

https://dspace.org/

The politics of headmanship in the Mokhokhong Valley

Devitt, Paul

2014-12-08
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/15909

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

descent group. This major descent group is comprised of three segments named Nankoe, Tsoanamatsie, and Majoro. Co-operation and mutual support are closest within the segments, but there is a strongly felt, and expressed, view that the solidarity of the major descent group is important both politically and economically. The acquisition by one member of extra land is seen by all as a strengthening of the descent group's economic position, as well as increasing the chances that some will remain at home and not move away permanently. The subtraction of land by the headman from a widow of the descent group is regarded as a loss to the descent group as a whole. The commemoration of an ancestor by one man is the concern of all descent group members.

The Matumaneng descent group is remarkable as being the only remaining such group in the community of any size and cohesion, and I stress this because the fact that it is still a functioning unit has had important political implications, as I shall show in later chapters.

Old men in this village, such as Lejone Tsoanamatsie, recall six ascending generations and their own sons have children. Descent groups of such depth are rare in Lesotho except among some chiefs and there is no parallel in Mokhokheng. Where descent groups have stabilised in one locality and have considerable numerical strength there, conditions are generally favourable for more than the usual four generations to be recalled.

Matumaneng shares with ha Mapetja the quality of homogeneity and unity brought about by ties of kinship. Both

are long established, but Matumaneng has much greater political and economic strength because of its relatively numerous, able and physically present mature men.

In 1958 the doors of the people of Matumaneng were, formally at least, turned towards Jobere 'Mabathoana following the abolition of _pabalo_. This constituted a major step in the consolidation of the community under his jurisdiction, and since that time the people of this village have paid at least nominal allegiance to Jobere, although they still retain a deep emotional attachment to Matete.

Today, Matumaneng is still expanding. Some households are extending their buildings, and a new house has just been completed for a married son. Three sons of the village have built their own houses nearby in Thotaneng.

Maqakalaneng

For the last ninety years this has been the home of the headman of Mokhokhong ha Philipi, and this has strongly influenced the composition of the village. Philipi himself was not prolific. One of his two sons died fairly young, and the other, the father of Jobere, became headman of a small village to the east of the valley, ha Maeso. The house of 'Mabathoana is today represented in Maqakalaneng by two households. One is headed by Jobere's widow and successor, who has no children; the other belongs to Jobere's late brother's wife, whose children have all left home.

Maqakalaneng has grown by accretion, rather than by the expansion of descent groups. Many of the families now

living there came to this village in order to be close to the headman. Two families, Mabote and Ramalicha, came with Philipi in 1888, as his 'luggage bearers', and settled next to him. Three other families are related affinally to the Mapetjas. Others, being distantly related either to the 'Mabathoanas or to other families already there, came to the headman to request land and a residential site, and built near him. This was an obvious thing to do since ha Mapetja has always been occupied solely by Mapetjas and their affines, Matumaneng was subject to another chief, and Thotaneng is of very recent origin. On the positive side it is, or used to be, considered an advantage to be near the chief or headman, for the reason that he was the source of protection and of favours. A headman would usually encourage people to settle near him because it facilitated control over his subjects and gave greater unity to his following, as well as offering to the visitor the impression of status based on a numerous following. The growth of Maqakalaneng has therefore taken place along different lines from that of Matumaneng and ha Mapetja, so that from the point of view of kinship unity it is relatively heterogeneous, or rather, many of the kinship ties are traced to a distant ancestor, or through affinity.

Thotaneng

This village was established in 1957 when Jobere directed a new-comer to build there, since the existing villages were becoming overcrowded. Since that time more new-comers have built there, in addition to the sons of residents of

Maqalalaneng and Matumaneng who could not find space in their fathers' villages or who wished to escape immediate parental supervision while remaining within the community of their birth.

The houses in Thotaneng are generally much further apart than the houses in the other villages. Most have their own gardens adjacent and are set a little distance away from their nearest neighbours.

Thotaneng is expanding more rapidly than the other villages; several houses are under construction there now, and one of these is being built by the son of one of the oldest residents. Two people have told me of plans to set up small businesses, a café and a butchery, there. It is favoured for this sort of enterprise, and also for beer selling, because of its situation on the main footpath running through the valley.

The rather detailed and personal observations recorded in this chapter arise out of the nature of the material. The people of Mokhotlong are ~~intensely present~~ to their IMMEDIATE PARENTAL environment and to their past. They are not shielded from their environment by the accessories of an advanced technological culture, nor do they exercise a very effective control over it. Hence the physical problems of adjusting to the climate, the season, the topography, the distances between places, the growth of weeds, the onslaught of insects, the shortage of firewood, and so on, determine many of the decisions of daily life, and some of the more important long

term decisions as well. The past has been relatively uneventful in terms of innovation, enterprise and revolution, so that personalities, rather than events, stand out as historical landmarks. The ties of kinship that link these figures with living members of the community give the past its immediacy.

CHAPTER III. KINSHIP AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION.

After several weeks of work on the genealogies of Mokhokhong I produced a single genealogical chart some ten feet long and another four feet long. The two could have been integrated by means of some very long horizontal lines indicating marriages between persons several feet distant from one another on the chart. Only about twenty out of the nearly three hundred members of the community would not have been included on this composite genealogy. The initial impression produced by such a chart is one of community solidarity, but the extent to which this actually is so depends on the degree to which traditional kinship obligations are translated into action. One of the purposes of this chapter is to examine kinship behaviour today in relation to the structural pattern indicated by the genealogies.

Old people in Mokhokhong complain frequently that young people no longer respect their elders nor observe the duties required of them by custom. Such complaints were also made by Plato of the Athenian youth of his day. There are a number of factors which lend credence to the elders' claim, however. One of these is a comparison of the older literature with the modern situation. Ashton (1967: 18) says, "Kinship is a powerful and persuasive factor that enters into almost every social situation in a Mosuto's life.". He did his field work in the late 1930's, and this statement would now no longer hold. In Mokhokhong kinship considerations may enter into most social situations involving

certain of the older people who are also members of strong descent groups, but often economic, political or purely personal factors entirely override kinship in importance. Sheddick (1953: 32), who was in the field during the late 1940's and early 50's, wrote, "Nowadays (the male parent's) responsibility is being slowly undermined, partly by European concepts of personal rights and partly by the growing economic independence of adult children.". There are other reasons as well, which I discuss below. In this situation it is impossible to make any categorical statement concerning the strength or weakness of kinship obligations under all situations. Within some families it is stronger than in others; under certain circumstances a man may find it advantageous to fulfil his obligations as a Kinsman to another assiduously, so that he may ask a favour later on; older people are generally more punctilious about their obligations than younger people; married people more so than unmarried. With available information, however, it is impossible to give any clear indication of the rate of change in kinship institutions or their observance.

Marriage and Kinship.

The household is the most important single social unit, or sphere of interaction, in the daily lives of the people. Husband, wife, and their children form the basic residential unit. The products of their work are contributed mainly to the support of this unit.

The husband usually leaves very shortly after marriage for further spells on the mines or at other work in South

Africa. Some men remain at home for two or three days only after marriage. Some stay for several months, but because very few young men have adequate fields, if any, and because local employment is very scarce, virtually all are forced to go to South Africa. Many newly-wed men also have large debts, from bohali and from the expense of setting up their new home, and have to work abroad for funds to pay these off.

The husband's absence raises several problems. The first of these is where his wife should stay. There are three common solutions; the wife may stay with the man's parents or with his mother if his father is dead; or she may stay with her parents; or, if her husband can afford it, they may establish a house of their own in his community.

The first alternative is commonly used, and is favoured by many young men, especially if their relations with their parents are good. This is the solution most harmonious with tradition, for a young woman marrying into a family should fall under the authority of the head of that family. The arrangement also has the advantage that the young, and presumably attractive, woman is hereby given a measure of protection from the advances of unauthorised males in the absence of her husband. It also enables the young couple to avoid the expense of setting up their own household.

Young wives may resent this arrangement, however, for it places them under the often very strict authority of their husband's father. A very formal relationship between a man and his son's wife is prescribed. He should be polite to her but may dictate to her the kind of relationships which

she may or may not entertain, especially with other men. Some men are most particular about the conduct of their daughters-in-law, for deviations, especially sexual, reflect on his capacity to organise his household and may bring disgrace and ridicule on him. He will also be responsible to his son should the girl fall pregnant during her husband's absence. The new wife should treat her father-in-law with extreme deference. She should not use his name but should refer to him or address him by the name of his eldest son or the name of her husband, prefixed by 'Ra'. (father of....). She should not touch him or his clothes, nor should they eat together. This type of observance seems to many young women an absurdity, although they may submit to it because not to do so would cause great unpleasantness. Moreover, a husband normally sends his money to his parents, who use some of it for the support of his wife and children. She is therefore economically dependent on her father-in-law.

In this situation the relationship of a migrant's wife to her mother-in-law is most important, for she spends most of her time helping the old lady. This relationship can be a warm and friendly one, full of mutual respect and co-operation, or it may be bitter and venomous. There are several examples of each in Mokhokhong. The extremes are most evident where the mothers-in-law are widowed. In the one case there is peace and harmony, while in the other there is constant suspicion on the part of each that the other is using the family resources for selfish ends.

The second possibility for the wife of a migrant is not

she may or may not entertain, especially with other men. Some men are most particular about the conduct of their daughters-in-law, for deviations, especially sexual, reflect on his capacity to organise his household and may bring disgrace and ridicule on him. He will also be responsible to his son should the girl fall pregnant during her husband's absence. The new wife should treat her father-in-law with extreme deference. She should not use his name but should refer to him or address him by the name of his eldest son, or the name of her husband, prefixed by 'Ma' (father of....). She should not touch him or his clothes, nor should they eat together. This type of observance seems to many young women an absurdity, although they may submit to it because not to do so would cause great unpleasantness. Moreover, a husband normally sends his money to his parents, who use some of it for the support of his wife and children. She is therefore economically dependent on her father-in-law.

In this situation the relationship of a migrant's wife to her mother-in-law is most important, for she spends most of her time helping the old lady. This relationship can be a warm and friendly one, full of mutual respect and co-operation, or it may be bitter and venomous. There are several examples of each in Kokchokhong. The extremes are most evident where the mothers-in-law are widowed. In the one case there is peace and harmony, while in the other there is constant suspicion on the part of each that the other is using the family resources for selfish ends.

The second possibility for the wife of a migrant is not

usually favoured, except in special circumstances, such as the husband having no parents or close kin with whom his wife can live. When the wife returns to her own people the relationship between husband and wife reverts, virtually, to that existing before their marriage. The husband and his kin have no control over their new wife, nor does she contribute anything to their welfare. A major disadvantage is that the man may forgo any land rights he has in his own community if his wife is not maintaining them by working his fields. Nor could a claim by him for land normally succeed in the absence of his wife. This means that when he stops migrating and settles with his wife and children, he begins as a new man, even in his own community of origin, as far as land rights are concerned. Therefore this solution is rare.

Nowadays most young men try as soon as possible to establish their households independently of their parents. Some may even build their first house while they are bachelors and without any prospective bride. But the majority still spend some time after marriage at their parents' homestead before they have saved enough to build their own houses. A year or two is common.

A man will normally build in the community of his father for only here can he legitimately claim arable lands. He can also hope to receive land from his father when the latter is too old to work or has died. The alternative is to move to another community where the chief or headman will accept him as a subject, and to apply for land there. Nowadays the chances of his receiving an adequate allocation are slim,

because as a new-comer his application will not normally be considered until local men have been given land.

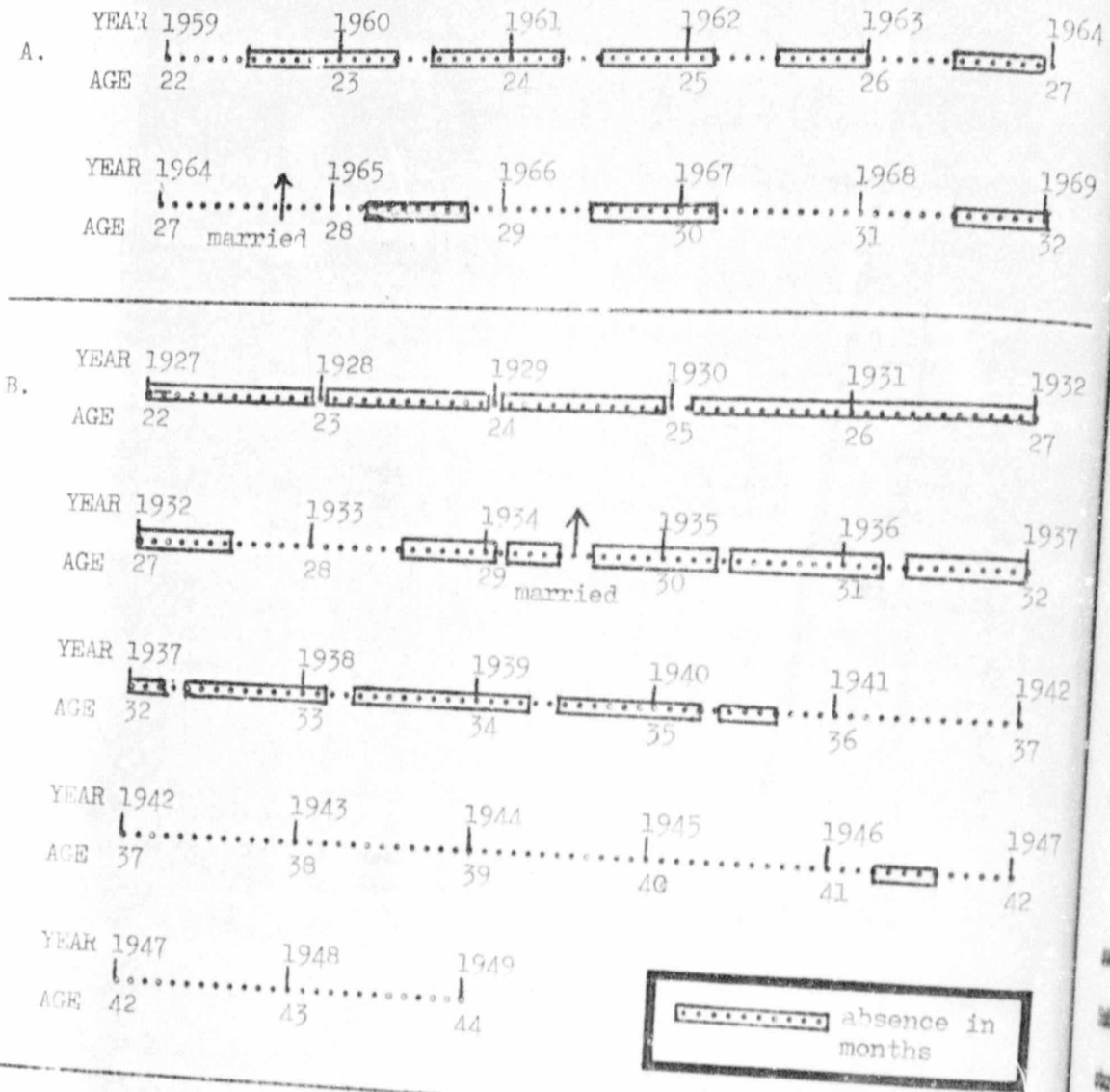
In Mokhokhong most young men build in Thotaneng. This is only partly due to the scarcity of land in the old established villages, and some houses are still being built by the sons of old men next to the parental homestead. In Thotaneng houses tend to be spaced more widely than in the other villages. Independence and privacy from one's neighbours and kin are valued. The young wives of Thotaneng are therefore much freer than those living with their affines, and a great deal of scandal centres about them. Several have lovers openly residing in their houses.

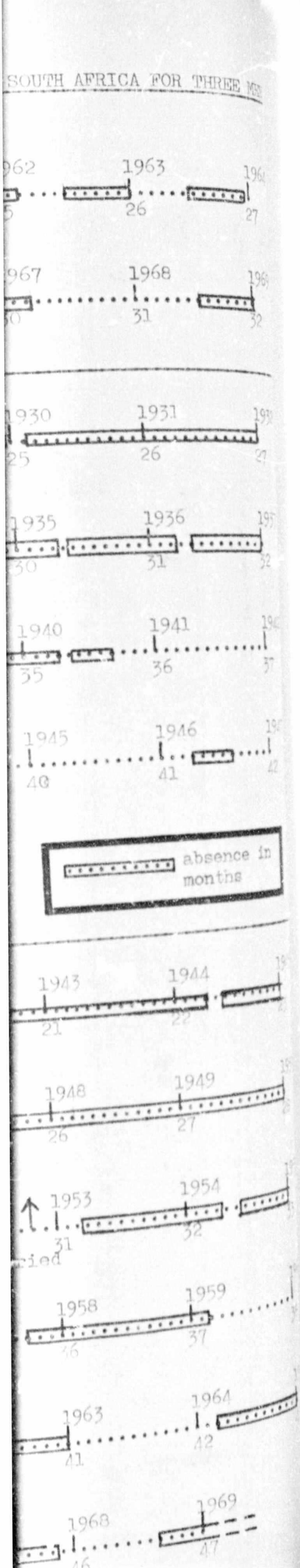
The underprivileged position of young men and new-comers in relation to land holding is exemplified by the population of Thotaneng. The twelve families resident there hold 8.01 acres total, giving an average of 0.66 acres per household, although five families have no land at all. In comparison with the rest of the community, therefore, with an average holding per family of about three acres, the women of Thotaneng have little agricultural work, which also liberates them for other activities. These include the baking and selling of bread, much beer selling, participating in voluntary organisations, selling their labour to those who have land but too few workers in the family, and visiting outside the valley.

Most men begin their careers as migrant workers when they are eighteen to twenty years of age, and are seldom seen again in Mokhokhong, apart from periods of a few weeks

FIG. III SHOWING PERIODS OF ABSENCE AT WORK IN SOUTH AFRICA FOR THREE MEN

(Constructed from Wellmer's data)





to a few months every two or three years, until they are about thirty seven. Migration then becomes less frequent, longer periods are spent at home, until the age of about forty five when most men have ceased to migrate altogether. At present those over forty five who are still migrating are either landless or have very good jobs in South Africa. The age of thirty seven coincides approximately with the time when a man can expect to receive adequate land, two acres or more, to warrant his staying at home to cultivate it. Before this time he cannot support his family without wage earnings, and even with two acres he must find other sources of income.

The most active period of mens' lives is therefore spent away from home. The brief 'resting times' spent in Mokhokhong are too short to allow any serious project to be started and established. Men contribute relatively little to agriculture at this time, both because they are often not present during the peak labour-input periods and because they regard the interludes between contracts as times for recuperation. Some men do start a project, such as building a house, but unless they can complete it before they leave or arrange for someone else to complete it, their work is often undone by the rain and sun and the walls collapse before the roof is on.

Of the 104 men between the ages of fifteen and sixty five in the community, fifty one are either away at a distant work place, or resting briefly with the firm intention of returning shortly to their work place. There are several others who are presently at home and hoping not to have



KNOWLEDGE OF HERBS, GAINED FROM HER FATHER, IS A USEFUL ECONOMIC ASSET.

to return to work in South Afri
tainly have to go for economic
happen at the end of a man's c
a great effort into his farming
nain at home, but he probably w
the first few years, and since
ast to work he returns once ma
ay happen several times until
migrating. But many men retu
contractual on the mines, and
money to the task of domestic

Apart from its effect in
hesitancy of the best part of
inhibits continuity in public
etc.) or private projects (e.g.
the personnel is constantly ch
ersonal also has an effect on t
Nethinking, since allegiances
ctually changing with the pre
persons.

The Position of Women.

The majority of the wives
provided by their husbands.
free male supervision and gre
ean for spouses to correspond
only when specific messages h
ay instruct his wife to make
ploughing and planting his fi

to return to work in South Africa, but some will almost certainly have to go for economic reasons. This frequently happens at the end of a man's career as a migrant. He puts a great effort into his farming & try to make enough to remain at home, but he probably will have a bad season within the first few years, and since he is not quite old enough not to work he returns once more to his work place. This may happen several times until he is too old to continue migrating. But many men return sick, some with phthisis contracted on the mines, and find it impossible to give much energy to the task of domestic reconstruction.



R. IS A USEFUL ECONOMIC ASS

Apart from its effect in depriving the families of Mokhokhong of the best part of its labour force, migration inhibits continuity in public projects (e.g. roads, dams, etc.) or private projects (e.g. houses, kraals, etc.), as the personnel is constantly changing. The changing of personnel also has an effect on the internal politics of Mokhokhong, since alignments and balances of power are constantly changing with the presence or absence of influential persons.

The Position of Women.

The majority of the wives of migrants live in the houses provided by their husbands. They have considerable freedom from male supervision and great responsibility. It is common for spouses to correspond, although infrequently, and only when specific messages have to be conveyed. A husband may instruct his wife to make certain arrangements for ploughing and planting his fields; a wife may request more

money for school fees, clothes, medical expenses and so on. Some women never hear from their husbands while they are away, nor do they receive help from them. One woman last saw her husband six years ago and believes he will not return, for when he left he had no land in Mokhokhong. Another woman did not see or hear from her husband for twelve years and had abandoned hope of his return. But he arrived at her door one day, unannounced, sick and destitute. She has continued to exert the dominant influence in her household which she established during the years of her self-sufficiency. Returning husbands may be angry with their wives for not complying with their instructions on cultivating the fields; wives may reply that their husband did not send enough money, or that so and so did not co-operate as agreed, so that alternative arrangements had to be made.

There is very often uncertainty within a family where the husband is a migrant about who has the right to take certain decisions. A young wife living with her husband's parents normally has most decisions made for her, but a wife living in her own house in the community of her husband must consider whether, in any given situation, she should consult her husband by mail or wait for his return, consult her father-in-law, or take the initiative herself. To wait for the husband's reply or return may mean a disastrous delay; consult the father-in-law may bring an unwanted interference in her domestic affairs; to take the decision alone may well bring the wrath of both husband and father-in-law on her head. A wife must often choose between getting the job done and following the correct pattern of consultations.

When a wife is living independently of her father-in-law the return of her husband from his work place is often traumatic. In most cases she has taken over most of the duties of her husband in the home. His only function in the household during his absence has been that of money earner, and perhaps occasional consultant on major decisions. He must now try to reassert his authority in the home and his wife must adopt a subservient rôle. One man recently returned from the mines and sold a part of the agricultural produce that his wife was storing for home consumption; the woman was very bitter because, she said, he had contributed nothing to that produce and spent the money lavishly on himself. When the husband leaves again for another period of work his wife again assumes the principal duties of running the household.

Women have come to undertake considerable responsibility in the public, as well as in the domestic spheres. This is not so evident in the traditional institutions, such as the pitso or court hearing, but rather in the new associations and organisations which have emerged in response to specific needs. (See Chapter V) Women have organised their own club for saving money and for provident purposes; they are very influential in the Farmers' Association; they have been elected by the community to sit on various ad hoc committees such as that responsible for the installation of the village water supply. I have no record of a woman conducting her own case in a court hearing, but several where women have been represented by men, in the traditional manner. It is rare for women to offer opinions or defend points of view at

pitsos. Mabatho is an exception to this generalisation, for she sometimes argues persuasively at pitsos in favour of one course of action as against another. This however is in accordance with tradition, for female chiefs and headmen are fairly common and in theory at least ought not to be at a disadvantage because of their sex. How far this is true in practice is very difficult to tell. A female headman is expected, in general, to consult with her advisors, the village council, and with her husband's kin in situations where a man might take his own decision. On the other hand a determined female headman can act on her own initiative without risk of formal sanctions, although she may be strongly criticised by those who thought she ought to have sought the advice of men.

The whole question of the status of women is one which could bear a detailed and lengthy analysis, and would yield valuable insights into the changing social structure and organisation of the Basotho people. This cannot be done here, but constant reference is made throughout this study to the implications of these factors.

Peasant Economy

The household, consisting basically of the nuclear family, sometimes with single adult relatives or children of relatives added, and sometimes with the husband away at work for most of the time, is the most important social unit in the daily lives of the people of Mokhokhong. Wider bonds of kinship are, however, recognised and may become important for certain purposes and at certain times.

The descent group is comprised basically of the male descendants of male ancestors. Seniority is reckoned, in the first instance, by membership of the senior house of the apical ancestor; that is, all the sons of the senior wife take precedence over the sons of junior wives. After this, birth order counts, the eldest son being most senior.

The existence of functional descent groups wider than the nuclear family depends very largely on the length of time a group of kinsmen and their ancestors have been living in one place and on the degree to which they have been able to retain their young men. By a 'functional descent group' I mean one which provides a basis for actual co-operation among its members, such as assistance with ploughing, or with bohali cattle, loans or gifts of food during hard times, support in disputes, especially over land, and so on. There is in Mokhokhong only one example of such a descent group and that is the group comprising the descendants of Letunana (see Genealogy II). The constituent families (or minor descent groups) of this descent group are, in order of seniority, Nankoe, with thirty two members; Tsoanamatsie, with forty five members; and Majoro, with twenty one members. These families occupy an almost continuous block in Matumaneng. They help one another in their fields and with house repairs, they constantly loan one another implements and utensils, food, money, cattle and horses. The members of the group were outraged when Jobere, as was his right as headman, removed one field from the widow of a deceased member on the grounds that she no longer had need of so much arable land



ELDERS OF THE MATUMANENG DESCENT GROUP.

and that this field should be allocated to a family which had no land. They felt that this was a diminution of assets of the descent group as a whole, even though land is held by the individual who has sole rights over the disposal of the produce.

About a year ago one of the Tsoanamatsies held a feast in commemoration of his father's death. To it he invited all the members of the Matumaneng descent group (but no others from Mokhokhong) and other descent group members from beyond the valley. Some came from the northern and the southern extremities of Lesotho, bringing their children with them, for, as the host explained to me, it was necessary for the children of the group to meet and know their kinsmen so that they would not drift away and forget their obligations. The principles of seniority in the group were also shown to the children.

The unity of the Matumaneng descent group is also expressed in its history of loyalty to Matete, shared by no other group in Mokhokhong ha Philipi. Even though the descent group has formally 'turned its doors' towards the descendants of Philipi its members retain an awareness, which is recognised by other members of the community, of a separate identity.

This group is a powerful political force in Mokhokhong. Jobere and Mabathe have both acknowledged that their work as headman becomes extremely difficult in the absence of support from Matumaneng, and virtually impossible in the face of

unified resistance from that quarter. Thus, both headmen have tried to draw the senior members of that group into positions of responsibility. The last two matona, the man responsible for the preservation of the reserved grazing, the last two chairmen of the Farmers' Association, and many officers in the village council, the voluntary associations and committees, are members of the Matumaneng descent group. The reasons for the political importance of this group are clear. Firstly, non-co-operation from such a large segment of the community could make it virtually impossible to mount any public projects, to arrive at any concensus in the settlement of disputes, or to achieve any semblance of agreement on matters of public policy, such as the setting aside of reserved grazing areas, land distribution, the use of firewood and thatching grass and the adoption of soil conservation measures. Secondly, the Matumaneng descent group contains a relatively large proportion of the able and competent men in the community, whose services are necessary to fill the positions of public responsibility. Thirdly, a failure on the part of the headman of ha Philipi to capture and retain the allegiance of Matumaneng means a strengthening of Matete's support, and this would seriously affect the chances of reclaiming the fields on Philipi's side of the boundary stream from Matete and his subjects.

There is a high degree of interaction and communication among the members of the Matumaneng descent group, so that their views are often well co-ordinated and their differences ironed out before they appear in public. This again gives

them a strength not possessed by other groups of kinsmen.

One example of descent group solidarity occurred when Peter, a young member of the Matumaneng group, home on leave from the mines, was stabbed by a man of another very small descent group. For many years there had been friction and occasional violence between these two groups. On Easter Sunday afternoon a number of people were drinking beer in Thotaneng. The wife of one man got up and announced that she was going to visit at ha Mafefoane; as she left her husband came out and began to pull her back, saying it was too late to go. Peter came out of the beer hut and told the man to stop molesting his wife. An argument developed up to the point where the infuriated husband pulled a knife and stabbed Peter twice. Leaving a trail of blood Peter set off for his father's house in Matumaneng. His assailant immediately left Mokhokhong and was followed by his brother who also feared vengeance on account of his brother's deed. In spite of the fact that the victim was a member of the B.C.P. (whereas all the senior members of his descent group are B.N.P.) and his conduct towards his kinsmen had long been regarded as scandalous, his senior kinsmen took the knifing as an attack on the descent group as a whole. They discussed the matter together and laid a charge at the police station. Although they did not contemplate any direct counter-violence others in the community commented that the aggressor and his brother would do well to keep out of the way for some time.

It is, however, possible to overemphasise the degree of co-operation and mutual understanding among the people of

Matumanong. Recently a case was brought to the headman's court by a Mankoe against a Majoro, whose goats had entered Mankoe's wheat field in the night. Unable to agree on the extent of the damage, or of Majoro's responsibility, or on the compensation payable, and unable to settle the matter with the aid of other descent group members, they had to bring the matter to public view. The descent group is also divided in respect of membership of the Farmers' Association, a point discussed in some detail in the final chapter.

Other, smaller, descent groups are so torn by internal conflict that they provide scarcely any basis for co-operation among the members. Politics is especially divisive and two of the smaller descent groups are so divided on political lines that the kinship obligations which ought to unite their members seem, in fact, to exacerbate the conflict. The relationship between mothers and sons has become very strained. The sons ought to respect their mothers and to help them in their fields and with the heavier jobs, but the mothers belong to the B.N.P. while the sons are ardent supporters of the opposition party which disapproves of co-operation across party lines.

Shortage of land is a major threat to the solidarity and perpetuation of the descent group. Virtually every man wants land, and he expects to receive it from the chief or headman under whom he was born, that is, in the same place as his father. If land is not available here he may go elsewhere to look for it, and if another chief grants him land he will likely settle there, thus breaking up the geographical

solidarity of his descent group. It is therefore in the interest of every descent group to ensure that the land held by its members is not depleted, so that, with the permission of the chief, it may be handed on to the next generation intact. Under present conditions of land scarcity, and even loss of land through erosion and exhaustion, and of population expansion, estimated for the nation at 3% per annum, it becomes less and less possible to hold young men as residents in the places of their fathers. They must go out to look for jobs and other opportunities, until their mid thirties when they may, if they are lucky, receive some land. In many cases it is only the lack of opportunities for permanent settlement in other places, South Africa included, which brings men back to Makhakhong to settle. "This is a place of starvation," they say. These circumstances, which tend to increase in severity, bode ill for the continuance of large and powerful descent groups. Fragmentation of these groups must proceed as men drift out in search of a living when their home cannot provide one.

Social Stratification

In traditional times several factors operated in Sotho society to produce well defined social strata. Most important of these were rank, lineal and clan seniority, age, sex, and wealth. There were other criteria which operated less generally, such as valuable technical skills, bravery in war, magical skills, or the ability to recite praise songs well.

In Makhokhong there are only two ranks of any significance - the headmanship and the commoners. The headmanship used to carry with it many benefits. The headman could choose his own arable land, as much as he needed. He received informal tribute from his subjects, especially on those occasions when they wanted to ask a favour. Up to a half of any firewood or thatching grass collected in his area by his own subjects or others was normally given to him. He received a higher bohali for his daughters - up to twice the normal amount.

The headman had considerable political and legal authority. It was his decision whether or not to allocate land to an applicant, where and of what size the land should be. Since land was by far the most important requisite for making a living this gave the headman a great deal of real power in his community, more especially since he was also empowered to remove land from people under certain rather broadly specified conditions. The headman's court, in which, after a full hearing, his judgment was final, unless an appeal were taken to the chief, was also a means whereby he could exercise considerable influence in the community. Until 1946 the headman could execute sentences passed by his court; he could fine his subjects, order compensation paid, and prescribe corporal punishment in certain cases. The relative wealth of the headman gave him additional influence over his subjects, as some of them would be obliged in times of hunger to ask him for help.

Relatives of the headman did not really constitute a class separate from the commoners in that their actual priv-

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

PUBLISHER:
University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg
©2013

LEGAL NOTICES:

Copyright Notice: All materials on the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg Library website are protected by South African copyright law and may not be distributed, transmitted, displayed, or otherwise published in any format, without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

Disclaimer and Terms of Use: Provided that you maintain all copyright and other notices contained therein, you may download material (one machine readable copy and one print copy per page) for your personal and/or educational non-commercial use only.

The University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, is not responsible for any errors or omissions and excludes any and all liability for any errors in or omissions from the information on the Library website.