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The politics of headmanship in the Mokhokhong Valley

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The resolution of this conflict has solved only one problem, and that is the fact of the people of Matumaneng residing in Jobere's area but not owing allegiance to him. This is no longer the case, but the matter of interploughing remains. Jobere regarded the 'reclamation' of the lands at present ploughed by Matete's people to the east of the river as the final phase in his programme of political and territorial integration. In 1963 he brought a case against Matete for ploughing land, to the east of the boundary, that was not his own. In fact Matete personally was only one of those so ploughing, but the case was brought against him as the person responsible for his subjects in matters concerning land use. Again drawing on ample documentary evidence largely stemming from past court decisions, Jobere was awarded the case and Matete was ordered to withdraw. He ignored this order until 1968 when Jobere gave him notice of further legal action. Matete was now tired of these proceedings and knew that he could not win. He therefore promised to withdraw after the harvest if Jobere would drop the case against him. Jobere agreed, but in April 1966 he became acutely ill and died after a week in hospital. Knowing that Jobere would probably be succeeded by his wife, who had virtually no experience in court proceedings, Matete was emboldened to continue ploughing on Philipi's side of the stream, and has continued to do so to this day. Mabatho has not pursued the case against him.

SUCCESSION TO THE HEADMANSHIP.

'MABATHOANA was appointed by Moshoeshoe I as headman over the whole of the Mokhokhong Valley as well as over a large area surrounding it.

LETLALA and his line followed Sekhonyana to Matatiele and thence to Qutting where they remained in spite of appeals to return to the headmanship after 'Mabathoana's death.

POTJA and NOTSELE were 'Mabathoana's second and third born sons, after Letlala, but neither succeeded because (nominally) they were legitimised after their father's marriage to his second wife, whose children took precedence.

MAMAKE succeeded 'Mabathoana, but gave the area under discussion (Mokhokhong ha Philipi) to his younger brother Philipi. (Ignoring for the moment the legal dispute.)

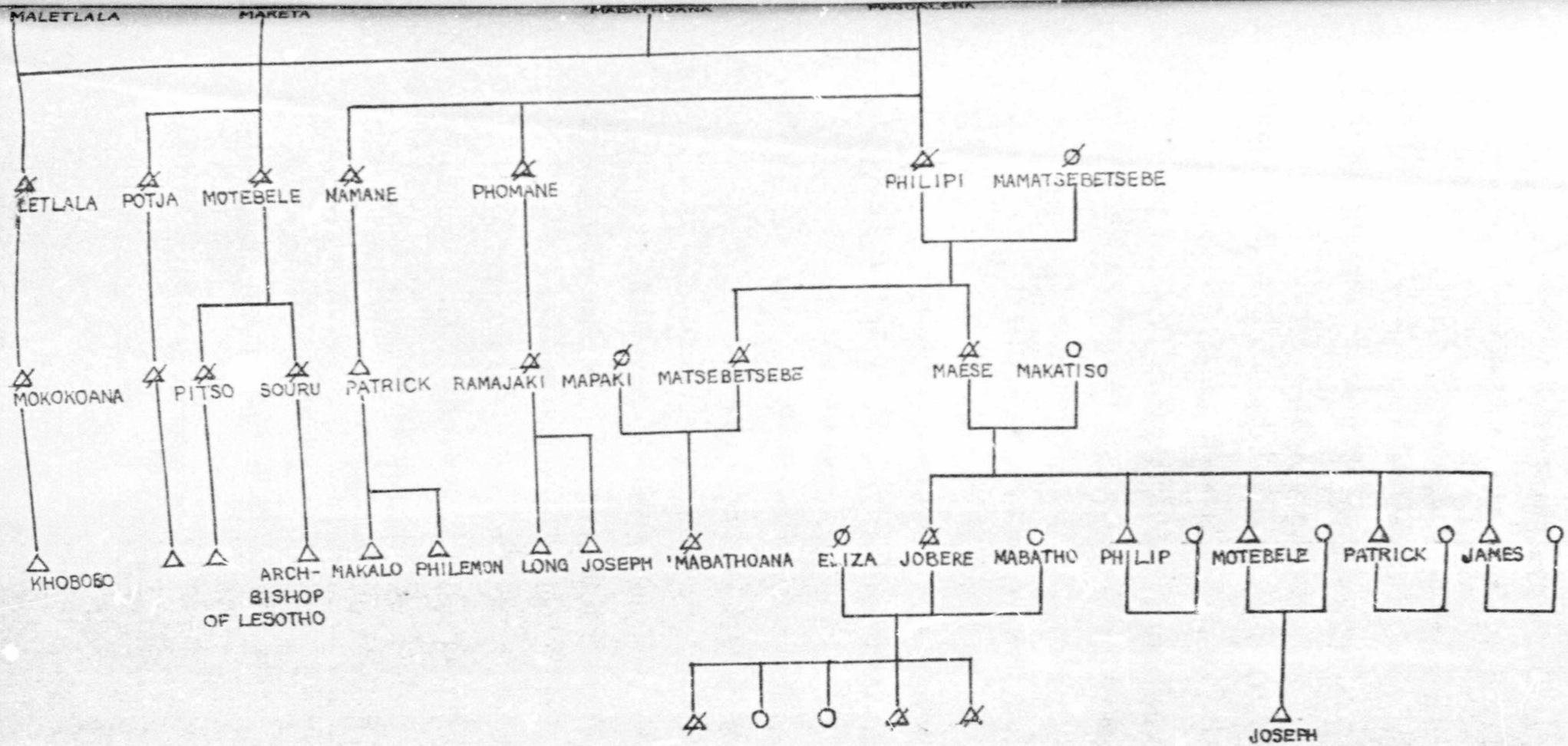
PHOMANE left Mokhokhong and went to live in the mountains.

PHILIPI was the first headman of the area subsequently named after him.

MATSEBETSEBE, being Philipi's senior son, would have succeeded his father, but predeceased him.

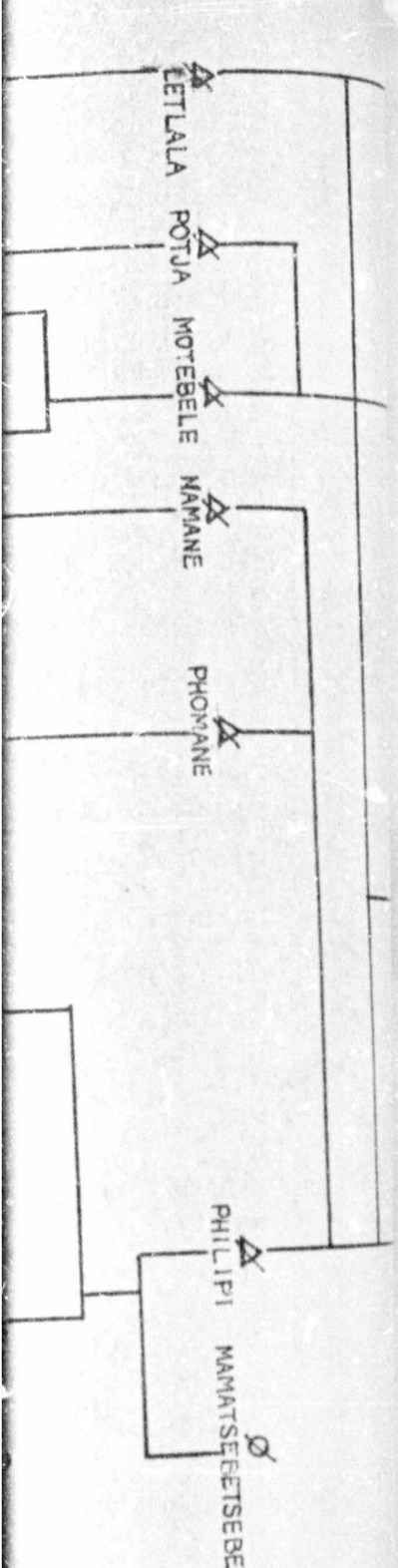
'MABATHOANA, son of Matsebetsebe, was two years old when Philipi died, and he was the rightful heir. He died at the age of sixteen, however, and did not succeed to the headmanship.

MAESE, second son of Philipi, also predeceased his father.



GENEALOGY NO. I

'MABATHOANA



JOHERE, eldest son of Maene, and next in line after 'Mabathoana, became headman at the age of eighteen. Johere died in 1968 and was succeeded by his wife.

PHILIP, next in line after Johere, lives in Johannesburg with his son, so that neither are considered realistic choices for the headmanship.

MOTEBELE, the brother after Philip is a village head on the plateau to the south of Mokholchong. Since he has established himself securely in that area and is the right hand man of the acting chief, it was thought unwise to bring him down to the valley.

JOSEPH, son of Motebele, was regarded by Johere as a suitable and adequate successor. After Johere's death, however, the 'Mabathoana kinsmen decided against Joseph, much to the chagrin of his father Motebele.

PATRICK, and his sons come next in the line of succession. He is not well liked in Mokholchong, however, and his sons are still too young.

JAMES, who comes last in line, is established in Johannesburg, and is therefore ineligible.

MABATHO was chosen as 'acting headman', since it was felt that she knew the people and the area and had the necessary ability. After her death the headmanship will revert to Maene's line. Here is thus a caretaking position which carries full headmanship status.

The Headman.

The purpose of this section is biographical. In a community of the size of Mokholhong the political process is strongly influenced by the dominant personalities of the time. The headman, although his office no longer carries the political power of former times, occupies the most highly politicised status in the community. Virtually all political activities converge, sooner or later, on him, for it is his job to retain the peace and mend the feuds and while this capacity he enters, or is drawn into, virtually every conflict larger than family disagreements.

A more formal discussion of the headmanship is reserved for a later chapter.

Jobere 'Mabathoana was headman in Mokholhong for fifty years, of which Mabatho shared the last twenty as his wife. She had now been acting headman for one year. Their commitment to, or at least involvement in, this rôle was therefore considerable by virtue of long association, and was reinforced by the absence of additional rôles such as are normally available to Basotho of their age. All Jobere's sons by his previous wife had died, his daughters had married and left home, and Mabatho bore no children. Hence the rôle that most people look forward to in their old age, that of heads of large families, was closed to the 'Mabathoanas. In fact, gratifying rôles of any kind within the kinship system were unavailable to the 'Mabathoanas because although Jobere was related by blood and marriage to almost all of the three hundred members of his community, most of these

tion were quite distant and did not afford him a close association with others as a kinsman. I mention these points because it is quite reasonable to ask in the context of Mokhokhong today why anyone should want to occupy a rôle as unrewarding as the headmanship. Jobere and Mabatho have both explicitly wondered whether their incumbency is worth all the trouble it brings.

Jobere was born in 1901 and was the first of five brothers. His grandfather was Philipi, the first headman of Mokhokhong. I have described certain of the political events that took place during Philipi's regime, the results of which were a part of Jobere's heritage, but there was another part which I have not yet mentioned, which, according to current opinion in Mokhokhong, was of great importance in Jobere's life. This was the definition of the headmanship as given by Philipi. Concrete information on Philipi is scarce. He died in 1918 so that only a few aged and often not very lucid informants remember him at all. Some of my information comes from a written text which I commissioned from an old man, a son of the late ward chief, who claims to have known Philipi intimately.

Philipi is said to have had an outstanding reputation for his knowledge of the law and for his skill in settling disputes.

He was often asked to assist neighbouring chiefs in their deliberations on difficult cases. He was appointed tax collector for the whole of his superior chief's ward - a highly responsible job at a time before censuses and general awareness of the necessity for receipts. In 1910 he

was appointed to the Basuto National Council. He also achieved some renown for his herd of pure-bred milk cows, for these were virtually unknown in Lesotho at the time.

Many headmanships today have an entirely undistinguished history, but Philipi established the headmanship of Mokhotlong as a prestigious and powerful office with a national reputation. It was into this mantle that Jobere stepped when he succeeded his grandfather in 1918.

Because of Jobere's youth his grandmother, the widow of Philipi, Mamatsehaebe, was appointed 'acting headman', until such time as Jobere should be mature enough to undertake the duties of the headmanship himself. So Jobere departed for the mines, leaving his grandmother to continue in the tradition of her husband, which, according to my admittedly scanty information, she did with reasonable effectiveness.

The delegation of authority by a headman to a kinsman or to his _letona_* is well established in tradition, for headmen feel the economic compulsion to go out to seek work in the same way that everyone else does. The deputy carries on all the routine functions of the headmanship, such as conducting court hearings, _pitsos_, allocating land, etc., but normally the major decisions concerning such

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* The traditional official whose duty is to assist the headman and to represent him in his absence.

matters as boundary disputes with neighbouring headmen, whether and where to install a new road, and so on, will be held over until the return of the headman himself. In cases of emergency he may be asked to come home to solve the problem, or his deputy, if sufficiently literate, may write to him to ask for instructions.

Jobere had a Std. 6 education, and was thus able to command a 'white collar job' as clerk on the mines, while others from Nokhokhong laboured at menial tasks on the mines, on farms, in municipalities or in industry. He was better paid, more respected and freer to look out on the modern world and enjoy some of its benefits than his compatriots, who were scarcely literate, could not understand English, and therefore remained cut off from the cosmopolitan life around them.

Jobere worked at various clerical and small administrative jobs in South Africa until 1940 when he joined the British army, as did many Basotho, and 'went up North'. He spent time in North Africa, the Middle East and Italy, some of it as a prisoner of war.

In 1946 he was repatriated, and returned home to find his grandmother sick and feeble. Her duties were being executed by his '<u>letona</u>'; Jobere therefore decided to remain at home, or at least near home. He was now forty six years of age. His wife had born him five children, and eight years previously he had been 'gazetted'* as a headman.

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* In 1938 the colonial government called for a registration of all chiefs and headmen, whose numbers had grown extremely large due to the custom of 'placing'. Jones (1951) maintains that about ½ of these traditional authorities were not gazetted, while the position of those who were was made secure by official recognition. (see also Appendix I)

These factors were positive inducements for him to remain in Lesotho. In 1948 Mamatsebetsebe died and simultaneously Jobere's wife became seriously ill. A diviner said that an affine of Jobere's, whose husband had died in the war, wanted Jobere for herself, and therefore had given beer with evil medicine in it to Jobere's wife. This was demonstrated to the satisfaction of all present when the sick vomitted and produced a bundle of sinews known as 'lesika' which had caused the damage. But it was too late. Just before her death Jobere's wife told him that on no account must he marry the woman who had treated her beer, but that instead he should marry Agnes Mabatho Pobo, a single woman of equal education to himself, and belonging to a respected family in a nearby village. They were married later that year.

After a brief period with a land surveying team in Lesotho, Jobere became a court clerk, a post which set him on a career which led to his appointment as a president of local courts in various parts of Lesotho, and ultimately as president of the appeal court at Mafeteng, which dealt with appeals from three local courts. He retired from this position in 1967, and established himself permanently in Mokhotlong.

By the time of his retirement Jobere's sons had all died, the last in a mine accident. Mabatho had borne no children. This was one of the major disappointments in his life. He once said to a group of villagers gathered at his house: "I have no children. I do not work for myself, for I am old, nor do I work for an heir. It is for you that I



NABARRO AND JOSEPH 'MABATHOANA AND THEIR GENERAL FACTOTUM

am spending my life and my money". In spite of this element of despair Jobere carried out his duties with great energy and determination.

I have mentioned the 'mantle' which Jobere inherited from his grandfather. The set of expectations which Philipi had built up in his incumbency of the headmanship were on the whole remarkably well fulfilled by Jobere. Philipi's dairy herd was an indication of his understanding and mastery of modern economic practice, and a symbol of his membership of a much larger community that that of Mokhokhong. Jobere too, through his achievement of responsible and prestigious positions in South Africa and in Lesotho had proved himself an adept in the white man's culture and a man of wide experience. Jobere was certainly the wealthiest man in Mokhokhong and used modern agricultural methods. But perhaps Philipi's most outstanding and well-remembered characteristic, and one on which all my informants are agreed, was his knowledge of and skill in the law. Many hours of observation at Jobere's court and detailed examination of cases in which he was involved, showed that he had apparently inherited his grandfather's adeptness, and that much of his political strength lay in his formidable reputation as a legal adversary. Many of my informants told me that they were definitely deterred from committing actions which they knew would provoke him because they knew that if the matter came to court, Jobere's own or a higher, they would stand very little chance of success against him. Records of the series of cases in which Jobere and Matete confronted one another show how carefully Jobere would prepare his



JOBERE CONDUCTING A VOLUNTARY ROAD IMPROVEMENT GANG ON THE APPROACH TO THE VALLEY.

arguments and assemble his witnesses, and with what ruthless accuracy he would pick holes and find contradictions in his opponent's case. Jobere was clearly at home in the court situation and appeared, both in the records and in person, to enjoy legal confrontation. His adversaries were normally awkward and inarticulate by comparison, failings which Jobere utilised to the full in destroying their case and substantiating his own.



[illegible] ON THE APPROACH [illegible]

Although Jobere's legal expertise gave him a considerable measure of coercive power over his subjects, it also generated a certain resentment among those who thought they had valid cases but who could not uphold them against his. There is a real distinction to be drawn between this type of situation and one in which political strength is based on consensus, for dependable support is difficult to guarantee where the basis for compliance is coercion. On the other hand Jobere's authoritarian behaviour was often appreciated by those who had no special axe to grind at the time, since it conformed with the traditional expectations and maintained a degree of peace and predictability in community relations.

The final parallel I wish to draw between Philipi and Jobere concerns their involvement in national politics. I have mentioned that Philipi was appointed to the National Council which was set up to deal with national affairs in consultation with the colonial government. Jobere assisted the present Prime Minister, Chief Jonathan, to set up the Basutoland National Party in 1958, which was mentioned at Jobere's funeral by the Prime Minister's representative and recognised by a cash contribution towards the cost of saying

masses for the deceased.

Mabatho was born in 1920 in a village about two miles to the east of Mokhokhong. Her father was a relatively wealthy and educated man who sent her to school at first in Lesotho and later in Natal at Marianhill, where she went as far as Std. 8. Until her marriage she worked in Maseru with a women's group making handicrafts, as a primary school teacher, and also spent some time at home helping her mother. She was twenty eight when she married. She went to Johannesburg to buy certain parts of her trousseau and there was a white wedding.

Mabatho came to her husband's household as a mature, and relatively well-educated and travelled woman with a number of ideas of her own about how things ought to be managed. On one level therefore she was her husband's peer and he often sought her advice on practical matters such as how to phrase a letter, the precise meaning of a written message, calculations of quantities and costs of seed and fertilizer, how to read a map made by Mr. Stevens, and so on. In this way she was brought into the realm of headmanship affairs, but in a peripheral rôle. Johannes would never consult her on the broader issues of the headmanship such as the settlement of disputes and the allocation of lands. To the time of his death she was in complete ignorance of his financial situation.

In the majority of households in Mokhokhong the rôle of mother takes precedence, in a certain sense, over the rôle of wife. It is as a mother that a woman achieves full

acceptance as a wife. Ashton (1967:66) quotes with approval Dieterlen who wrote in 1912 (p.49): "One marries her in order that she may abundantly accomplish the functions of maternity rather than to find happiness with her or to give her any.". Before she has children, unless her husband is absent at work, her sphere of authority is very small. He makes all the major decisions concerning the domestic economy and other internal arrangements, as well as regulating extra-domestic relationships. He will not normally consult with his wife on matters of any importance whatever. With the birth of her first child, however, a woman establishes a domain of her own in which the husband has very limited influence, but at the same time he has a great interest in the welfare of his children. Accordingly the status of a wife is immensely increased when she has children, for she has then established a 'house' within which she is the main holder of authority. She then has a right to be consulted by her husband on all matters relating to the affairs of her house.

I have made this digression in order to show that Mabatho's relationship with her husband was unusual. She had no children and therefore did not qualify for the respect and autonomy granted to mothers. In addition, her failure to produce an heir for her husband was made more serious because the succession to the headmanship was involved. On the other hand Mabatho's ability to comprehend her husband's problems and to give practical advice on them was a valuable asset which gave her an influence not normally enjoyed by women.

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I shall describe in some detail in later chapters how Mabatho established new organisations in the community and used these as forums within which to exercise her influence. The year before I began research in the community she had established a butchery and beer selling enterprise in one of the villages. She had constructed a well-terraced vegetable garden, over two acres in extent, in which she grew a large variety of vegetables and fruit trees. She sold the surplus to her neighbours and to people from the neighbouring communities.

At nearly all times Mabatho has had young men and girls* working in her house and assisting her with her garden, and this has further reduced the domestic demands on her time. Of all the women in Mokholhong she is probably the least bound by the normal arduous daily routine, which occupies most other women with tasks such as fetching water, firewood, and wild vegetables, and with sweeping, cooking and looking after children.

To sum up, then, Mabatho's position differed from that of other women in Mokholhong in three major respects: she had more education and wider experience; she lacked children; and she had relatively more time to herself. The importance of these factors will emerge as the discussion of Mabatho as headman proceeds.

After Jobere's funeral Mabatho confined herself to her house and did no work for a month. This was required of her by custom. Various female affines came to assist her

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* Some are hired by her while others are the children of poor relatives.

during this period. Life in the community was also muted during this time. There were no court hearings or public meetings of any kind. Even beer drinks were few and poorly attended. People tended to remain quietly at home rather than to visit one another as is common at this time of year when there is little agricultural work. It is almost impossible to describe in concrete terms the atmosphere which prevailed in Makhokhong at this time. It was not a time for interviewing and few people felt like informal conversation.

Although Jobere was not universally liked he was generally respected and even feared. Without question he was the 'big man' in the community and his death was a major event. Everybody knew that none of the possible successors to his position could play the rôle as he had. Jobere knew it too, and just before he died he predicted that the headmanship would die soon after him.

About a month after the funeral the senior men of the 'Mabathoana descent group, the 'owners' of the headmanship, assembled in Makhokhong to appoint a new headman. In the absence of a son of the headman it is customary to appoint the widow as 'acting headman' if it is felt that she can adequately discharge the duties of the position. The 'Mabathoanas decided that Mabathe's qualifications were sufficient and they announced their decision at the large pitso which had assembled to hear who was to be appointed and to accept or oppose the nominee. Only one dissenting voice was heard - that of the village madman, who said that Mabathe

was an outsider, a 'Zulu' and should therefore be rejected. His objection was ignored but as I shall make clear in the final chapter, it was prophetic.

The final act in the installation of Mabatho was for the 'Mabathoanae to take her to the ward chief at St. Michael's, to present him with an ox and to request him to gazette her name as the rightful successor to her husband. This duty was entrusted to Motebele 'Mabathoana (see Genealogy I), but to this day, fifteen months later, it has not been carried out. The main reason is that Motebele had been expecting his son, Joseph, to be appointed as Jobere's successor. Jobere had in fact told me some months before his death that he wanted to prepare Joseph as his successor. Since this is a factor which contributes significantly to Mabatho's present insecurity it is worth exploring a little further.

Jobere had appointed Motebele as a sub-headman over an area on the plateau to the south of the valley during the 1930's. After the death of Chief Lebaneng in 1966 Motebele was appointed as _lekona_ to the chief's widow, who succeeded her husband as acting chief. Since the old lady was blind Motebele became _de facto_ chief, conducting the affairs of the chieftainship in her name. (He could never, of course, become the legal chief because he was not genealogically eligible.) When Jobere informed him that he would like Joseph to come and stay in Mokhotlhong to learn the ways of the headmanship Motebele replied that he had no intention of sending his son, who is a policeman, to become a 'servant'

LIST OF FAMILY NAMES BY VILLAGE.

Ha Jonkaneng	Ha Mapetja	Matumaneng	Thotaneng
Kelepa	Mapetja	Majaro	Mahase
Letseng	Kelepa	Mankoe	Mankoe
'Mabathoana		Matekane	Metaing
Mabote		Ramashamole	Pali
Moerane		Tsoanamntsie	Ramono
Ramaliehe		Ramolchuneng	Lilane
Thaki			Moraua
Ramano			Monyane
Teisi			Ralehakoe
			Ramakhoteng
102	34	114	

LAGE.

Matumaneng	Thotaneng
Majoro	Mahase
Mankoe	Mankoe
Matekane	Metsing
Ramashaole	Pali
Tsoanamatsie	Ramono
Ramaldyaneng	Vilane
	Morena
	Mosuane
	Ralehaha
	Ramolleta
114	41 Peop
	Tota

in the household of his uncle.

While Matebele's decision was understandable on economic grounds, since jobs as policemen are not easily acquired, it was tactically unwise for one who wanted his son to succeed to the headmanship in Mokhokhong. The senior 'Mabathoanas therefore decided not to appoint him on the grounds of his lack of experience and his ignorance of local problems. It is at least possible that had he undergone the preliminary apprenticeship suggested by Jobaro, he would have been appointed headman, with Mabatho acting for him while he continued with his police work.

The Growth of the Community[x]

The villages of ha Mapetja and Matumaneng were already established when Philipi 'Mabathoana was placed in Mokhokhong in 1868. He displaced a poverty-stricken individual who was living in Maqakalaneng and occupied his two huts; but the village that sprang up around him was named after the original inhabitant - for the word 'Maqakalaneng' means 'the place of poor people' - in spite of the fact that the relatively wealthy Philipi flourished in this place.

Three of the four villages of Mokhokhong are therefore of ancient standing. The fourth, Thotaneng, was established only in 1957 to cater for new-comers and for the overflow of married sons who could not, or did not wish to, find suitable building sites near the homesteads of their fathers. In the last year a few people have requested and been allocated sites in the previously uninhabited area to

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x The reader should refer to Map I, at end.



HA MAPHEJA

the south-east of Maqakalaneng, but this seems to be mainly for social reasons, the applicants valuing privacy above contiguity, and finding even the relatively spacious layout of Thotaneng too restrictive.

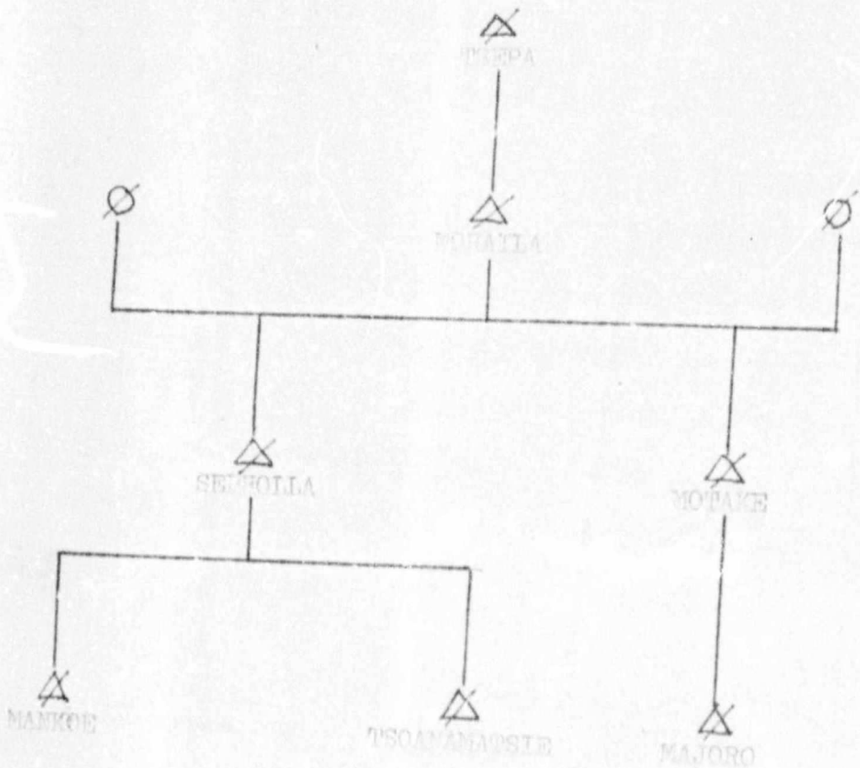
Ha Mapetja.

The original Mapetja is said to have belonged to one of those Nguni groups which fled before the advance of Chaka. One informant says Mapetja brought with him the skill of iron working and used to produce hoes and spears from the smelting of a local stone, although I know of no such stone in the area.



Mapetja married locally, established two houses, and fathered five sons and several daughters. The husband of one of the daughters married uxorilocally and founded a line which is still well represented in Mokhelehong. This was a promising start for a new lineage, but its potential has not been realised. Some Mapetjas moved away from their natal village and established themselves on the plateau to the south of the valley. Today ha Mapetja appears to be in an advanced state of decomposition. In the last generation, at least, the males of this line have met with diverse and often tragic fates. Of nine households in the village only two have male heads, and one of these is not a Mapetja, but a descendant of the man who married uxorilocally. The same fate is said to afflict the Mapetjas on the plateau; their men and male children die in mine accidents, of slow and wasting diseases, or, as recently, suddenly and inexplicably in the night. This phenomenon is explained locally

GENEALOGY II MATUMANENG DESCENT GROUP.



as 'bad luck', or witchcraft, or more usually both.

No new buildings have been erected in ha Mapetja for many years. It is a place of widows and small children. Of all the villages it is the most compact and the most homogeneous kinshipwise. Some people say they do not like Mapetjas to enter their houses lest they bring the spirit of their misfortune with them. Likewise, ha Mapetja attracts relatively few visitors. I once asked, if Mapetjas have this kind of reputation, do not young men avoid the daughters of the place? I was told that the old people make special medicine to divert the young men's attention from this feature. In fact, no cases of spinsters being left on the shelf are recalled.

In spite of its antiquity, therefore, ha Mapetja is not prominent in community affairs. Partly this may be ascribed to its reputation, which is connected, probably as both cause and result, with its isolation and encapsulation, and partly it is due to the lack of mature men.

Matumaneng

The position of Matumaneng was, until 1958, ambiguous. The people gave their allegiance to Matete, and yet were physically established in the area of Philipi (and subsequently Jobore) 'Mahathoana. Before Philipi was placed in Mokhokhong, however, the descendants of Mohaila (see Genealogy II) were living in Matumaneng. Today the descendants of these ancestors comprise 18 out of 23 families living in Matumaneng, and regard themselves as members of a single

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