Women Chiefs and Pre-colonial Tswana Patriarchy

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Abstract
It has usually been held that in traditional Tswana society women could not be *dikgosi* (chiefs) in their own right, though they could be regents. However, the historical record indicates that although it was not common, women could in some circumstances be *dikgosi*. Indeed, one of the traditional *morafe* (chiefdom or polity) founders (Mohurutshe/Lehurutshe) is said to have been a woman. Female chiefs seem to have constructed themselves as 'social males', which helped resolve the problems posed by agnatic succession but which may have increased the tendency to erase the memory of them. Comparisons with other Sotho-Tswana societies can be helpful in analysing the issue.

Introduction
It is generally asserted that in Tswana polities women were never *dikgosi* in their own right, though they could be regents. When Kgosi Mosadi, the female *kgosi* of the Balete, was installed in 2003, she referred to notable twentieth-century female regents such as Ntebogang of the Bangwaketse or Pulane Moremi of the Batawana as precedents, though, interestingly, she also mentioned Queen Victoria (Seboko 2003). I will argue, however, that tradition actually suggests a more complex picture, in which female *bogosi* (chieftainship) was not unknown in reality. Memory of such cases, however, has tended to be erased over time. (For a useful summary of the history of female *bogosi* in Botswana, see Matemba 2005.)

A particularly interesting and important case concerns the origins of the Bahurutshe, who according to tradition emerged when a previous group split into the Bahurutshe and Bakwena following the death of Malope. The eponymous founders of the Bahurutshe, Bakwena, Bangwaketse and Bangwato are all part of the story. There are several competing traditions about their relationships, though books sometimes only state one of them, and as we shall see, some recent work has questioned the traditional approach. In one tradition, Malope was the brother of Mohurutshe, also called Lehurutshe, and Kwena was Malope's son, with Ngwaketse and Ngwato being in later generations. Another tradition, however, is that Malope was the father of Mohurutshe and Kwena, and sometimes Ngwaketse and Ngwato are added in the same generation (Sillery 1952:104-105). Schapera (1994:302) makes Mohurutshe the sibling of Malope, but has Kwena, Ngwaketse, and Ngwato all as sons of Malope. It has been suggested that the versions in which Kwena, Ngwaketse, and Ngwato are placed in the same generation are a representation of the nineteenth-century alliance of the three *merafe*. My interest, however, is with Mohurutshe, or Lehurutshe.

Lehurutshe
One tradition is that Mohurutshe, also known as Lehurutshe, was a woman. She was the only child of the great wife, and for this reason many wished to make her *kgosi*. However, others were unwilling to accept this and followed Kwena, the (male) heir in the second house. The stories do not seem to mention any question of a regency. The two groups split from each other.

Lehurutshe, at the head of a considerable following, left the capital Majanamatshwana and went to live in Tsoenyane, then known as Lesosong, now the town of Heidelberg. On their way to Lesosong they went through a pass of the Mokgana Mountains (Magaliesberg). So they must have lived north

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of Magaliesberg. In later years they removed from Lesosong, crossed Kokotsi (Witwatersrand), and settled in the Madiko (Marico) Valley. The followers of Princess Lehurutshe were then named Bahurutshe after her and those of Kwena were called Bakwena (Mpotokwane 1974:37).

In this version, we see a true female *kgosi*. Lehurutshe was not a regent; indeed it is precisely the fact of becoming the substantive *kgosi* which leads to the dispute. Leonard Ngcongco also records, as one tradition, the female-*kgosi* version: 'the dispute was about whether the chiefdom should be in the hands of the eldest child in the senior house regardless of whether it was female, or whether the leadership should be kept male by electing the senior son of the second house' (Ngcongco 1979:33-34).

In another version Mohurutshe was male, and the split between him and Kwena was along more ordinary lines. James Mpotokwane (1974) begins with a detailed account of the female Lehurutshe but thereafter refers instead to the male Mohurutshe, and indeed puts 'King Mohurutshe' in the title of the article. He does not state a preference in the article. Mpotokwane was an expert in the history of the Bakhurutshe, a branch of the Bahurutshe, and his article reports traditions collected from elders, probably including early in the twentieth century (Lebang Mpotokwane, telephone interview 28 October 2019). In the male-Mohurutshe tradition it is agreed Mohurutshe was senior; in one version he rebelled against his father Malope but failed to take over (Mpotokwane 1974), and in another Kwena seceded for unknown reasons (Transvaal Native Affairs Department 1905). The name Lehurutshe seems to be given only to the female claimant, while Mohurutshe is used for both the male and the female figures (cf. Sillery 1952:104).

The tradition with a male Mohurutshe was recorded in 1905 (Transvaal Native Affairs Department 1905:11), and P-L Breutz initially recorded the traditions with Mohurutshe as male. However, during some supplementary research, he consulted Bahurutshe elders ('very old informants') and learned of the female-*kgosi* version. This would seem to have been in 1936, when he did six weeks' research in Dinokana (Breutz 1989:7). Breutz also noted that the Barolong retained a tradition of the sojourn of the (female) Mohurutshe with them during her search for a new location (Breutz 1989:7). The female-*kgosi* version is also recorded in Kwena tradition:

> They [the Bakwena informants] said... MOHURUTSHE was a female chief, because no male heir had been borne by the great wife of MALOPE; and Kwena, Ngwato, Ngwaketse (possibly of the next generation) and others were sons of junior wives, but all of them had the totem kwena (crocodile)... These sons and the majority of the tribesmen objected to a female's assuming the chieftainship as this was contrary to the custom in those days. MOHURUTSHE therefore left with her followers... This happened around 1440 or 1480. The tribe now took the phofu (eland) as their totem (Breutz 1953:24).

This is also noted by Sillery (1952:104). Leonard Ngcongco also notes the Kwena-Mogopa tradition for the female *kgosi*. He does not clarify the source (Ngcongco 1979:33–4), but on the basis of nearby notes it may have been Breutz. It is worth noting that Mpotokwane gives a different totem tradition, whereby *phofu* (eland) had been the totem of the group before the Hurutshe-Kwena split (1974:37).

Breutz (1989:7) makes the interesting observation that 'It was very unusual for anyone to know that MOHURUTSHE was a female' (apparently referring to knowledge among Bahurutshe). The wording implies that, in his view, the female-*kgosi* version was the correct one, although relatively few people knew about it. Since, in Setswana, gender is not marked either in the name 'Mohurutshe' or in the words that would be used to refer to her, it would be relatively easy for her gender to be forgotten without any actual moment of change.

Thus, the female-*kgosi* version, while less well-known, is attested by two traditions recorded by Breutz (firstly Bahurutshe informants, and secondly Barolong tradition) and one from Mpotokwane. Sillery (1952:104) refers rather vaguely to other sources, such as an unspecified and unpublished paper by Schapera.

'Lehurutshe' as the name of the female *kgosi* is attested by Mpotokwane (1974). As Mpotokwane comments, it is an unusual name, used by modern Bahurutshe for their area, not as a personal name. 'Mohurutshe', however, could be a back formation. This may be evidence in favour of Lehurutshe as the older form of the name. It is worth noting that Tlou and Campbell (1995:104–105) seem to favour the female-Lehurutshe tradition.

Doubts have been raised as to the historicity of the eponymous founders, although this does not necessarily mean traditions are dismissed *in toto*:

> The ethnonym Hurutshe is most probably derived from *-hurutsha, an archaic causative form of the verb stem -huruga, which can be translated as 'cause to move residence'. The verb stem -huruga no longer occurs in Tswana, but has been recorded as a dialectal variant of -huduga in Northern Sotho.... Interestingly, oral tradition relates that after the split between the Kwena and the Hurutshe branches, the latter, under their leader Mohurutshe, were forced to move away (Boeyens 2016:30–31).

On such a theory Mohurutshe or Lehurutshe would be named after the *morafe*, not *vice versa*. The Bahurutshe changed their totem from *phofu* (eland) to *tshwene* (baboon). According to one tradition, the change involved the first-fruits ceremony. Baboons had already been eating the melons, and Kwena refused to eat melons contaminated with baboon saliva, but Mohurutshe (and followers) did so, thus obtaining the seniority (Ngcongco 1979:33, 45n.51). This story, reminiscent of the biblical story of Jacob and Esau (Gen. 25:29-34 and Gen. 27:6-35), was told by Bakwena and justified a claim that, despite the Bahurutshe's first-fruits priority, Kwena was actually the senior (Brown 1926:261–262). In the second story, Motebele (son of Lehurutshe or Mohurutshe) was hunting with his brother Motebejane and his *mophato* (age-set, conventionally translated 'regiment'). They captured a young baboon, and Motebele ordered them to keep it at the cattle post till it grew up. Alas, when it heard baboons barking on the rocks it ran away to join them; Motebejane and his whole *mophato* were flogged, leading to war (Brown 1926:263, Mpotokwane 1974:38, Transvaal Native Affairs Department 1905:11). Why Motebele wanted a baboon is not stated, at least in any of the sources cited. Motebejane won the struggle and, to mark his triumph, adopted the baboon as totem (Breutz 1953:19 and Brown 1926:263). Such stories may be fictional or symbolic, though when a totem was changed there was presumably *some* basis for the choice.

Ngcongco suggested that the curious stories about baboons (which appear in two generations) might symbolise problems with *tshwene*-totem refugees, and that the Hurutshe-Kwena split might be connected with this (Ngcongco 1979:46n.56). By this interpretation, the change of totem to *tshwene* could be an allegory of a *tshwene*-totem sub-leader taking over. However, this goes beyond the scope of this paper. The Bahurutshe had seniority in terms of the first-fruits ceremony and this was attributed to Mohurutshe being the elder; although their seniority was also observed by the supposedly unrelated Bapedi of Zoutpansberg (Transvaal Native Affairs Department 1905:11).

If *dikgosi* are supposed to be male, then the story of Lehurutshe is a surprising one, and yet it does not make any particular point. It is not, for example, a story told only by the Bahurutshe's rivals in order to discredit them. The story does not show the *morafe* suffering disastrous consequences as a warning about the perils of female leadership. Nor indeed is Lehurutshe presented as extraordinary, though if she existed

we can surmise she must have been an impressive figure to attract support against a male rival. There is a Setswana proverb about female leadership, which I cite here in the Serolong version. In the full version, it says '*Ha di etelwa pele ke manamagadi, di wela ka lemena*'. This translates as 'if they (cattle) are led by cows, they (will) fall down a cliff'. However, it is often cited in the short form: '*Ga di ke di etelwa pele ke manamagadi*', ('they (cattle) are never led by cows') (Leloba Molema, personal communication 6 October 2018).[1]

Interestingly, because the full version is a conditional sentence, it does not exactly say that female leadership is impossible or never happens; rather, that if it does happen the consequences are bad because a female leader cannot be a good leader. But Lehurutshe's people do not fall over a cliff. In this, the story differs from such legends as that of Pope Joan. According to that legend, a woman in disguise rose through the Church and became pope during the early Middle Ages. This was widely believed until the Early Modern period when it was demonstrated to be fictitious. Pope Joan's supposed reign was regarded as a rather shocking deviation (indicated by such lurid details as her discovery by giving birth in public). We may also note that the existence of a proverb deprecating female leadership implies that it is a possibility.

There are other references in tradition to women in power. Bakgatla tradition records an event similar to the case of Lehurutshe: a succession dispute, c. 1650, involving a woman from the first house (Mosetlha) and a son from the second (Kgafela), which led to the establishment of two branches, Bakgatla-baga-Mosetlha and Bakgatla-baga-Kgafela (Makgala 2009:49). Matemba (2003:55), however, records an alternative tradition that it was Kgafela who was the woman. The similarity of the Bakgatla tradition to that of Lehurutshe might suggest a transposition of the same story, although Marc Bloch warned that this argument should be used with great caution (Bloch 1954:123-124 and 130-133). However, in this case the logic of the situation means that the pattern is inherently likely to recur. It is significant that such traditions tend to be unclear, reflecting a tendency to forgetting of information that does not fit expectations.

Female Chiefs in a Patriarchal System

Lehurutshe is a figure from the distant past. She may be a symbolic figure. But there are examples from the early nineteenth century of female leadership as an option. Most famously, there is MmaNtathisi, the regent who led Batlokwa during the Difaqane wars (1820s–1840s). However, that was a regency—or at least it is usually so described, though how meaningful the distinction is in her case is unclear. Would a female *kgosi*, a queen or chief in her own right, have been possible?

The standard theory is that this could not happen. The simpler form of the argument is that it would be contrary to tradition; there were rules and this would go against them. On the other hand, it is clear that the rules of succession could be flexible in the case of men, and things happen in most political systems that are contrary to the theoretical norms.

A more sophisticated theory is that it could not happen because it would go against the logic of agnatic succession. That is, family and royal relationships were constructed on the basis of male relationship only. If then a woman were *kgosi,* how would her husband and his lineage fit in?

At root, however, both these approaches have the same weaknesses. Firstly, they assume that normative rules will necessarily translate into reality at the level of central power. On the contrary, this is precisely the level where deviations are most possible without compromising the general social principles. Secondly, they overlook the possibility that systems and rules can be interpreted in different ways when necessary. Thirdly, they simply ignore counter-examples and contrary evidence.

Counter-examples exist. Possibly the most striking case is that of the Kololo ruler Sebetwane's

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[1] Dr Molema would welcome information from former herdboys etc. as to whether the proverb is purely symbolic or based on any actual bovine behaviour.

daughter Mamochisane, to whom Sebetwane passed *bogosi* in his lifetime. This was recorded by David Livingstone (1857), who was resident with them, and there is no doubt from his account that she was installed as a chief, not as a regent. (It would be possible to argue that the Makololo were atypical. At any rate, Livingstone regarded Sebetwane's action as *unusual*.) Recognising the problem of a female ruler's husband, he apparently advised her that 'all the men were hers, she might take any one, but ought to keep none. In fact, he thought she might do with the men what he could do with the women' (Livingstone, 1857:179). However, relationships with the men provoked the wives. She found her position very difficult and gave up power to her brother Sekeletu. According to Livingstone's account, Sekeletu was not keen, being afraid of a rival. Mamochisane explained her action, at least publicly, as a desire to retire to private family life (Livingstone 1857:179). As this shows, the problems raised by agnatic succession were real. But it also shows that they did not make female chieftainship impossible. Sebetwane's advice seems to envisage that the solution was to dispense with a husband and be the 'man' herself.

It is possible that Botswana history could benefit from more comparisons with other Sotho-Tswana societies (Kuper 1975). In this case a comparison with Lesotho society is useful. In the colonial period, there were some cases of women holding office as regents or as minor chiefs. British colonial officials became concerned at this, apparently holding assumptions that such women could not function as effective agents of policy. However, they were told by Basotho chiefs that there was historic precedent for women reigning as chiefs in their own right. One situation mentioned was that a widow might become chief (Epprecht 2000:116). Assuming that succession passed to male heirs after her, such a chieftainship would interrupt the sequence without altering it. The British, however, were reluctant to accept such information as it challenged their understanding of how the society was supposed to function. Epprecht's work suggests that the rigid theory of male chieftainship may be a construction of British colonial officials and Basotho patriarchs. In Lesotho, female chiefs and regents were 'social males'. '[W]omen chiefs were "men" in social terms… Their rights and dignity stemmed from the office and the relationships inherent in the institution of chieftainship rather than their biological femaleness' (Epprecht 2000:110).

The Paramount regent 'Mantsebo insisted on being addressed as *Ntate* (Sir) and regarded others as related to her on the basis of her being male. On one occasion she explained (to a woman) that 'I call myself a man because I am the Paramount Chief... you are my wife because I was married to you by my father. I say you are married to me because I have taken the name of my husband your father' (Epprecht 2000:110).

Mamochisane seems to have used a similar definition of her position. 'One man whom she chose was even called her wife and her son the child of Mamochisane's wife' (Livingstone 1857:179). Thus, relationships could be interpreted in ways that fitted the usual logic despite an obviously different reality. Such patterns indicate a weakness in assumptions about agnatic lineages. If a woman could be a 'man' with agnatic relationships, would we necessarily even know from tradition that a chief had been female? The phenomenon may raise wider issues about gender identity.

The case of the Lobedu or Lovedu in South Africa is also worth noting. A Northern Sotho society with the usual agnatic relationships has become modified, notably by the creation of the Rain Queen. 'According to Lovedu legend, the first Queen [Maselekwane Modjadji] succeeded after conflicts between the King (her father) and his sons had led to a period of intense internecine strife. This was in about 1800' (Kuper 1975:146n.2). Thus, a woman emerged as chief in her own right in response to a crisis and failure in the elite. Comparable events (without the same long-term consequences) would have been possible in Tswana society.

The traditions about Bobjwale Mere Mathiba are interesting but unclear. At the death of Kgari, the King of the Bangwato, in 1828, his great wife was childless, but his second wife Bobjwale had a

son Kgama [Khama II] and his third wife had a son Sekgoma [Sekgoma I]. Sedimo, a nephew of Kgari, 'entered the house' of Bobjwale under the levirate custom. Macheng [Matšeng] was born from this relationship, and was legally an heir of Kgari, ranking above Sekgoma, although interestingly Sekgoma used Macheng's lack of biological descent to denigrate his claim (Sillery 1952:118). In some accounts Sedimo was the regent (Sillery 1952:118), while in others it was Bobjwale herself (Schapera 1965:191). Sekgoma I seized power following the death of Khama II in 1834, but he had to face opposition from part of the *morafe* who wanted Bobjwale to be the leader. Whether they wanted her to be regent or actually chief is unclear. It is also said that Bobjwale left with her supporters and ruled small Ngwato groups in the Chobe-Hwange region (Matemba 2005:7). The traditions about Bobjwale seem surprisingly unclear for so recent a period—perhaps another example of the tendency to forget female rulers.

In another case, in 1880, President Brand of the Orange Free State heard claims to *bogosi* from the Barolong. A woman named Tsai claimed that she should take office. She stated that the Barolong did not have fixed rules and that, although men admittedly had *more* right to the estate than women, she would be better in this case (Landau 2010:157).

Paul Landau has raised questions about the nature of pre-modern Tswana chieftainship. In periods of fluidity or crisis, groupings may have been formed *ad hoc*, and he suggests that women could become nominal heads for some groups:

> These women were placeholders over unrankable alliances of opportunistic men, who had not been circumcised together, who agreed upon no common past male chief or ancestor, yet who wished to take wealth together.... [S]ometimes a woman could unite factions more effectively than any existing man or ancient paternal ancestor's name (Landau 2010:40).

Landau refers to such women as 'titular leader[s]' (Landau 2010:40). The Makololo evidently took their name from Mmakololo (or Kololo), wife of Sebetwane. 'When Sebitwane was fighting, his men began to call themselves after a wife, MmaKololo.... They did not recognize Sebitwane's paternal bloodline in a particular relationship to their own, and so elevated a noninheriting woman while they pushed on' (Landau 2010:58). Such placeholders were not, of course, examples of actual female power. But they show a further flaw in the argument that agnatic descent systems ruled out women chiefs. In some circumstances, such relationships could actually make the choice of a woman a convenient manoeuvre.

Landau regards Mohurutshe (female) as a symbolic or 'paradigmatic' figure and interprets her name as 'person-of-*rotse*-place' (*mo ha rotse*): '"prestige place" converted into a feminine sign' (Landau 2010:62). This is connected to Landau's broader reconstruction of the nature of early Tswana society. Landau notes that Mohurutshe, like other names in early tradition, appears in multiple traditions (Landau 2010:63). In assessing oral traditions, one has to ask the classic historical question about sources: what was the purpose of creating the source? Traditions were transmitted not simply to convey neutral information, but to convey meanings about the situation. (This does not necessarily mean, however, that they are fictional.) One complication with assigning symbolic significance to Mohurutshe is that her female version was apparently rare in tradition.

Another point to consider is that chieftainship did not necessarily follow the supposed rules even in theory. Comaroff (1978) argued that the genealogies supposedly governing Tswana succession were, in practice, constructed to fit the actual achievement, though this view has been questioned by others including Parsons (Parson 1990). Without discounting Comaroff's (1978) analysis, it cannot be the whole story, since deposed lines were known, which would not be the case if the genealogy was always fitted to the facts of power. Indeed, sometimes the heir to a deposed line continued to hold some ritual prerogatives as *kgosi ya lerotse*, a reference to precedence in the first-fruits ceremony (Schapera 1994:57). The Tswana did not

necessarily believe a *kgosi* was the legitimate claimant any more than they believed that Mamochisane's 'wife' was really female.

Such deviations from the rules of succession could come about in several ways. In some cases there was a seizure of power: Sekgoma I is an example of this. In other cases, the *morafe* simply preferred another candidate (Arbousset 1991:112) who might not even be a legitimate relative (Transvaal Native Affairs Department 1905:12 and 15). According to Schapera (1963:163), there were (up to the 1940s) 91 recorded dynastic disputes among the eight 'major' *morafe*, including 52 in which the chieftainship was in question. Every *morafe* was involved. Fighting was not uncommon, though the numbers involved were small-14 dead in the Bangwaketse conflict of 1857 (Schapera 1963:163). Schapera further observes that 'that conflict was not unexpected is shown... in the Kgatla ceremony of installing a new chief, one feature of which is a public announcement that whoever opposes his right to the office should be ready to fight at once' (Schapera 1963:162).

In the present day, there is the case of Kgosi Mosadi. Of course, her installation in 2003 was seen as an innovation reflecting a modernisation of the chieftainship. It does, however, illustrate the adaptability of Tswana traditional institutions. The case of Kgosi Mosadi also raises another point: if she were a figure of tradition, would we believe that 'Chief Woman' could be a real name for such a person? (*Mosadi* means 'woman'.) As this illustrates, coincidences happen. Since 2003 more women have become chiefs.

It should be noted that social patterns have changed over time. Changes can be obscured by continuities in terminology. There is reason, for example, to think that earlier Tswana *merafe* had a different structure from the ward system of the post-*Difaqane* period (Parsons 1973:92). Breutz (1989:7) suggests that in earlier periods there may have been a matrilineal aspect: this is not to confuse matrilineality with female leadership, but rather to suggest that succession outside agnatic lineage might have been legitimate (Breutz 1987:7). It is worth noting that the 'matrilineal belt' is not a great distance away and that the Tswana were extensively involved with Khoe pastoralists who were at one time matrilineal (Neil Parsons, email communication 11 October 2018). The question of matrilineality goes beyond the scope of this paper: while the evidence suggests that cattle ownership influenced societies towards patrilineality (Holden and Mace 2003:2425-2433), this finding seems too coarse-grained for the complex gender relations involved here. Interestingly, there is a version of the Lowe story in which the control of cattle was taken from women by men (Campbell 1815:307 and B Morton 2011:57).

Another important consideration is that the population during this early period when Lehurutshe and Mosetlha lived (if they are based in reality) was probably quite small by later standards. Rather than the large Tswana polities of more recent times, one should think of the small pre-colonial settlements of the Tswapong hills or the Kalahari. The ability of such groups to force adherence to rules was limited even in later periods (Kuper 1970:160-2). A loose parallel could be drawn with early Anglo-Saxon kingship where succession was within a royal family, but the successor was not necessarily the eldest son, or a son of the old king at all. Rather, there was a 'fluid and negotiable succession protocol' (Burch 2015:156-60). Looking back, however, later English people tended to imagine things in terms of the norms of their own time. (This was taken to an extreme by the romances transposing Arthurian legend into the world of medieval knights.) Similarly, Tswana succession in this early period was probably more fluid than it was in later periods, but in tradition events were interpreted in terms of nineteenth and early twentieth century expectations. Consider the early Hurutshe tradition about Motebejane and his *mophato*. It has been persuasively argued (F. Morton 2011:42) that *mephato* did not exist until much later than this, so this tradition has presumably been adapted. We find a *mophato* added to tradition, and a female chief perhaps removed.

One issue to note is the distinction between the norms of what is *supposed* to happen, and the historical facts of what *did* happen. The transmission of tradition may replace what is not understood or expected with what makes sense to those relating traditions. The great fourteenth-century Arab historian

Ibn Khaldun noted that a transmitter of tradition 'transmits the information, attributing to it the significance he assumes or imagines it to have' (2015:33). Also, even when the facts are well-known, there is a tendency to narrate the theoretical norm instead. Notably, although among Tswana groups there was in theory a clear rule of succession (the eldest son of the great wife), disputes and conflicts were common.

Historians talk of 'erasing' as a process in public memory, or indeed historiography. It has become a common observation that women's roles in history have been subject to it. Deliberate erasure was practised, not always very successfully, by some ancient civilisations including the Egyptians and Romans, and more efficiently by the Soviet Union under Stalin. George Orwell (1949), reflecting on the implications, coined the term 'unperson' for the abolished person in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. However, we are concerned with a less structured and indeed less conscious process of forgetting and transformation, which derives not from political authority but from expectations and power embedded in social relations. The female Mohurutshe (whether she is a historical or a symbolic figure) does show some tendency toward erasure, becoming less commonly known than her male alter ego. But, if so, the process was not complete.

There is no doubt that female leadership would have been an anomaly in a highly patriarchal society. However, I would suggest that the highest position in a state is a unique one and that it is possible for a woman to hold it with only a limited impact on the general pattern of gender relations in society. This is not true of positions at a lower level. This pattern can be observed in diverse societies, with elites accepting a female centre of legitimacy, or even finding it the least troublesome solution. In China, despite highly sexist social attitudes, it was not uncommon for the Empress Dowager to be the real ruler. Examples of *de jure* female rule can be found in sixteenth-century England with Mary Tudor; in ancient Egypt with Hatshepsut (who to some extent constructed her position as a social male, using the title 'king') (Ray 2002; Robins 1998; Trigger *et al*. 1986); or indeed in some post-independence states such as India or Ceylon/ Sri Lanka, where political dynasties could stabilise politics. The appearance of such cases in unrelated societies indicates that the phenomenon represents a pattern in the logic of power. Hatshepsut served the dynasty well, but was a somewhat unwelcome memory:

> Hatshepsut's accession ... may have been as much a dynastic defence-mechanism as an act of personal ambition. The co-reign no doubt generated tension, but it appears to have been fundamentally amicable, and the destruction of Hatshepsut's monuments is partly explicable as the expunging of a politically necessary reign which was offensive to the concept of *ma'at* [ideal cosmic order].' (Trigger *et al*. 1986:219).

Despite the great differences between the two societies, is there not here an echo of the erasure of Lehurutshe? Another interesting possibility is suggested by the *morafe* name 'Bamangwato' which was replaced by 'Bangwato' during the twentieth century, though it does still sometimes appear. It appears to be an elided form of *BaGaMmaNgwato* (Thapelo Otlogetswe, email communication 21 November 2018) and the eponym appears to be MmaNgwato.

Although the adoption of *phuti* (duiker) as totem by the Bangwato is usually explained by the story of the duiker rescuing Ngwato, there is an alternative though less romantic tradition that Ngwato adopted the duiker 'in order, it is said, to please his wife, who with her ancestors revered this antelope' (Ellenberger 1997:17). This seems to suggest a politically important marriage involving *phuti*-totem people, with MmaNgwato being an important figure. Perhaps MmaNgwato was a 'placeholder', in Landau's terms. At any rate, she had disappeared from tradition by the time it was first written down, and, with the shortening of the *morafe* name, she has now been completely erased.

Conclusion

The common statement that, among the Tswana, women were never chiefs in their own right, though they could be regents, does not seem sustainable. Although such cases were rare, women could be symbolic chiefs (placeholders) where power was held by men, *de facto* leaders where official chieftainship was held by men, or even chiefs of both symbolic and real power.

The assertion that this could not happen disregards the evidence relating to women chiefs, in favour of a theory of lineage that, while arguably normative for Tswana society, was sometimes more theoretical than real. In particular, women rulers could define themselves as social males, circumventing the problem of the agnatic system. Comparisons with Lesotho and other Sotho-Tswana traditions may be useful in identifying real practice.

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