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The politics of headmanship in the Mokhokhong Valley

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illages were relatively few. The headman was expected to dispense land and favours, and justice, impartially to his community, without regard to the degree of relatedness between individuals and himself. But close relatives did normally get better lands than other people, and they were more frequently chosen by the headman to sit on the village council.

In the past there was some status attached to clan membership. Basotho chiefs are drawn mainly from the Koena clan, and many others have been fictitiously incorporated in that clan. Not all Bakoena are chiefs of course, but it is said that membership of this clan entitled a commoner to a certain small degree of respect.

Lineage seniority was a more important principle. Everyone belongs to a descent group which is connected in an order of seniority with other descent groups. Members of a matrilineal descent group, which may extend over six or seven generations, trace their ancestry from an apical ancestor. The house is founded by his wives and the lines descending from his sons are graded in order of seniority. The sons, in descending birth order, of the house of his first wife, are the most senior, followed by the sons of the second house in descending birth order, and so on. Seniority within the descent group gave precedence in making decisions affecting the whole group, especially in marriage arrangements, in the settlement of disputes among kinsmen and in ritual. Since village communities were often comprised of single large descent groups with their adherents it was not uncommon for the headman to be the linially senior male.

Sotho society, although not entirely closed to the exercise of influence by younger men was largely a gerontocracy. The headman's advisors were normally old men, for it was thought (and still is) that only age can equip a man with "knowledge of the law" which is required for making wise decisions on community affairs. Males passed through a series of well defined stages which may be characterised roughly as infancy, lasting from birth to the age of about six or seven when the child becomes useful for performing minor tasks in the household, in the fields and with the stock; a period of puberty lasting until initiation; adolescence until marriage; young adulthood until the first child is born; and mature status when a man's sons had children. Older people were responsible for the conduct of younger people in general, so that if a man saw a group of herdboys, for instance engaged in some misdemeanour, and he did not prevent them from continuing, he himself would be guilty of misconduct and liable to be fined in the headman's court. A man's wealth generally increased with his age; he acquired more land, his herd increased, he inherited wealth from his father, if he had more daughters than sons he received many cattle in bohali payments.

Wealth was an important source of acquired status, and conversely poverty was considered a disgrace. Wealth gave a man freedom from the nagging concern with subsistence and enabled him to spend more of his time visiting, entertaining, and extending his network of social relations. He was able to offer generous hospitality, to give impressive gifts to the headman or chief, to assist needy relatives, to educate

his children, and to buy fine clothes for his family and fine furniture for his house. He could also marry more wives and so establish a large descent group.

In many ways he could build up a personal prestige and a sphere of influence to rival the headman's or even the chief's. To reduce competition from this source some chiefs would "eat up" commoners who rivalled them in wealth, by constructing a charge against a too wealthy man, finding him guilty, and removing his land and confiscating his cattle. This danger could generally be averted by the more astute by giving lavish tribute to the headman and by supporting him in public.

Sex was in many ways a more far reaching criterion of stratification than any of the others. Women had lower status in law as well as in the social, political, religious, and in many respects the economic spheres. There was a high degree of segregation in social life; women would not normally engage in conversation with men, nor eat with men. Most of the major domestic, agricultural, and pastoral tasks were assigned by tradition to men or to women - few might be undertaken by both sexes and most of the drudgery fell to women. Women were given the status of legal minors and were always represented by men in court. They normally took no part in local political or administrative affairs, although a few notable female chiefs have become extremely influential.

A man normally attached a certain amount of property to the houses of his wives. There each would have fields, cattle,

houses, utensils and implements, over which the wife had virtual control. A woman could own property outright, and in particular whatever she brought to her husband's house at their marriage was her own, and her right to this could be defended in court - by a male representative.

There is now no status in the community, with the possible exception of head of household, which carries any real power, in the sense that an order can be given with a high degree of probability that it will be carried out, regardless of the inclinations of the person given the order.

The headman has now lost the effective powers which formerly supported his authority. He has no executive legal powers any longer, land allocations are undertaken by a popularly elected committee, he no longer has any economic prerogatives, and his office has declined in prestige. People no longer regard the headman as a "big man" simply because he is headman. The question of the headman's standing will be handled in much greater detail in successive chapters.

Clan membership does not now provide any prestige worth mentioning. Lineal seniority is still reckoned but other factors are now so much more important in determining patterns of influence that even in the organisation of descent group affairs, the views of senior kinsmen may be overlooked in favour of junior, though more wealthy, more educated and more articulate men. The functions of the descent group are not now of very great importance in the lives of most people, although, as I have mentioned, the Matumaneng group

is somewhat exceptional in this respect. Most major decisions are taken within the nuclear family, and this means that an individual's status in the descent group is of no great practical importance.

Young men become economically independent of their senior kinsmen soon after starting work, in their early twenties. In addition they spend very little time at home where their seniors can supervise them, and were such supervision attempted, which it seldom is, it would hardly be taken seriously. Descent group seniors do not have any real sanctions to apply to recalcitrant juniors, nor any real rewards to cajole them with. Many of the interests of the younger men lie in the towns where they work so that their motivation to conform to rural standards and to accept the wisdom and council of aged kinsmen is not great.

In times past the assumption seems to have been that no problem was new and that every problem could be solved by recourse to custom and precedent. Therefore age, "knowledge of the law", and attendance at the headman's court over many years, was assumed to give a man the capacity to provide practical solutions to virtually all questions. Today however, the complexity and novelty of the problems confronting the people of Mahchohang are such that the older people are less able to understand them that the younger people whose experience, education, and perhaps openness of mind may give them a better grasp of the issues. This again detracts from the status of old people many of whom are simply regarded as being no longer "with it".

However there is still a place for traditional wisdom and this is found in the headman's court. Here customary rules are applied in the arbitration of cases, and it is here that old men with a good "knowledge of the law" who are also reasonably articulate earn respect. To become an acknowledged exponent of customary law a man must have great experience in the type of case most commonly brought before the village court. He need not necessarily have been a member of the lekhotlana[x], but he should have attended numerous hearings over a period of many years in Mokhokhong. A generalised knowledge of the law is of little value when it is not combined with a detailed knowledge of local circumstances, precedents and personalities, for all of these provide the basis for a decision of what aspect of the customary law is relevant to the case at hand. The opinions of men knowledgeable in the law, in this sense, are always given most weight in court hearings. Also it frequently happens that there are precedents, some of them twenty or more years old, which, when expounded by the old men, are clearly applicable to the case being heard. A man who can demonstrate his ability to use his knowledge of the law in the peaceful and satisfactory solution of local conflicts is given wide and grateful recognition of his contribution to harmony in the community. This knowledge is worthless, of course, unless accompanied by some degree of articulateness

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x This is the village council, formerly appointed by the headman, now elected by the community, which also hears cases in conjunction with the headmen.

and a command of rhetoric. The two best exponents of the law in Molcholchong are impressive performers before an audience. This reputation can hardly be earned by a young man, and few young men show interest in acquiring it.

Much has been written about the esteem that accrues to the owner of many cattle in African societies; in Molcholchong that esteem has a direct connection with the utility of cattle for plough[illegible] for paying bohali, and with the fact that very [illegible] people own sufficient cattle to make up a ploughing [illegible]. The owner of many cattle will therefore be treated with respect and even deference by those who wish to have his cattle plough for them, especially just before ploughing time, even though there is normally some reciprocation in the form of labour on the cattle owner's fields, or a cash payment. Men with enough cattle to form a team often come to arrangements with less fortunate relatives whereby the latter, in return for the use of the cattle, must plough the fields of the owner first, and when the first rains come, plant them first. After this is done the borrower may start work on his own fields. The cattle owner thus gets his ploughing and planting done for him and gets them done at the best time of the season. The borrower may have to wait for other borrowers to complete their fields, and so may plant too late for a good crop. Hence the agricultural yields of cattle owners tend to be greater than those of non-owners, other factors such as land size and use of fertilizers being equal, so that when other people are buying food from the stores at high prices, the cattle owners may be living off their own produce. The seven men

who own sufficient cattle to form a ploughing team are all respected and independent. They are prominent at pitsos and court hearings. Only two have joined the new Farmer's Association; all the rest state that they see no reason to join since they do not need a tractor to plough for them and if they wanted new seed and fertiliser they could buy it. They have a strong wish to remain independent and free of debts. One of the cattle owners who joined the association owns thirty four cattle, a half of which he has loaned to people outside the valley. He uses the rest to plough other people's fields in the community while he uses a tractor on his own fields because he says it does a better job. The other owns nine cattle which he lends to members of his descent group (Matumaneng) to do their ploughing.

In spite of the advantages of cattle ownership people do not normally invest their savings in cattle now. Cattle ownership carries many risks. Two people in Mokhokhong have had all their cattle, amounting to about twenty in total, stolen over the past ten years and many more have suffered minor losses. The scarcity of grazing in the valley and its environs is also a deterrent, for the cattle have to be taken to distant grazing grounds to find good pasture, and even then it is an exceptional year when the cattle get fat. Cattle have to be herded and this means that either the owner's sons have to do it or he has to hire a child, which will normally cost him board, lodging and clothing. Then there is the danger that the cattle may get into someone else's crops and the owner may be required to pay compensation.

People who own cattle try to increase the size of their herd, but non-owners seldom purchase cattle. Some people buy agricultural implements so that they may bargain with cattle owners who lack the necessary implements. In fact all the cattle owners also have ploughs, but several lack planters, so that planterowners may therefore undertake to plant a neighbour's field (using their planter and his cattle) in return for the loan of his cattle for ploughing and planting their own fields.

The father who can provide bohali for his sons can generally retain more control over them than can the father who can contribute little or nothing to his son's marriage. The owner of cattle will also receive many requests from relatives for assistance with Bohali, and if he can meet them he comes to occupy a strong position among his kin who respect him for his material success and his magnanimity.

Many people now invest their savings in banks, credit unions and the post office. This form of investment has no immediate social implications, but the security gained by a substantial sum of money in reserve, and the freedom from dependence on others, are greatly valued and envied by those whose existence is precariously poised between minimum subsistence and destitution.

While wealth brings independence and prestige, it also brings dependents. Few mature men will refuse to honour the obligation to help a needy kinsman by denying that the obligation exists. If they do not wish to offer support they will rather try to explain that their resources are far fewer than the casual observer might imagine, and their commitments

many. This claim cannot be supported in the presence of a large herd of cattle or a large store of food. But a bank account has the advantage of secrecy.

It has become common in Nokhokhong for those with less than about two acres of their own land, and with few other resources, to hire themselves out to work on the fields of others who have more land than they can cultivate by themselves and some spare cash. About twenty women find a meagre living (20c per day for hoeing, 15c a day for reaping) in this way during the appropriate seasons. Although there is a lot of grumbling about the long hours of work and the small pay they nevertheless find it worthwhile, and even essential, to take this employment.

One man in Nokhokhong, who, unlike most, is deliberately trying to increase his influence in the community (see Chapters V and VI), tries to foster the impression that he is wealthier than he is. His neighbours laugh at his expedients; they say that he travels at night with his donkeys from the store to his house so that the people may not see what a small quantity of food he has bought.

Although economic factors are important in determining the degree of influence a person shall wield, other factors may become dominant at certain times. Education is one of these. The standard in school actually attained has little interest for the people; it is the skills, the practical knowledge and the wider experience of educated people that is regarded as useful in certain situations. The degree to which

the community is becoming involved in the affairs of the outside world becomes progressively more. The valley is no longer in any way economically self-sufficient, if it ever was. Money is borrowed from and invested in institutions outside, employment is sought there, goods bought and sold there.

Mokhotlong is part of a modern, although extremely poor, independent state. The implications of this involvement are seldom clear to most people. They fear exploitation by those who control and understand the processes which impinge on their lives from outside. But at the same time most people recognise that the economic situation in the valley is deteriorating and that they need technical and financial assistance. At the present moment this almost inevitably involves some dealings with white people, who are generally distrusted, on principle, by nearly everyone. Virtually all the men and women have worked in South Africa and have returned with the view that all white men are motivated solely by the desire for profit in one form or another, usually money or land. The present government of Lesotho is regarded, even by many of its own supporters, as being 'a white government in a black skin'. Hence, any assistance, advice, or instruction offered by the government or other bodies containing whites is immediately suspect and is also seldom fully understood. In trying to understand the full implications of these communications people look to the educated members of their own community for interpretation. The secretary and vice-secretary of the Lekhotlaka and of the various vol-

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untary organisations are always people with Std 5 or more, literate and with some general knowledge of events and processes beyond the valley.

Educated people tend to have wider social networks and ranges of interest than others. Their command of English enables them to communicate with whites, and whites tend to spend most of their time in Nokhokhong with those to whom they can talk. This outward-lookingness is often deplored by the uneducated majority and is regarded as a sign of the lack of involvement of the educated in the affairs of the community. Thus the very qualities which give educated people their influence in certain circumstances, set them apart and under a certain amount of suspicion. It is often thought that they may use their powerful contacts outside the valley to the benefit of themselves at the expense of others. In interpreting the statements of visiting agricultural officers educated people often seem to act as advocates of the innovations being proposed. Often they are in fact innovators themselves, since they are generally more open to the advantages of the proposal than others are. Thus they are associated with government interests and suspected for the same reasons.

A forceful personality can enable a man to exert a profound influence in the community. I have stressed this point in my biography of Jobere 'Nabathsana. There are three men in Nokhokhong, all members of the B.C.P., whose personalities are abrasive and aggressive. They are all intelligent men and deeply committed to 'anti-establishment'

views. This brings them into opposition with almost any suggestion emanating from the headman and from the government. I have seen a meeting with an agriculturalist attended by thirty people paralysed by the vehement objections of one man. Some members of the Farmers' Association prefer to abstain from all public activity in this connection, for fear of the displeasure and shame of a few people who are not even closely related to them.

There are a number of old men, about six, who have attributes, such as education, knowledge of law, or wealth, which might have enabled them to exert some influence on the community, but who are disqualified by their dissoluteness, their incapacity to handle their family affairs, or their disengagement from matters of communal concern.

Most important decisions are now taken by individual families, or by voluntary associations based on common interest, or by the headman with or without consultation with the council. Influence is often exerted in informal encounters. Structural bonds, indicating patterns of authority and influence, are now so loose as to afford no basis for a formal approach to the study of influence.

Influence has become situational. No insight is gained by trying to determine a 'pattern' which will hold good for all circumstances, although some persons quite obviously exert more influence than others at most times. The wealthy man exerts an influence in the economic sphere on those who are economically dependent on him, and this may overflow into other spheres of interaction, but he may, for instance, carry

no weight at a court hearing; the man with 'knowledge of the law' is influential when legal matters are being debated, but may command no audience at an agricultural meeting. It is worth re-emphasising here that very few people indeed seek a generalised influence or public preminence; instead the prosperity of the family and the fostering of its interests occupies the ambitions of most men and they seek influence and exert it mainly in pursuit of this specific end.

In the affairs of the community it is men, in general, who have available to them the attributes that earn them prestige and respect, and accordingly I have written mainly about the criteria of status for men. It is often remarked in Lesotho, however, that women have received increasing recognition over the past decades for their expanding rôles in running the affairs of the community and household. The expansion of women's rôles is mainly due in some measure to the fact that women are often rather better educated than men. It is very common for boys to alternate their days between school and herding, and this has an extremely deleterious effect on their education. Not only do they miss half of their lessons, but find it difficult to follow when they do attend. Also, men's labour is more in demand on the wage market and in the local economy, so that as soon as boys become physically capable of earning a wage they tend to be taken out of school and required to contribute to the household economy. These factors apply less to girls, who therefore tend to proceed further with their education. There is also a positive inducement for educating girls in the higher bohali which may be asked for an educated girl.

It is not easy for a woman to achieve prominence in public affairs, although there are precedents, the late regent 'Mantsebo being a good example. But there is a female subculture and sub-community, discernible in various economic and social activities, in which a separate status system operates, and in which different criteria of esteem are used. Among these criteria education and capability are ranked high and often override other considerations.

The two most viable voluntary associations in the community are the Study Club, an all female organisation, and the Farmers' Association, in which women exert more influence, collectively, than men.

It is rare nowadays for people to seek generalised influence or authority within the community and many positively avoid involvement in public affairs, except where their own special interests are concerned. The community cannot be seen as a political field in which competition for power and influence is a continuous activity: most people are simply not sufficiently concerned with the community as such to bother about achieving a position of leadership in it. Those who, like the headman or the elected members of local committees and councils, have leadership thrust upon them, generally find such positions onerous and often uncomfortable.

The great majority of people in Mokhokhong are concerned far more with achieving economic stability and independence than with maximising purely political or social values. The exceptions to this generalisation receive detailed attention in Chapter VI.

CHAPTER IV. POLITICAL STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES.

In this chapter I discuss two of the most important public institutions, the headmanship and the village council, the lekhotlana. These interact with one another and with the community at large, and the principle occasions of these interactions are court hearings and public meetings, pitsos.

In many ways the court hearings are the most revealing of all social activities, for here many of the current grievances, conflicts, alliances, attitudes and designs are articulated. I have therefore given some space to an analysis of cases which have special explanatory value in relation to important facets of community life.

The Headman

Headmen are not normally of chiefly stock. In traditional times it was common for a chief to show his favour to one of his subjects, who had served him well or who had shown outstanding leadership qualities, by appointing him headman over a portion of his territory. I have related how 'Mabathoana was placed by Moshoeshoe in Molhokhong with a group of followers, and this pattern is common in Lesotho.

It seems to have been accepted from the earliest times that once a headman had been designated and had established himself the 'ownership' of the title belonged to this man and his descent group. This means that the position should pass down from the incumbent to his senior heir, and that where the rightful succession is in doubt it is the right of

the descent group to determine who should actually receive the title. It is therefore not within the rights of any chief or political superior of the headman to determine who should succeed him. The issue has been considerably complicated, however, by the custom of 'placing', (see Appendix I). The law of succession which is the same for headmen as for chiefs, is stated in the Laws of Lerotholi, Law 1, which reads:

> "The succession of chieftainship in Basutoland shall be by right of birth. That is the first-born male of the first wife. If the first wife has no issue, then the first-born male child of the next wife in succession shall be heir to the chieftainship."

This law in fact acts only as a guide, for there are numerous reasons why certain legal heirs might be considered unsuitable for the duties of the headmanship. Long absence from the community and detachment from its problems, chronic drunkenness, imbecility, or ignorance of the customary law, might all count against an heir in the decision of the descent group owning the headmanship. In the absence of any son of the late headman it is normal for the widow to step into his place as 'acting headman' until she dies or becomes incapable of carrying out her functions. The decision to appoint the widow to her husband's place rests with the headman's descent group.

The members of this group do not live in Mokholchong ha Philipi but are in Maseru and several other places. There are several living in ha Matete, but they are relatively junior. The 'Mabathoana descent group does not concern itself

with the internal affairs of the community unless a crisis arises, such as the death of the headman and the procedure for the selection of a new one.

The 'owners' must satisfy themselves that their appointee is competent and can rely to a reasonable extent on the support of the community. When the available senior men of the descent group have agreed that the widow of their deceased kinsman should be appointed they call a gathering of the whole community to ask the people to accept their nomination and to co-operate with and assist the new headman in the discharge of her duties. Anyone is free to express his dissent, but if the descent group has correctly assessed the position of the widow in the community she will be generally accepted. The final act in legitimising the appointment is for the descent group elders to take the widow to the ward chief, with a present of an ox (usually provided by the widow). His acceptance of the ox is the formal gesture of his recognition of the appointment and he will then arrange for her name to be substituted for that of her husband in the government gazette of chiefs and headmen.*

Under the Native Administration Law of 1938, once a person was gazetted his position was secure and he could only be displaced by formal proceedings taken against him by the state; he was thus safe from the arbitrary action of superior

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* For a much fuller discussion of succession in Lesotho see Jones, 1966.

chiefs who might wish to place one of their own sons or followers in his position or over him in such a manner as completely to undermine his authority. In 1946, however, this authority was greatly weakened by the establishment of Local Courts under the National Treasury, into which all fines and court fees had to be paid. Headmen were no longer permitted to exercise judicial functions. Their courts were no longer authorised to hear criminal cases or to impose penalties. Thus judicial and administrative authority have become separated at the local level (see Ashton, 1952: 210). This creates certain difficulties for the headman, who seeks substantiation for his administrative actions, for he cannot personally or through the agency of his court impose discipline. He may command his subjects to carry out certain actions, related to the maintenance of order in the community, such as apprehending a thief, delivering messages, attending at the hearing of a dispute or at a *kitao*, impounding stray cattle, keeping stock off reserved areas, mending a road, and so on. But he has no means of enforcing his orders. Some headmen may even secure the compliance of certain of their subjects in carrying out personal services such as providing thatching grass, reeds or firewood. But as Duncan (1960: 63) comments,

> "To be a lawful order it must be reasonable. Reasonableness can only be defined as that which does not shock responsible public opinion by its unreasonableness. Public opinion is changing fast....."

Thus the extent to which a headman can secure compliance

depends both on the degree to which his orders will be supported by the Local Court and the degree to which local public opinion will accept his demands as reasonable; the two are to a certain extent interdependent. A further factor, of great practical importance, is the extent to which the headman can actually use the authority of the Local Court as support for his orders. The Local Court is generally situated at the place of the ward chief or other senior chief, and this may be distant from the community in question. The travelling time on foot from Mokholokong to Ralejoe is about three hours, and by horse about half that time. The process of registering a case, assembling witnesses, paying registration and court fees, and actually attending the hearing may be extremely tedious and there is a 50c registration fee for each case brought. The court functions in a relatively formal manner according to procedures which, while not identical to an English or South African court, are quite dissimilar to those of the [illegible] court, so that those who are unfamiliar with it may be intimidated. This applies both to headmen and their subjects. The headman who is acquainted with Local Court procedure, and who is prepared to give the often very large amount of time and effort of trying to secure the support of the court for those of his orders which his subjects will not accept, is in a strong position vis-à-vis his subjects. If he can build up a reputation for winning his cases in this court his orders are all the more likely to gain compliance. If his orders are also generally accepted as being reasonable and for the public benefit, he will be in a doubly strong position. The headman

who is unwilling to use the local Court to secure a higher sanction for his orders may find great difficulty in securing compliance where the immediate benefits of obedience are not clear.

The definition of reasonableness as it relates to an order depends largely on the local reputation of the headman. One who enjoys much respect on account of his fairness in land allocation, his ability to mediate to the satisfaction of the parties at disputes, his knowledge of the law, can place much heavier demands on his subjects, and will have them accepted as reasonable, than a headman who lacks respect.

The ability of a headman to gain compliance stems largely from his personal qualities, and this is especially true when, as at Lekholokhong, the headman is not part of a large descent group strongly represented in his community. The headman is at the very fringe of the modern administrative bureaucracy and gains little recognition amongst his subjects on this account, and although he is officially a part of the bureaucracy he receives scant support from it in his rôle as local authority.

The Lekhotlana

Traditionally the village headman would appoint a small council of variable size to assist him in the affairs of the community. He would normally choose this council from among his senior kinsmen with the addition of a few old men

who
~~the~~ were locally known for their experience in dealing with local problems. This body would advise the headman on political, legal and administrative matters. But before taking any action on this advice the headman would consult with the men of the community in daily sessions at his khotla, a place near his homestead which was normally shaded by a tree and where it was pleasant to sit and discuss the matters of the day. Matters raised at the more formal occasions of the court hearing and the pitso would thus have received fairly full discussion beforehand.

Now, however, the headman's council, the lekhotlana, is elected by the community, at least nominally.* Five members are elected for a term of one year by all adult members of the community, although in fact only about twenty to thirty people bother to attend the meeting to cast their vote. Nominees are elected specifically to fill the posts of chairman (molulosetulo), vice-chairman, secretary, vice-secretary, and one ordinary member. The chairman automatically becomes the headman's letona.

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* Jobere used to announce to a public meeting called for the purpose the names of those he wished to have 'elected' to the lekhotlana, and in particular he named the letona. Occasionally he announced a couple of extra names to allow a modicum of choice. This procedure did not raise any serious objections from the electorate.

The functions of this council are poorly defined and there is hardly any literature on the subject. It assembles in public on two kinds of occasion only - at court hearings and at pitsos - and in private very rarely. Its duties are still purely advisory since the headman has the right to make the final judgment in court hearings, and after discussion to announce a decision at pitsos. This duty is, in a sense, more vital than in the past because the custom of holding daily discussions in the khotla has disappeared, so that the opportunity for the full discussion of all points of view of any issue is now reduced to the occasion of the court hearing or of the pitso itself.

Jobere seldom required the advice of his lekhotlana, preferring to make his own decisions and to act on his own initiative.

Mabatho, on the other hand, is often criticised for transferring too many of her own duties to the lekhotlana. The actual function of this body therefore varies with circumstances, an important factor being the temperament of the current headman.

In principle the lekhotlana could exercise considerable influence over the headman, since he would be rendered quite ineffectual by the concerted opposition of his council. In practice, however, at least during the time of my research which extends over three periods of office of the lekhotlana, it is an extremely apathetic and directionless body.

I assume that there is a connection between this apathy and the fact that there is no competition for nomination; on the contrary, candidates receive their appointment with resignation and sometimes with open objection, claiming that they are too busy or incompetent. The very minor prestige

which attaches to these positions does not compensate for the inconvenience of being called on to deliberate on public matters, attend _pitsos_, and hear court cases. In fact most men try by all means to avoid involvement in contentious issues, unless they are personally concerned in the outcome. The time consumed by these public duties is also begrudged. One of the members of the _lekhotlana_ told me that he was tired of giving his time to the public when he got nothing in return and neglected his own business on this account. The majority of men are simply not interested in gaining a diffuse influence and prestige in the community.

This fact, that the desire for influence and prestige is not generally a primary motive, is fundamental to an understanding of politics in Mokhokhong. I had assumed, in the early stages of my research, that there would be competition for high office in all spheres. I have since modified this view, and have come to the almost opposite conclusion that virtually all forms of public responsibility are avoided wherever possible. The lack of enthusiasm for public office, the poor attendances at _pitsos_ and court hearings, the dilatory performance of those elected to office, and the widespread and explicit distrust of those who attempt to exert any generalised influence or leadership, all support this contention.

The Pitso

The pitso is a formal occasion for communication between a chief or headman and his people. It is normally called at the instigation of the headman who informs his letona of the matter to be discussed and the day on which the meeting is to be called. The letona then instructs the village crier to announce the event to the villages. The latter does this with a stentorian bellow from a central rock in Ngtumaneng from where his voice carries over the four villages. The pitso had the function of enabling the headman to request the advice of his people formally and publicly, as opposed to the advice he got informally and semi-publicly at his daily sessions in the khotla. Thus democratic procedure was seen to be followed. A second function of these meetings was to enable the headman to convey messages and instructions from higher authorities to his people.

Every adult male was expected to attend a pitso and women might do so if they wished. Jobere once claimed to me that he could if he wished fine every man who failed to attend and had no adequate excuse. This was certainly an exaggeration of his power. Every man had the right to speak at a pitso; he might proffer advice to the headman or advocate any course of action he favoured or he might express his views on any subject related to the topic at hand.

After hearing the views of his subjects the headman would come to his own decisions, but if these conflicted with the desires of the com. ity he would in all likelihood receive stiff opposition in implementing them.

The lekhotlana was expected to be present at pitsos in order to assist the headman in explaining things to the people and to assist the headman in getting the sense of the meeting. Either the headman or the letona would conduct the pitso.

It is common these days for court cases to be heard and matters of public concern to be discussed at the same gathering. It is not easy to assemble a large group of adults because of a generally low level of interest in public matters, so that when people are called to attend the headman and her council try to arrange for as many matters of importance to be handled at the same time. Even so the complaint is often heard that 'the headman wastes our time' by calling meetings whose topics do not command much popular interest and whose conclusions have little practical importance with respect to the pressing, mainly economic, problems of the day.

Attendance at pitsos is a good index of the extent to which the headman is succeeding in unifying his community. Jobere and Mabatho both regarded a poor attendance as a personal failure. Jobere's pitsos generally drew about twenty to thirty men and ten to fifteen women; Mabatho's usually draw about half to two thirds that number. Jobere held a court or a pitso or both virtually every Saturday morning, and he even agreed with his lekhotlana to hold sessions during the week to handle the volume of cases and public matters which could not be concluded on Saturday, although this was seldom done. Mabatho holds pitsos about once a month and often they are over in an hour or so. She is not a forceful public speaker and, as I shall explain in Chapter VI, she chooses to exercise her influence and gain support by

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