1985), p. xvi.

necessity of remembering.[67] Another factor which often made memory redundant is the presence and increasing power of government ethnologists who come to bureaucratize culture and adjudicate heavy-handedly in chiefly disputes as happened in Mokopane's chiefdom in the 1940s.[68]

While the direction of these changes had, by the 1920s, become clear, their scale was to increase dramatically in the decades that followed. In addition, the degree of interference in everyday life escalated markedly when the newly-restructured and confident Native Affairs Department went on a campaign to make its authority effective in the countryside. Up until then, the native commissioner's knowledge of communities had resided more in files and letters and he mostly relied on traders and missionaries for on-the-spot information. However, such political textuality soon gave way to less mediated forms of knowledge as platoons of agricultural officers, vegetable garden advisors, prickly pear exterminators, surveyors, bull castrators, dipping inspectors, soil conservation officials, irrigation scheme planners, veld improvement officers, and forest rangers amongst others took to the countryside. Here they began to instruct people where to live, where and how to plough, which weeds to destroy, where to fish, how many cattle to have and a hundred other such instructions. As though this weren't enough, the commissioner's office mounted offensives on the few remaining areas of chiefly power. These included control over churches and traders within the location, circumcision and beer-drinking, the latter two being important locales for the performance of historical knowledge and narration.[69]

---

[67] Jackson and Scully both mentions examples of such a process. Jackson, *The Ndebele*, p.3 and Scully, *Phalaborwa*, p. 66.

[68] For details of the dispute see C.A.D., NTS 314, 12/55, Minutes of Inquiry at Native Commissioner's Office, 18/1/49 and Informal Memo - Native Affairs Department, 1/12/49.

[69] Paragraph drawn from T.A.D., KPT 2, N15/4/8, Agriculture - Miscellaneous - Soil Conservation; KPT 11 N1/12/10, Circumcision; KPT 12, N1/15/6, Annual Report - Potgietersrust District; KPT 14, N 2/3/2,

The pace of such schemes accelerated during the 1940s, 50s and 60s with betterment schemes and Bantu Authorities that effectively rearranged the face of the countryside. As far as storytelling goes, the removals and relocations that these schemes brought, hastened some of the changes outlined thus far. Perhaps the final seal came with the physical changes of residential resettlement. Among the many changes that such resettlement brought was the erasing of the kind of architecture with its *dikgoro* (courtyards) that had hosted storytelling and the performance of oral forms.[70]

The waning of particular forms or institutions is frequently told as tragedy. I have followed a similar route here largely because the story has been viewed from the vantage point of the chiefly class. There is, of course, nothing inherent in the events themselves that makes them tragic and there were, no doubt, many, particularly women, who would not particularly have grieved the passing of an authoritarian literary form.

There were, of course, many who reacted politically to the increasingly authoritarian forms of chiefly rule. One major focus for such a set of responses became tribal levies for land purchase that chiefs extracted from their increasingly unwilling followers. In the area under discussion, such dissent expressed itself through the ward and headman who on one occasion

---

Church and School Sites and KPT 41, 2/31/2/7, Soil Erosion Works - Valtyn's Location.

[70] Point drawn from J. Yawitch, *Betterment: The Myth of Homeland Agriculture* (Johannesburg, SAIRR, 1982), p. 49 and Jackson, *The Ndebele*, p. 119. His map between pp. 70-1 gives a reconstruction of what a typical settlement might have looked like.

at least, effectively broke away from the chief.[71] However, the option of voting with one's feet no longer existed and so the only possibility for dissent was to set up a chiefdom within a chiefdom. In cultural terms, such opposition could produce no dissenting voices in so far as the headman simply reproduced the chief's patriarchal authority.

The question then arises as to whether one can ever detect dissenting voices through the boom of dominant chiefly memory.[72] In order to answer such a question, some people have turned to the notion of *bricolage*. In terms of this argument, the oral historian like the *bricoleur*, works with raw material not originally designed for his purpose. And many oral historians do indeed work this way, drawing, for example, on radio serials as narrative ballast for their historical reconstructions.[73] In much the same way, the popular storyteller could ostensibly appropriate chiefly historical forms and in so doing, "break down the images and symbolism of dominant and subordinate cultures in order to recombine them in a way that subverts cultural dominance."[74]

Whether any one would still have any inclination to appropriate chiefly historical form is a moot point. After all, the possibilities for escaping the dominant chiefly culture are constantly widening while the material available for *bricolage* has considerably expanded. Much chiefly historical form is

---

[71] For an account of one such tribal levy revolt in Mapela's location see T.A.D., KPT 43 and 44, C.A.D., NTS 3757 2268/308 and NTS 7727 201/333.

[72] For a comparative perspective on this issue see C. Hamilton, *Ideology, Oral Traditions and the Struggle for Power in the Early Zulu Kingdom*, M.A. thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1985.

[73] Example taken from Scully, *Phalaborwa*, pp. 118-9. For discussion of *bricoleur*, see much of Comaroff, *Body of Power* and also R.P. Werbner, "Review Article: The Political Economy of Bricolage", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 13, 1, 1986, pp. 151-6.

[74] Werbner, "Review Article", p. 151.

intended to act as an aesthetic check on the present, keeping it in line with the values of an epic, absolute past. However, once the present has been ripped out of line with the past, the currency of chiefly historical forms can only become quaint and obsolete.

If one were interested to understand more about the cultural form of dissenting voices, then it is probably to the *nonwane* that one should look. Many Sotho *dinonwane* yet await the type of subversive readings that people like Jackson and Beidelman have given to similar stories in West and East Africa. In these readings, the two writers indicate how through "contrived ambiguity", the stories often probe the cracks of political authority.[75]

Another aspect of such an analysis of *dinonwane* would be a focus on humour. While oral historical narration can contain humorous interludes, it is, like praise poetry, a serious, epic form. The voice that echoes derisively beyond such pretension is what Bakhtin has termed, a "culture of folk carnival humour." Such "folk laughter" opposes all "that is finished and polished,...all pomposity,...every ready made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook. "[76] However, in one sense there is very little left to laugh at. In both senses of the word, the Gwaša story narrates a world that is 'finished'.

---

[75] Jackson *Allegories* and Beidelman, *Moral Imagination*.

[76] M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, tr. H. Tswolsky (Cambridge and London, The M.I.T. Press, 1968), p. 3.