

https://dspace.org/

"I dress in this fashion": women, the life-cycle, and the idea of SeSotho

James, Deborah

1992-09-21
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/8789

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

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

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

African Studies Seminar Paper
to be presented in RW 7003 (7th floor) at
4.00p.m. MONDAY 21st SEPTEMBER 1992

Title: "I Dress In This Fashion": Women, the life-cycle, and the idea of SeSotho.

by: Deborah James

No 324

"I dress in this fashion":
women, the life-cycle, and the idea of _sesotho_[1]

Anthropologists have become interested in "the colonisation of consciousness", and in the processes by which this colonisation has been withstood. While some scholars have examined acts of resistance whose social and political effects were more easily measured, a longstanding concern of anthropologists has been the subtler means of defying domination, often through the reassertion of apparently traditional cultural forms, with effects sometimes perceptible no more widely than within local communities themselves.[2] This set of concerns has been injected with new life and with greater theoretical sophistication by some recent studies. These examine the portrayal, through local knowledge, of processes of colonisation and/or of incorporation by rural people as an industrial proletariat within the capitalist/industrial world. This knowledge is seen as both enabling people to conceptualise their own history as dominated but resilient subjects (J & JL Comaroff 1987:193) and, in parallel, as facilitating the ongoing construction of group or individual identities by such people (Ferguson 1992; Thomas 1992).[3] The production of this local knowledge often involves the invoking of tradition (Coplan 1987, 1991), and often counterposes this with images of modernity, resulting in sets of opposed dualities: town/country, townsman/peasant, Christian/non-Christian, _setswana_/_segoa_.[4]

Criticisms have been levelled at this writing. Spiegel, for example, disparages "dualist approaches" for the inappropriateness of their search "for persistences of a pre-industrial world view in the ways in which people order and

---

[1] I gratefully acknowledge assistance from the University Research Committee, the Mellon fund, the CSD; and the assistance and support of the African Studies Institute, Witwatersrand University. Thanks to Adam Kuper and Jim Kiernan for comments on earlier drafts. Philip Mnisi, who acted as interpreter, was senselessly killed on 5th July 1992. I dedicate this paper to his memory, with gratitude and sadness.

[2] See, for example, Alverson (1978), Mayer and Mayer (1971), McAllister (1980, 1991).

[3] The "construction of identity" is invoked with almost mantra-like frequency in contemporary studies, but has in fact been of concern to anthropologists since Barth and Cohen published their influential pieces on ethnicity/retribalisation in 1969. The debate about "the construction of ethnicity" has occurred in parallel with, but often not in explicit conversation with, that about "constructed identities". On ethnicity, see for example Vail (1989), Harries (1989) Webster (1991).

[4] I am grateful to Leslie Bank and to Caroline Jeannerat for bringing some of these materials to my attention.

perceive their contemporary relationships" (1990:46). But the emerging contrast between, for example, setswana and segoa, was not "a confrontation between a primordial folk tradition and the modern world" (J & JL Comaroff 1987:194-5). Rather, Tswana tradition came to be formulated largely through its complementary opposition to "the ways of the European". Roseberry suggests that the very images of a pre-industrial or pre-capitalist world which feed into the making of such dualities are products of people's encounter with the relationships and realities of the industrial or capitalist one (1989:144, 201-3, passim).

This paper is about a group of rural women who perform a style of music called kiba, thought of as part of the overarching genre of mmino wa sesotho (sotho music).[5] The adjective sesotho, (sotho ways) which describes a range of activities and ideas associated with the music and its performers, is a situational one. Like its opposite sekgowa (white ways), it has no rigid boundary, nor can it can be identified with a particular group of people who subscribe to its tenets.

In areas of the northern Transvaal, there was a distinct divide established from early on, especially in the Pedi heartland Sekhukhune, between those who converted to Christianity (majekane) and those who remained loyal to the chiefs (baditshaba).[6] This social divide corresponded with, and in many ways resembled, that between "Red" and "School" Xhosa in the communities described by McAllister (1980, 1991) and by the Mayers (1971, see also P Mayer 1980). Hence, in contrast perhaps to the case of the Tshidi, the notion of sesotho may sometimes be thought of as characteristic of a particular group of people: non-Christians or traditionalists. In practice, however, as I will show in this paper, the boundary between even these apparently highly distinct groupings, even in the heartland where it might be thought to be strongest, is fugitive and vague if one seeks for it in concrete terms. Thus, both sets of contrasts - sesotho/sekgowa and majekane/baditshaba - tend to be used by people as conceptual tools rather than as labels for the actions

---

[5] The meaning of setso, used like sesotho to describe a range of beliefs and behaviours, of which music is only one, is given in the dictionary as "origin", but in its more common use as an adjective (wa setso, literally "of origin") it is translated by Pedi-speakers well-acquainted with English as "traditional". While in an urban setting, and prompted partly by its use on the radio, the term setso has come to predominate over sesotho as a description of music, in a village context the term sesotho still predominates as a characterisation of this music and its trappings.

[6] Majekane is the derogatory term for Christians, and baditshaba, meaning literally "those of the nation", is the self-referential term by which non-Christians identify themselves. The equivalent terms used by Christians, and inverting the moral weighting, would be bakristi (Christians)/baheitene (heathens).

or orientations of definite groups of people.[7]

What I shall attempt to show in the following pages is that the notion of sesotho has undergone substantive changes over the last few generations. In a heartland Pedi village like Ntshabeleng, sesotho has progressively incorporated elements both from other groups and, more significantly, from sekgowa itself, while retaining the distinctiveness of its contrast with sekgowa. The intrusion of these new elements has often coincided with points of change in the life-cycle, after which they become adopted more generally. But in addition to the flexibility of these paired opposites, there is another point which this paper will stress. Sesotho and sekgowa are differentially adhered to and invoked by women and men, and the contrasts between the two sets of opposed terms are often thought of as aligned.

The paper starts with a discussion of this identification between village women and sesotho, of which clothing is an important outward and visible sign. Due to the incorporation of new elements, introduced through a variety of channels but especially through schooling, the details of sotho dress have differed for each successive group of female initiates. In parallel with innovations in the content of women's sotho dress, the means whereby girls acquire the clothes of adulthood have also changed, with older generations of women having been given money to buy them by fathers, brothers or husbands, where their daughters spent short spells as farmworkers to earn the money themselves. These stints of independence were followed, for women remaining single as for those who married, by a return to the sphere of motherhood, household work and subsistence agriculture. In contrast, the earlier and more consistent involvement of boys in the worlds of school and work have meant that their clothing, once they become adults, is invariably that of sekgowa.

But this opposition between male and female orientations and behaviours, as expressed in the outward and visible sign of clothing, is not consistently experienced or invoked. Indeed, in the context of particular women's domestic living circumstances with particular men, it may be absent altogether. It is on the occasion of musical performance, as the second part of the paper shows, that sesotho is stressed through singing, dance, dress, and the consumption of sorghum beer. Through these means, performance provides for a dramatisation, partly through parody, of an overarching female identity in opposition to men. The cohesiveness of womanly and customary ways presented in a

---

[7] The performers of kiba provide an illustration of this point. Asked in abstract terms about the social and religious orientation of this music's players and audience, people insist that it is part of sesotho, and that it belongs to baditshaba (those of the nation; non-Christians). But an analysis of its constituency - and particularly of the composition of urban female groups, as I discuss elsewhere in my thesis, reveals a large number of church-members among performers and audience alike.

performance context may be less strongly stressed elsewhere.

Women, the domestic domain, and sesotho

Village women, especially in certain contexts, are associated with sesotho more strongly than men. To appreciate why this should be, we must look at the connections between the domestic domain and sesotho, and at how the assigning of women to the former often entails their cloaking in the guise of the latter.

The role of women in providing for the continuity or reproduction of the household or domestic sphere is a common theme, in studies both of capitalism in the first world and of its intrusion into third-world contexts. There is some ambiguity as to whether this role should be seen as a sign of subordination and oppression, or as a source of social power, or perhaps as a mixture of both. In some European peasant societies, for example, the domestic arena appears as a source of great influence to the women who occupy prime positions within it, where their menfolk, marginalised from power in the wider socio-political arena and denied any significant role in the family, are virtually without any influence at all (Rogers 1975, Gilmore 1980).

In the case of southern African societies, there is a similar ambiguity about the assigning of women to the domestic sphere. It has been argued that the central dynamic of the precapitalist agricultural societies of the region arose from their ability to control women's productive and reproductive capacities within the homestead unit (Guy 1990). Later, the control of these capacities in turn lay at the basis of these societies' "giving up of labour" to the industrial centres of South Africa, while at the same time allowing them to escape "full proletarianisation" (Bozzoli 1983:151). Indeed, according to one viewpoint, which has now been largely dismissed (in part as overly functionalist), South African capitalism depended upon and even purposefully enforced the conservation of families in the reserves as systems of support and reciprocity, in order to be able to rob them of the labour-power of their male members (Wolpe 1972:108).

Some women were to escape from this realm of enforced and custom-bound domesticity, often under the rubric of alternative definitions of the domestic provided by Christianity or colonial ideology (Delius 1983, Comaroff 1985:150, Bozzoli 1991:15,59-60). But those who remained as rural wives dependent on the earnings of male relatives continued to be seen as somehow responsible for the continuity of the household and the domestic domain. The ambiguity about the role of such women centres around whether this work has been assigned to them as unwitting dupes of the combined forces of precolonial patriarchal ideology and capitalism, or whether they have thereby derived some power previously denied them by actively retaining and augmenting their part in sustaining household and village life as partly autonomous domains.

One could rephrase this issue in local terms. In the Lesotho communities studied by Murray, he found that women's "keeping house" amounted to doing the "work of custom" (1981:150). In the absence of men, it was mainly women who, although subordinate and conceived of as inferior, played a major role in maintaining "the ideas and practices which are recognized as 'proper Sesotho'", and in using these to help "reproduce social relations, between the living and the dead, between men and women, and between the generations" (ibid.:149).

In my study, as in Murray's, what materialist approaches represent as women's role in reproduction translates in folk terms as women's role in enacting and behaving in the ways of sesotho. As with the more material tasks of reproduction, there is an ambiguity concerning the status with which this role is endowed. On the one hand, some of the most sesotho of the things that women do - such as sitting on the floor while men sit on chairs - are thought of as part of the respect normally shown by a woman to her husband and parents-in-law in particular, but also to men in general. In such a case, the upkeep of sesotho performed by a woman on behalf of others is thought of by some - not only outside onlookers but also women who have made an early escape from the strictures of rural domesticity - as demeaning to her. On the other hand, there are women - particularly migrants - whose espousing of sesotho (or setso) serves their own purposes, and empowers them.[8]

The claim that women have become responsible for the "work of custom" is not one that derives only from the absence due to migrancy of males to do this work. It has its genesis as well in other dislocations of the public socio-political domain which have been wrought by the apartheid regime. In an area peripheral to the Pedi heartland, Hofmeyr shows how the genre of oral historical narrative, previously the domain of men and performed mainly in the central kgoro of a village, was unable to survive the destruction of this public space which occurred with the forced relocations of Betterment planning. Traditions of female storytelling, situated in the household all along, did in contrast transplant successfully (1991:17).

Sesotho of singing, sesotho of wearing

In the village of Ntshabeleng, situated in the Pedi heartland Sekhukhune not far from the seat - recognised by locals though not by the South African government - of the paramountcy, there are several women's music groups. Each is based in a different part of the village, and draws its membership from this particular locality. The group whose members' experience forms the subject of this paper, Dithabaneng (those from the place of the mountain), takes its name from the rocky hill around whose base its singers' houses are clustered.

---

[8] The use of sesotho by migrant women from the northern Transvaal is explored in detail in other chapters of the PhD thesis from which this paper is drawn.

The women of Dithabaneng can put a precise date on their origin as a group with this particular membership, clothing, and style of music and dance. They came together in 1976, having seen and been inspired by the new style of kiba performed by women singers from Mphahlele some 70 kms to the north west.[9]

Dithabaneng has many features shared by other groups which sing in this style. Members have elected a leader and a leader's deputy, whose function is to call the group together for practices and performances, to lead the singing, and to discipline latecomers or those inappropriately dressed. There is a variety of other personnel, including two "police" who dress in khaki uniform with leather Sam Brownes, and levy fines upon male onlookers whom they arrest, and two nurses with epaulettes who administer "medicines" to the singers. In addition, members of the group have conceptualised and formulated a consistent policy which differentiates a range of different performance scenarios, from weddings, for which they charge a standard rate, through competitions, which they enter with a hope of winning, to dances at the houses of prominent group members, when they buy food and drink with their past earnings and, in the words of one member, "we eat our money".[10]

The members of Dithabaneng are drawn from a very small area, and many of them have played and sung together in the past. A bewildering succession of women's singing styles, usually copied from "somewhere else", drew local singers - and before them their mothers and grandmothers, many of whom are no longer active in performance - together in a variety of groupings. Some of these were named, though none was characterised by such uniformity of dress as the present group.

As this generational continuity within a single village suggests, a number of women have remained in their natal village even after marriage. This is explained partly by the high rate of cousin marriage among group members, even among women marrying as late as 1981.[11] Of the women singers I know, only one came to the

---

[9] This style is most commonly known by its rural practitioners as mpepetloane or lebowa, but its spread throughout the northern Transvaal countryside was part of the broader development of a migrant style of music, formerly exclusively male, known as kiba. The development of this style of music is explored in D James, "Ke rena baeng/we are visiting: the development of kiba, a performance style of northern Transvaal migrants" in E Gunner (ed) Politics and Performance in Southern Africa, Johannesburg, Witwatersrand University Press (forthcoming).

[10] Mmagojane Kgalema, recorded discussion with DJ and PM, Ntshabeleng, 29/12/90.

[11] Evidence suggests that this practice has persisted more in heartland contexts. My own work in a Trust village peripheral to the reserve (James 1986:37) shows the decline of

village from a distant location (about one hour's drive away), a further three moved from nearby villages to marry, and the remainder were born in the village itself, some moving no further than a few doors away to set up house with or near their in-laws who were also their relatives.

The women in the group are thus connected by various ties of kinship, both consanguineal (including lineal and collateral relationships) and affinal. The group contains several pairs of sisters, several pairs of sisters-in-law, and one mother-and-daughter combination. A further linking factor, cross-cutting kinship to some degree, is that women of the same age-group born and raised in the village attended initiation and were formed into mephato (regiments) together. The ties eventually formalised as membership of Dithabaneng thus had their origins in a range of previous and sometimes long-standing local connections, at least between the group's core members, from whom those more peripheral or recently-arrived have taken their identity as singers.

Despite these close ties, the women do not normally regard themselves as equals. Even those as closely related as sisters are distinguished by their individual marriages, their widely differing levels of income and, consequently, their differing orientations to sesotho. They constitute an undifferentiated group only in the act of singing together, using a range of performative devices thought of as characteristically sesotho. It is the dance which forms the group.

One of these unifying motifs is the invocation of tau (the lion). By virtue of marriage if not of birth, all the people in the group - like most of those in the village - bina tau (dance the lion). This sense of a unifying connection to a symbolic animal has been translated as "totemism" and as involving membership of a "fairly loose association of agnatic kin" (Monnig 1967:234). But the fact that "there is no special native term" for such a grouping, and the lack of "any kind of social solidarity among the members" (Hoernle 1937:91-2) substantiates the impression given by the singers of Dithabaneng: the invocation "ditau" (lions), rather than denoting an actual group of kinsmen, is used to address each other as co-singers on occasions of heightened significance, or to assert some sense of overarching and symbolic local-political unity when performing in front of people from other villages or places.

Apart from the rhythmic co-ordination of voice and action, a further expression of group cohesion and uniformity is the clothing worn when singing. The entire performance, including mmino (dance) and diaparo (clothing) are characterised as

---

cousin-marriage in such a context, while Bothma's research in Ntshabeleng in the late 1950s showed that "almost all the marriages were contracted between relatives of some sort, because hardly anybody is not in some way related to everybody else" (1962:46).

sesotho.

"I dress in this fashion"

Dithabaneng's performances emphasise sesotho as an inviolate concept, but the actual orientation towards sesotho has been transformed over several generations. In addition, sesotho clothing - albeit older and less striking than the group's uniform - is worn by some singers all the time, while others, often due to the influence of their husbands, have made a move to the clothing of sekgowa, saving sesotho clothes for performance only.

	Male	Female
Pre-initiates	Lekgeswa skin loin-cloth Hair shaven close to head	Lebole short string apron in front around loins Nthepana triangular skin apron to cover buttocks Semabejane short cotton blouse just covering the breasts Leetse Hair fashioned in long strings treated with fat and graphite
Initiates	New loin-skins Hair reshaven	Lebole short string apron in front around loins Nthepa long back apron of married women Semabejane short cotton blouse just covering the breasts Tlopo hairstyle of marriageable and married women

Table 1: Pedi clothing demarcating life-cycle stages

Neither the flexibility nor the variation of sesotho are visible in accounts of "traditional" Pedi dress. In a classically static account of a rural lifestyle, Monnig describes Pedi clothes as having been significant in demarcating the different phases of the lifecycle from one another, and simultaneously in providing for a gradually deepening distinction between the sexes. To substantiate this he gives information on the first two major phases of life (summarised in Table 1). Monnig comments, however, that:

> in practice, most [initiated] girls nowadays wear long, gaily-coloured cloths from their loins down to their feet, covering the traditional clothing, while very few women wear the traditional hair-style, usually covering their heads with a head-cloth instead (1967:128)

He also indicates that semabejane, the short blouse worn by initiated and by older uninitiated girls, "was introduced by missionaries, but has been adopted by all the Pedi, Christians and non-Christians alike" (ibid.).

This account, like many of its kind, sets up an idealised version of the traditional life-cycle with its accompanying clothing. If people adopt some Western clothes, they are seen as treading a one-way path from tradition to modernity. In fact, the semiotics of dress, and its social concomitants, are more complex.

The short smocked cotton garment Monnig calls semabejane, and referred to by Dithabaneng women as gempe for initiates (from the Afrikaans hemp - shirt) or gentswana for non-initiates (little shirt), is a good example of this complexity. By the mid 1950s these garments, although certainly deriving in style and material from European influence, were items of clothing indicating a thoroughly sotho orientation.[12] An orientation towards the paired opposite, sekgowa, was shown by wearing clothes known as roko (dress; pl.diroko) or khiba (pinafore; pl.dikhiba). In the village, still cleft by a deep social and geographical divide between Christians and non-Christians, it was mostly the former who wore the clothes of sekgowa, while the latter wore sotho clothing.[13] In this instance, then, adherence to one or other polarity of the sesotho/sekgowa duality was associated with

---

[12] Indeed, one version of the garment is called sesothwana (little sesotho).

[13] Members of Dithabaneng, recorded discussion with DJ and PM, 20/7/91, Ntshabeleng; dates calculated according to when members of particular regiments were initiated. The geographical divide in the village was reflected in terminology: majekaneng was "the place of the Christians" while baditshabeng was "the place of those of the nation".

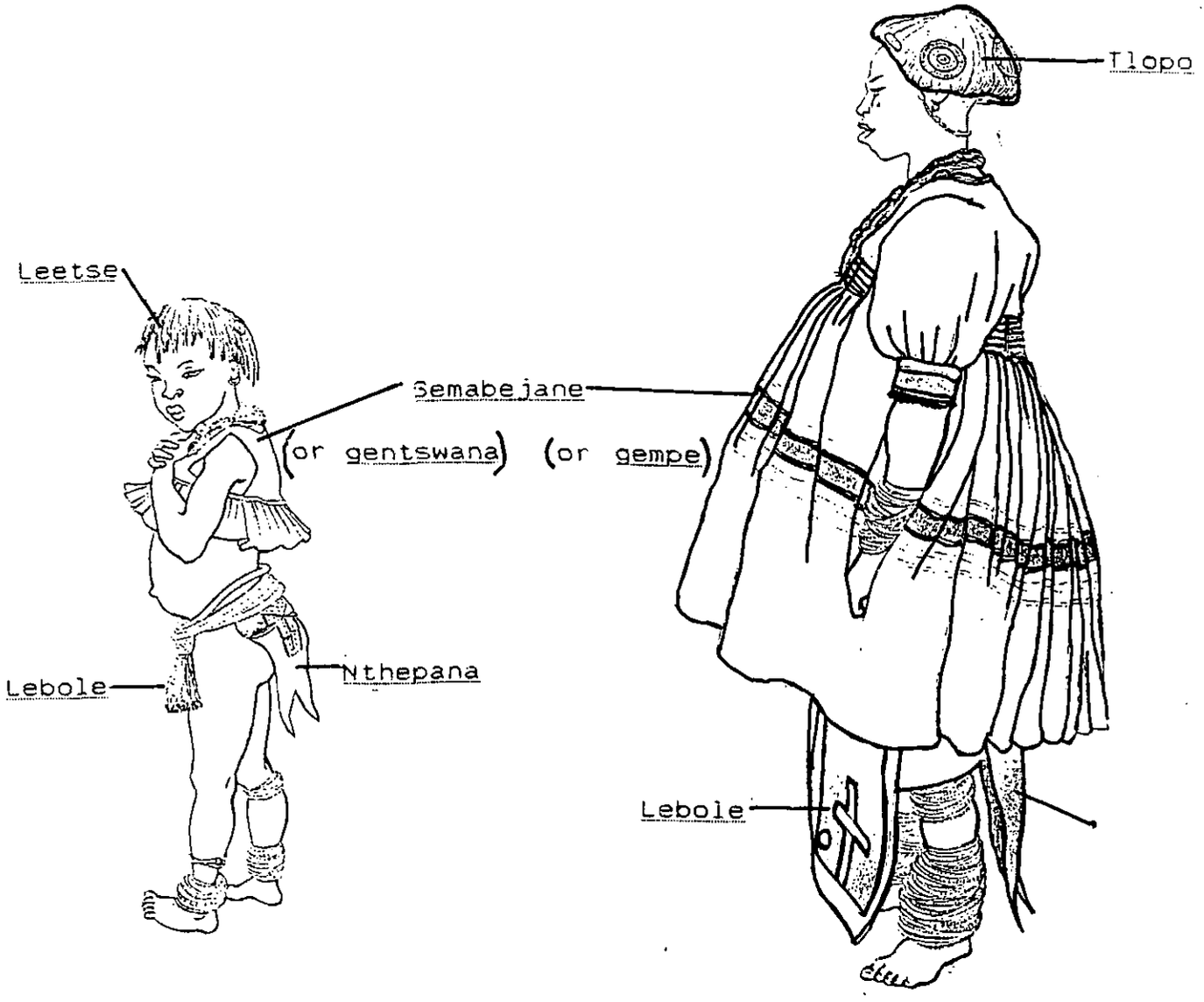

Figure 1: Female sotho dress of Pedi, showing semabejane or gempe in its pre-initiate and initiate form

(from Tyrell 1968:67;
Monnig 1967:107,123,128)

membership of definable social categories.

But sotho dress,[14] like its opposite, was to undergo continual transformation. Although gempe (sotho smocked shirt), and its accompanying lebole (string or leather apron) are still worn by returning initiates, in other contexts these garments have been supplanted by a new version of sotho dress. This has three main identifying features: a lesela (length of cloth) or tuku (from the Afrikaans doek) wrapped around the waist; a sese (headscarf consisting of a large piece of fabric); and maseka (bangles). If these elements are present, the fourth element - a commercially-made vest, "skipper" (short-sleeved cotton knit shirt) or overall does not detract from the whole ensemble, but indeed becomes a part of it.[15] This ensemble of clothes appears in various versions. For the performance of kiba, it is characterised by the use of striking colours and of materials thought to be particularly attractive. But in an everyday context, the materials used are often drab, and sometimes old and tattered.

It can be seen then that certain types of clothing deriving from mission influence, and named with words deriving from sekgowa, were nevertheless included within the definition of sesotho, and strongly contrasted with sekgowa, throughout. The sesotho/sekgowa contrast thus coexists with an image of change within the category of sesotho. If, for these villagers, opposed polarities such as sesotho/sekgowa do enable a conceptualisation of historical change as the Comaroffs claim (1987:193), the actual mechanism through which change occurs, and through which these categories are continuously replenished with new elements, is through life-cycle rituals, particularly initiation. The experience of successively initiated mephato (initiation regiments) orients these conceptions of change (cf Molepo 1983). Thus, the life-cycle stages which, for Monnig, provided for a static approach to understanding society, in fact allows for a more dynamic self-perception, since each mophato has a different experience of these stages.

The transformation of clothing, and of the sotho lifestyle, was prompted partly by a variety of what might crudely be called "culture contacts", including - for an older generation - the presence of trading stores, visits to husbands in town, and - for a younger generation, and far more influential - the proliferation of schools in the area after the 1950s. The means for purchasing the clothes defined as necessary to consecutive stages of the life-cycle had to be provided by wages earned beyond the domestic domain. For the older generation of women - the present grandmothers in Dithabaneng - this money was procured by men: by fathers and brothers in the case of

---

[14] lit. sesotho of wearing (sesotho sa go apara). This is distinguished from sesotho of speaking (sesotho sa go bolela) and from various other forms of sesotho.

[15] Ibid.

initiates, and by husbands for their wives. A younger generation - Dithabaneng's present older mothers - followed the example of boys in leaving home to earn their own money on farms around the time of initiation. But in contrast to boys who then went off to work in contract labour in the urban areas, these girls, having earned enough money to buy the clothes appropriate to their new status of initiates, then returned to the domestic sphere to raise children and keep house. Here, they came again to depend on male earnings for clothing and other basic necessities, or in some cases were forced to subsist without these earnings.

For the village-dwellers of Dithabaneng, then, the acquisition of clothing for different phases of life has necessitated links connecting them within their rural families to places of employment in white South Africa (referred to as makgoweng: the place of the whites). Although it became commonplace for women of an intermediate generation to make brief forays into employment at white farms (referred to as mabaleng : the place of the plains), these links have mostly been made by fathers, brothers and husbands.

Men's earnings, women's clothes

The oldest of the group's singers, Mmakgolo wa Pine Khulwane, was born around 1930 and initiated around 1944 in Matsedi regiment. For her co-initiates, as for older women whose activity as singers ceased some time ago and who never became members of Dithabaneng, the money for the purchase of the clothes necessary to a proper sotho woman's lifestyle was earned by fathers, brothers and husbands in contract employment. Worn by a married woman, these clothes in turn, like the elaborate and heavy gempe (sotho smocked shirt) once worn by Mmagomathumasha Madibane and still stored by her in a trunk, became outward and visible signs of her husband's wealth. The more material used in the extensive smocking of these, and the more garments worn one over the other, the richer the provider was seen to be.[16] The clothes were thus worn with pride on both a woman's own and on her husband's behalf.

The lyrics of songs sung both by Dithabaneng and by older and now inactive singers reflect the dependence of this generation of women, and indeed of subsequent ones, on the earnings of men. In the song Lebowa, women sing:

Lebowa la kgomo le motho	Lebowa of cattle and people
Pula-medupe yana Mohlakeng	Stormy rain.
Lebona ge ke te kapere	Seeing me half-naked
Ke tshonne ke hloboletse	I have no clothes to put on
Ke setse ka dibesete	Except a vest
Ke lebowa le kgomo le motho	It's Lebowa of cattle and people
Pula ya mamehlaka e yetla	A stormy rain is coming

[16] Mmagomathumasha Madibane, recorded discussion with DJ and AM, Sephaku, 25/1/89.

Nke be ke na le kgaetsedi	I wish I had a brother
A nthekele onoroko	Who would buy me a petticoat.
Re supa gore gare sa sila	We no longer grind our meal.[17]

Like those of other songs sung in the village, these lyrics consist of a densely-packed combination of themes, some surviving from older songs and others introduced by the current singers. Interpretations of these vary between different singers, and between different contexts in which the song is to be understood. One of these is the context of dancing itself: within this, the semi-nakedness of the woman in the song is interpreted as rendering her unable to dance with her fellows in Dithabaneng.[18] In more general terms, however, the theme of dependence on male earnings for clothing, and of deprivation without these, can be clearly heard. A similar theme occurs in the song Marashiya in which a woman bemoans the fact that her husband has failed to bring her necklaces, (again making her unable to dance with her colleagues):

Ke reng ka hlaela pheta ye botse	I don't have a shiny necklace

Commenting on this line, Mmakgolo wa Pine said

> "when other men have gone to town to work, he is always here at home not working, so I won't be able to dance as I have nothing to put on, no shiny necklances".[19]

The dissatisfaction expressed here about men who have failed to provide new clothing might seem to indicate a greater desire for the fruits of an absent husband's labours than for his companionship in the household. Rather than being reflective of a callous desire for material gain, however, this theme coexists with others to suggest an ambiguity about one of the central paradoxes of migrancy in southern Africa - the fact that parents have been forced to live apart in order to ensure the well-being of their families (cf Murray 1981:102). Another song, for example, bewails the absence of a brother who has become a lekgolwa (a person who leaves for the city and never returns):

Setimela wa Mmamarwale	Train of Mmamarwale
Nthshwanyama	Black carrier

---

[17] Mathabathe Mokwale, recorded discussion with PM, Ntshabeleng, 29/12/90.

[18] Members of Dithabaneng, recorded discussion with DJ and PM, Ntshabeleng, 14/7/91; for more detail on the reinterpretation of lyrics as referring to the context of dance itself, see D James, "Ke rena baeng".

[19] Mmakgolo wa Pine Khulwane, recorded discussion with DJ and PM, Ntshabeleng, 28/7/91.

Setimela nkabe se rwale buti bokgolwa	Train should carry my brother from bokgolwa
Buti e sa le a eya bokgolwa	My brother home from bokgolwa (the state of being a migrant who never returns)
Ngwana-mme o tla nwa ese ka mmona	My mother's child would die without me seeing him
Setimela nkabe se rwale	Train should carry women
Se re iseng ka lebowa khutlong sa thaba	It would carry us to Lebowa mountain
Ka ntshe gago tsotsi gago mathatha	Where there are no tsotsis and no problems

Songs thus express sadness, not only about lazy men who have no employment, but also about those whose employment takes them away forever. On the other hand, the absence of a man who is working to send his wife money for clothes and basic necessities, makes room for her to have affairs with other men who are present in the area, and it may be precisely those clothes bought by a woman's husband which she wears to make her look attractive to these other lovers.[20]

Wene o se nago lesira	You who have no headscarf
Makolone a tlogo feta	Those from the Transkei will pass you by
Wene o se nago lesira	You who have no headscarf
O wa hlaka	You will suffer
Makolone a tlo go feta	Those from the Transkei will pass you by

The Transkeians to whom this song refers were men who came to the bus depot in nearby Apel as drivers of railway busses, and who would spend the night with local women. As single men who went home only once a year and who "saved all their money in an atchar tin", they were seen as rich and therefore as desirable lovers.[21]

For the present grandmothers of Dithabaneng, sources of contact with sekgowa were fairly limited. Since all were from baditshabeng (the place of non-Christians), none took any interest in church nor went to school. They dressed in gempe (sotho smocked shirts). Although this was a missionary innovation, the garment had by the 1940s and 1950s already long been regarded as part of sotho apparel, and was definitely not a part of the dress of Christians. These women paid visits to

---

[20] In the Molepo district further north, when male migrants began to use privately-owned taxis rather than busses to return home, these became known as mmethisa [wa mathari] (those which cause young married women to be beaten), since these brought husbands home at unexpected times and enabled them to walk in on their wives' illicit affairs (Molepo 1983:77).

[21] Song and comment recorded in writing during discussion with members of Dithabaneng, Ntshabeleng, 28/7/91.

their husbands in town, but these were sporadic and of short duration. Sometimes, as in the case of one singer who visited her husband in his Pimville, Soweto shack for two weeks, the visits were made not only for the sake of general companionship but also for the specific purpose of falling pregnant:

> I waited long enough for him to give me "a hairy man", then I returned home.[22]

When visiting town, the people these women met were not so much the white bearers of sekgowa as its black adherents from other parts of South Africa: an encounter for the most part equally alienating. For Mmakgolo wa Pine, the speech of the Christian Xhosa people she met while visiting her husband, around 1957, in Springs where he worked as a compound policeman, sounded so incomprehensible that she thought they were asking her to fetch water when in fact they were praying. But more alienating still was her experience when she left her daughter with them for some hours while running an errand and returned to find that they had taken off the child's skin garments and clothed her in roko (a dress).

> They took my child, undressed her and gave her a new style of dressing. I didn't like it, and as I didn't know what was going on,, my husband found me crying. He asked me what the matter was and I told him that these people want to thopa (capture) my child. They took away all that skin clothing and gave her a dress and had her hair cut. My husband told one old man about this, and he came and explained that they did this because they wanted the child to look like theirs and not to be different. Even if the children didn't understand each other, they should look the same. Upon realising that I was against this, the old man called the others after a few days to come and apologise for the mistake they had made.[23]

In this rather dramatic narrative, the use of the word go thopa, normally used to denote the taking of captives in war, illustrates the strength of Mmakgolo wa Pine's fears that her daughter would be taken from her and from the nurturing bosom of sesotho, and lost to the world of sekgowa as represented by these Xhosa Christians.

At the time of the visit, around 1957, Mmakgolo wa Pine and other married women of her original regiment were still wearing gempe (sotho smocked shirts) and mekamo (elaborately-combed and greased hairstyles) similar to those described by Monnig. Certainly, the

---

[22] Singers of Mararankodi, discussion with DJ and PM, Ntshabeleng, 28/7/91.

[23] Mmakgolo wa Pine Khulwane, recorded discussion with DJ and PM, Ntshabeleng, 19/7/91.

photo in Mmakgolo wa Pine's passbook, issued at around the same time, confirms that this was so. Cognisance should be taken, however, of the fact that already at this time the most sotho of clothes were being reserved for occasions of greatest auspiciousness, and having one's photograph taken was one of these. Although she wore mekamo for the photo, Mmakgolo wa Pine was by this time putting on sese (a headscarf) for everyday wear.

Women's earnings, women's clothes

There were a number of things demarcating the experience of this older female regiment from those following it. One of these was that its members, while firmly believing that brothers and prospective husbands should go off to work on farms to prove their manhood, never worked on farms themselves, whereas most of the women from subsequent regiments did.

For a number of male regiments, consisting of boys born from around the mid 1920s onwards, farm work was an expected part of the life-cycle.[24] A large part of the expectation placed on boys to work on farms - although to begin with their departure was mostly without parents' consent - was as a kind of second-tier initiation, proving adult male status and showing, especially to a prospective wife, ability to work in more lucrative employment later on:

> To show that you will work in future, you will first run away from home to the farms. This showed that you were a man, and you would work for yourself.[25]

But a more immediate consideration for boys themselves was the necessity to buy clothes.[26] This was, likewise, to be the main reason why girls in their turn began running away from home to work on farms. Those born around 1940 and initiated in Matladi

---

[24] Lucas Sefoka, recorded discussion with DJ and MTN, Johannesburg, 27/2/90; Molepo (1984:16); evidence presented to the Native Economic Commission. Delius (1989:595-6) claims that even traditionalist communities in sekhukhune were changing their attitudes to education and beginning to send their sons to school from around the 1930s, and that a number of "tribal schools" were established in the 1940s. But judging from life-histories of migrant men from sekhukhune, it was only in the 1960s and 1970s that schooling for boys gained acceptance sufficiently widely, for non-Christians as much as for Christians, that it eclipsed or supplanted the period of work on the farms, or displaced this into the period of school holidays.

[25] Mmagojane Kgalema, during recorded discussion with members of Dithabaneng, Ntshabeleng, 19/7/91.

[26] This reason given by men for first leaving home to work is reflected by a number of other accounts from the Transvaal: Niehaus (1991), Molepo (1984:16), Native Economic Commission.

regiment around 1954 were among the first to do this. A possible reason why they had not done so earlier, apart from the greater restrictions placed on girls generally, is that the arduous journey on foot from Sekhukhuneland to white farming centres such as Marble Hall and Roedtan was seen as more easily undertaken by boys. By the time girls began to undertake this journey, they did so in the trucks sent by farmers right into the reserve areas to recruit labour.

Girls, following in boys' footsteps into the world of labour at mabaleng, also imitated and adapted the songs they heard men singing. Mmagojane Kgalema, initiated in Mantso around 1964, described such a song, which was sung while weeding on the farm:

Owi owi owi	Owi owi owi
Eya tsena Neisele	The Nissan is coming
Ke ya ga khayi letebele Kekana	I am going there to the place place of the Kekana Ndebele
Tlou letebele	Elephant Ndebele
Ngwana wa MmagoRaisibe	Child of Raisibe's mother
Mapeperesane	Truck with a large loading space
Pholo ya mpone tse pedi	Ox with two side mirrors.[27]

For a variety of reasons, parents were mostly not in favour of their daughters' working on farms, so most of the girls who did so departed from their homes with stealth and subterfuge, as Ramogohlo Diphofa, initiated around 1954 in nearby Mphanama recounts:

> We didn't ask for permission from our parents, we ran away whilst they were away at their fields ... At times when they were around, you would just put your clothes and blankets over the wall of the yard without them seeing you.
>
> *If you asked for permission, wouldn't they allow you?*
>
> They would not allow us.
>
> *Were your parents and others upset about this?*
>
> In fact when we got on the truck, little boys would do so as well, but when the truck pulled off, they got off and we would ask them to tell our parents that we had left.[28]

Mmagopine Khulwane, from a regiment initiated about ten years later, tells a similar story:

---

[27] Members of Dithabaneng, recorded discussion with DJ and PM, Ntshabaleng, 19/7/91.

[28] Ramogohlo Diphofa, recorded discussion with PM, Mphanama, 20/12/90.

> From my home, I met my father on the way ... He asked me where I was going and I lied, saying I'm going to fetch water. It was when I was next to the truck that I showed him the blanket and said, I'm going to the farms. My father told my mother about this.[29]

The reluctance of parents to let their daughters leave was in fact not always uniform: fathers were seen as most strongly disapproving while mothers were more ready to give permission, being unable to suggest any other means by which their daughters might acquire the clothes they wanted:

> Sometimes, if you find your mother is at home, you say, I'm going to the farms: "well, go, and buy yourself some clothes"[30]

For girls as for boys, then, the main spur to this phase of mild defiance against parents was the need for clothes appropriate to the status of an initiate. Mmagoshower Debeila emphasised the necessity of this, since "we would be thought naked if we continued to wear ntepha, lebone and leetse".[31] She indicated that it was not her family's shortage of money which drove her to work at this stage, but rather the fact that she had seen older friends returning from work with clothes and was influenced by this, and by her co-initiates, to go. The departure for farms of Ntshabeleng's adolescent girls, then, was similar to the phase spent working as domestics by young girls from Phokeng (Bozzoli 1991): occurring at a phase of life when these women had not yet taken on broader familial responsibility, it was seen not as providing a contribution to general family finances but as facilitating the purchase of a specific set of goods for the girl herself.[32]

Despite this individual orientation, and despite the apparent rebelliousness of these girls, their departure for the world beyond the village was in a number of ways reincorporated into the life-cycle of the obedient daughter living out her life according to the tenets of sesotho. A contract lasted three months, and at the end of the first of these a daughter like Mmagoshower brought her wages - a total of R18 in around 1960 - back to her mother, who then used them to buy the vests and

---

[29] Members of Dithabaneng, recorded discussion with DJ and PM, Ntshabeleng, 19/7/91.

[30] Mmagojane Kgalema, recorded discussion with PM, Ntshabeleng, 29/12/90.

[31] Mmagoshower Debeila, discussion with DJ and PM, Ntshabeleng, 16/7/91.

[32] In the case of Phokeng, the girls worked for money to buy their trousseaux.

dituku she needed.

By the time a girl went off on her second three-month stint as a farm labourer, after a break of about a month, her parents no longer protested at her departure. And for most, the third or fourth contract was the last, since it was at around this time that most of them prepared for marriage - "we were being courted" as Mmagojunius Ramaila put it - and for building a home in the village.

While it is true, then, that go tshaba maburung (to run away to the place of the Boers) signified in some sense a rebellion by groups of age-mates against control by the older generation, it is also true that the challenge to parental authority which this practice represented was soon co-opted and transformed as its perpetrators became, in turn, custodians of the domestic domain and of sesotho.[33] It must also be noted that the set of mores and practices rebelled against were based not on a monolithic and cohesive ideology, but on one deeply divided along gender lines. By the time the members of Mantso were undergoing initiation in around 1964, girls were rebelling not simply against the arduous duties defined as appropriate to them within the domestically-defined boundaries of sesotho - childcare, fetching water, weeding and chasing the birds away from the crops, and helping to repair the house - but also against the emergent modern definition of a girl's role as scholar. Parents were frequently divided over which behaviour was most appropriate to a girl, and in some cases this division separated mothers as proponents of the conservative, domestic version of sesotho from fathers who, although not necessarily wishing to convert to Christianity, were keen to encourage their daughters to complete at least the primary levels of education and hence to engage in the world of sekgowa and tlhabologo (civilisation). This was so in the case of MmagoPine:

> My mother said that I should leave school and stay at home. ... If a girl could write a letter to her husband, that was just enough. ... She said that I should repair the wall with mud and do weeding in the fields. So I ran away to mabaleng.
>
> *So you were running away from duties at home?*
>
> I also didn't like going to school. I knew that after stopping school for a week when my mother told me to do so, my father would order me back to school again. So I realised that if I ran away to the farms, I would

[33] Rebelliousness followed by later conformity is of course a common theme of studies on youth: see for example Bozzoli's description of how in the successful peasant economy of Phokeng it was boys who had the greatest desire to escape the strictures of society's patriarchal controls, but were later to gain more rewards than women out of "accepting the system" - eventual independence and access to land (1991:81)

> spend three months there and during this time, the teachers would take me off the school registers, knowing that I had gone to mabaleng.[34]

For this girl, her flight to the farms in order to escape conflicting sets of pressures from both parents nevertheless led her inexorably back home and back into the values and ways of sesotho when she returned to her mother's house to bear children and to become involved in domestic duties as a mother.

School, clothes, and women's life-cycle

From around the 1960s it was school - whether attended or fled from - which was seen by people as playing a central role in transforming the attitudes, ways of dressing, and ways of behaving of men and women, and of older and younger people alike.

Mmakgolo wa Pine gives an account of this process. Having wept at the efforts of Christian Xhosa to dress her daughter in the clothes of sekgowa in 1957, she and her contemporaries were, a decade later, to welcome the new dressing style seen as emanating from school. They came to feel that the necklaces, bangles and many-layered gempe (smocked shirts) of earlier sotho clothing had been heavy and uncomfortable. When their daughters were encouraged by teachers to wash out the grease and graphite of the leetse hairstyle, they eventually followed suite by washing out the grease of the mekamo, till then thought appropriate to married women. Not wanting to be thought naked, however, they replaced this hairstyle with setlanyana (a small headscarf), "then I saw those wearing a bigger one, and copied them", until eventually the modern sotho headscarf sese became the norm.

The change in head-dress is an example demonstrating the full complexity of the transforming of sesotho dress. A generation of non-Christian women whose resistance to the idea of school for their daughters was so strong that they actively encouraged them - in many cases successfully - to leave, nevertheless embraced some of the new stylistic trappings seen to accompany the activity of scholarship. Their incorporation of these trappings appears on the surface to have had something of the character of an acceptance of mission or colonial ideology.[35] From the point of view of the wearers, however, it represented on the one hand a wish to replace one kind of haircovering with another, and thus to continue to express the respect required of a woman by her in-laws and by men in general, but on the other it signified a moving beyond the discomfort and restrictiveness of statically-

---

[34] Mmagopine Khulwane and Mmagojane Kgalema, in recorded discussion with members of Dithabaneng, Ntshabeleng, 19/7/91.

[35] Comaroff suggests that "headscarves are widely worn by black women in South Africa and express the canons of mission modesty, which overlaid the elaborate code of hairdressing" (1985:224).

defined rural dress and a pleasure in the attractiveness of rapidly-changing styles.[36]

Although this liberation from unnecessarily restrictive ways was rejoiced in, there is a sense of ambivalence about some of the changes for which school was seen as responsible. The proverb used by Mmakgolo wa Pine to describe the older generation's imitation of their children in adopting new ways shows that this process was not viewed entirely in a positive light.

> A cow will fall into a donga as it tries to follow its calf. This is the same with people. If your child is burning, you will go into the fire to fetch it out.[37]

School was seen by women of an older generation not only as having provided for changes in clothing styles, but also as having introduced transformations in behaviour - and indeed in the typical sotho life-cycle - which are viewed in a much more unambiguously negative light. Mmakgolo wa Pine offered the "pencil" and the ability to write as a monocausal explanation for the ability of youth nowadays to evade parental authority, and for the associated decline in sexual morals:

> a boy may come and study with your daughter. They boy will take a pencil and write something for the girl to read. And if you as a parent suspect something and sit around with them to keep an eye on them, that wouldn't help. Because after the boy has written her something on the paper, she would also take her pencil and reply to him. All this happens in your presence, and when they do this, you will thing that they are studying and that your daughter will pass at the end of the year because she has a friend who is helping her to study.[38]

But instead of engaging in diligent scholarship, what the couple would be doing, said Mmakgolo wa Pine, was taking advantage of the mother's inability to read in order to plan a clandestine liaison which would eventually lead to the pregnancy of the girl.

For some people, school and literacy appear as jointly responsible for widening the generation gap between themselves and their children, and bring with them a range of related ills. According to such a view, it is because girls no longer mix with other girls but rather form friendships with boys in class that girls began to fall pregnant at a younger age. This has caused

---

[36] Members of Dithabaneng, recorded discussion, Ntshabeleng, 20/7/91.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Members of Dithabaneng, recorded discussion with DJ and PM, Ntshabeleng, 20/7/91.

the age at which children are initiated to decrease (from mid adolescence to the age of six or eight years). Previously, when re be re na la malao (we had laws), a girl would leave for the farms, return without yet having become pregnant, and become initiated thereafter. But now children must undergo this ritual earlier, as "we do not want to take a mother or father to be initiated". In this account, the virtual disappearance of the phase of childhood prior to initiation - bothumasha for girls, bosoboro for boys - is seen as having come about because of education.

Schooling thus had a range of significances: it allowed for an incorporation of new elements into the sotho lifestyle, but it also introduced lawlessness and indiscipline, seen as contrary to the principles of sesotho, or indeed to any code of morality. From yet another perspective, schooling appeared as a harbinger of sekgowa. People's different orientations towards schooling were influenced by a range of factors. One was religious orientation - to Mmagomotala Mofele, who considers herself moditshaba (one of the nation; a non-Christian), to go to school was foolishness: "as we grew up we only knew that those going to school were children of majekane (Christians)" while majekane in turn would mock them, saying ba tshaba tlhabologo (they're afraid of civilisation).[39] Another factor was age: often older children did not attend school, or attended only for a few years, where their younger siblings acquired a fuller education as the necessity for this became more generally accepted. Place in the order of siblings also played a part, since parents were sometimes able to send younger children to school once their older siblings had grown up and were contributing to the household finances. It was also sometimes the case that parents opposed to schooling for an older child had become accustomed to the idea when their younger children reached schoolgoing age. A further factor was individual motivation. Mmagoviolet Phakwago, a member of Matladi regiment, was so keen to be a scholar that the teacher reached an agreement with her mother to let her stay home and tend children one day if she could come to school the next. Her younger sister, in contrast, ran away from school with friends to work on the farms. But it was gender which was perhaps the most important factor in influencing which children were sent to school and which were not, before a time when it became accepted that all children should attend school as far as possible.

According to Mmagoviolet Phakwago, when she was a child and people "did not yet know the importance of education", old women thought it a waste to take a girl to school rather than having her come to help in the fields.[40] Mmagojane expressed the perceived differential needs for education thus:

---

[39] Mmagomotala Mofele, discussion with DJ and PM, Ntshabeleng, 17/7/91.

[40] Mmagoviolet Phakwago, recorded discussion with DJ and PM, Ntshabeleng, 17/7/91.

> A girl will always be at home, but a boy needs to go to school so that he will be able to find employment. If he finds that he does not know even a single "A", he will have to come back and stay at home.
>
> *So with a girl there is no problem [if she leaves school]?*
>
> No, there is no problem with a girl because a man will come and marry her and she will get support from him. Now, with a boy, who will support him?[41]

It was therefore expected that boys would be more particularly exposed to sekgowa, first at school itself, and then through the careers which took them off to the farms and then to work at centres of industrial employment. This is reflected in the clothes worn by boys and men. Although Monnig's rather sketchy account of the differentiation of the male life-cycle by clothing describes initiated boys as dressing in "a new loin skin", informants in Dithabaneng and elsewhere explained, in contrast, that from around the time of initiation - corresponding roughly with a boy's first trip to the farms for an older generation, or from the time of his first starting school for a younger one - he ceased wearing lekgeswa and began instead to put on trousers and shirts. There was in some cases an intermediate phase in which short trousers were worn during school hours to be replaced with lekgeswa for the rest of the day.[42] But in general, in contrast to girls whose clothing throughout the life-cycle, although gradually acquiring new elements, was continually redefined as sotho, their brothers and cousins experienced a swift and decisive move from the sotho clothing of childhood to the clothing of sekgowa which defined their adolescence and adulthood.

For these men, working on the mines or in the cities, it was only during the performance of kiba both in town and during visits home that the clothes of sesotho could again be worn. In this domain there was, as with women's clothing, a redefinition of new elements, such as the Scottish kilt, as part of sesotho or setso.

A similar differentiation of male and female clothing among reserve-dwellers is noted by Jean Comaroff in the case of the Tshidi Tswana:

> Indeed, male hair and clothing styles have been more closely regulated by the idioms of discipline and production than have those of females, reflecting the greater engagement of men in the world of industrial

---

[41] Mmagojane Kgalema, recorded discussion with PM, Ntshabeleng, 29/12/90.

[42] Salome and Andronica Machaba, discussion with DJ, Johannesburg, 19/10/91.

> capitalist production (Turner n.d.(a)). Women, on the other hand, remain closely associated with the domestic sphere (1985:224-5).

In Ntshabeleng as I mentioned earlier, the divide between the ways of sesotho and those of sekgowa was often thought of as aligning with that between two social groupings which, certainly for the first half of the 20th century, were regarded as quite distinct: non-Christians (baditshaba) and Christians (majekane). But from the evidence presented here it can be seen how even within the social category baditshaba, and indeed even within a single family in that category, there are a number of further differentiating factors - age, place in the order of siblings, personal motivation, but especially gender - which align some members closer to one and some closer to the other side of the sesotho/sekgowa divide. To summarise: because the present members of Dithabaneng have since childhood been identified more closely with home and with the domestic than their brothers, have worked beyond the village only in rural employment and then only for short periods, while their brothers have spent years as labourers on the mines or in the city, have had little or no exposure to schooling, and always less than the male members of their families, it is easy to see how these women have had their role in the domestic domain identified closely with the idea of sesotho.

Women, married and unmarried

I earlier suggested that Dithabaneng's older members, as younger women, were dependent on male kin or affines to buy them the clothes necessary to the life of a proper sotho woman. As young married women, their adornment in heavy cotton smocking was an important means by which their husbands could display their wealth, derived both rurally and from contract employment. For the young women of later regiments, although their brief move into farm employment allowed them some independence and provided for the purchase of their own cloth, their return home was, ideally, a move towards economic dependence on a husband similar to that experienced by members of previous regiments. Indeed, it was the fact of "being courted" and of preparing for marriage which made further stints of farm labour inappropriate, since it was thought that a married woman should not bereka (work for money).

For members of these younger regiments, however, this ideal did not always correspond with reality. Almost half of Dithabaneng's members in this age-group, who became marriageable from about 1960 onwards, are now living their adult lives as unmarried mothers within their parents' or mothers' households, and dependent on the earnings of a brother or an uncle, or on a mother's pension. For the other half of this generation as represented within Dithabaneng, the return from farm work did

result in marriage: to a cousin, in most cases.[43]

Those members who are married and receiving regular remittances are, as were their older counterparts, dependent on their husbands for, among many other things, the purchase of clothes. Such dependency also carries with it the obligation to listen to a husband's dictates about what to wear. Few husbands have much interest in influencing their wives' wish to wear the everyday contemporary sotho dress described earlier. But since husbands, even non-Christian ones, are often oriented more towards sekgowa than sesotho, wives' dependency on them sometimes entails a move towards a way of dressing, and of behaving, more in line with this orientation.

For Mmagoshower Debeila, the malokwane (leader) of Dithabaneng, such a change in style occurs only on particular occasions. She was married in a conventional western wedding dress, as a photograph on her wall testifies, and she wears diroko (dresses) when she spends some time staying in the location adjoining Premier Mine in order to visit her husband at his place of work.

In the rather unusual case of Mmagoviolet Phakwago, her husband's preferences overlaying certain tendencies in her own background have effected her transformation from a woman wearing sotho dress along with female siblings and cousins to a woman dressed in the clothes of sekgowa. It is only when dancing with Dithabaneng that she dresses in sotho style and sings sotho music. Sesotho, as I will show, serves in the context of musical performance to emphasise the equality of female kin and to offset the economic factors which in material terms differentiate these women married

---

[43] To separate Dithabaneng's members out into those who have and those who have not married might seem to be a misguided exercise in static typologizing, since as Murray has indicated most rural families undergo diverse temporal processes of change which may take them through several apparently discrete "types" within a single generation (1981:100-7, 155). In the area of Lesotho he studied, for example, many women after a period of virilocal residence as a wife in the absence of a husband might experience marital dissolution, work for some time as a migrant, and later return to rear children in a matrifocal household (ibid.:155). Although in Ntshabeleng village and the broader area there undoubtedly are some women who have spent periods working in town - mostly in domestic service - none of the group's members, even unmarried ones, have done so. Although the presence or absence of a husband as a wage-earner is an important factor in economically differentiating Dithabaneng's members on either side of the marital divide, the poverty of even those without husbands has never been sufficient to drive them to work in town. This is largely because all have remained ensconsed within, and able to depend upon, broader agnatic structures rather than having been driven into the social and economic deprivation of the "small female-headed household" (Murray 1981:154).

to different men, or unmarried, from each other.

One of the things setting Mmagoviolet apart from her contemporaries, and indeed even from the sister born after her, is the fact that she knows the year of her birth - 1939. This is because her paternal uncles were Christians (majekane), and when she was born her father was living with his wife at their place. Although he had not attended school, had been initiated, and so was not considered a proper Christian - the Lutherans originally forbade converts to become involved in this ritual - he lived amongst people who were literate. By the time her next sister, Mmagojunius, was born, her parents were "no longer taking this [Christianity] seriously", and had moved away from these kin to the section of the village inhabited by non-Christians (baditshaba), so her date of birth was not recorded.
It is hard to know whether it was this early influence from literate people which influenced her in her later interest in schooling. Again, this was in contrast to her younger sister. Although both schooled only to Standard One, for Mmagoviolet it was a struggle to remain at school even for that long, where for Mmagojunius it was "bad influences" which caused her to leave so early and run away to the farms: the idea of education which parents could not adjust to for the first daughter had become more acceptable by the time the second was old enough to attend. For the older girl, attending school at all involved an elaborate negotiation between her mother, who wanted on the advice of some village women to have her tend the baby, and the teacher. Asked by the latter to choose between school and home, and unable to relinquish what she desired - school - to do what she felt she ought to - childminding - she could not decide between the two. The teacher suggested a system of daily alternating, but domestic duties finally won out, causing her to leave school after three years. (Her youngest brother was eventually to be schooled right through to Standard Ten).

The man Mmagoviolet was to marry came from a background in which there was a similar mixture of mission and anti-mission influences. His parents, too, had lived in "the place of the Christians" (majekaneng) but although his father had been baptised his mother was "one of the nation" (moditshaba; a non-Christian), and they too moved back to "the place of those of the nation" (baditshabeng) after some time. He, having followed the normal trajectory for a youth from this section of the village, was retrenched from his job as a factory worker and decided to establish a small rural trading-store, with a diversity of attendant enterprises such as picture-framing. His house is one of the few in baditshabeng with electricity and a television, and he likes to watch sport with his friends on a Saturday afternoon.

While he was at work on the Reef, he managed to procure a house in Tembisa. At an earlier stage in the family's development, his wife used to spend periods of several months at a time living there with him: now that he has left the Reef and moved back to Lebowa, his son in turn has settled in the family's Tembisa house. This pattern of procuring a secure place of urban

residence as one of a rural family's assets is common in sections of the community with a long-standing history of migration, and often with a Christian background, and it is yet another feature marking off Mmagoviolet and her family from her contemporaries in Dithabaneng, whose husbands are all housed in compounds at their places of employment. In this family, however, a move towards the more modern and urban lifestyle described by the term sekgowa did not entail an affiliation to Christianity.

What the story of Mmagoviolet and her husband shows is that membership of social categories such as Christian or non-Christian, and affiliation to accompanying styles such as those of sekgowa or sesotho, was neither static nor historically preordained. Within the life process of one family, different members could be oriented in a variety of ways, or the same members oriented differently over a period of years, with respect to these major social and conceptual divides. Despite the ease of movement between these clearly-distinguished and mutually exclusive categories, the history of this family still displays the basic pattern in which women and the domestic domain belong to sesotho while men are seen to connect them to and even pull them towards sekgowa. Mmagoviolet, although she wore dresses as her husband wanted her to, and went to town to be with and to keep house for him there, was far happier when she could return home where she had the help and support of her mother-in-law and the companionship of her female neighbours. The following section will explore the way in which, for her as for her less "modern" sisters, cousins and co-singers, the occasions of Dithabaneng's performance use the idiom of equality, subsistence agriculture and female sotho identity to express this sense of cohesive - albeit contested and only momentarily achieved - female companionship and bonding.

Women, performance, and the crops of sesotho

For a period after Dithabaneng was formed in order to sing the new kiba style of music, there was a wide range of performance contexts in which the group was involved. It took part in a number of local competitions, and was very much in demance to perform at weddings for a fee of around "twenty pounds" (R40). More recently, however, their popularity has waned and live performance has been replaced at weddings by taped music played on a hired hi-fi system. The range of possible performances has thus shrunk to one main type: "parties" held at the homes of individual members. These are ostensibly for enjoyment and pleasure alone, but in fact like many other such "parties" in this reserve area they entail an aspect of phasa (ancestral propitiation).

A party at Mmagojane's

The preliminaries and preparations for the party, to be held at the house of Mmagojane Kgalema, one of the group's "police", began in late July 1991. In an initial discussion between Mmagojane and her fellow group members on the one hand, and her husband on the other, he was

informed that the group had designated her the host for the next of these parties, and in which he expressed his surprise that this was the case and his reluctance to provide the food that he imagined would be required. He was assured that he would not be held liable for all costs, but would be asked to provide only a goat to be slaughtered and a tin of mealie meal. After some further protestations and expressions of dissatisfaction at not having been informed of this earlier, he finally agreed.

The next stage was for each member of the group to contribute a tin of sorghum from her year's crop, which was then made into beer by the hostess and some of her fellow-members. Indeed, it was said that August was the best month for such a party, since it came in the time between harvesting and planting when there was still some sorghum left for making beer.

On the night before the party the goat was slaughtered, leaving time for the meat to be cooked in black pots over a fire on the following day.

During the party itself, the sexes remained separate. The women of Dithabaneng performed in the open space in front of the yard, observed mostly by children and other women who stood or sat on the ground in a circle around the dancers.

During breaks in the performance, singers and audience drank home-made sorghum beer from calabashes. Mmagojane's husband and other men who were home from town sat on chairs under a tree some distance away from the performers, and drank bottled beer out of glasses. Men and women, in these separate areas, had their food served to them by the women of the house.

Occasionally one of the "police" would approach the men in their separate circle and involve him in a mini-drama of mock arrest, with one of the "police" making as if to handcuff him, asking aggressively for his pass, and eventually fining him some money before agreeing to let him go.

At the very end of the party, the skin of the goat which had been slaughtered was spread on the back of the woman whom, the group had agreed, should host the next party. At the previous such event, held during December 1990 at the house of the other "policeman", Mmagolina Sebei, a similar laying on of the skin had signified that this present party would be held at Mmagojane's house: "we felt that, after one police, the other police should do the same thing". Proposed future celebrations will be held at the homes of the leader and of her deputy, since it is thought that office-holders in the group should host these events.

To understand the significance of the different foodstuffs served

at this party, it is necessary to examine the practice of - and the decline in - agriculture in the village and in the broader area of the reserve in which it is situated. All Dithabaneng's married women acquired arable land from their in-laws when setting up house, and even its unmarried members work in the fields of their own parents. As in reserve areas throughout southern Africa, the significant factor influencing agricultural output is not, however, the availability of land but rather the availability of cash.[44] The high cost of hiring traction make it impossible to grow any food without an input from wages earned in urban employment. For married Dithabaneng women this comes from their husbands, while for those unmarried some money is paid out of a mother's pension or by a brother. In economic terms, then, the greater amount of money available for ploughing to married women receiving regular and fairly good remittances certainly ensures a higher return on this investment: where Mathabathe Mokwale paid R50 to plough a section of her fields and reaped only one bag of sorghum worth R60, Raisibe Sebei paid R180 to plough a larger area and reaped five bags worth about R300 in total.

Even for those households with a more secure access to male wages, however, their fields are, and are regarded as, a supplementary rather than a primary source of food. This again is a common theme in studies of southern African reserve areas: indeed, in a more global view, it is the decline of these reserves which is seen as having caused their wholesale dependence on the sale of labour to the industrial centres of the Republic. In this area specifically, the factor of unremitting drought has been a further major impediment to agriculture: people who a few years ago reaped a reasonable harvest have found the returns on whatever cash they do invest in ploughing declining year after year. For some, the combination of a shortage of cash with the uncertainty of any return have made them plough smaller sections of their fields in each successive year.

Another factor which in this agriculturally poor area of Lebowa has led to the sense that field produce is supplementary rather than primary is the fact that the land here, while able to be used for growing sorghum, is or has become incapable of sustaining the crop which has come to be regarded as a staple - maize or mealies. This food must be bought directly with money remitted by men, without the intervention of female agricultural activity to make it available.

A song sung by young women during the 1950s shows clearly how, at that stage when mabele (sorghum) was still a food eaten widely in the village as a whole, maize was becoming associated with

---

[44] See, for example, Murray (1981:76-85), James (1987:76-8). As in the Lesotho villages studied by Murray, landholders in Sekhukhuneland who have no money for ploughing frequently let out their land for sharecropping by people who have cash or own tractors (P Delius, personal communication).

migrant men, who both supplied it and demanded to be fed it:

Mararankodi, taba tsa le sego	Mararankodi, news of laughter
Taba tsa bogadi le bagaditsong	News of marriage and of being a co-wife
Ebego ke dibotsa mang	Whom will I tell this news
Ebego ke dibotsa mang, taba tsa bogadi ye	Whom will I tell this news of marriage
Bana ba bogadi ba nkgowa-bjang	The children at my husband's place are shouting about me
A ba nkgowa bjang ba sa bone mpa mantsha	They are shouting about me because they don't see stomach (I am not pregnant)
Moratiwa o tlile bosego ka tsoga kangwedi ka kgatla lehea	My lover came at night, at the time of moonlight, and I woke to grind maize
Mmamoratiwa o tlile bosego rrago-ngwanaka ka kgatla lehea	My lover, the father of my child came in the night, I woke to grind maize
Ga a je mabele, ga a je leotsa	He doesn't eat sorghum, he doesn't eat millet
Ke kgatla lehea	I grind maize.

This rejection of earlier subsistence crops in favour of bought maize has since become commonplace. The sorghum which is still grown in varying amounts, having been assigned this marginal role, remains within women's sphere of control, and is used for two main purposes: as seed for the next harvest, and to make beer. Although this sorghum beer provides a small income to unmarried women in some poorer households such as Mmagomotala Mofele, the increasing rejection by men of sorghum beer in favour of the bottled variety makes such an income negligible in comparison with that earned, for example, by Mmagoshower from the sale of commercial brands at her spot (informal bar).[45]

The main use of the beer made by Dithabaneng women from the sorghum they grow, then, is for the ritual and ceremonial purposes associated with sesotho. The fact that all members - despite fairly wide disparities in income deriving ultimately from differences in access to male earnings - can contribute some sorghum towards the beer which is to be drunk at a performance and then consume the resulting brew together, stresses the links binding them together as equal participants and as kinswomen, and deemphasises the economic differentiations which divide them and which link some to the ways of sekgowa through their links to particular wage-earning men.

---

[45] See Colson and Scudder (1988) for an account of the declining ability of women to produce an income from home-brew as men began to favour bottled beer.

Another aspect of the group's performance which dramatises the sisterly communality of women and the division - even antagonism - between them and men is that of the "police" play-act. Although "police" are not the only dramatis personae in kiba - Dithabaneng and other groups have a range of characters, including baboons and monkeys, dingaka (diviners), and doctors and nurses - the "police" act has most impact since it involves members of the audience and even those outside the circle of onlookers. Its strong amusement value also derives from the fact that it involves transvestite dressing, and in this respect it is the reverse of some equally amusing pageants in male kiba groups in which men dress as women and engage in exaggeratedly female behaviour, including kissing and mock love-making. Here, the aspect of male behaviour and dress which is latched onto is that of intimidating uniformed authority.

There is an element of genuine crowd control in the function of these figures: in men's kiba, for example, "police" do not dress in uniform, but are known merely for their use of a whip to keep extraneous people and onlookers from moving into the circle of dancers. For women's police, although they are thought of as having a similar controlling function, the limits on their authority, based partly perhaps on limited strength, have increased the play-acting component of their role:

> Some men force their way through because we are women. When arrested, they will refuse to pay and just because we are women, we leave them.[46]

Mostly, then, women arrest unsuspecting men whom they suspect will comply with their demands for a fine rather than genuine troublemakers:

> *Do they arrest men only?*
>
> Yes, they don't arrest women.
>
> *Do they arrest those men who have done something wrong?*
>
> Its papadi (a play/game), they just arrest them even if they haven't done anything wrong.[47]

Sometimes an element of secrecy is necessary so that the "police" can conceal her intentions from one of her innocent victims:

> As men are drinking there, we will go and arrest them. We will approach them as if we are dancing. ... You can't arrest them in a group because, if you arrest

---

[46] Mathabathe Mokwale, recorded discussion with PM, Ntshabeleng, 29/12/90.

[47] Raisibe Sebei, recorded discussion with PM, Ntshabeleng, 29/12/90.

> one, the others will try to run away. ... I will take him away and tell him, "Why did you come to the dancing without your jacket, it is against the law?" He will take out some money, and then he is released. Whether he pays five cents or ten cents, there is no problem.[48]

But sometimes an arrested man might pay as much as R1. The fines are collected together, and counted up at the end of the day:

> after eating, just before we go home, someone would tell us how much we have raised: "Batau (lions), your money is so much".[49]

In these dramatic interludes, a range of elements are compressed, including an obvious component of social commentary and satire about the arbitrariness and frequency of police intervention in black people's lives within broader South African society. But an equally important aspect - albeit of symbolic rather than material significance - is that of concerted female action to wrest from returnee migrants an amount of money which can be put into the dancers' collective fund and "eaten" at a future party.

On a practical level, it would have been impossible to hold a party - despite the contributions in sorghum and female labour - without the pressure exerted by the collectivity of singers on Mmagojane's husband to donate from his sphere of male-owned assets the substantial contribution of a goat to be slaughtered. In similar vein, but in the domain of papadi (play/game), women police assuming the trappings of an authority normally denied them, make inroads into a source of wealth within the possession of men - cash - and incorporate this under their collective control within the domain of sotho performance, dress, and celebration.

Conclusion

This paper began by suggesting that sesotho, rather than suggesting a rigid adherence to the ways of the precolonial or primordial past, has been successively redefined in its opposition to the category sekgowa. Both are conceptual tools rather than describing the orientations of bounded groups of people; they are used as grids or templates to order experience in a variety of different settings. Even in cases where this and other similar sets of paired opposites are used to characterise definite and concrete groups, as in the frequent association of baditshaba (those of the nation; non-Christians) with sesotho, other contexts prompt alternative uses and alignments of this term, such as its identification with women

---

[48] Mmagojane Kgalema, recorded discussion with PM, Ntshabeleng, 29/12/90.

[49] Ibid.

in contrast to the identification of sekqowa with men. And the alignment of sesotho with women is temporary in turn. While in performance contexts it acts as an idiom of sisterly equality and solidarity, the women it connects in this way in other contexts are linked into social categories or proto-classes not normally associated with sotho behaviour.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alverson, H (1978) Mind in the Heart of Darkness: value and self-identity among the Tswana of Southern Africa, New Haven, YaleUniversity Press.

Barth, F (1969) "Introduction" to Ethnic Groups and Boundaries, London, Allen and Unwin.

Bothma, C V (1962) Ntshabeleng Social Structure, Pretoria, Government Printer.

Bozzoli, B (1983) :"Marxism, feminism and South African Studies" in Journal of Southern African Studies 9(2).

Bozzoli, Belinda, with Mmantho Nkotsoe (1991) Women of Phokeng:Consciousness, Life Strategy and Migrancy in South Africa 1900-1983, Johannesburg, Ravan Press.

Cohen, A (1969) Custom and Politics in Urban Africa, Berkeley,

University of California Press.

Colson, Elizabeth and Thayer Scudder (1988) For Prayer and Profit: the ritual, economic and social importance of beer in Gwambe district, Zambia, Stanford, Stanford University Press.

Comaroff, Jean (1985) Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance: the culture and history of a South African people, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Comaroff, John L & Jean (1989) "The colonisation of consciousness in South Africa" Economy and Society 18(3).

_____ (1987) "The madman and the migrant: work and labour in the historical consciousness of a South African people" American Ethnologist 14(2).

Coplan, David B (1987) "Eloquent knowledge: Lesotho migrants' songs and the anthropology of experience" American Ethnologist 14(3).

_____ (1991) "Fictions that save: migrants' performance and Basotho national culture" Cultural Anthropology 6(2):164-192.

Delius, P (1983) The Land Belongs to Us, Johannesburg, Ravan Press.

_____ (1989) "Sebatakgomo: Migrant organisation, the ANC and the Sekhukhuneland revolt", Journal of Southern African Studies, 15(4).

Ferguson, James (1992) "The country and the city on the copperbelt" Cultural Anthropology 7(1):80-92.

Gilmore, David B (1980) The People of the Plain: Class and Community in Lower Andalusia, New York, Columbia University Press.

Guy, Jeff (1990) "Gender oppression in southern Africa's precapitalist societies" in C Walker (ed) Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945, Cape Town, David Philip.

Harries, P (1989) "Exclusion, classification and internal colonialism: the emergence of ethnicity among the Tsonga-speakers of South Africa" in L Vail (ed) The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa, London, James Currey.

Hoernle, W (1937) "Social Organisation" in I Schapera (ed) The Bantu-Speaking Tribes of South Africa, Cape Town, Maskew Miller.

Hofmeyr, Isabel (1991) "We spend our years as a tale that is told": oral storytelling, literacy and historical narrative

in the changing context of a Transvaal chiefdom unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand.

James, Deborah (1986) "Land shortage and inheritance in a Lebowa village" Social Dynamics 14(2).

____ (1987) "Kinship and land in an inter-ethnic rural community" unpublished MA dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand.

Mayer, P (1980) "The origin and decline of two rural resistance ideologies" in P Mayer (ed) Black villagers in an Industrial Society: Anthropological perspectives on labour migration in South Africa, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Mayer, P (ed) Black Villagers in an Industrial Society: Anthropological perspectives on labour migration in South Africa, Cape Town, Oxford University Press.

Mayer, P and I (1971) Townsmen or Tribesmen, Cape Town, Oxford University Press.

McAllister, P (1980) "Work, homestead and the shades: the ritual interpretation of labour migration among the Gcaleka" in P Mayer (ed) op.cit.

____ (1991) "Using ritual to resist domination in the Transkei" in A D Spiegel and P McAllister (eds) Tradition and Transition in Southern Africa: African Studies Fiftieth Anniversary Volume 50(1&2):129-144.

Molepo, Mashoahla Moses (1983) "Peasants and/or proletariat: a case study of migrant workers at Haggie Rand Limited from Molepo Tribal Village." Unpublished Honours dissertation, Industrial Sociology, Witwatersrand University.

____ (1984) "The Changing Nature of Labour Migration from the Northern Transvaal with Particular reference to Molepo village c1900-1940" MA dissertation, SOAS, University of London.

Monnig, H O (1967) The Pedi, Pretoria, J L van Schaik.

Murray, Colin (1981) Families Divided, Johannesburg, Ravan Press.

Niehaus, Isak (1991) "Witch-hunting and political legitimacy: continuity and change in Green Valley, Lebowa" unpublished seminar paper, Anthropology Dept seminar, Witwatersrand University.

Ranger, T (1985) "The invention of tradition in colonial Africa" in E Hobsbawm and T Ranger (eds) The Invention of Tradition, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Rogers, Susan Carol (1975) "Female forms of power and the myth of male dominance: a model of female/male interaction in peasant society" American Ethnologist 2:727-756.

Roseberry, William (1989) Anthropologies and Histories: essays in culture, history and political economy, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press.

Schapera, I and S Roberts (1975) "Rampedi revisited: another look at a Kgatla ward" Africa 45(3).

Spiegel, A D (1990) "Cohesive cosmologies or pragmatic practices?" Cahiers d'etudes africaines 117(XXX-I):45-72.

Spiegel, A D and P McAllister (eds) Tradition and Transition in Southern Africa: African Studies Fiftieth Anniversary Volume 50(1&2)

Thomas, N (1992) "The inversion of tradition" American Ethnologist 19(2):213-232.

Vail, L (ed) (1989) The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa, London, James Currey.

Vail, L (1989) "Introduction: Ethnicity in Southern African history" in L Vail (ed) op.cit..

Walker, C (ed) (1990) Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945, Cape Town, David Philip.

Walker, C (1990) "Women and gender in southern Africa to 1945: an overview" in C Walker (ed) op.cit..

Webster, David (1991) "Abafazi Bathonga Bafihlakala: ethnicity and gender in a Kwazulu border community" in A D Spiegel and P McAllister (eds) op.cit.

Wolpe, H (1972) "Capitalism and cheap labour power in South Africa: from Segregation to Apartheid" Economy and Society 1(4):425-56.