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The changing context of resistance in Sekhukuneland
1950 - 1986

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The Sekhukhuneland Revolt - one of the most dramatic episodes of resistance in the 1950s - took place in the north-eastern Transvaal. In the 1980s the same area was caught up in a struggle which Lodge has described as 'the most significant rural uprising' since the Pondoland revolt of 1960. There were significant elements of continuity between these revolts - not least of all in the role of a broadly Congress political tradition - but there were also major shifts in the composition and focus of the struggles. In the 1950s an ANC linked organisation of migrant workers - Sebatakgomo - played a crucial role. It rallied support both on the Rand and in Bopedi in defence of a residual but cherished economic and political autonomy grounded in chiefly power and communal tenure. In the 1980s although migrants played some part, the youth were at the cutting edge of the rising. Their central grievances were the conditions in schools and the nature of chiefly rule. This paper is a preliminary attempt to chart the changing context and content of these struggles and in so doing to convey a sense of some of the processes of rural transformation under Apartheid.

Migrants and the Sekhukhuneland Revolt

Labour migrancy has long been a central feature of the political economy of Sekhukhuneland and it is unsurprising that workers played a leading role in political events in the area. But in order to understand precisely how this came about and the nature of the organisations that migrants created in the 1950s it is necessary to trace the changing patterns of the employment and association of Pedi migrants from at least the 1930s.

By the early 1930s the bulk of Pedi migrants were employed either on the gold mines of the East Rand or as domestic workers in Johannesburg and Pretoria. As in earlier decades migrants stuck together both en-route to work and at their places of employment. This concentration of workers was both the product of, and facilitated by, continuities in patterns of authority and organisation between town and countryside. Chiefly influence was not limited to the migrants' home villages and elements of rural youth socialization continued to play a vital part in the lives of migrants at the mines and in the suburbs.

Sekhukhuneland comprises a patchwork of locations (reserves) demarcated in the 19th century and farms purchased by communities or acquired by the South African Native Trust in the 20th century. Dotted across this land are the scores of rural villages which form the cores of the numerous chiefdoms and sub-chiefdoms. In the first decades of the twentieth century the

boys growing up in these communities spent much of their time looking after stock, firstly small stock which were herded in the environs of their villages and subsequently large stock which often were kept at remote cattle posts. Education at the cattle post and more generally amongst herders was largely in the hands of their peers and older youths. Only a tiny minority attended the handful of mission schools in the area and these children were overwhelmingly from the small Christian communities. Especially in the central reserve areas hostility to Christianity remained strong and converts usually lived in separate sections of the villages. Christian and "traditionalist" youth tended to remain in distinct groups with limited fraternization and even open hostility between them. Any youth from a traditionalist family who was baptized risked being given a thorough beating by his parents and/or the chief. Indeed, one of the main reasons that attendance at schools was so low was the parental fear that the schools were primarily recruiting grounds for Christianity.

Non-Christian youths had clearly defined leaders who emerged through switch fighting competitions. Champion musicians, singers and dancers also emerged. Once leaders were established the youths were no longer known as basemane (boys) but masoboro (uninitiated youths). These adolescents formed a distinct subgroup. Their parents were not held responsible for their actions but they were also not full members of the community. They administered their own internal forms of - often rough - justice. Masoboro were expected to be insubordinate and unruly. Their parents lamented this behaviour and their victims punished them severely when they got the chance but they also understood that it was a phase which would pass with initiation.

Initiation (koma) was held in the individual chiefdoms approximately every five years and it was compulsory for all youths of the appropriate age - from early teens to mid-twenties - to attend. They were secluded for three months at a time in lodges in the mountains. The instruction they received laid great emphasis on rank, the office of chieftainship, and the authority of age. Boys were schooled in the history of the community and in the economic, political and sexual roles that they would assume as adults.

During initiation and also more generally youths had it drummed into them that their prime loyalty and responsibility lay in the countryside to their parents and to the households they would one day establish themselves. Urban areas were Makgoweng - the place of the whites, or Lesokeng - a wilderness. They were warned that locations, and especially urban women, were dangerous, disease-ridden and degrading. And they had the example of Christian youths - who it was believed simply abandoned their rural responsibilities - held up to them as an example of truly delinquent behaviour.

Each initiation group was formed into a regiment led by a royal son and the process was designed to cement the loyalty of the members to the chieftainship, to reinforce the bonds between

age mates and to create relationships of solidarity and mutual co-operation that would last through life. After initiation only marriage and the establishment of a household stood between the young man and full adult status.

Missionaries and converts viewed initiation as the bedrock of paganism and chiefly power and normally prohibited youths from attending. This deepened the cleavages between the groups still further for a non-initiated man could not be made privy to the affairs of initiates. Even later in towns when migrants held meetings, however educated a man might be "if you have not been to initiation school ... you are nothing man". Many Christian youths felt this exclusion deeply and attempts were made within their communities to incorporate elements of traditional initiation. Confirmation was presented as an equivalent experience and informal age-sets were widely recognised amongst Christian youth. But a yawning gulf remained.

For much of the 19th century young men only undertook their first spell of migrancy once they had been initiated. A trip to the mines was to some extent incorporated as a stage in the transition to manhood. But by the 20th century while it was considered preferable to wait until koma before looking for work the reality was that many youths left for town before initiation. But this did not mean that they missed initiation or the processes that surrounded it. The tendency of Pedi migrants to cluster at particular points of employment ensured that, while entire age grades seldom found work at one place, sections often did and could practice many of the activities - including singing, dancing and fighting - appropriate to masoboro. And as soon as a decision was taken by the chief to establish an initiation group word would be sent to youths working in mines and towns that they must return home.

The clustering of Pedi migrants and the enforcement of ethnic divisions on mines, meant that standing by rank and regiment and close bonds between age mates were not left behind in the countryside as workers journeyed to the towns and masoboro became men. Migrants lived with workers from their home villages and districts, they discussed home matters and they dealt with disputes that developed amongst themselves. Men also travelled between the different mines visiting their village and age mates and engaging in a range of activities with them from drinking to debate. At this stage most Pedi migrants remained very wary of locations. Some went both there and to the town centres. But many liked little of what they saw. And any man who became involved with an urban woman risked being shunned by his fellows and being severely treated by the elders on the mines.

Rurally based patterns of association were thus continued in modified form in the compounds but a variety of groupings more specific to the mines also developed. One pattern was that close friends - usually from the same village - formed magodisano savings groups which were rotating-credit associations in which a number of migrants contributed every week or month and took turns

in drawing the full amount.

Another form of association was too fluid to be called a group. One informant simply described it as "the collection". If a man was injured money would be collected - primarily on a village or district basis - to enable the victim to travel home and some men might be delegated to accompany him. But the main role of "the collection" came in the event of a workers' death. Although at that stage a man who died at work was buried in the mine cemetery, money would be gathered so that his personal effects could be taken home, his wife and parents told of the circumstances of his death and sometimes given an amount of money. It was strongly felt that his family should know his true fate and not be left wondering whether he had simply abandoned his rural responsibilities and been sucked into town life.

Pedi migrants outside of compounded employment also created a rich variety of associations. One of the most important of these were the malaita groups which gathered on Sundays and marched to their battle places. The world of the malaita showed considerable continuities with a wider rurally focussed masaboro culture and also contained elements of the mutual assistance provided by the other more recent forms of association. But while migrant associations of this kind were pervasive they tended to be informal and introverted. There is little evidence that non-Christian and unschooled migrants had contact either with wider political or with labour movements in the decades before the second world war.

Changing forms of Migrant Organization, 1930 -1954

In the 1930s and 1940s significant shifts took place in the nature of Pedi employment on the Rand. The resumption of economic growth, in particular the expansion of secondary industry from the mid 1930s, allowed increasing numbers of men to find work in the burgeoning factories and offices. A considerably smaller but nonetheless significant shift also took place into self employment. Migrants found new kinds of accommodation most importantly in municipal hostels which despite their unsavoury and overcrowded conditions were considerably less regimented, controlled and less remote from a wider urban world than mine compounds.

These changes in migrant employment and accommodation were partly facilitated and partly accompanied by changes in the educational levels of Pedi migrants. As we have seen there was considerable hostility to education amongst "traditionalist" communities in Sekhukhuneland and there was also miserly provision of educational resources. But in the 1920s and particularly in the 1930s this began to change. The virtual stranglehold which the Berlin Missionary Society had maintained on schooling in the area was loosened and a number of other missions including the Anglicans and the Catholics established primary schools. These churches did not insist that pupils were baptised and gave more

attention to teaching English. Also, although the repeated requests for the establishment of non-denominational schools were refused, levels of migrant hostility to mission schools diminished somewhat, as some men with long experience of life in the cities started to impress on their sons the need for some schooling in order to be able to secure reasonable employment. Boys often alternated between spending one week herding and one week at school.

Communities which lacked local mission institutions in some cases set out to create their own schools. At Mafeke for example in the 1930s:

We had one teacher who taught us under the mohlopi tree, he would lean his blackboard against it. He stayed in the village in a small thatched house which was built for him... he was hired by the community .. we paid him with chicken eggs.

In the 1940s communities started to contribute funds to mission schools and a number of "tribal schools" were established with money raised within chiefdoms.

But this drive for education did not take place only in the rural areas. Many migrants on the mines and in the hostels became determined to learn to read and write. Often they would turn to literate fellow migrants who out of concern or for a small fee, would assist them with basic literacy. Men from Sekhukhuneland also attended night schools either to upgrade their education or to acquire basic skills. The extent of this should not be exaggerated - the majority of migrants from the area were still without western schooling by the 1940s - but many more men than previously were now leaving for town with some primary school education. They were literate in the vernacular and had some grasp of English which exposure to urban life could rapidly supplement. Some men became avid newspaper readers and they would tell their fellow workers the news of the day.

From the 1940s new forms of association started to appear which were shaped by the changing circumstances of migrants. The most pervasive of these were burial societies which were organized in the various urban centres by men coming from the same village. They provided for the bodies of deceased members to be taken to their home villages for burial, and they also acted as welfare societies which provided a variety of forms of protection for their members and their families and formalised the mutually supportive roles that looser migrant associations had long played. They also provided a context in which home affairs could be discussed and a channel of communication between migrants and chiefs.

In these decades some migrants also joined trade unions, the Communist Party and the ANC. The ANC had a long history of connection with Sekhukhuneland. But its relationship with the area was mainly refracted through chiefs, the local Christian elite and small clusters of supporters. After 1948 additional

obstacles were added to the already considerable barriers facing those wishing to organise in the reserves. Partly as a result the workers who made links to wider movements made these connections in an urban rather than a rural context. These men were mainly those who had some education, worked in secondary industry and the service sector, or were self employed. Although ANC and union members were a small minority of the migrants from Sekhukhuneland on the Rand they played a crucial role as brokers between their fellow migrants and wider organizations. Unlike most Pedi members of the ANC in earlier decades they were not members of the traditional or Christian elites but were non-Christian, initiated men who shared the same accommodation and employment as large sections of their fellow workers from Sekhukhuneland. They joined or even initiated the burial societies which mushroomed in these years. And they were able to communicate the concerns of migrants to the ANC and translate the sometimes rather abstract language of ANC politics into terms which had an immediate and powerful resonance for their compatriots

Pressures on Migrants

From the 1940s there was growing political ferment amongst Pedi migrants on the Rand who increasingly found themselves under threat in both the urban and the rural aspects of their lives. From 1945, after the brief partial respite from pass controls of the war years, migrants confronted a growing battery of measures designed to monitor and control their movements and employment. These regulations impinged most directly on men who had, or sought, employment in secondary industry and in the towns. The issuing of a consolidated "dompas" after 1952 symbolised this changing context for many and was keenly felt as yet another example of the state tightening its stranglehold on their lives. And the threat of being endorsed out of the towns to their homes, or worse still to the farms, loomed large in the lives of many workers.

But the most fundamental threat most migrants felt was to the rural world which played such a central part in their self-definition. For most migrants in these years the towns remained Makgoweng - the place of the whites. Despite their impoverishment, the rural areas - especially the reserves - represented places of refuge from white authority and from the social corrosion of capitalist relationships. Of course, the reserves were by no means immune to the effects of either of these phenomena but both communal tenure and chiefly authority provided barriers against the complete domination of their lives by white officials, employers and the market. Despite a widespread view that the office had been degraded by colonial rule, and despite considerable criticism of the behaviour of individual chiefs, chieftainship retained considerable popular allegiance which was reinforced by contemplation of the alternative - direct rule by white officials. By the 1950s there was growing pressure on land in the Pedi heartland and there was considerable variation in the amount and quality of land to which families gained access.

Nonetheless the overwhelming majority of married men were able to gain access to plots of land. Equally, although there were relatively few men with large herds, cattle remained central to bridewealth while most men had the expectation of owning stock at some point of their lives and many retained the hope of establishing viable herds. The resources of land and cattle which existed provided important support for many rural households, allowed some men the possibility of an early retirement from migrancy and were vital to families which did not have access to migrant remittances. Initially Betterment Schemes and then Bantu Authorities were seen as weapons finely honed to slice through to the heart of this world. Stock culling, the demarcation of land and the removal of "black spots" were seen as attempts to strip rural communities of their remaining economic props and it was believed that agricultural officers and co-opted chiefs would usher the white state into every nook and cranny of rural life.

The consequence of these policies was a growing political ferment amongst migrants on the Rand. In hostels and compounds migrants discussed the unfolding state strategies and information spread widely. In the early 1940s men from the eastern Transvaal followed the imposition of Betterment and the bitter resistance to it on the Trust Lands in the northern Transvaal and felt that what they heard confirmed their worst fears. The Nationalist victory in 1948 deepened their sense of apprehension. For many migrants from Sekhukhuneland this political development recalled the days of "Kruger" when the notorious Abel Erasmus had installed puppet chiefs and exterminated their cattle.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s the "New Era of Reclamation" pronounced in 1945 made its unwelcome presence felt on the Trust lands which bordered on the old reserve areas in Sekhukhuneland. With intensifying state intervention in adjacent areas the reserves seemed to many to be a last redoubt which the Bantu Authorities Act of 1951 was designed to undermine. Chiefly autonomy was seen as a vital protection for rural communities but at the same time many migrants feared that chiefs would have little stomach to resist the threats and blandishments of the state. From the early 1950s rumours that the Pedi Paramount Morwamotse Sekhukhune had agreed, or would agree, to the establishment of Bantu Authorities and that in consequence Betterment would be imposed in Sekhukhuneland sent regular alarms through the migrant community on the reef.

Another poison arrow in the Nationalist Party quiver in these years was Bantu Education which was the source of bitter struggles in the towns. Its introduction also proved highly contentious in Sekhukhuneland. The headmaster of the only secondary school in the area Godfrey Pitje - a former President of the ANC youth league - resigned rather than accept the new system and a small core of ANC members were unwavering in their opposition. Some teachers feared that the quality of education would suffer and chafed under the new system. But most teachers in the area were reluctant to challenge the new order while some welcomed the opportunity of considerably expanding the provision of

rural education. It was not however an issue which aroused a mass response in the area. There was a general scepticism about state initiatives but many non-Christian families remained suspicious of Christian controlled schooling and were not inclined to feel overly concerned about the passing of missionary dominance. The prime concern of the vast majority of families was Betterment and Bantu Authorities and teachers were often viewed as outriders of this new dispensation.

In the early 1950s against this backdrop of mounting migrant militancy a group of young workers from Sekhukhuneland who lived in hostels and who were also members of the ANC - led by Flag Boshielo and John Nkadimeng- decided to launch an organization. As Nkadimeng recalls

Sebatakomo came about in 1954with the issue of culling cattle... the curtailment of land ... and so-called soil erosion under the Bantu Authorities Act... we felt that many things were going to be done to our people in the country and they were not sufficiently addressed. So we needed an organisation, a group in the movement.

Originally composed of the existing ANC members from the north-eastern Transvaal Sebatakomo sought - with considerable success - to reach a much wider constituency. Sepedi pamphlets were distributed and meetings were organised in hostels on the Rand, and migrants moving to and from their home villages provided an effective link between rural communities and Sebatakomo. From 1956, as the state moved to attempt to enforce Bantu Authorities, support for the movement grew rapidly - a process facilitated by the fact that migrants grouped in burial societies joined the organization en masse and their village-based structure was incorporated as the bedrock of Sebatakomo. While the movement organised in support of chieftainship it emphasised that kgosi ke kgosi ka batho (a chief is a chief by the people). A parallel commoner body the Khudutamaga which replicated the village based structure of Sebatakomo was also established in Sekhukhuneland in 1956. The Pedi Paramount Morwamotse and other chiefs who had wavered in the face of state blandishments and threats had their resolve to resist considerably strengthened by this mobilization and by the justifiable fear that their lives would be at risk should they buckle. Chiefly reluctance led the state into ever-greater levels of coercion which in 1958 resulted in the outbreak of violence known as the Sekhukhuneland Revolt.

On the 16 May police opened fire on a crowd in the village of Manganeng killing two people and injuring several others. In the aftermath of this event 'collaborators' were attacked first at Manganeng and then throughout Sekhukhuneland. By the 17 May nine men had been killed and many more had been injured while numerous houses and shops were put to the torch. Police swarmed over the area and the villagers took to the mountains. There were over 300 arrests and trials dragged on over the next two years. Yet resistance remained cohesive. Migrants dug deep into their

pockets to provide legal help for their imprisoned compatriots and villagers stayed in the mountains and refused to pay their taxes or to have any dealings with officials.

Restructuring from the 1960s

The initial revolt was put down with considerable brutality but in the face of enduring and unified resistance the state struggled to regain its control in the area and was forced in the short term to beat a somewhat undignified retreat. Attempts to enforce both Betterment schemes and Bantu Authorities in the central reserve areas were shelved. The NAD concentrated instead on attempting to undermine the unity of opposition by breaking the power of the Paramountcy. Subordinate chiefs were approached and offered recognition as chiefs if they accepted the establishment of Tribal Authorities. By the mid 1960s this strategy had born considerable fruit and 26 magosi had been appointed in an area which had previously boasted only a handful. In 1968 with the Paramountcy facing a major threat to its authority Morwamotse's widow Mankopodi struck a deal with the NAD which involved the establishment of Tribal Authority at Mhlaletse and her assuming the chairmanship of the Regional Authority. She also assisted in the appointment of a further 29 magosi making a total of 54 recognised chiefs in the central Sekhukhuneland area alone.

Sebatakgomo - renamed Fetakgomo in 1957 - continued to lead migrant opposition to this gradual entrenchment of Bantu Authorities but found it more difficult to mobilize against a piecemeal approach and in the extremely repressive context of the 1960s. The capitulation of the Paramountcy also led to a final rupture with the urban based leadership. But the various village based burial societies continued to function although they were often subject to a process of fission. There was considerable disquiet in their ranks about the changing nature of bogosi but these societies continued to offer a channel of communication between migrants and chiefs and to concern themselves with community issues. This was, however, a somewhat uneasy relationship as chiefs attempted to use burial societies to assert control over migrants while the latter, at times, attempted to curb abuses of chiefly power. But the pressure that migrants could bring to bear was intermittent and it was usually only over the Christmas period, when large numbers of men returned to the villages, that they could exercise real influence.

Patterns of migrancy also changed in important ways in these years. The 1960s is recalled as the decade when women from the heartland of Bopedi entered migrant labour on a significant scale. Influx controls started to bite particularly once the system of labour bureaux was fully established. Some migrants still managed to slip through the ever finer mesh of this net but an increasing proportion found themselves trapped into formal recruitment and into the extended contracts which men had struggled against for so long. They also confronted still greater

barriers to escaping from the most unattractive and lowly paid jobs in industry. And after 1970 the slump in the growth of employment meant that the number of work seekers from Sekhukhuneland raced ahead of the creation of new jobs while various downturns in the economy also inflicted widespread redundancy on migrants from the area - particularly in the early 1980s. These changes along with the transformations in the rural political economy discussed below made migrants particularly receptive to organization by the independent trade union movement which started to expand rapidly from the late 1970s. Migrant networks were mobilised through the hostels on the Rand once again but this organizational drive was focussed on pay and conditions in the towns and not on rural transformations. In the 1980s many unions became increasingly sensitive to community issues but consideration was primarily given to problems in urban townships. The rather different difficulties confronting migrants in their home villages were rarely given organizational attention.

For some migrants the establishment of Bantu Authorities sounded the death knell of chieftainship but many saw it initially as simply one more symptom of the colonial degradation of an institution which they still valued highly. For the latter individuals chiefly rule was still seen by as central to the maintenance of a wider structure of rank, patriarchy, land tenure, and, more broadly, the preservation of molao (inadequately translatable as the law). But there was also a widespread awareness of the changes which were being wrought in the institution.

One crucial transformation in Sekhukhuneland was that a substructure of political leadership which had not previously enjoyed state recognition or material support and in consequence had needed to maintain significant levels of local legitimacy, now enjoyed both state recognition and salaries. Councillors came to be appointed by the chiefs and some were salaried. They also increasingly enjoyed office as a result of connections to the chief rather than, as in the past, representing a significant segment - usually a kgoro (ward) - of the community. Chiefs also exploited their position in new bureaucratic structures to buttress their power. For example, once tribal labour bureaux were established chiefs were entrusted with registering work seekers and it became common practice to deny recalcitrant subjects this registration thus denying them the possibility of employment. And magosi were also able to gain considerable political and financial leverage through their role in school committees and boards. The cumulative effect of these and other changes was to deepen the gulf between chiefs and their subjects and to make chiefs even less responsive or beholden to the communities they ruled. This was a process which was far from uniform and there were individual office holders who ruled with some care for their subjects and maintained significant levels of support. But the ideal that kgosi ke kgosi ka batho which was an important element in popular support for the institution became ever more remote from the realities of rural life.

The 1960s also brought other important changes in this rural political economy. Crucial amongst these were the effects of the interaction of the virtual doubling of the population between 1970 and 1980 (the result of natural increase and resettlement), mounting pressure on land, and tightening influx control. In the 1940s and 1950s in Trust areas the application of Betterment which demarcated and allocated individual plots set in motion a sharpening division between the landed and the landless. And increasingly families who settled on Trust lands - usually from white farms - were able only to secure residential sites. By the 1960s in the old reserve areas the capacity of communities to ensure that all their subjects received even small areas of marginal land began to be exhausted. In a context of mounting land shortage chiefs increasingly asserted their control over the allocation of the remaining land and inheritance became ever more important in securing access to land. The end result was that better and larger areas of land were dominated by the ruling strata within chiefdoms while long established members of these communities also retained access to some land although the fragmentation of plots and landlessness mounted with each succeeding generation. By the early 1980s it was very often only the youngest son who stood to inherit land. But worst off were the families who as a result of forced removals or growing pressure on white farmlands settled in the area from the 1950s. Although some immigrants managed to gain access to land many could only secure a site upon which to build and had little prospect of securing land in the future. A clear division was finally developing in Sekhukhuneland between those with and those without land although this was still blurred by the fact that many who had rights to land nonetheless lacked the resources to put that land under production. And in contemporary Sekhukhuneland even in those rare years - like this one - when the rains come, considerable expanses of land still lie fallow.

This bleak circumstance points to another crucial change which took place in the 1960s and 1970s - a radical reduction in the importance of cattle in the local economy. On Trust lands the reduction of cattle numbers was an integral part of betterment and settlers on these lands were also increasingly barred from bringing stock with them. But even in areas where culling was not imposed cattle declined in significance. The growing pressure on land, both through the expansion of arable lands and the heavy usage of grazing areas, reduced the carrying capacity of the area so that weakened stock were ill-equipped to withstand either drought or disease. Every year in the spring large numbers of cattle died before the first summer rains came to their rescue. Crucially - as we will explore further below - the expansion of schooling steadily diminished the number of youth who were available to herd stock. This led to the collapse of the system of cattle posts by the end of the 1950s and the concentration of stock in the immediate environs of the villages put still greater pressure on local grazing which led to a further deterioration in the condition of stock. Herds of cattle were concentrated in fewer and fewer hands and many

families faced mounting obstacles in securing the use of a span for ploughing at the appropriate time.

From the 1960s onwards tractors became the dominant means of working the land. Each community that accepted the establishment of a tribal authority was given a tractor and, while these rarely survived more than a couple of seasons, they considerably widened the appreciation of the speed and range of this form of traction. As the tribal authority tractors collapsed private tractor owners found a considerably enlarged market for their services. And it was often easier for migrants to send back cash for the hire of a tractor than to attempt to ensure that a span could be procured at the right time. The increasing use of tractors and the lack of herders led many families to sell off cattle or not to replace those that died. In recent years cattle theft has also flourished in a context of inadequately supervised stock. Stolen cattle are either sold to local butchers or slaughtered with the meat then being sold off the back of bakkies at knock down prices. Goats are now the dominant form of stock - a development which has further accelerated the decline of decent grazing. A span of oxen drawing a plough is a very rare sight indeed in contemporary Sekhukhuneland.

The decline of cattle can be directly linked to another fundamental change in the region in this period - the establishment of mass education. As we have seen by the 1950s primary schools were scattered across the region, mainly located in the largest villages and there was a one secondary school at Jane Furse which in the mid 1950s was closed and replaced by two other schools. From the 1960s, however, there was a rapid proliferation of schools in Sekhukhuneland. Migrants - not least of all those working in "the firms" - became increasingly convinced of the importance of education to securing better pay and conditions and were committed to securing an education for their children. As we have seen Bantu Education - while hardly welcomed by migrants - nonetheless appeared to offer education which was not strictly coupled with Christianity and to offer resources to expand rural schooling. The spread of Tribal Authorities also encouraged the spread of schools. It was felt by many of the newly-appointed chiefs and their supporters that their recently defined autonomy should find expression in the establishment of separate educational institutions. The provision of school buildings in rural areas was a responsibility which fell on local communities. Villagers and migrants bore the brunt of raising the money and of construction and their efforts brought impressive results. By the end of the 1960s most villages in Sekhukhuneland boasted a primary school and the early 1970s witnessed the proliferation of junior secondary schools. In the late 1970s and the early 1980s senior secondary schools - with classes up to matric - were widely established. In the period 1977-1982 the number of senior secondary schools in Lebowa trebled.

One significant consequence of the expansion of schools was the creation of a rather more uniform youth culture. The previous

pattern in which the cattle post and initiation were the central shaping experiences in most youths' lives while a minority of mainly Christian children attended schools and lived largely separate lives was steadily eroded. More and more, school came to be the central focus of, and education a dominant value in, the lives of Christian and non-Christian alike. This did not, of course, mean that the gulf between these youth vanished and tensions and conflicts continued both in and out of school. Initiated youth snubbed their uninitiated fellows and mocked them as majakane while the latter derided the 'backwardness' of the more traditional pupils. And patterns of association also tended to form along these lines. Nonetheless this common context did serve to multiply contacts and friendships across this divide and the growing enthusiasm for western sport - particularly football - provided additional common experiences. School was also the forum in which children of recent immigrants were initially integrated into the wider society.

In these decades the antipathy to Christianity in Sekhukhuneland also weakened as the minority status of the religion started to be transformed by the rapid growth of Zionist and other independent churches. Elements of Christian ritual - for example prayers to open and close public meetings - became a common feature of community life. Equally important was the fact that more and more girls were sent to school. And while initiation remained an important institution in most communities the proportion of boys and girls who did not attend koma grew.

Thus from the 1960s some divisions among rural youth started to narrow but a deep gulf remained between the experiences of pupils in Sekhukhuneland and those who lived in the cities of the Transvaal. More than 300 kilometres of often dreadful road with infrequent, slow, and expensive transport, and an almost total absence of newspapers coupled with Radio Lebowa's fanciful and partial version of events, ensured that most young people at schools in Sekhukhuneland secured only glimpses of the life styles of their urban counterparts. In the 1960s and early 1970s it was young migrant workers who brought news of what was happening in the towns and their worlds - centered on the compound, the hostel and the factory - were remote from, if not in actual conflict with, those of urban youth. The 1976 student led revolt which seared its way through township after township did not find a counterpart in Sekhukhuneland. Pupils certainly were aware of what was happening, and both heightened police activity and the circulation of some pamphlets helped to ensure a tense atmosphere in the area for much of the latter half of 1976. But the students stayed in school, wrote their exams and there was little in the way of open confrontation with local authorities.

But it was precisely this relative tranquility in 1976 which was to encourage a process which would bring urban and rural youth into closer contact in the following years. Many parents in the urban areas feared for the future of their children growing up amidst the 'tsotsis' and the turbulence in the

townships and the violence in 1976 intensified these fears. The spread of secondary education in Sekhukhuneland allowed those who had linkages to the area to contemplate sending their children to school there. Parents who had grown up in Sekhukhuneland, but had subsequently settled in the towns nonetheless saw rural villages as relatively ordered environments in which adolescents would run less risk of becoming delinquents and were more likely to get continuous education. Some families actually moved back to the Bopedi but the more common pattern was for children to be sent back to stay with grandparents or other kin and for their parents to send back money for their support. Sometimes they would occupy homes which their parents built in the prospect of eventual retirement in Sekhukhuneland. These children - who were already well versed in the ways of the towns and who in the 1980s had access to an ever-expanding convoy of black taxis - returned to the cities during the holidays and provided a vital link between evolving urban and rural youth cultures. Their urban experience provided them with a certain cachet. They knew the latest forms of language, music and dress in the townships and they brought records, magazines and newspapers with them to Sekhukhuneland. They also carried news of politics in the towns and ultimately accounts of the growth of youth organization.

Grassroots Grievances

Thus the decades after the Sekhukhuneland Revolt brought far reaching changes - only some of which have been touched on above - to local level society. They also spawned the increasingly bloated and intrusive presence formed by the Lebowa government which deserves fuller treatment than is possible in this context. However for the purpose of this paper the crucial point is that by the 1980s the particular course of these transformations had created a number of festering grievances at the grassroots of the society. The most significant of these in relation to the events of 1985-86 were the contemporary reality of chiefly rule and the conditions in the schools.

As we have seen from the 1960s the nature of chiefly power was transformed. Its remaining roots in a residual political and economic autonomy withered and chiefs were increasingly recast as state functionaries, manipulating bureaucratic power while resting on the active support of a fragment of their communities. In this changing context a number of recurring points of friction developed within chiefdoms many which were primarily over the level of exactions and chiefly abuses of community funds. Families had to meet a range of levies. There was an annual 'traditional' levy which in the 1960s replaced the payment to the chief which every migrant had long been expected to make on his return to the village. All families now had to pay whether migrants were present or not, and the amount was steadily increased. The second most important annual levy in most villages was for the school building fund. But beyond these payments, communities had to meet a series of specific requests. Chiefs expected their subjects to raise money to buy them cars, to build them houses and to pay the bridewealth of - at least- the mohumagadi(chief

wife). They were also expected to deliver a variety of traditional tributes including a portion of all beer brewed and cattle slaughtered as well as rendering tribute labour on the chief's lands and in the royal kgoro. School children in particular found their studies regularly disrupted by summonses from the mosate to labour. And parents had to pay very stiff fees when their children attended initiation school.

These demands placed a heavy burden on communities which were already struggling in a context of mounting unemployment and growing numbers of households - often female-headed - without access to migrant remittances. They were also particularly resented by those families who had no access to land. But it was not only the existence or magnitude of these payments which caused discontent. The greatest anger was caused by the regularity of major missappropriation of community funds by the chiefly elite. This was particularly marked in relation to the school building funds which communities discovered with depressing regularity to be pitifully small or non-existent despite years of heavy payments which should have swelled the coffers to bursting. This was one important source of acrimony in the villages and it also placed considerable strain on migrants' relationship with chiefs. By the 1980s many of the children who listened to their parents complaints about chiefly exaction and corruption and saw its impact on their lives and those of their families found it difficult to understand any remaining ambiguity about chiefly rule. For them the matter was clear - the magosi system was rotten to the core.

But equally pressing concerns of the youth related to conditions in the schools. By the 1970s and 1980s education was seen by a cross section of the society as being fundamental to survival and essential to any kind of advance. But by the 1980s there was also a growing awareness of the desperately poor quality of the education that was being provided. The rapid expansion of schools had both been outstripped by the growth in numbers of pupils and had far exceeded the supply of teachers and resources. The consequence was a proliferation of schools with massively congested classrooms, often lacking doors, blackboards, desks and windows, which froze in winter and baked (and leaked) in summer. Many classes particularly in primary schools but also in secondary schools were conducted outdoors. Schools lacked libraries and even the most rudimentary scientific and technical equipment. In contrast to white students school fees were charged and pupils had to purchase their own stationery and uniforms in a context of intermittent and expensive local supplies. Students who failed to pay their fees were excluded from schools and those who came to school improperly dressed ran the risk of a similar fate. In these unpropitious circumstances it was essential for survival to secure the correct course textbooks - now matter how odious their contents. Students from families which could not afford to purchase this basic resource felt themselves to be gravely disadvantaged. A central demand in 1985-6 was for free books.

While students and parents were increasingly angered by these conditions many teachers slid into demoralization and apathy. Rural teachers were often underqualified and a growing proportion of poorly paid private teachers swelled their ranks. They lacked organization and the majority shied away from politics for fear of losing their posts. They faced massive classes with pathetic resources. There were of course teachers who where both gifted and committed but the picture painted by students of schools in the 1980s is a bleak one. Teachers often failed to come to classes or if they did arrive were unprepared or even drunk. Students were taught by rote and discouraged from asking questions. The sexual harassment of female students was a recurring problem but should a girl fall pregnant in this or any other way she would suffer by being excluded from the school. However the central, most frequent and bitter complaint that students made was about the unbridled use of corporal punishment in schools. Teachers deeply alienated by the impossible context in which they worked, uncertain of their subjects and fearing for the collapse of their authority literally hit out. Boys and girls alike were slapped, beaten with canes and lashed with strips of rubber tire or sjamboks for offences which included not having full school uniforms, being unable to pay school fees on time, arriving late or being unable to answer questions in class. Children from families which struggled to maintain them at school thus suffered additional punishment and humiliation. And the sjambok tucked under the teachers arm became the everpresent symbol and source of his authority. This grim reality ensured that probably the most popular demand amongst students in 1985-6 was for an end to corporal punishment in the schools.

But the problems of the youth were by no means confined to the schools. There was a considerable drop-out rate particularly at secondary level. This was as much the result of financial difficulties as failure for the policy within schools was to push students up. The heavy failure rate - usually over 50% and this year close to 80% - came with the externally administered matric exams. Some students left school for periods to wait for, or earn, additional funds. Others repeated matric in the hope of passing. Both processes ensured a wide age range in the schools with students in their early or mid twenties being a common feature. As external employment opportunities dwindled and the local economy atrophied, school leavers - even those who had passed matric - faced a mounting struggle to secure employment and the result was a growing number of unemployed youth in each village. Strapped for cash and deeply bored many of these youths would congregate at local stores and were dubbed matuckshops as a result or they would hang around the ubiquitous 'bar lounges' trying to cadge drinks. Some found that dagga helped to kill time or dabbled in trading it to the towns. A number facing a choice between taking work on nearby white farms for as little as R18 a month or embarking on a life of crime took the latter option. The most common strategy was to travel to urban areas, break into houses and return home to sell the stolen goods. But some of these youths also found local victims. The result of these

developments was that villagers who had long taken satisfaction in the relative absence of the disorders they saw in urban areas found that deeply disgruntled and financially desperate youths contributed to a marked increase in serious violence and theft in the countryside.

Organization

This context was ripe with organizational possibilities but until 1984 there was little in the way of formal organization in place. There was however an important legacy from the struggles in the 1950s. Fetakgomo had crumbled in the late 1960s but its leaders had not become politically dormant. By the mid 1970s John Nkadimeng and others from Sebatakomo were pivotal figures in Umkhonto we Sizwe structures within the Transvaal. In 1976 a number of M.K. cells were established in villages in Bopedi and a local programme of military training was established by the banks of the Oliphants River. Early in 1977 the security police stumbled across this Transvaal M.K network and widespread arrests followed which destroyed - amongst others - the Sekhukhuneland structures. John Nkadimeng, however, managed to slip out of the country.

Despite this setback and the need to keep a low profile in the face of constant police harassment, a network of one-time ANC and Sebatakomo activists living in the villages kept the memory of the struggles of the 1950s and the Congress alive if sometimes only for a very small group of family and friends. The most influential of these figures was Peter Nchabeleng. Born in the village of Apel which lies under the Leolu Mountains in the north of Sekhukhuneland, Nchabeleng was active in the ANC, the office workers union (a SACTU affiliate) and in Sebatakomo in Pretoria in the late 1950s. In 1963 he was tried for involvement in Umkhonto we Sizwe and sentenced to eight years on Robben Island. On his release despite his request to return to Pretoria he was banished to Apel - a piece of vindictiveness that the state would have ample cause to regret.

In the repressive climate of the 1970s many local people at first were rather nervous of the presence of an ex-Robben Islander in their midst and he was unable to find local employment. But by the mid 70s Nchabeleng had helped establish a number of small discussion groups amongst students at the local schools which also drew in some older activists and a few teachers. Three copies of the Freedom Charter were circulated and it formed the basis of discussions along with historical issues and the nature of national democratic struggle. In these years Nchabeleng was constantly raided by the local security police. In 1975 he was arrested for contravening his banning order, tried in Pretoria and given a three year suspended sentence. In 1977 he was charged with involvement in MK activities in Sekhukhuneland. He was acquitted in 1978, but his banning order was renewed for five years and his son Elleck was found guilty and sentenced to six years on Robben Island. In the early 1980s he narrowly escaped two attempts on his life. But he nonetheless continued to

provide schooling in the history and programme of the ANC.

In the context of national political mobilization from 1983 onwards Nchabeleng and the youth with whom he was in contact provided a crucial impetus to local organization. In 1984 a Sekhukhune Youth Committee was established drawing its support primarily from school students in the neighboring villages of Apel, GaNkwane, and GaNchabeleng and by the end of August 1984 a kombi load of students attended the first UDF rally in the northern Transvaal at Seshego. In 1985 this committee gave rise to the Sekhukhuneland Youth Organization (SEYO) which modeled itself on COSAS and which initially had branches in 6 villages in the Apel region but had a much wider network of contacts. The ultimate aim was to establish a federal structure based on a proliferation of thoroughly rooted village based youth congresses. SEYO organized a regular supply of newspapers and magazines, held discussion groups on local issues, the latest news and on the Freedom charter. Its less experienced members also wrestled with the concepts and language of class analysis. One activist recalls a particularly prolonged debate about whether or not the women who hawked vegetables by the roadside formed part of the bourgeoisie. They also attempted to take up UDF campaigns locally although the million signature and the black Christmas campaigns did not have instant local appeal. The Nchabeleng household became a hive of activity as groups of students came and went. Many stayed over night deep in discussion or labouriously copying out newspaper articles on a typewriter borrowed from the local commercial school.

At roughly the same time Turfloop University also started to provide organizational impetus in the area. In the 1970s, despite its relative proximity and its role as a crucible of the Black Consciousness Movement, Turfloop students had done little to initiate organization in their rural hinterland although they did have some impact in the immediate environs of the university. In the 1980s politics at Turfloop reflected the national shift among black students to allegiance to the charterist camp. Late in 1984 the university branch of Azaso resolved to give greater attention to rural areas. One initiative was to set up a special sub-group consisting of students from Bopedi who were given the task of encouraging organization in their home villages during their vacations. When term resumed they were expected to report back on their activities and in some cases individuals were then sent out to the villages to give further assistance. Turfloop students also assisted SEYO by helping to draft a constitution and by hosting workshops.

These developments took place in a context where there were already political stirrings in some villages for it was not only in the environs of Apel that small political discussion groups formed from 1983 onwards. Responding to a climate of political change, feeding on the accounts and materials brought by youths in contact with the urban areas and some input from individual Turfloop students, these groups discussed the rise of the UDF and the contents of the Freedom Charter. In some cases

Cosas members from the urban areas visited friends at rural schools and in 1985 and 1986 some youths from the towns took refuge in the rural areas while others toured schools in Sekhukhuneland drumming up support much to the alarm of teachers and headmasters. The message that they carried - that whites got free education and free books in properly equipped schools and that black students should get the same - was one which struck a powerful chord with pupils in local schools, as did the condemnation of corporal punishment and their call for elected SRCs to give students a voice in the running of schools. Most schools in Sekhukhuneland continued to operate in 1985 but boycotts occurred in a handful of villages - usually over the issue of corporal punishment - and the campaign for elected SRCs gathered considerable momentum.

Workers also contributed to quickening the political pulse of the area. In the 1970s the Steelpoort River Valley, which forms the southern boundary of Sekhukhuneland, was the scene of a surge in the development of local mining - particularly of chrome. While the mines were carefully situated across the Steelpoort River and thus beyond the borders of Lebowa, hostels and townships for the workers who laboured in these enterprises were established within the homelands boundaries. In the early 1980s Mavu made its presence felt on these mines and also came to play a central role in both hostel and community life - its activities facilitated by the fact that one local chief - a keen supporter of Sebatakomo in the 1950s - welcomed union organizers in his area. In 1984 when UMMAWASA split from MAWU one of the main regions it carried with it was Steelpoort Valley/Lydenburg partly because of the attachment of the workers to their organizer. This break if anything increased the cohesiveness of the local organization although conflicts quickly developed with the national leadership of the new union. In 1985 union members and played a crucial role in the establishment of the Steelpoort Youth Congress which was widely regarded as one of the best organized youth congresses in the region. Street Committee structures were set up in the townships and union members also helped set up youth organization in villages which lay further afield. In addition members of STEYCO took advantage of their position adjacent to white farms to attempt to organize farm workers - much to the fury of the local farmers.

In 1985 an organization focussed on migrant workers - the Northern Transvaal Peoples Congress (NOTPECO) - also started to have some impact in the area. Its history remains to be fully researched but it is clear that it drew heavily on Sebatakomo as a model seeking to mobilize support amongst workers on the Rand, using hostels as recruiting grounds and burial societies as building blocks. It was highly critical of chiefly rule and saw itself as working in tandem with the trade union movement. It also aimed to establish support amongst the unemployed and to start employment generating projects. But its development seems to have been hampered as a result of being drawn into a series of festering succession disputes - most notably at Phaala Manoge and Mohlaletse - which deeply divided its members and engrossed the

time of its leadership. While the extent of NOTPECO's influence is at present unclear what is apparent is that in the course of 1985 migrants - particularly those who were members of trade unions - became increasingly assertive in the affairs of their villages. This was not the consequence of any marked shift in union attitudes to rural areas. But the experience of union organization and practices and the context of growing political ferment contributed to a willingness among some migrants to challenge chiefly corruption and exaction more directly. In a number of villages outside of the Steelpoort areas young unionized migrants emerged as informal local leaders.

These developments helped cement an alliance between migrants and the youth in some villages which proved deeply alarming to a the chiefly stratum. It was usual over the Christmas period when migrants returned home for meetings to be held at mosate to discuss matters arising from burial society deliberations in the towns and the affairs of the village. During December 1985 some chiefs confronted a chilling development. Youths, who would not normally have been permitted to attend these meetings, congregated from early in the morning at the mosate singing and chanting 'ga gone temokrasi'. (there is no democracy) They were joined by migrants many sporting an array of union T Shirts, with the co-existence of FOSATU, CUSA and COSATU emblems providing vivid symbolism of the recent history of the labour movement. The central demand made in these meetings was that chiefs should provide a proper account of funds that had been collected and - where there were shortfalls - make good the missing amount. In at least one village youth seized the tribal authority papers and conducted their own audit which revealed a deficit of R40-000. Faced with these demands a number of chiefs fled from their villages.

Instead of a Conclusion

In late 1985 and 1986 youth organization in the area spread like wildfire. Harsh police action often contributed to the blaze - every death and every funeral spurred youth on to greater efforts and added to the militancy of their demands. In early 1986 a campaign was launched to 'isolate' the police and informers and a call for chiefs to resign gathered force. White farmers who wanted to enter the area had to carry passes issued by the youth and white business vehicles were stoned and burned. From the 3rd of March, after a series of clashes between pupils and police, virtually every school was closed. In this brutal and turbulent context organization grew at a pace and on a scale which was impossible for the existing leadership to service and school. Activists recall that by March of 1986 there wasn't a village anywhere that hadn't formed its own youth congress. At meetings individuals would introduce themselves as representing youth congresses from communities that even local people had barely heard of. One organizer recalls

they had got the UDF from newspapers and heard about the formation of youth congresses so they just got together and called themselves macomrades without any politics at all - saying no the Boers are mad - Amandla Awetu

But it was not only on a regional basis that this shift took place. Within villages with a longer history of organization the broad body of the youth now became actively involved in the youth organizations. In the Apel region for example where at most a couple of hundred youth were involved in political activities in early 1985, by early 1986 more than 7000 youths regularly arrived at meetings. This mass base came to assert a growing influence at the expense of the relatively politicised elements which had initiated organization and who were now increasingly overshadowed by new leaders more in tune with the concerns of this enlarged constituency. Once the bulk of migrants returned to work on the Rand their influence dwindled and although some parents committees were established in the villages their development lagged hopelessly behind that of youth congresses. And the Sekhukhuneland Parents Crisis Committee established in late 1985 was both rather narrowly based - primarily consisting of businessmen - and seriously disrupted by police action.

In many villages the activities of the youth while retaining elements of the original political programme increasingly took the form of a generational revolt against all forms of authority in which the most militant call automatically commanded the widest support. Youth stayed up all night singing and marching in the villages going from house to house demanding that parents allow their sons and daughters to join them. Few parents dared to resist these demands. Youth also made mounting demands on shopkeepers for food and money to assist them in the struggle and they commandeered cars, buses and taxis. While a proportion of these demands had some political purpose numbers of the more criminal elements within the villages exploited this growing anarchy with considerable creativity. These developments alienated many parents and ruptured alliances with migrants.

This mass membership and new leadership also achieved its own ideological synthesis. One issue raised with growing insistence was a question which which had been aired by youth at workshops from early in 1985. As an activist recalls

One things that used to emerge was really a serious problem with all rural people - the youth were always asking questions about witchcraft from very early on... I remember one guy saying (at a workshop) "No comrades, here is a serious problem. They are talking about things we don't even know. But we are having problems here at home that have to be faced. A member of our youth committee was struck by lightning last month.....the diviner says he was bewitched and now we say an injury to one is an injury to all...now what should be our position ? On

this side we have got the police and the army and the witches against us and of course our position with the army and the police is clear. But now with the witches what should be our line?"

This was a question which, in the context of mounting violence in the area, was differently resolved in the various villages. In most communities the youth contented themselves with turning to local ngaka for assistance with medicines to protect them against both witches and the police. In a handful of others they took more drastic action. In early 1986 in GaNkwane, one of the first villages in which youth organization was established but also a community with a long history of conflicts over witchcraft, 32 people - mainly older women - were burned despite the attempts of Peter Nchabeleng and the original core of youth activists to stop the witch-hunt. In the middle of 1986 the army and police operating under the protective cloak of the state of emergency and assisted by vigilante groups - usually composed of close associates of the chiefs and unemployed older men - launched a major onslaught against the youth whose vulnerability was enhanced by their isolation from a significant portion of the wider community. By mid 1987 after months of shootings, beatings, arrests and detentions the youth movement had effectively collapsed. Nonetheless it had ensured that a broader cross section of rural youth than ever before was exposed to elements of political organization and ideology, and this experience left residues that could provide a starting point for future organization.

Instead of Endnotes

In honour of Phil Bonners' chairpersonship of the History Workshop and as a tribute to the disruptive capacity of the Hepatitis A virus this paper comes without endnotes. The first 8 pages are mainly a rather brutal summary of sections of a recently published ? article - 'Sebatakgomo; Migrant Organization, the ANC and the Sekhukhuneland Revolt' JSAS 15(4) 1989 ppl-35. This paper - like the article - is primarily based on interviews. The vast majority of the approx 140 interviews have been done with male informants. This research is, however, far from complete especially for the period from 1960. 60296
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A number of written sources have also been useful. These include the unpublished papers 'Insurgent Politics in the South African Countryside; The United Democratic Front in Lebowa' by Tom Lodge 'Peasants and or Proletariat? A case study of a group of migrant workers at Haggie Rand Ltd from Molepo Tribal Village' by Mashoahla Moses Molepo (ASI, 1983). Deborah James' MA thesis (Wits 1987) 'Kinship and land in an inter-ethnic rural community' also contains valuable material. Statistical evidence has been drawn from the 1985 Development Bank Report on Lebowa and the annual reports of the Lebowa Department of Education. Newspapers sources have also been used with SASPU National being a particularly rich source for the period 1984-1987.