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Constraints on a Precolonial Economy. The Bakwena State c.1820 - 1885.

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INTRODUCTION

For the greater part of the Nineteenth Century, before "protection" (1885); the BaKwena experienced dramatic changes in their political and economic life. The then overriding concern of Kgosi Sechele (1829-1892) and his people was maintenance of autarchy. The BaKwena resources were marshalled to this end at a time when national independent existence faced prolonged threats from difagane and Afrikaner intrusions. The BaKwena economy was accordingly geared to the immediate and urgent need to uphold political independence. It was during this period when the BaKwena economy was under strain that, the now ubiquitous, labour migration commenced its tradition. As we shall see below, it was not fortuitous, but historically and sociologically explicable that labour migration among the Batswana may well have started with the BaKwena.

This paper seeks to explore - and indeed one may argue - to locate the beginnings of labour migration in the context of political and economic dislocation of the period prior to 1885. Natural conditions (e.g. droughts) are not excluded, but these are seen as mediated by socio-politico-economic processes.

THREAT TO BAKWENA AUTARCHY & KGOSI SECHELE'S DEFENCE STRATEGIES

The political misfortunes of the BaKwena were first ushered by an internal dispute over women in 1822 when a revolt against Motawasele II¹ (c.1807-1822) split the BaKwena into two groups.² In 1824 the BaKwena under Tshosa were invaded at Dinawe

by the Makololo. Sechele's section settled at Sokwane c.1831, and later between 1842 and 1844, they moved to Magodimo, Thamaga, Kolobeng and Tshonwane.

In the 1830s and 1840s Kgosi Sechele's attention was directed at reuniting the nation and thereby strengthen his forces against the encroaching Transvaal Afrikaner Commandos. Faced with the two objectives the BaKwena of Sechele struggled to control the all-important itinerant trade in ivory and ostrich feathers, and skins traffic to the Kgalagadi as a means of acquiring guns which were vital for defence of the state. Sechele moved east to Tshonwane, closer to the white "traders' road" to control its northern end. Although Sechele's settlement was far to the East at Tshonwane he managed to slip his people past Bubi who interposed himself between Tshonwane and the Kgalagadi, making the latter less accessible to Sechele and his people. Sechele's settlement at Tshonwane was closer to the hostile Afrikaners in Western Transvaal. A strong defensive stone wall was built around the settlement to bolster his position on the East. Cumming commented that Sechele on hearing possible Boer attacks, "he suddenly resolved to secure his city with a wall of stones, which he at once commenced erecting". Also in November 1844, Cumming observed that, "the wall had been completed, entirely surrounding the town, with loopholes at intervals all along through which to play, upon the advancing enemy with the muskets which he had resolved to purchase from hunters and traders like myself".³

Although Sechele's town of Tshonwane was under constant Boer threat, he had a monopoly of access to traders who sold the essential fire power (guns). Tshonwane was strategically placed to receive refugees escaping from attack and forced labour in the Transvaal.⁴

Traffic in arms and ammunition was vital to the BaKwena and continued unabated despite the Sand River Convention (January, 1852) which prohibited the sale of arms to the "natives". The traffic in guns was irresistible on the part of both the British and Afrikaner traders and hunters because of the handsome profits from gun sales. Cumming himself made £30 from a musket which had cost him 16 shillings.⁵ For the BaKwena this trade was essentially not only for hunting; it was vital for the preservation of their independence from Afrikaner aggression.

In 1852 an Afrikaner Commando destroyed Sechele's settlement at Dinawe "carrying away women and men to make slaves of them."⁶ This put Kgosi Sechele on the defensive. The BaKwena removed from Dinawe to Dithejwane. From the latter Kgosi Sechele further redirected BaKwena economy to one overriding objective: to defend against further Afrikaner encroachment and overrule. Trade with the Kgalagadi was intensified in order to acquire more gun power. Sechele sent his mephato (regiments) on regular trips into the desert and onto Lake Ngami to collect ivory, skins and ostrich feathers which were to be exchanged for arms and ammunition. In September 1857 the BaKwena were said to have "no end in guns".⁷ Like at Dinawe they also built a stone wall around the new settlement of Dithejwane. Further, camouflage pits were dug around the wall to neutralise the advantage which Afrikaners on horses had over the BaKwena foot soldiers.⁸ The BaKwena soldiers kept on guard their settlement with increasing vigilance until well after British Protection (1885).

Thus BaKwena trade was not stimulated by economic needs per-se, for the period c. 1820-1885; it was mainly geared to meet political ends. Because of the trade's political nature, it was a peculiar kind of trade, different from the one that preceded it.⁹

This trade was very much a state enterprise, Kgosi Sechele as the prototypical entrepreneur, regulating and re-directing trade to achieve the overriding political concern of survival and independence. The characteristic instrument of trade of this period was the mophato (regiment) directed by Kgosi Sechele to collect ivory, in places as far as Ngamiland and the reaches of Ghanzi for skins and feathers from the Kgalagadi peoples. This method of obtaining goods was not trade, it was more akin to "cattle-lifting" - a practice which was often at the point of growing out of control - as raids and counter-raids became almost indistinguishable. Apart from controlling all the transactions involving trade goods, the Kgosi normally had the first opportunity to deal with the white trader, and the transaction was first and foremost for arms and ammunition; items indispensable for the survival of the state. The period of controlled trade was uncharacteristic of BaKwena and it was permitted to function because of the exigencies of the unsettled political situation.

THREAT TO BAKWENA AUTARCHY AND KGOSI SECHELE'S STRATEGIES

It was also the threat of political insecurity that Kgosi Sechele sought energetically for a resident missionary in his settlement. As a token of appreciation Sechele welcomed his new muruti (teacher) Roger Price at Molepolole in 1868 by "sending a fine ox for slaughter."¹⁰ Earlier, by inviting Livingstone to his settlement at Tshonwane in 1845, Sechele endeavoured to solve, at a stroke, his problems of trade and defence.¹¹ Livingstone had noted a similar desire for a missionary from the BaKgatla Kgosi and commented, "I need scarcely add that his wish, although sincere, does not indicate any love for the doctrines we teach. It is merely a desire for the protection of temporal benefit which missionaries are everywhere supposed to bring."¹²

That was the impression the Kgosi had for the missionaries. Sechele had confided in Livingstone of his desire to get a missionary, "who would help him in sickness, teach him wisdom, and mend his guns", and later he told the Boers of his relationship with the English, "they are my friends. I get everything from them".¹³ The preservation of the Tlhaping nation against difagane incursions in 1825 by the help of Robert Moffat seemed to assure Sechele of the diplomatic utility of a missionary. With the ever present threat of the Transvaal Afrikaner, a resident missionary seemed to be a solution to the twin needs of trade and defence.

However, missionary invulnerability soon proved illusory as Afrikaner aggression continued unabated and Sechele's baptism lost him support of the BaKwena. When Sechele relinquished his role as principal "rain-maker" in 1848 (after baptism), many BaKwena blamed the missionary and Kgosi Sechele for the severe drought of 1847 to 1853. Besides the rift between Kgosi and the people due to the presence of a missionary, the argument that the presence of a missionary would discourage Afrikaner attack was proved false by the attack of Livingstone's mission station at Kolobeng and the BaKwena settlement at Dinawe in 1852. The strong feeling of betrayal by British missionaries was confirmed by the Sand River Convention of that year in which Britain disclaimed all alliances with "natives" north of the Vaal River. Sechele's brother Khosidintsi strongly

attacked the London Missionary Society agencies when he told Robert Moffat that:

Is it because we have not white skins that we are to be destroyed like libatana (beasts of prey)? Why do the English assist the Boers? Why do they give them power over lands that are not theirs to give? Why do the English supply them with ammunition, when they know the Boers? Do the English want our country? We have been told that the English is a strong nation. They have driven their white Bushmen (Afrikaners) into our country to kill us. Is this strength? We are told that the English love all men. They give or sell ammunition, horses and guns to the Boers, who have red teeth, to destroy us, and if we ask to buy powder, we get none. No, no, no! Black man must have no ammunition: they must serve the white man. Is this their love?¹⁴

After the Convention the BaKwena soon learnt the difference between their interests and those of the British Government.

Although the resident British missionary meant an encroachment of British imperialism, there were immediate advantages to his presence. At least initially, the missionary gave various gifts to the Kgosi and traded in guns and powder. When at a later stage the strategy of balancing British against Transvaal Afrikaner became a clearly defined BaKwena policy, the missionary served as a useful intermediary between the BaKwena and the British government as was the case with the support given to Sechele when he went to Cape Town in 1853 to appeal to the High Commissioner for the return of captured BaKwena children by the Afrikaners at Dinawe (1852).

However, the missionary presence did occasionally pose an internal threat to the unity of the nation. Sechele's baptism for example, led to the blame for drought being pinned on him by the BaKwena as he had relinquished the crucial role of rainmaker. Public reaction led Sechele to employ baagedi (immigrant) rainmakers. Similarly his appetite for things foreign cost the royal exchequer considerable amounts of ostrich feathers, ivory, skins and cattle, and further exacerbated the rift between Kgosi and the people. Mrs. Price observed that

Sechele in 1863 had a thousand cattle, a hundred sheep, and ten or twenty goats, but noted that "Sechele is in reality poorer in cattle than any great chief in Africa, because he has parted with an immense number for the sake of European goods and valuables which he has in abundance..."¹⁵ Sechele paid £300 in ivory and ostrich feathers for the construction of two European style houses, for himself and his son. Such houses of a distinctive style further served to alienate the Kgosi from his people; "his chief men who have been used to come and visit him in his hut and be quite at ease now tremble to enter this place".¹⁶

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF DIFAQANE AND AFRIKANER INTRUSIONS

Important events took place which had sweeping consequences for BaKwena agriculture and the economy generally. Difaqane disturbances in the Transvaal brought many refugees in great numbers, putting a strain on the limited resources of the Kweneng. This tide of immigrants continued to swell until the Afrikaner advance into the Transvaal, and especially after 1852 when Sechele met Afrikaner expansion with armed resistance (chimurenga) and offered refuge to the victims of Afrikaner oppression.

Concurrent with this trend in population increase was a corresponding decrease in edible fruits, roots and game in the area surrounding Molepolole although game had been known to be abundant at Kolobeng in the early 1840s.¹⁷ The relatively sudden increase in human population not only overtaxed the environment, but also drove farther most of the animals into the less accessible areas where they soon fell victims to lack of water.

Both BaKwena and the refugees were stripped of most of their livestock during the difaqane and Afrikaner intrusions. A great demand was placed upon agriculture as former means of food production gradually became inadequate. While immigrants posed an increased problem in food production, they also represented an enormous increase in the labour force and they brought with them an advanced technology in iron-working and in agriculture.¹⁸ It is reasonable to suppose that the refugees, especially the metal workers and cultivators of the Rustenburg area, laid the foundation for grain cultivation as became practised by the BaKwena.

Kgosi Sechele's settlement at Tshonwane had a population of about 300 in 1843 and the BaKwena section under Bubi at Dithejwane had an estimated 350.¹⁹ As greater numbers of immigrants joined the BaKwena of Sechele, the former no longer consisted primarily of a single kin group and both sections probably had more baagedi than BaKwena from the 1840s onwards.

By 1860, Sechele's BaKwena had swelled to over 20,000 and the settlement at Molepolole took on a large, sprawling pattern which spilled over the hills of Dithejwane into the valleys and plains below. Beyond the houses were the people's fields of sorghum, maize, beans, and melons, and the larger amount of land under cultivation reflected the people's increasing dependence on agriculture. Trade became more specialised and directed to fulfill the basic need of defence against Afrikaner aggression, and because the Kgosi was responsible for the survival of the nation the trade in guns was necessarily for that purpose.

The absorption of immigrants into the BaKwena nation resulted in the distinctions of BaKwena and baagedi; dikgosi and dikgosana and morafe (nation). Apart from the social, linguistic, and cultural differences between the two social strata, there were economic distinctions. The immigrants generally arrived without cattle and found the BaKwena dikgosi and dikgosana in possession of the right to tax goods and labour, the exclusive use of servants, and whatever herds of cattle left after the Makololo and Afrikaner invasions. But the immigrants possessed labour skills which were valuable to BaKwena, as metal-workers, cultivators, dingaka ("doctors") and baroka ba pula ("rainmakers"). "Doctors" and "rainmakers" soon accumulated considerable herds of cattle because their services as dingaka and baroka ba pula were frequently sought by BaKwena dikgosi and dikgosana. The successful marketing of these rare skills together with participation in the profitable Kgagaladi trade resulted in a redistribution of BaKwena wealth, generated income, and led to a rise in the status of many baagedi.

The dynamics of BaKwena society were thus based upon flexibility rather than rigid and timeless "customary behaviour" determined by kinship. There evolved a variety of avenues for social mobility to contain possible opposition from "below".

Similarly the BaKwena economy underwent sweeping changes to meet new requirements. Centralization and the rapid increase in population helped to determine the changes from hunting, herding, and gathering to cultivation, herding and trade. These changes were accompanied by re-organisation of labour force, a new relationship between men and women, increasing investments in house-building, and the rise of crafts and specialists. Although the economy was, to a large degree, controlled by the kgosi, especially after the Afrikaner attack at Dinawe, gradually these controls were relaxed (as the threat of Afrikaner aggression diminished) and individual BaKwena travelled into the desert to obtain trade goods and livestock for themselves. At first, the BaKwena used the people of the Kgalagadi as servants, giving them hunting dogs and expecting the furs derived from the use of those dogs to be brought to them as sehuba (tribute). Gradually many BaKwena obtained ostrich feathers, skins, and livestock simply by extorting them from their servants.

THE BEGINNINGS OF PRECOLONIAL LABOUR MIGRATION IN THE KWENENG

It was amid this political tumble and economic dislocation among the BaKwena that the beginnings of labour migration can be discerned. From the mid 1830s the Afrikaner occupied the more productive and better-watered areas in the Transvaal, displacing the BaKwena and other Tswana, and driving them toward the Kgalagadi. The Afrikaner claimed the Transvaal to be theirs by right of conquest and desired to drive the BaKwena and the BaKgatla "from their present position further west and to the Limpopo".²⁰ The BaKwena were pushed on to the fringes of the Kgalagadi, there to eke out a living from a marginally productive land.²¹ Livingstone noted (1849) that "the people are completely in the power of the Boers. Great numbers (of Boers) have come from the Southward and took possession of the whole country; a larger share of the trudgery falls on MoKgatla than any one else".²² They had also designs on kgosi Sechele, "the Boers desired to reduced Sechele to the level of the Eastern tribes, which desire has long been expressed in Selmn luguto-rious Raad".²³ In 1871 the BaKgatla finally left the Transvaal to settle around Mochudi, then still under Sechele. In 1849 the BaKaa in their hundreds had joined the BaKwena from the north where they disliked oppressive exactions of the Ngwato Chief Sekgoma.²⁴

Great numbers of immigrants who often arrived without cattle or corn put further strain on the economy of the BaKwena. The now large BaKwena population of over 20,000 odd had to subsist on meagre resources through dispossession of their cattle, and the land on which they now found themselves was less productive and for the most part dry. Added to this was a long spell of drought between 1845 and 1853 when Livingstone was with the BaKwena. Drought conditions prevailed without significant break. In 1849 Livingstone wrote to his sister, "greater hunger prevails, and a burning sun seems to say we shall have another failure of the native corn crop. This is the fourth year of stunted crops, and the BaKwena formerly were remarkable for the abundance of their corn". In the same letter he mentions of the effect of the drought on the skins trade, "the drought on the Kgalagadi side has been so great, very few have been able to go thither in search of skins, so they are scarcer this year than we ever knew. Only those who have BaKgalagadi near them have been able to procure any. The majority of the people have none. We have bought none for a long time past on account of the scarcity having raised their value".²⁵ Kgosi Sechele was observed to be eating meat infrequently and most people were subsisting "almost entirely on locusts".²⁶

On the 11th of April, 1849 in a letter to Robert Moffat Livingstone noted that, "hunger is intense. The majority of the people are away. 66 went off at once for the Colony for work. About 100 have gone at different times. Many have gone Kalahari-wards".²⁷ There were fears that old people would die of hunger. The immigrants BaKaa arrived at this point and made matters worse for the Kgosi's exchequer: "the BaKaa have come and are erecting their town opposite our house. They have nothing and will add to our hunger, for the BaKwains (BaKwena) will share with them to the last".²⁸ One scarcely needs to add that whatever little livestock was left among the BaKwena must have been greatly reduced by the prolonged severe drought. Missionary efforts suffered no less; "Hunger is very great, and all attention is taken up in caring for the body. School is very thin and so is the church generally".²⁹ The drought impoverished many, "we are hard up, Charles. We cannot help the poor people, and to make matters worse, another tribe, the BaKaa,

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have come to live here (Kolobeng). As long as the BaKwena have anything it will be freely shared. We have had scanty harvests ever since we came to this tribe. We can do nothing without irrigation".³⁰ The drought devastated livestock, and corn became very scarce and Livingstone found it difficult to obtain any on sale, "we are without corn. Tried to find cattle among both BaKwains (BaKwena) and BaNuaketse (BaNgwaketse), but could not".³¹ The BaKwena economy thus suffered a heavy blow from natural disasters and heavy demands from a large population; and hence the dependence and importance of the Kgalagadi trade to them at the time.

Labour migration among the BaKwena is known to have started about the mid-1840s.³² Mission stations in South Africa like Kuruman were some of the early institutions to provide employment for the BaKwena. Initially employees were paid in beads, "a variety which costs about 3 shillings per pound, and they frequently changed (tasks) so that the work would be spread around and a maximum number of BaKwena would be taught "civilised ways" and "cleanliness".³³

BaKwena also sold their labour power away from home as in guiding missionaries and trades, help them transport their goods, and working on farms in the Cape Colony and the Transvaal as store assistants and farm-hands. As early as 1847, BaKwena left for the Cape and the Transvaal to work for the white farmers. Such labour migration had its roots in the general displacement and dispossession of the difaqane and Afrikaner encroachment. Also natural disasters like the severe drought of 1847 to 1853 played their part. Going to Makgoeng increased during these years because it was a means of getting food for the migrants and they returned home with cattle which were their wages for the period of employment.³⁴ Livingstone wrote letters of identification for those seeking work in the Cape and Transvaal during his stay with the BaKwena: "The party of BaKwains (BaKwena) who went down with a note from me went straight to Dolesberg, delivered the note to the magistrate and got a pass, and then proceeded Southwards. Those of the babereki³⁵ who have returned home have brought some cattle".³⁶ This practice

formed the basis for labour migration which followed the opening of the South African diamond and gold mines in the late nineteenth century, and indeed it is more so today that labour migration is affected mainly by local economic conditions as in crop failures and absence of local employment.

Labour migration may have started among the BaKwena because of the intense strain on their economy and geographical proximity to white farms. Sechele moved East in the early 1840s and built his staadt in the Marico District in an attempt to control trade in guns and ivory along the "Missionaries' Road", and thus settling adjacent to the Transvaal farmers where extensive farms' objective need was a large labour force.

CONCLUSION

Early nineteenth century labour migration followed BaKwena dispossession of productive land by the Transvaal farmers. Labour migration's long history from the 1840s to the present is evidence in support for view that since land dispossession, the BaKwena have been forced to eke out a living from a marginally productive area between the Kgalagadi semi-desert and the Transvaal. The historical "push" into the edges of the Kgalagadi left them in an area prone to chronic drought and famine. Thus "economic pressure" on migration between 1840s and 1885 at least, should be seen in its correct portrayal - as part effect and part cause of labour migration - migration following forced occupation of marginally productive land.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Kgosi Motswasele II (c.1807-1822) was the father of Kgosi Sechele I (1829-1892) and last ruled the United Bakwena until the revolt over women in 1821. See Schapera, I., (ed.), Praise-Poems of Tswana Chiefs, Oxford 1965. p. 123
- ² After the revolt of 1822 the Bakwena split into groups - one led by Tshosa and later Bubi (joined Sechele's Section in 1853) and the other led by Segokotlo and by Sechele from 1829
- ³ Cumming, R. G., Five Years of a Hunter's Life in the Far Interior of South Africa, II, London 1850, p. 68. Also, David Livingstone to Robert Moffat, Mabotsa, September 22, 1845, LMS-SOAS, Africa, Odds, Box 21
- ⁴ There were many instances of the Tswana being rounded up from their villages to go and work on farms of Afrikaner settlers for no food or pay. David Livingstone refers to this practice as "slavery" - See Schapera, I., (ed.), David Livingstone Family Letters 1841-1856, Volume Two 1849-1856, Chatto and Windus, London, 1859, pp. 8-12
- ⁵ Cumming, R. G., Five Years of a Hunter's Life in the Far Interior of South Africa, I, p. 330. See also, Chapman, James, Travels in the Interior of South Africa, I, London 1868, p.18
- ⁶ David Livingstone to his parents, 26 September, 1852, in Family Letters, Volume II, pp. 187-191
- ⁷ Baldwin, W. C., African Hunting and Adventure, London 1863, p. 175. Also Dolman, Alfred, In the Footsteps of Livingstone, London 1924, pp. 196-199
- ⁸ Wallis, J. P. R., (ed.) The Matabele Journals of Robert Moffat 1829-1860, I, London, 1945. pp. 170-171, 344-346, 377
- ⁹ The late 18th century trade was mainly for barter involving tobacco and essentials like spears, arrows and hoes. See, Okihiro, G., Resistance and Accomodation : Bakwena-ba GaSechele 1842-1852, Botswana Notes and Records, Volume 5, 1973, pp. 104-116
- ¹⁰ Long, Una (ed.), The Journals of Elizabeth Lees Price, 1854-1883, London, Edward Arnold, 1956
- ¹¹ Schapera, I., (ed.), D. Livingstone's Missionary Correspondence, I, p. 127

- ¹²Ibid., pp. 35-36. See also David Livingstone to Rev. J. J. Freeman, Kolobeng, January 9, 1850, LMS-SOAS, Livingstone Letters, Folder 9
- ¹³Schapera, I., (ed.), Family Letters, I, p. 132; and Livingstone, D., Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa, New York, 1858, p. 43
- ¹⁴Wallis, J. P. R., (ed.), Matabele Journals, I, pp. 377-379
- ¹⁵Long, Una, (ed.), The Journals of Elizabeth Lees Price, London 1956, pp. 112
- ¹⁶Ibid., pp. 281-283
- ¹⁷David Livingstone to R. Moffat, Kolobeng, August 13, 1847, LMS-SOAS, Africa Odds, Box 9, Folder 2A; David Livingstone to Benjamin Pyne, Kolobeng, May 28, 1846, LMS-SOAS, Africa Odds, Box 22
- ¹⁸Okiliro, G., Livingstone "Residence and Accommodation," p.105
- ¹⁹David Livingstone to A. Tidman, Kuruman, June 24, 1843, LMS-SOAS, Africa Odds, Box 9, Folder 2A
- ²⁰Livingstone, David, Family Letters, II, p. 9
- ²¹See Duggean, R., Kweneng in the Colonial Era, Botswana Notes and Records, Volume 9, 1979, pp. 24-34; Breuz, P. L., Ancient People in the Kalahari Desert, Afrika und Übersee, Band XLII, BNA-BNB 367, pp. 49-64; and also Moffat, J.S., Missionary Record at Molepolole, 1895, London, pp. 7-8
- ²²Livingstone, David, Family Letters, II, pp. 8-9
- ²³Ibid., "lugubrious Road" - "Parliament" for the Afrikaners
- ²⁴Ibid., p. 35
- ²⁵Ibid., p. 15

²⁶Ibid., p. 19

²⁷Ibid., p. 31

²⁸Ibid., p. 28

²⁹Ibid., p. 43

³⁰Ibid., p. 44

³¹Ibid., p. 106

³²Schapera, I., Migrant Labour and Tribal Life in the Bechuanaland Protectorate, Oxford, 1956, p. 23

³³David Livingstone to Charles Whish, Chonwane (Tshonwane), October 9, 1846 LMS-SOAS, Africa Odds, Box 22. Also Chamberlain, Some Letters from David Livingstone, p. 92

³⁴Schapera, I., (ed.), Family Letters II, p. 31; Also Livingstone, Missionary Researches, 1858, p. 39

³⁵Men who had gone to seek work in Cape Town were nicknamed babereki. See Schapera, I., (ed.), Family Letters, II, p. 126

³⁶Schapera, I., (ed.), Family Letters, II, p. 120