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BY: **Deborah James**

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Bagagešu/those of my home: migrancy, gender and ethnicity[1]

Ethnicity has been an area in which scholars of southern Africa have shown a gradually increasing interest over the last couple of decades. This interest has sharpened over the last five or six years to become a major concern, with Vail's 1989 collection, and his comprehensive introduction, as something of a watershed. More recently still, the holding of two major South African-based conferences on the topic within the last two years suggests that it has become a virtual obsession in the region.[2]

Both southern Africanists' recent preoccupation with ethnicity, and their lack of concern with it in an earlier period, can be explained to some degree by reference to the influence of events in the broader socio-political arena. The prevalence of papers on the origins and current machinations of Zulu nationalism at both of the conferences mentioned above suggests that the divisive cultural politics of Natal have had more than a little to do with scholars' current interest in the topic of ethnicity in southern Africa. Similarly linked to political priorities and concerns has been the virtual ignoring of ethnicity as a topic in southern African studies during the period from the late 1950s to the early 1970s. Since apartheid was founded on the basis of ethnic differences reified by the state, scholars opposed to this policy were reluctant to lend weight to the notion that such differences were experienced as real by the social actors of their study.

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[1] This paper was previously presented at the JSAS conference, **Paradigms lost, paradigms regained**, in York in September 1994. My thanks to the singers of Ditšhweu tša Malebogo and Maaparankwe; to Malete Thomas Nkadimeng and Sam Nchabeleng for help with translation and transcription; to Adam Kuper, Isabel Hofmeyr and Henrietta Moore, for helpful advice on writing at an earlier stage; to the University Research Committee and the Mellon fund, both of University of the Witwatersrand, for research grants; to the Director and Staff of the Institute for Advanced Social Research (previously the African Studies Institute), University of the Witwatersrand , for help, support, and space to write in; and especially to Patrick Pearson, for help, support and babysitting. This paper is dedicated to the memory of Philip Mnisi, who provided inestimably valuable help with research and translation, and who was brutally and senselessly murdered during 1992.

[2] Conference on Ethnicity held in Pietermaritzburg in 1992, Conference on Ethnicity, Identity and Nationalism in South Africa: comparative perspectives, held at Rhodes University, Grahamstown, in 1993.

This lacuna has been particularly noticeable in the discipline of anthropology.[3] While students of urbanisation on the Zambian Copperbelt and in West and East Africa were conducting detailed studies on migrants' use of their situationally-defined "tribal" backgrounds as a basis on which to organise themselves in town, anthropologists in South Africa - with the obvious and notable exception of the Mayers (1971) - remained blind to, or ignored, this phenomenon.[4]

Also showing the influence of broader socio-political events on academic concerns is the way in which the investigation of ethnicity was inhibited - not only in anthropology but in other disciplines as well - by an overriding preoccupation with processes of class formation, paralleled or inspired by the rise of the independent trade union movement in South Africa. The assumption that culture and consciousness were broadly commensurate with, or determined by, class membership (Bozzoli and Delius 1990:28-9) left little room for the investigation of workers' ideologies of primordial distinctiveness. An enquiry into the existence of subjectively-experienced cultural difference would perhaps have been seen as a tacit encouragement of divisions within the fledgling labour movement.

It was for social historians working in the late 1970s and 1980s to investigate how processes of proletarianisation in southern Africa, far from subsuming pre-existing divisive and culturally-specific identities, operated to create and give substance to these (Guy and Thabane 1987, 1981; Delius 1989, 1990; see Bonner et al 1993:11-14). Thus southern African scholars acknowledged, a full twenty years or more after Mitchell's *Kalela Dance* (1956), that workers' stressing of tribal or "home" allegiance was neither an anachronistic hangover from their rural origins, nor a quiescent accepting of ethnic identities engineered by the apartheid state, but a newly-constituted way of interacting with other people within the world of work and the city. Where these historians improved on the analysis of earlier anthropologists was in their insistence that ethnic associations were historically and regionally

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[3] Anthropologists were aware perhaps that there was a disturbing similarity between the cultural specificities stressed by their own forebears and the concept of ethnic uniqueness which has been used to justify the depredations of apartheid: see Gordon and Spiegel (1993:86-8).

[4] See for example Mitchell (1956), Harries-Jones (1969); Little (1967; Parkin (1969) Southall (1975a & b); Cohen (1969).

specific, rather than being variations on some basic and timeless theme with the inevitable "function" of promoting adaptation to the urban environment (Little 1973; Southall 1975b).

These developments set the stage for ethnicity in the southern African context to be seen, not as a threat to worker consciousness, but as one of the means through which this consciousness has been mediated, experienced, and expressed. Beyond providing workers in the region with assistance in getting work, in arranging accommodation and funeral transport, in saving money, in finding companionship in town, and in articulating their grievances (Clegg 1982; Delius 1989; Molepo 1983), ethnicity has been shown to facilitate male migrants' safeguarding of their rural assets, in part by enabling them to state and operationalise an emotively-charged link to the land (Vail 1989:14), and by empowering them to defend it (Delius 1993:150-2).

It is by now well accepted, then, that the efforts of male migrant workers to gain control of resources, in the workplace and at home, have often assumed an ethnic form. But it is interesting that the efforts of women workers to gain control of resources in the linked spheres of urban workplace and rural base have rarely been characterised in "ethnic" terms. In relation to the male migrants who group together on ethnic grounds or who participate in "regional" or "ethnic" associations, women have appeared in the literature either as desiring their freedom from such groupings and their associated values, or as firmly dominated by the male agents initiating these groupings.

Where female migration has been relatively uncurbed, such migration has appeared as an opportunity for total escape from the strictures of patriarchal rural society. This was so in South Africa prior to the extending of influx control to women (Bozzoli 1983; Walker 1991:188, passim), and also in towns in West and East Africa and on the Copperbelt (Little 1972; Cheater 1986:159; Parpart 1991; Parkin 1975). In such situations there is a tendency to exaggerate women migrants' desire to be free from all strictures: they have been portrayed as promiscuous, or as entering into only fleeting sexual relationships. The readiness to portray women migrants in this light, according to Brydon, says more about the desire of male vested interests to control these women than about the actualities of their experience

(1987:171-2).[5] This exaggerated emphasis on female unconstraint has led to an assumption - inaccurate, as Brydon indicates (ibid.:176) - that the relationship of such women to male migrant associations is a distant or non-existent one. One of the focuses of male migrant activity has been the desire to control or curb the activities of such women in town (Parkin 1969:165), or to procure exclusive access to their sexual services (Bonner 1990:241, 247-50).

On the other hand, in situations where the existence of male migrancy has been predicated on the existence of a more-or-less viable rural economic base, and on the stable presence of men's wives to manage the rural economy, male organisation is thought to have been dedicated in part to keeping such women in their rural place. Indeed, the strength of ethnicity as a focus of association among male migrants in southern Africa is to be explained, according to Vail, in terms of its promise for enabling control not only over land, but also over women (1989:14). And long periods of male absence from home may paradoxically augment the strength of an apparently primordialist ethnic ideology (Gay 1980:52). This perspective, like the one previously discussed, tacitly excludes women as the possible initiators of ethnic ideologies, or as the members of migrant groupings. If they are the objects of control through these ideologies or by these associations, they are unlikely also to be active subjects initiating or perpetuating them.

The invisibility of women as ethnic subjects can be seen, not only in the observations of those who analyse ethnicity, but also in the language of those who are active participants in it. Vail, in proof of his contention that southern African ethnic ideologies are partly centred on the control of women, paraphrases a Tswana proverb which asserts that "women have no tribe" (1989:15). The proverb bears testimony to the fact that "the cultural construction of an ethnic identity, at least of its highly visible, public face, is still largely a male affair", and also to the fact that women's share in endorsing or modifying such identities "by engaging in informal networks, gossip" and other similar activities has perhaps gone as unnoticed within communities of informants as it has been by those observing them (Lentz 1994).

I argue in this paper, using a case study of northern Transvaal migrancy, that women do act

[5] See also Izzard (1985:271) for a criticism of Little's depiction of migrant women as motivated primarily by a desire for independence.

as agents in rather than being mere victims of the process whereby ethnic identities are formulated. Such an argument must take special note of the fact that, in recent studies of male ethnicity, the "ethnicity is primordial and inborn" vs. "ethnicity is situationally selected" debate appears to have been resolved with an acknowledgement that ethnicity generally combines aspects of both. Viewing ethnic identity both from an analyst's perspective and from that of ethnic subjects themselves has entailed an awareness of the duality, or the "Janus-faced" nature, of ethnic identity, although consensus is lacking about what these two faces actually consist of. For Vail, the duality is one which incorporates the backward-looking reliance on primordial sources of identification and the forward-looking capacity to incorporate contemporary ethnic markers (1989:6). Lentz sees ethnicity's essential duality as lying in its ability to yoke together "essentialist claims" with "malleability according to context and interests" (1994), while Sharp in a similar argument sees ethnic claims to land and autonomy as combining dedicated committment to a given identity on the one hand with an ability to be reflexive and selfcritical about such an identity on the other (nd).

But this acknowledgement of the dual nature of ethnicity has been absent, once again, where women are the ones identifying themselves in this way. If women align themselves with the ways or traditions of a particular group, they have usually been seen as acting in defence of a threatened way of life, and as resisting "the destruction of their culture" (Etienne and Leacock 1980:21). In cases where rural women wear traditional or customary clothing while their menfolk put on western clothes (Comaroff 1985:224-5; Schapera 1949) this appeared to reflect the fact that women, not yet incorporated into the work force, have remained within the domestic sphere and have thus been free to retain their own ways. Indeed, women are often portrayed as the repositories of custom: custodians of identity on behalf of, or in the face of its loss by, men (Murray 1981:150, Hendrikson 1994).

Thus, while the claiming of an ethnic identity by men has been seen in recent writings as a dual process in which the efficacy of primordialist labels is partly to be explained by the pursuit of situationally-defined contemporary goals, the claiming of a similar identity by women appeared, where it was discussed at all, as a wholehearted, unmediated and unreflexive affiliation to a culture of origin.

The observations above embody a paradox. On the one hand, a woman has "no tribe". This statement illustrates the subordinate status of women, since it points to the fact that their interventions in the process of identity-making have gone unnoticed both within local communities and in the pages of scholarship. Seen in an inter-ethnic context, the statement also highlights a woman's subordination: if she marries a man outside her own "group" she can acquire a new or an additional identity but her "loyalties are considered somewhat ambivalent" due to her unwillingness completely to "sever relations to [her] parental kin" (Lentz 1994). It also highlights her role as rearer of children: her natal identity should be effaced by her husband's identity when she bears and raises children and confers this assumed identity upon them.

On the other hand, it is women who truly have "a tribe", in that it is they who have remained within the domestic domain, who have conserved original customs, and who are assumed to be the bearers of real identity. Seen in an inter-ethnic context, the implication that women are the "natural" bearers of ethnic or tribal status can be clearly seen in situations where women out of wedlock bear children fathered by men from other groups, and where the children will - presumably through "blood" as well as through upbringing - be assumed automatically to acquire the identity of the mother (see Wilmsen 1993).

This paper explores some of the implications of this paradox in a discussion of sotho identity as developed by northern Transvaal migrant women, and focuses on two aspects of this identity in particular. Both these aspects are expressed in the emotive terms of family and home which make them appear intrinsic or primordial in nature but both on closer examination emerge as complex combinations of ascription and achievement. Firstly, I discuss ethnicity's genesis in family relationships. A woman's sotho identity is on the one hand intrinsic in that it is considered to be based on the ties of kinship which bind her to her natal family. But this identity is not, on the other hand, automatic, since it rests largely on the correct observance of the filial duties and obligations which are attendant upon a woman's full membership in such a family. Secondly, there is the question of a common home. A woman's sotho identity is said to be founded on the sharing of a single geographical place of origin or "home" (gae) with other women, to whom she refers and whom she addresses as "those of my home" (bagagešu). But this common territory is striven after rather than

being automatically present.

The women in question are from the far northern Transvaal. They have founded a series of migrant associations - mostly starting alongside male associations but later becoming semi- or completely independent of these (James 1993) - based on the performance of "traditional music" (mmino wa setšo), and specifically of a genre called kiba (from the verb "to stamp"). The groups hold weekly meetings on the Reef, but pay visits to the rural homes of their members and of other people, for the purposes of performing semi-professionally at parties or life-cycle rituals. The male form of the kiba genre, based originally on rural performance, has evolved during nearly a century of rural-urban migration. Migrant women's song and dance, although similarly linked to pre-existing rural performance, has only recently claimed an identity in equivalence with men's (James 1994).

This definition of men's and women's migrant performance as versions of the same genre obscures significant social discontinuities. Male migrant musicians have their origins in areas and socio-economic circumstances very different from those of the members of their female partner-groups. Male and female performers came to the Reef from two distinct kinds of areas in the northern Sotho homeland of Lebowa, where they experienced widely divergent socio-economic and cultural conditions as youths and young adults. Male performers are mostly reserve-dwelling traditionalists (baditshaba, "those of the nation"), many from the Pedi heartland of Sekhukhune, who began to play kiba as children, and who have followed a conventional migrant trajectory, from compounded employment through to less restrictive forms of labour, in which kiba performance played a central role. All are married, some have wives and children living in the countryside who visit them occasionally, while a very few have family members living with them in urban accommodation. Their female co-performers, on the other hand, are almost all single or divorced women, who work as live-in domestic servants to support their own children and/or members of their natal families based in the countryside. They grew up on freehold land, on white farms or in reserves of the area further north known as Leboa, in communities where Christian influence - either mission or independent - engendered a musical culture of adolescence which favoured choir, concert and

church songs.[6]

Women's kiba performance did not, then, emerge through simple continuities with past practice. Forged out of a series of disparate though musically compatible rural female styles, for some of its performers it represented a revival of the sotho culture of pre-adolescence. But for some it involved an invoking of the musical practices seen as being not of their own but of their mothers' generation, while others had never seen sotho music performed by members of their own Christian-oriented families but only by unrelated neighbours characterised as "those of the nation" (baditšhaba). In the ethnically diverse northern Transvaal, yet others had grown up speaking languages such as Sindebele or Venda, and performing associated styles of music. Women's performance apparently harked back to a shared origin (setšo) but spoke more of a commonality developed among friends in town than of a culture they had personally transported, intact, from the countryside.

Family ties

In laying claim to ethnic identity, common ties of blood or kinship provide a motif as powerful as that of a shared place of origin. Yet notions of entitlement to ethnic status based on family membership or blood ties have been little investigated.[7] Those emphasising the situational quality of ethnic group membership tend to see such a group identification merely as one among a series of alternative and sometimes overlapping memberships which an individual might choose to invoke in different contexts (van Binsbergen 1994), of which family membership might be another. Perhaps as a result of Barth's "situational" orthodoxy (1969), the idea that these various levels of membership might be thought to be intrinsically

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[6] A major conceptual cleavage exists between Sekhukhune and Leboa, corresponding roughly with the distinction between areas south-east and north-west of Pietersburg. See Delius (1989:588, 591), and James (1993:51-9). Sekhukhune or GaSekhukhune is the local appellation, which does not recognise the limits of the magisterial district Sekhukhune, but extends its boundaries to all those parts of the northern Sotho homeland of Lebowa which are south-east of Pietersburg, and even to much of the white farming area beyond. In similar vein, Leboa is the name for the northern areas as locally imagined, where Lebowa is the official name for the homeland as a whole.

[7] But see Lentz: "ethnic ideologies invoke shared descent that is believed to result in common, deeply rooted psychological and cultural characteristics. They liken new social networks beyond kinship to consanguinity, and thus construe them as primordial and morally compelling" (1994).

interconnected rather than optional and unrelated alternatives, and hence that entitlement to a particular ethnic identity might be limited by or based on membership of a given family, is not one which is commonly found in the literature.

But the case of kiba singers from the northern Transvaal demonstrates that the construction of a broader sotho identity proceeds, not "out of thin air" or produced by an entirely random process of bricolage, but on the basis of positions assumed within narrower spheres, less inclusive in breadth and span. Crucial among these are the immediate natal family which each supports and in most cases heads. Another, not addressed in this paper, is the extended family including relatives both living and deceased within which many now play the major spiritual roles of divination and ancestral propitiation (James 1993:226-254). Despite the primordialist language of family, blood, and descent, these identities were not automatically "given" but rather had to be achieved, partly through the observance of filial duties.

The families which served as the basis of this ethnic identity were not those established through the bearing of children within a conjugal relationship. Although some kiba singers had lived briefly as married women prior to widowhood or divorce and some even came to town to join their husbands, others remained single throughout. Unmarried and previously married alike were eventually united by their common experience as single women without male support: indeed it was this experience which drove most to become members of dance groups in the first place.

Rather than being based on the experience of dependent wifehood within their in-laws' families, then, migrant women's sotho identity was founded upon their experiences as wage-earners within their natal families. Their coming to play this role was due in large measure to the processes of resettlement in the official "homelands" to which rural people into the Leboa area - whether farm tenants, inhabitants of the freehold land which was cleared as "black spots", or dwellers in the small reserves - were subject. It was due as well in some cases to the subsequent departure and permanent absence of fathers who were new to the migrant labour experience, or to their death.

For those who had lived in the white areas of South Africa in peasant farming or labour

tenant families, their fathers' first move to town as workseekers, and their families' first dependence on a migrant wage, occurred only after moving into the homeland.[8] Flora Mohlomi's father, for example, began to work only after leaving his tenancy at GaKgopa and settling at Boyne in Molepo district in 1953. His first migrant contract then took him to Port Elizabeth, which made visits to his family costly and thus infrequent. For the father of Salome and Andronica Machaba, the family's move from their rented acres at the freehold farm of Makgodu to GaKgare in the Malebogo district prompted his departure to look for work, but he never returned to his family:

> after he disappeared, that was the end of him. Even now we have forgotten what he looks like. Our children do not know him. They just hear us say "you have a grandfather".[9]

Some singers, especially those born late to older fathers, had already lost their fathers at the time of the move to the homelands. And others, like Helen Matjila, had fathers who even in the face of dire need by their families were unwilling to travel to towns to look for employment after leaving the farms.

In contrast to these farm-dwelling girls, their counterparts living in the small reserve areas of the north came from families which had relied on migrant wages for at least one generation. But this did not mean a greater reliability on the part of the male providers of this income. Mary Kapa, born in the Mašašane district of the homeland, lost her father to the city just as the Machabas did. The father of Phina Komape from the Moletši district died when she was a child, leaving her family unsupported. And in the case of Fransina Monyela, from Molepo, her father became ill and so was unable to earn a living. This absence of a paternal income was to play a definitive role in prompting women - reserve-dwellers and

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[8] The start of involvement in migrancy at this time confirms a claim made in the report of the Surplus People Project that relocation, especially from "black spots" to settlements without agricultural land, often led to higher levels of migrancy within the population. The same report indicates that these relocated people newly entering the labour market often had to accept employment in the least skilled and worst-paid jobs, since they had not been involved in the gradual building up of urban networks known to those longer acquainted with migrant labour. Surplus People Project, Vol. I, (1983:26-7). For an account of similar contrast between longstanding networks built up by heartland migrants and the lack of such networks among recently-resettled labour tenants, see James (1987:183), Sansom (1970:71-4, 97-8).

[9] Salome and Andronica Machaba, recorded discussion with Deborah James (DJ) and Malete Thomas Nkadimeng (MTN), Johannesburg, 13/5/90.

former farm-dwellers alike - to migrate and to view themselves as key figures in supporting first their mothers and siblings, and later their own and their siblings' children.

But the role of responsible daughter and breadwinner was not forced upon these women by the necessity of material support alone. There were cultural precedents in northern Transvaal communities which also played a part in creating women's twin sense of duty and preeminence within the family. Anthropologists documenting rural life among the Lovedu and Pedi have pointed to the central role played by a kgadi (eldest sister) in intercession with the ancestors (Monnig 1967:56-7; EJ and JD Krige 1943:235): she became "the ritual head of a family, just as the eldest brother [became] the jural head" (Kuper 1982:60). Indeed, it was often in relation to her brother that a girl's or sister's importance in her natal family was phrased. The significance of her role viz-a-viz her brother was evident in the practice of the "cattle-linking" of these siblings through cross-cousin marriage. The bridewealth paid to a family for a girl's marriage would be used by one specific brother when he required cattle with which to pay bridewealth in turn, and this linking would give the sister particular ritual rights and duties over the house established by the brother through his marriage (ibid.)

Bonds between siblings, with these precedents in the northern Transvaal, appear to have become increasingly important under present conditions of conjugal collapse in the labour-sending areas of southern Africa more broadly. In situations where conjugal collapse has made maritally-based households unviable, sibling bonds, based more on willing reciprocity and less on formal obligations than conjugal ones, have served as a basis for the formation of households (Niehaus 1994). Such broader reciprocity within the natal or agnatic family has ensured continued support for stay-at-home women whose desertion by husbands or single status would otherwise leave them destitute, (Schapera and Roberts 1975:267; Murray 1981:110; Izzard 1985:268-9, 272-3). A sense of obligation originating between siblings often provides such women with monthly remittances from their brothers (James nd), and may extend even to members of the descending generation, with a man in his role as malume (mother's brother) maintaining his sister's children and their children in turn. The wage-earning women of my study, however, although similarly bonded in co-operation and amity with male siblings, occupy a position of great structural similarity to them which sometimes results in competition as will be seen below (James 1993:149-151).

The families within which migrant women assume their key roles, like these roles themselves, cannot then be thought of as automatically provided by heredity even though they were formed around relationships of blood. In them, individual agency mediated processes of social and geographical dislocation and aspects of customary practice. But how do these family relationships link to ethnic entitlement?

One of the ways in which the claim to being sotho is phrased by these women is by reference to the appropriate performance of duties within the family. In affirming such an identity, women invoke custom in two paradoxical ways: first in endorsement of the right of a sister, particularly an older sister, to exercise authority and undertake obligations within her natal family as mentioned above: but second, almost contradictorily, in proof of the fact that it is a brother's or son's responsibilities in such a family which are paramount. It is in the domain where brotherly and sisterly roles overlap and have begun to be seen as competing that what constitutes "proper sotho behaviour" is most fiercely contested.

"In sotho, the oldest child should support the younger ones" was Helen Matjila's explanation of her entry into migratory wage labour as a domestic servant. As a wage-earning *daughter*, she legitimates her role by invoking an oldest *son*'s obligation to act as custodian of family assets such as cattle, holding them in trust for his younger siblings (Monnig 1967:336-7; James 1988:39-40). The gender switch which her statement embodies is justified in the following terms: it is preferable for an older daughter rather than a son to assume such responsibilities, since her becoming a parent serves to bring her closer to her family of birth rather than distancing her from it as in the case of a son. A son who has children in a stable marital relationship will work to send money home to his specific nuclear household. A wage-earning daughter who has children - whether born outside of a marital relationship or within one of short duration - will leave them in the care of her mother with whom she will establish a system of mutual dependence with benefits for both parties.[10] This reciprocity, both prompted by and further enabling intergenerational family continuity, ensures that her wage-earning capacities are not lost to her relatives. The discourse through which sotho identity is claimed operates here to endorse the substitution of a daughter for a son while

[10] See Izzard (1985:273-5), Preston-Whyte (1978:62-9) for similar cases in Botswana and Natal respectively.

retaining notions of duty and proper behaviour intact.

A married brother may of course aid his sister in the burden of maintaining his natal family, particularly if he views his own role in terms of another sotho injunction: that a youngest son should look after his parents in exchange for taking up residence at their home (James 1988). The younger brother of Helen Matjila, for example, lessened the load she bore as sole breadwinner when he began work and undertook partial support for his family of birth in addition to providing for his wife and children.

From the point of view of such a brother, his commitment to meeting the needs of wife and children above that of mother, sister, and sister's children may be expressed through a redefinition and a narrowing of the proper duties of a kgaetsedi (brother) and a malume (mother's brother):

> Let's say [your sister] is old enough but not married, and on top of this she has got some children. You on the other hand have got some children and a wife, and in this situation you won't be able to manage both - your sister and her children together with your wife and your own children. Another thing is that my sister's child is not that much connected to me.[11]

The sloughing off of responsibilities by brothers/sons for their sisters, sisters' children, and parents, like the assuming of these responsibilities by sisters/daughters in their place, are much discussed and contested. Both processes involve a change in roles formerly separated along gender lines, but are nonetheless justified by claims to a sotho identity.

These daughters' positioning of themselves as breadwinners and key providers of support within the natal family was a process engendered by the combined experiences of rural relocation and the prescriptions of custom. Although the wellsprings of this redefinition of "family" were in the countryside, it was to have its realisation in the experience of migratory labour, in an urban setting. It was in town, then, that new ideas of "home" originated. developed.

[11] Prince Seroka, recorded discussion with MTN, Tembisa, 21/4/91.

"Those of my home"

> Home is where this music is sung ... we don't want to forget setšo ga gagešu (the tradition of our home people)
>
> Fransina Monyela

A common rural "home" has been observed to serve as a basis for urban-based groupings in much of the anthropological literature on migrant associations in Africa mentioned earlier, although, perhaps because of its awkward resonances with apartheid's "homelands" it has been absent from the South African literature of the same vintage. In this literature, a group of "home-boys" or "home people" implied a fixity rather than a flexibility of the region on which such an association is based. Despite Little's remark that "the basis of common origin is often more imaginary than real" (1967:27), much of this literature has tended to take for granted the existence of a clearly-defined rural home or place of origin, which in turn provided a clear-cut basis for membership. But if the construction of home-boy networks is viewed as a strategy rather than as an automatic process, then "home" begins to appear as a flexible notion which "enable[s] migrant workers to constantly reposition themselves in ways suited to the actual situation" (Erlmann 1992:608). The conceptualisation of "home" by northern Transvaal migrant women involves much creative representation by individual agents and many subtle shifts in meaning and emphasis.

For each of the women who joined dance group, the idea of "home" (gae) and its accompanying "those of my home" (bagagešu) was conceived of in narrow terms during the first few years of working in town, and later expanded to accommodate a broader, more flexible and more situationally-invoked concept.[12] Some clues as to how this process occurred can be found in group members' retrospective reflections on the individual friendships which were cemented in the founding of singing groups, or which later brought them into such groups.

Home, in its initial and limited aspect, began with the narrow range of acquaintances, mostly

[12] See Guy and Thabane (1987) for a similar concept, also situationally and flexibly invoked, among migrant members of the Marashea (Russian gang) from Lesotho.

from the same village or immediate home area and mostly male, to which each woman was introduced by the male kinsmen who acted as her initial protectors when she arrived on the Reef to look for work (James 1993:81-4). Each of these small groupings of "home people" was conceptualised as representing one of the small reserve areas, eponymously named for a specific chief, in the Leboa area north of Pietersburg - Moletši, Matlala, Malebogo, and others (see map).[13] As the woman established individual contacts with other women met in town, the criterion of a shared language became a crucial one in giving the idea of home a broader catchment area. One kiba singer pointed out that any chance acquaintance would qualify as mogagešu (a home person) if she spoke northern Sotho.[14] For women whose sojourn on the Reef had been too short and too isolated to allow the learning of other languages, merely overhearing another woman speaking northern Sotho was sufficient to establish a sense of commonality. Flora Mohlomi and Grace Shokane met by chance in a shop, and discovered that they spoke a mutually intelligible language. Through this means, Flora Mohlomi was later introduced to women's kiba, of which Grace Shokane had been a member for some years.[15]

Although language provided both the means for making such encounters and an image of commonality in terms of which these could be explained, there were other considerations, as well, which made home people - broadly defined - more important than other casual acquaintances. As Julia Lelahana said, it would be in adversity, especially, that bagagešu could help her. If she became ill, for example, bagagešu would be more likely than any other person to ensure that she was taken back home. A similar need, to take the dead back home for a proper burial, had formed the basis of many of the northern Transvaal male migrant associations, which were later joined by women (Delius 1989:589-9; James 1993:83). But Julia's statement indicates a later development in which groups of women without mediation through men began to commit themselves to the repatriation of ailing friends.

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[13] As in the case of Sekhukhune and Leboa, the names of these reserves have been underlined to convey the sense that they exist, as named thus, in local conceptualisations rather than in official nomenclature. Although the original locations did bear the names of these chiefs, they have now been subsumed into magisterial districts with different names.

[14] Flora Mohlomi, discussion with DJ and Philip Mnisi (PM), Johannesburg, 11/8/91; Julia Lelahana, discussion with DJ and PM, Johannesburg, 13/10/91.

[15] Flora Mohlomi, discussion with DJ and PM, 11/8/91.

They also began to involve themselves in the provision to their fellows of the kinds of practical and financial assistance well-documented in studies of migrant associations elsewhere: by using informal contacts to get jobs for friends with better pay and conditions of service, and by founding a range of rotating credit savings clubs (mehodišano: lit. "those which cause each other to save").

Sanctioned by these more broadly-defined notions of compatibility and shared rural base, women established the friendships which were to become the basis of kiba, or which were to introduce later-joining members to the group. But it was once these women had been thus attracted to the activities of kiba that their home-based identities, through the idiom of musical style, became most encompassing.

The language of northern Sotho, despite regional variations, had provided a template for the modelling of relationships between people from diverse areas. This was so, even for those who had not spoken it at home in childhood, and whose knowledge of it had been restricted to occasional contacts with neighbours. But regional variations in rural female genres of dancing were seen as more pronounced, and were initially more divisive. These were not so much at issue for the majority of members who since early adolescence had eschewed rural sotho music in favour of church-oriented genres. But they were important for the minority: women who had already been active performers in the rural context. When Julia Lelahana joined women's kiba, she found only a few women who danced in the style of her home area, Moletši. It was these women only whom she characterised at that stage as bagagešu. Affronted by what she saw as the others' inability to dance well, she began to try to teach them her own regional style, but they said, "wait, we will build each other". The ensuing process of reciprocal learning moulded the definitive way of performing which people nowadays have come to associate with the women of the kiba group Maaparankwe.[16]

The creation of a new home base transcending the boundaries of smaller regions transformed these women from strangers into bagagešu. This involved some change in the actual lyrics of songs, particularly in their references to the features of particular home areas, as some

[16] Julia Lelahana, discussion with DJ and PM, Johannesburg, 13/10/91.

examples in the next section will demonstrate. But more important than the altering of explicit references to geographical landmarks were adjustments in performance, and the simultaneous broadening and standardising of music and dance style. Through this process, a diversity of styles, known in their rural contexts by a range of names - as kneeling song (koša ya dikhuru), makgakgasa,[17] or collectively as sotho music (mmino wa sesotho) - came to be subsumed within the broader overall category of traditional music (mmino wa setšo).

This process of stylistic homogenization has resulted, in some contexts, in an implied home even more encompassing than that which incorporates the diverse actual homes of a group's members. A complex interaction between urban and rural versions of the style has been involved. Fierce competition between groups in an urban context, and imitation by one group of features seen as excellent in another, has resulted in a homogenous urban style. This has in turn been transmitted to the countryside; either when a group plays at a member's rural home for a life-cycle ritual, or when it is hired to play by people from another - often very far-flung - village. The resulting sense of acquaintance with a broader region is based not only on a pattern of frequent and frequently reciprocated visits by performers from one local area to audiences in a variety of others. It is also forged through the blurring of specific area-based sub-styles to form a broader and more widely-accessible genre.[18]

Home: splits and realignments

It was not only the initial formation of women's kiba groups and the broadening of their style of singing which involved the ongoing re-elaboration of a common home base. Their fissions from and fusions with other groups also entailed a redefinition of distinct or of unifying geographical origins. While this process of realignment reflected the making and breaking of individual friendships between women, it was also a measure of female performers' shifting dependence on their male counterparts. Splits between men's and women's groups embodied conflict over the deployment of performance resources - instruments, audience,

[17] The name for this style of singing is said to be based on the sound made by leg-rattles during a dance.

[18] See James (1993:22-4) for an account of the use of this music to symbolise the "national" unity of Lebowa.

style of singing, payments for public appearances - and often led women singers to terminate these partnerships or to re-enter such partnerships on terms of their own choosing. Although, for men, representing a "home" area in the context of urban performance did certainly entail some changes of name and of symbolic repertoire (James 1993:58-9), for women, the rearrangements of group membership, and the reconceptualisation of which home area they represented, were far more fundamental. In the most extreme example of this, a group of female migrant performers from a scatter of areas in Leboa ("the north": defined as north of Pietersburg) ended up in partnership with a group of men representing its dichotomously opposed area Sekhukhune (the Pedi heartland and seat of the Pedi paramountcy, south-east of Pietersburg).

Ditšhweu tša Malebogo (the bright ones of Malebogo) was a group whose members decided to separate from their original male partners - and from some women newly associated with these partners - and thereafter to stay unaligned. They had initially performed as female members of the Alexandra township-based men's group representing Matlala district, but had left after a dispute concerning the use of drums. Their existence as an independent group was made possible on a practical level by the women's acquisition of their own drums, of a separate storage space for these,[19] and of supporters' and audiences' willingness to commission and to support performances despite their lack of male partners. But the division was characterised as one between people of incompatible home areas and customs:

> "Matlala men chased us away. They said we are many and they don't know where some of us come from. They wanted only women from Matlala".

Another member accounted for the split in terms of style of dress:

> "The people from Matlala don't dress like us. We did not agree about the manner we dress".

A further comment similarly stressed the importance of differences in culture of origin:

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[19] Until the violence of early 1991, drums were normally kept in the Alexandra men's hostel during the week, and brought out on Sundays for practices: Ditšhweu got permission to keep their drums in a nearby house.

"we realised that Matlala women were discriminating against us because they did not want us to sing our own songs, so we decided to split".[20]

The extensive reference to different cultures of origin in this description of group fission displays a notion of home more imaginatively invoked than based on real rural affiliations. The group which separated from men's Matlala to become Ditšhweu tša Malebogo in fact retained two women from Matlala area, left behind in the Matlala group one from Malebogo who was "troublesome", and eventually incorporated a range of others from homes far beyond the borders of the Malebogo area which gave the new group its name. Two or three of the group's founder members were from villages in Malebogo. But the definition of Malebogo as home base proved wide enough to include people of Tswana, Venda, Ndebele, and other origins.

One of these is Phina Komape. Her rural home is in the Mašašane area, in the Sindebele-speaking section of Komape village. But her version of the song Sekhekhe sa go nwa bjalwa (a drunkard who drinks beer) refers in its concluding verses to a more broadly-defined northern area:

Sekhekhe sa go nwa bjalwa	A drunkard who drinks beer
Ke a le bona le sobetse	I see it is sunset
Ba ipshina ka go re sega	They enjoy laughing at us
Le a re bona re tagilwe	You see us, we are drunk
Legodimong re tla no ya	Heaven is where we will go
Legodimong go bo kgaule.	Heaven, the place of forgiveness of sins.
Mathiri ge la kgobokgane le sang go nwa bjalwa	Young women, when you are together, stop drinking beer.
Nkwenya ya lena ke mang?	Who is your leader?
Nkwenya ke Maleaka.	Your leader is Maleaka.
Le a re bona re tagilwe	You see us, we are drunk
Felegetšang Mmanotwane sa go nwa bjalwa	Go with Mmanotwane, the one who drinks beer
Ke bana ba Mamotswiri	They are Mamotswiri's children
Kgane ga go na Masogana a go nwa bjalwa?	Are there no young men who drink beer?
Dirang ka pela le tloge	Hurry up so that we may leave
Se apa bošula o etla	Bad people are coming
Le a le bona le sobetše	You see the sun has set
Banna ba bangwe ba a betha ge se nwele bjalwa	Some men beat their drunkard wives
Dirang ka pela le tloge	Hurry up so that we may leave
Blouberg Makgameng	Blouberg Makgameng
Ditšhweu tša Malebogo	The bright ones of Malebogo

[20] Joanna Maleaka, recorded discussion with DJ and MTN, 24/3/90; Salome and Andronica Machaba, recorded discussion with DJ and MTN, 13/5/90; Rosina Msina, recorded discussion with DJ and MTN, 21/4/90: all in Johannesburg.

Lebelela Rita o bone.	Look and see Rita Mountain.

She has personalised the lyrics of an existing song by adding references to her group and its leader, and to the area to which it claims allegiance. She weaves together allusions to a variety of geographically disparate landmarks: the Blouberg, the range of mountains within the Malebogo area from which the group takes its name, and Rita, the large mountain north-east of Pietersburg which serves as a symbol of the whole of Leboa.[21]

Another such member is Joanna Maleaka, the group leader referred to in the song above, who comes from the Kgothama area in the homeland of Venda. While she subscribes to the idea that she and the other members of her group are all bound together by their sharing of a common rural base, the praises she recites express both her admiration of Malebogo and its clear contrasts with her own "real" home in Venda.

Re bina koša kua Alex	We dance in Alex
Kosa re a bitša Ditshweu tša Malebogo	Our group is called the bright ones of Malebogo
Malebogo ga se bodulo	Malebogo is not a place for settling
Go dula dikokoto	It is a place for heroes
Go dula banna ba mosadi	It is a place for the children of a woman
Iiuu! Ke motswetla, ga ke iphihle	Iiuu! I am a Venda, I don't despise myself
Ke tswa GaRamapulana	I am from Ga-Ramapulana
Go na kua ga bo Mphephu.	At Mphephu's place.

The "place for settling" refers to her own home, in a Trust area where the implementation of the government's plans for agricultural "betterment" led to massive relocations of people into dilaineng (lit. "the place of lines"; the grid plan imposed by Trust officials). She contrasts it with Malebogo, a reserve area in which people's antipathy to this planning led to its abandonment by the authorities. The lyrics serve both to highlight the heroism of Malebogo, the chosen rural reference-point of the group to which she belongs, and to announce her dogged defence of her own home area in the "Trust".[22]

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[21] Phina Komape, recorded discussion with DJ and MTN, Johannesburg, 31/5/90.

[22] Joanna Maleaka, recorded discussion with DJ and MTN, Johannesburg, 24/3/90; and recorded discussion with DJ and PM, Johannesburg, 5/10/91. The "Trust" farms or areas were those purchased by the South African Native Trust (later Bantu Trust, and later still Development Trust) to augment the original reserves or "homelands" which had been scheduled by the 1913 Land Act. These areas, together with the system of government control of agriculture which was implemented in them (often with only partial or minimal success) came to be known simply as "Trust".

Other women's groups, after experiencing similar separations from male partners, elected to re-enter partnerships with men on terms of their own choosing. The women who now sing as part of Maaparankwe SK Land (those of the royal leopard-skin clothing, Sekhukhuneland) are an example. They, too, began their careers as urban singers in alliance with the men of Matlala. After their separation from these men, provoked partly by demands from them for sexual favours, they spent some time unattached to male performers. But their sense of physical vulnerability, especially when travelling to the countryside or to unknown urban locations to perform, drove them to seek out a partnership with the men's group SK Alex, composed of male migrants from Sekhukhuneland resident in Alexandra township. They subsequently ended this alliance in favour of a new one with the Tembisa-based Maaparankwe, in the interests of more harmonious relationships, greater professionalism and higher standards of performance. Aligned with SK Alex and later with Maaparankwe, these women's identity became that of representatives of the Sekhukhune region rather than of its rival region Leboa from which they do, in fact, originate. They see these two consecutive new partnerships as having given them certain benefits as performers - a performance space, an audience, protection in the townships, jointly organized transport. But their involvement in the moral economy of kiba has more to it than merely a partnership instrumentally entered-into. Despite their independence and autonomy as a group of female performers, they are deeply involved, together with Maaparankwe men, in the ongoing recreation of "home" through a creative use of performance scenarios and contexts. As part of this, the evocative and frequently-invoked symbols of the Pedi chiefship provide a powerful rallying cry, both for the men born in the area where this chiefship once held sway, and for the women born far beyond it.

The co-operative venture undertaken by men and women such as those of Maaparankwe was pursued, then, in the interests of polished performance and of harmonious social relationships, but given shape through the search for specific home-based identities. In this way, women from northern areas of Leboa have come to be thought of, by themselves and by others, in association with the Pedi heartland of Sekhukhune.

Through all these shifting partnerships and changes in membership, notions of an appropriate "home" have been invoked and activated. For the women of Ditšhweu tša Malebogo this

embodied a breach in group membership while for those of Maaparankwe it became the idiom of a new partnership. Singers created cohesiveness out of flux and diversity, either building on the template of existing male identities or cementing identities independently of men. But for all, "home" and the singing and dancing associated with it have served as a flexible system for associating with other migrant women in town.

Ethnic women, ethnic men

Like membership of a family and the playing of appropriately dutiful and responsible roles within that family, belonging to a common home is one of the means by which women lay claim to membership of a broader sotho collectivity. It also endorses their right to belong to the community - even more encompassing and more recently "imagined" - of those who value the things of tradition (setšo). These claims to membership, though apparently essentialist in nature, do not however speak of their female claimants' intrinsically "tribal" or "ethnic" status. Rather, they combine the primordialism of blood and territory with flexibility and forward vision in a manner more frequently noted in discussions of male migrant association. "Family" appears as a site for the conservation of custom but is a mould for the casting of new gender roles and a context in which migrant women can pursue their aspirations to autonomy and emancipation. "Home" evokes symbols of a rural landscape but embodies a cementing of friendships made in town and a pursuing of these through the idiom of polished and professional performance within the urban context.

The devising of home and of family is not undertaken completely independently of the male ethnic project, however. Individual brothers, whether in competition or collaboration with wage-earning sisters, have served as models in the quest for dutiful sotho behaviour. Men's groups, whether as temporary partners, rivals, or rejected cohorts, have been instrumental in women's creation of a series of successive "homes". Indeed, the very musical genre of kiba which gave women both the occasion for forming their clubs and the means for performing once thus united, was originally a male one (James 1994).

The construction of a sotho identity by migrant women singers through kiba performance and through an ongoing redefinition of sotho family duties is thus a complex and equivocal one.

They themselves, as single and breadwinning women, have assumed social positions markedly modern, and almost masculine, in their attributes and attendant duties. They have taken on male roles within the family, have begun to sing in a male style in a public domain previously reserved for males, and have entered into partnerships with male groups. Is their use of a male archetype in modelling an ethnic identity, then, an act of dependence or one of autonomy?

In attempting to answer this question I must make glancing reference, for the purposes of comparison, to a rather different constituency of female kiba performers: that of the dependent and rurally resident wives and sisters of migrant men (James 1993:158-198). For these women, family is the arena of unmitigatedly dependent domesticity in in-laws' or parents' homestead, and home is an unequivocally identifiable village. Here, being sotho represents ambivalent values. Admittedly it is the locus of family continuity, of birth-given identity, and of the positive values associated with this: all the senses in which women unreflexively have "a tribe". But at the same time, seen from the perspective of "the male-dominated dominant discourse" in which the image of appropriate male behaviour is valued more highly than that of the female (Moore 1992:8), this female version of sotho is marginal, and hierarchically inferior, to the male migrant sotho identity which evolved, in part, precisely to control women as Vail suggests (1989:14-15). Male identity is inevitably more highly valued than female identity within an ethnic construct which has developed in part around the control of subordinate women.

For stay-at-home wives and sisters to assume, and to be the bearers of, this sotho identity in which women are subordinate, is perhaps an inevitable statement of their dependence. But for wage-earning women in pursuit of an autonomous identity to align themselves wholeheartedly with such ethnic images originating in a male discourse would be a self-negating exercise. It is true that they have made use of this discourse to some extent: the legitimating precincts of male sotho identity provided a space within which kiba women have won the right publically to comment and to be heard as their male counterparts do. But in affiliating with a sotho identity, they have stepped boldly beyond, rather than remaining imprisoned within, the sphere of custom and domesticity, and have expressed their aspirations towards modernity rather than backward-looking conservatism. Their version of sotho

identity does not allow for them to be "pathologized" (Moore 1992:8) as rural women singers are, by having their performance groups and songs labelled as less important than men's. Migrant women performers have created a new identity by selecting and interweaving elements from the shifting terrains of sotho man- and woman-hood.

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