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A Peasantry Under Siege: A Case  
Study of the farms Bloedfontein  
and Geweerfontein.

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A PEASANTRY UNDER SIEGE: A CASE STUDY OF THE FARMS BLOEDFONTEIN AND GEWEERFONTEIN

The Transvaal Rural Action Committee (TRAC) has been working closely with the 2 adjoining farms, Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein, situated a one and a half hours drive north of Johannesburg in the Mdotjana district in the central Transvaal. The farms face incorporation into Bophuthatswana and the residents, 95% of whom are North Sotho or Ndebele, possible removal to Rust de Winter approximately 30 kilometres west. (1) This paper is based mainly on interviews with the residents and correspondence between the community, TRAC and the state and, as such, it must be viewed as a preliminary study.

Bloedfontein covering 6 113 morgen was finally paid for in 1929 and Geweerfontein covering 832 morgen in 1948. (2) The farms are viewed as a single entity by the residents and have the same headman. They have a population of approximately 15 000. It is one of the few areas in South Africa where a black peasantry has been able to survive, to an extent, the onslaught of the Apartheid system and capitalist agriculture.

Presently the area is administered by Kwandebele. Most of the present residents were born on the farms concerned. Through the years the community has built up a substantial infrastructure. There are roads, dams, boreholes, 3 primary schools, a high school, a clinic, a post office and various other substantial buildings. The clinic and 2 of the schools were built entirely from funds donated by the community. (3)

Although many of the residents work in the PWV area, many of the workers do have land. A large proportion produce enough food to subsist adequately. When there are good rains some are able to produce a surplus. Little is sold on the market, however. This is partially due to the cohesiveness of the population. A local resident expressed this in the following way:

What we grow goes into our stomachs. We don't sell food. If we have grain, we give some to our neighbours. Then the next time, they will give us what they have. Some of the people have got tractors. We give some of what we reap to them to us their tractor, or we pay money. (4)

The nursing sister in charge of the local clinic is adamant that she has never seen a case of malnutrition. And we don't have many bad sicknesses here, not even whooping cough and measles. The children are immunised. (5)

At present, according to local sources, there are up to 2 000 peasants on the 2 farms, the average farm size is 4 morgen. The

main crops are maize and sorghum. All the fields are ploughed by tractors. Cattle, goats and pigs are reared.

However, behind this picture of apparent security is intense insecurity and simmering ethnic hostility between the North Sotho/ Ndebele and the Bagatla ba Mocha, a Tswana grouping. This ethnic hostility has existed from the 1920's. It has always remained a war of words, however the potential for this hostility to lead to violent conflict is presently very high.

What this paper sets out to do is to illustrate that the ethnic hostility in the area is not irrational but has a strong material base in that it has been fuelled significantly by racist state policies and corrupt chiefs both past and present.

Further, this paper sets out to sketch how ethnicity and the distorting of history are at present being used by the state to legitimate possible removal and the incorporation of the 2 farms concerned into Bophuthatswana.

On the 16 September 1986, on the very last day of that Parliamentary session, the Borders of Particular States Extension Amendment Bill was passed by the tri-cameral parliament. The Bill makes provision for the incorporation by State President's promulgation of various specified areas into the "independent homelands" - Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei. Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein have been earmarked to be incorporated into Bophuthatswana.

#### The purchase of Bloedfontein

The way in which Bloedfontein was purchased has laid the basis for the ethnic hostility which has constantly characterised the area. The story of the purchase of the farm Bloedfontein has been told by many of the old residents. The facts are always the same. Perhaps the most reliable and poignant account is the one told by Mr Sam Kekana, the son of the main purchaser. Mr Kekana was about 19 when the purchase was first initiated in 1922 or 1923. He left the area with his father in 1927. He tells the following story:

I, Sam Madimetja Kekana, was born at Tweefontein in 1903. I was, however, brought up at Bloedfontein (Senotlelo). The owner of Bloedfontein then was a Mister Jan Schuurman....

My late father, Mr Martin Kekana was a foreman at Bloedfontein.

During 1922 or 1923, Mr Schuurman decided to sell this farm, Bloedfontein, to my father and his group of men. At that time there were approximately 40 families on the farm. They were all North Sotho or Kwandebele.

My father called a meeting in 1922 or 1923 in December. At

that meeting it was agreed that we would purchase Bloedfontein.

We sold a large number of cattle to make the payments.

Mr Schuurman emphatically told my father that he must never ever leave Bloedfontein for another area....

He asked my father whether he had any chief or not. The authority of a chief was sought when one had to buy a farm or a plot. My father said his chief was out at Zebediela in the Northern Transvaal to which Mr Schuurman answered that Zebediela was out of reach and he would prefer a chief that was nearby. A neighbouring Tswana chief, Chief Robert Moepe, of the Bakgatla ba Mocha tribe was chosen by both my father and Mr Schuurman to be the chief to sign.

It must be pointed out that Chief Moepe and his people never paid a penny towards the purchase of Bloedfontein. Chief Moepe wanted to crook my father and take his land simply because he had signed when my father bought Bloedfontein.

In 1925 Chief Moepe was sentenced to 3 months in gaol after it was found that he taken money that the community had given him for the purchase of Bloedfontein and spent it on a car...

Eventually in 1927 my father got fed-up with Moepe's dealings and decided to leave the area.

Most of the original purchasers decided to stay on and contend with the treachery of Chief Moepe. In 1929 the R 169 and 5 shillings owed for the 6 113 morgen farm was eventually paid off.(6) The title deed stated that the land was held in trust for the Bakgatla ba Mocha people under the leadership of Chief Robert Moepe. This was to have dire implications for the community.

#### The purchase of Geweerfontein

In 1947 the residents of Bloedfontein purchased the farm Geweerfontein, measuring 832 morgen for £ 1 872 and 18 shilling.(7)

One of the original purchasers tells how Geweerfontein was bought.

The farm was bought from a copper mining company, the Bourke Trust and Estate Company. Chief Patrick Moepe, the son of Robert, first approached the Bakgatla ba Mocha and asked them if they wanted to buy the farm. They were not interested as they felt the farm was not fertile.

Moepe then approached the headman of the Bloedfontein people, Amos Moelets. Moelets called a meeting of the community to

discuss the possible purchase. The Bloedfontein people agreed that it would be worthwhile. A bag of kaffircorn,

which is £3 8 shillings was collected from each family to pay for the farm.

Unfortunately the residents allowed Moepi's son, Robert to sign the title deed.

The ramifications of the Moepis signing the title deeds

The Moepis signing of the respective title deeds have had significant ramifications for the Bloedfontein/ Geweerfontein community and has led to the residents despising the Bakgatla Ba Mocha.

Through the years the main complaint was that the Bagatla Ba Mocha refused to acknowledge that they did not own the land and used their claim to the land to their own advantage. The residents feel intensely insulted by the Bakgatla ba Mocha's claim to the land.

A memorandum to the Bakgatla Ba Mocha expresses this:

The Bakgatla Ba Mocha chief Moepi signed as nominee on behalf of our fathers when the farm Bloedfontein 515 was purchased and he (sic) is not and will never be the owner of the said farm nor can the Bakgatla Ba Mocha tribal Authority become owners of the said land, the lawful owners are, the heirs to the estates of our fathers. (8)

The memorandum goes on to say

The said Bakgatla Ba Mocha have appointed headman who have wrongfully, unlawfully and fraudulently put people on the farm Bloedfontein and the said Headman have collected money from the new arrivals and placed them on our property.

The money so collected from these people for a lengthy period is enough to buy five farms the size of Bloedfontein but the said Headman and the Bakgatla Ba Mocha have not accounted to the Bloedfontein Community as owners of the land nor has it accounted to the authorities. (9)

The failure of the Bakgatla Ba Mocha to provide schools and their expropriation of school subsidies sent by the state is also a major factor contributing towards the hostility most Bloedfontein /Geweerfontein residents have for the Bakgatla Ba Mocha. The same memorandum states that

The Bloedfontein (Senotlelo) Community builds schools without the assistance of the Bakgatla Ba Mocha Tribal Authority and/or Tribes assistance but once the said schools have been built and a subsidy is paid towards those schools the said Bakgatla Ba Mocha take the subsidy and use it for their own

purposes, and they state money must be kept by the Chieftainess.

Whether (sic) there are debts arising from building schools we are not given the money required but we are told there is no money.

When we the community of Bloedfontein contributed towards the debts of buildings of schools we have built and we pay in at the tribal offices then such money is allocated towards other matters or other schools and not for the projects earmarked for such contributions when in fact the money is expressly contributed by us for our schools.(10)

The residents demanded

that all the money contributed towards our school building fund to be returned to pay for outstanding debts on our schools.

We want to be restored our former position where we had our own trust account and allocations which was taken by the Bakgatla Ba Mocha Tribal Authority.(11)

Residents also did relish being classified Tswana and in the memorandum demanded that

the Bakgatla Ba Mocha desist in forcing our children and wives to take up Bophuthatswana citizenship against our will.... (12)

Another major issue was that the Bakgatla Ba Mocha collected rents from the various shops in the area. In a letter to the Bantu Affairs Commissioner the community complained

That the said Bakgatla Ba Mocha Tribal Authority has taken certain funds which legally belong to our community and are still collecting rentals for shops. We would like to know who collects the rentals of the following shops:

- a. Evergreen Shop
- b. F.J. Thanda Bantu Store
- c. P. Shima Cafe.

All the rentals for these shops are to accrue to the credit of our community and kindly inform us who is collecting them presently and under what authority and also what is being done therewith.(13)

The above issues have contributed to the Bloedfontein/Geweerfontein community having an intense antipathy for the Bakgatla Ba Mocha. This antipathy was probably heightened by them not having the strength to actually confront the Bakgatla Ba Mocha in any other way then through memoranda to the local magistrate and Bantu Affairs Commissioner. This form of protest appeared to have being mainly due to the presence of very weak headmen. In the late 1970's things started to change and

slowly the local residents started to assert themselves. It is appears that this shift was partially related to the change in headmen. Mr Ben Tema became a headman in 1971. He appears to have been more determined to confront the Bakgatla Ba Mocha. In the 1980's the community became even more determined to stand up to the Bakgatla Ba Mocha. At present the latter are not allowed to come onto Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein and no monies are given over to them. This increasing confidence appeared to also coincide with the increasing politicisation and role of the youth in the running of community affairs.

From 1972 the state used the Moepi's signing of the title deeds to legitimate Bophuthatswana administering the area. In 1979 the administration of the area was taken over by Kwandebele. This handover was greeted with a great deal of jubilation by the Bloedfontein/Geweerfontein residents who felt their oppression at the hands of the Bakgatla ba Mocha was at last to end.

However, they had not realised that apartheid functionaries are reasonably uniform. A letter to the TRAC expresses this naivety and intense disappointment.

On the 8 August 1979 we were told that we are under the Kwandebele government. This made us very happy and we thought we will be relieved from slavery.

What surprises us is that they do not allow us to do anything in (sic) our farms, such as the building of schools, shops, churches etc. They always tell us to wait without the reason (sic).(14)

The present endeavours by the state to incorporate the area into Bophuthatswana and remove the residents

The present endeavours to incorporate Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein into Bophuthatswana and possibly remove the residents have once more brought the ethnic issue to the fore.

It appears that Mr Lucas Mangope was temporarily prepared to relinquish the area as he was not keen to have non-Tswanas in his domain. However, Mangope and chieftainess Moepi, the wife of the late Patrick Moepi, a Mangope loyalist and presently a member of the Bophuthatswana legislative assembly, were seemingly intent on one day regaining the land with one important proviso - that the troublesome Bloedfontein/Geweerfontein residents be removed.

This was conveyed to government and in the consolidation plans released in September 1985 it was revealed that Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein were once again to become part of Bophuthatswana but the residents were to be moved approximately 30 kilometres west to the Rust de Winter area. Kwandebele was to receive Rust de Winter as "compensation" for the loss of Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein.

An article in the Star on the 25 September 1985 was the first indication the community received that the state intended to remove the residents and incorporate the area into Bophuthatswana. The state had conducted all its negotiations with the Bophuthatswana and Kwandebele administrations and totally ignored the Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein residents. Subsequent correspondence illustrated that the state used the signing of the title deeds by the Moepi's to legitimate it totally bypassing the Bloedfontein/Geweerfontein representatives. (15)

Distortion did not stop at the unquestioned acceptance of Moepi's claim to the land. The Star article indicated very directly the extent to which the state was prepared to misinform the public so as to pursue its own plans with as little opposition as possible. In the article referred to, Mr Chris Heunis, referring to the residents of Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein, said that "these people had already agreed to co-operate and voluntarily collaborate with this resettlement." (16) This excessive misrepresentation by the government was rapidly followed by another. In an article in the Business Day (26 September, 1985) Mr Ben Wilkens, the Deputy Minister of Land Affairs and Development, was quoted as saying that the removal would involve moving only "a few dozen families". (17)

Almost immediately the community wrote to Mr Wilkens. Their letter dated 1 October 1985 told him that they were not prepared to move and asked him "with whom did you negotiate and when?".

The community accused the government of trying to rewrite their history:

... you say that these 2 farms belong to the Bakgatla ba Mocha. This proves beyond doubt that you know nothing concerning these farms. (18)

The letter then proceeds to explain to Mr Wilkens how the farms were bought.

Wilkens responded in a letter dated 18 December 1985 by repeating that the area was to be incorporated into Bophuthatswana and the residents moved:

...I have to advise that the fate of the farms Geweerfontein and Bloedfontein has been determined by an agreement between the South African and KwaNdebele Governments.

The decision that the farms Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein be included in Bophuthatswana can unfortunately not be reconsidered. It is however trusted that you will find it ultimately possible to accept the decision as well as the compensatory land to be made available in the Rust der Winter area. (19)



This curt response was totally rejected by the Bloedfontein community. They wrote back to the Minister on the 21 January 1986 and reiterated that they were totally opposed to the move and to incorporation into Bophuthatswana. They again asked to be consulted.

The tribe is not prepared to move to Rust der Winter area because they love their farms and they are happy. It is painful to be told about the removal in (sic) the farm you bought without been consulted. This means forced removal and we are not prepared to accept this to happen. (20)

The Minister did not have the courtesy to respond to this letter. After numerous telexes sent by the community's lawyer the Minister finally sent a reply dated the 25 June 1986 reaffirming the government's decision to incorporate Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein into Bophuthatswana and remove the residents to Rust de Winter.

The decision to transfer the farms Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein was taken after the Governments of KwaNdebele and Bophuthatswana have (sic) been consulted and after their consent had been obtained. The RSA Government is therefore not prepared to reconsider the decision and discussions with the people concerned regarding alternative land in KwaNdebele would be arranged once the land has been identified. (21)

A letter repeating the community's objection to the move and the incorporation and requesting a meeting with the Minister concerned has been sent. In early December 1986 the community received a letter from Wilkens reiterating the government's refusal to rescind the incorporation of the area concerned into Bophuthatswana. There was no mention of the proposed removal to Rust de Winter. (22)

The announcement by the state that they are to remove the Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein people provoked a storm of publicity. The state then retracted the removal threat. In a telex (18 September 1986) to the Star and Business Day Mr Ben Wilkens stated that reports that people are to be moved "are devoid of all truth". (23)

He confirmed that the incorporation was to go ahead, using Moepli's claim to the land to legitimate it.

The two farms belong to the Bagatla tribe of Chieftainess Regina Moepli who made strong representations for the incorporation of Geweerfontein and Bloedfontein into Bophuthatswana. After consultations between the South African government and the governments of Bophuthatswana and KwaNdebele it was decided to accede to the request of the chieftainess. (24)

The state now appears to be undecided about removing the

community. For the moment it appears to have taken heed of the community's statement that they would rather die than move.

However, the state is determined to press ahead with incorporating the area into Bophuthatswana. Bloedfontein and Geweerfontein residents are very anxious about the future. They do not want to have anything to do with the Bakgatla Ba Mocha or the Tswana authorities. Although the Kwandebele administration has not done much for them, they have left them alone. The community fears that after the incorporation chieftainness Moepe might try and make life impossible and pressurize them to move. A big fear is that with the help of Mangope's repressive apparatus she might try to settle her own subjects on the land and endeavour to strip the headman, Mr Ben Tema of his power.

These anxieties and the potential for conflict are illustrated in the following letter from the Bloedfontein Community Authority to the TRAC.

We would also request your attorneys, our representatives to take care of the Central Government who wants to make a confusion of two tribes thus Tswanas and Ndebeles to rule together at one place because we the Bloedfonteins do not want to be under the Tswanas.(sic) We entirely do not favour the Tswana Government this will cause bloodshed. (25)

It is apparent that the experience of the Bloedfontein/Geweerfontein residents has contributed towards the having a strong sense of ethnicity. However, as this letter and the letters to Wilkens indicate, as the struggle unfolds they are beginning to see the major role the state is playing. They are becoming aware that the state is using the Moepe issue as a means of perpetuating their subjugation by the Bakgatla Ba Mocha.

### Conclusion

The Bloedfontein/Geweerfontein saga besides being a fascinating story in itself illuminates a number of aspects. It reveals how the racist past affects the racist present and how the state distorts history to so as to facilitate the implementation of its policies. It also reveals the intense corruption amongst chiefs and homeland leaders. Finally, it shows that in order to understand why ethnic hostility still persists one has to meticulously examine the historical context within which it is acted out.

## NOTES

- 1 This figure is the one generally given by local residents.
- 2 Deed of transfer No T 10109/1929 and Deed of Transfer No T33905/1948.
- 3 Information obtained from local residents.
- 4 The Star, 20 September 1986.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Deed of Transfer No T 10109/1929.
- 7 Deed of Transfer No T 33905/1948.
- 8 Memorandum of grievances at meeting of 24.5.77.  
Between Bakgatla Ba Mocha and Bloedfontein Community.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Correspondence from the Bloedfontein Senotlelo Community to the Bantu Affairs Commissioner, Mathajana 17 November 1977.
- 14 Correspondence from the Bloedfontein Community Authority to the Black Sash (TRAC) 18 June 1985.
- 15 Refer to page 8 for the contents of the telex sent to the Star and Business Day on the 18 September 1986 by Mr Ben Wilkens.
- 16 The Star, 25 September 1986.
- 17 Business Day, 26 September 1986.
- 18 Correspondence from the Bloedfontein Community Authority to Mr Ben Wilkens, 1 October 1985.
- 19 Correspondence from Mr Ben Wilkens to the Bloedfontein Community Authority, 18 December 1985.
- 20 Correspondence from the Bloedfontein Community to Mr Ben Wilkens, 21 January.
- 21 Correspondence from Mr Ben Wilkens to the lawyer representing the Bloedfontein community, 25 June 1986.
- 22 Correspondence from Mr Ben Wilkens to the Bloedfontein Community Authority, 28 November 1986.
- 23 Telex from Mr Ben Wilkens to the Star and Business Day, 18 September 1986.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Correspondence from the Bloedfontein Community Authority to the TRAC, 23 September.