

## Sephiri Molosiwa: A Mongwato Royal Still Going Strong at 102 Years of Age

*Seatholo Masego Tumedi\**

It is not every day that one learns of someone who has lived for more than a century and yet all their senses are still intact; and, more than that, they are even technologically savvy enough to be accessible through a mobile phone. Thanks to a Mooka/Mophuting man who also happens to be my ‘great grandson’, Rre Johnson Mpho-a-Mmolaatlou McDonald-a-Seema also known (at Maalosong/Maboleding, in Serowe) as Johnson Mpho-a-Mmolaatlou McDonald-a-Mokudinyane-a-Molosiwa-a-Kgama I. I listened to the constant ‘whisper’ of: ‘Sephiri this . . . Sephiri that . . .’ As Johnson’s ‘great grandmother’ I had no other option but to listen, and eventually act. Seatholo I -a-Nthokwa-a-Phate-a-Kokwana I-a-Malesela-a-Motsumi (wa Morabana) after whom I was named (as the third or fourth) is an ancestral grandmother to Mmolaatlou McDonald Seema (Johnson’s father) from his maternal side.

Well, it took me a fairly short time to decide to fill up my fuel tank (fortunately it was that time of the month when one receives one’s *tandabala* (pension) and hit the road driving from Tonota, going in the direction of ga-MmaBessie-a-Kgama (Serowe) to see MmaBapati as Mme Sephiri Molosiwa is known in her ‘hood’.

It was after getting lost several times in the vast semi-urban Sjapi with the villagers indicating two opposing directions as places where to find the Maaloso kgotla (even with the possibility of a third alternative in the form of some diminutive version of Maaloso: Maaloswana) that I found Mme Sephiri’s home.

House 385 is located alongside some paved road in the neighbourhood of ‘*ko letamong*’, and the old Maphatshwa club site; and it sits to the south of KMS as the Khama Memorial School is popularly known in Serowe. 385 is a big, beautiful affair with a striking *stop-nonsense* (parameter wall), a sufficiently furnished *leobo* (thatched shelter), some lovely greenery, all neatly trimmed *et al.* In short 385 announces to the beholder: ‘*ha go nna diithati*’ (‘here live people who take very good care of themselves’).

As a way of appreciating the compliment about her home Sephiri says: ‘*Tse ke tiro tsa gagwe*’ (‘he is responsible for it all’) as she points to her first born, Rre Bapati Motalaote who, in turn proudly tells me: ‘*ha, ke ha ga Motalaote*’ (‘this is Motalaote’s place’).

I am certainly no expert in the methods used for measuring the element of success, but 385, inter alia; perhaps, spells a success story the sum total of which includes the following factors:

- a small child born in exile; and as if that was not enough of a disadvantage, after exile she still grew up in a third region, away from her own people.
- a young girl who, while in exile, lost her father to some strange air-borne disease (*bothoko ja phefho*, most probably the Spanish Flu of 1918).
- a youth who married too early to remember the details of her courtship.
- a bride-to-be who became a victim of an aborted marriage plan when her would-be-husband fell right into the *bokgwelwa* trap which was orchestrated by the notorious migrant labour system of South Africa; a system that left a trail of broken families in the whole of the southern sub-continent.
- a single mother who was compelled to work her butt off to bring up her children

As it should be fairly clear by now, I came to know about Mme Sephiri Molosiwa from Johnson aka Mpho whose legal surname, Seema, is actually borrowed from his father’s maternal grandparents.

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The Seema name was borrowed on account of Johnson's father, Mmolaatlou (aka McDonald) and aunt Serodumo's unfortunate status as orphans and their subsequent raising by their maternal grandparents, the Seemas (who are Bakaa of Serowe); an act of benevolence which, however, masked their truer/fuller identity of being, paternally, the Molosiwas. Johnson and his siblings are thus, by right, tied up to Sephiri Molosiwa (and others) by consanguinity as Baphuting.

It was Johnson's constant reference to and description of Sephiri Molosiwa as 'an upfront free lady'; 'diplomatic but stern'; and 'historically knowledgeable' that kindled the latent journalistic/researcher's curiosity in me, compelling me to arrange for a chat with her. And what an astonishing life-long experience our conversation unearthed!

Sephiri's life experience starts with one of the ga-Mmangwato socio-historical occurrences; mainly and namely, one of the several squabbles between Kgosi Khama III and his son, Sekgoma; who, as is common knowledge, is the father to independent Botswana's first Head of State, President Sir Seretse Khama (aka Goitsebeng aka Mmaphiri). The squabble which was apparently over some family affair led to the banishment of Sekgoma from ga-Mmangwato. While Sephiri gives no details nor any dates associated with the squabble, another source that is in no way related to her indicates that in 1911 Sekgoma 'set up a house at Nekati with a woman from [the] royal family of Bangwaketse'.<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, it is not very clear as to whether this date could have marked the beginning of, or fell within the time period of Sekgoma's exile, but the date is not too far apart from that of Sephiri's birth in Nekati. Interestingly also, (according to some historical sources) Sir Seretse Khama was to be born at Nekati in 1921, some three years after Sephiri's birth.

In relation to the reportedly frequent friction between the two Bangwato royals, it is interesting to note that in another interview I conducted in Shoshong back in 1986, another elderly source, Mme Mothookae Monamodi (1909-1989) talks of a similar incident whereby Kgosi Khama III had banished Sekgoma to Lephephe in the neighbouring Kweneng tribal territory.<sup>2</sup> In this particular case, according to Mme Monamodi, the *morafe* (tribe/ethnic group) had decided to express their disapproval of Khama III's action by nicknaming him 'Mmamolelekwane' and composing a satirical song (using the same nickname for the song's title):

Mmamolelekwane <i>iyoo!</i>	Mmamolelekwane <i>iyoo!</i>
<i>Ga a bola'a ngwana a sa utwa!</i>	Didn't s/he kill a live child!
Mmamolelekwane <i>iyoo!</i>	Mmamolelekwane <i>iyoo!</i>
<i>Ga a bola'a ngwana a sa utwa!</i>	Didn't s/he kill a live child!

'This is an ancient song. Mmamolelekwane refers to [Kgosi] Kgama. It talks about the incident when he banished his own son, Sekgoma, to Lephephe', Mme Monamodi explained. Well, in the case of the exile to Nekati referred to above, amongst those who formed part of the group of the Bangwato who went into exile with Sekgoma was, Mooratsatsi-a-Molosiwa-a-Kgama I and his wife, Kejeleng-a-Motingwa. In 1918 this couple gave birth to a baby girl they named Sephiri who was joining three of her siblings who came before her. However, as fate would have it, Mooratsatsi would shortly become a victim to the Cov19-like disease which Batswana dubbed '*bothoko ja phefho*' (possibly the Spanish Flu of 1918). Thus Sephiri was rendered fatherless virtually in her infancy. 'As a consequence of my father's death, I was later to be moved to Sebina village in the Bokalaka area where I lived with Okopeng, son of Uncle Sedimo. He was an employee of Jimmy Haskins' store in Sebina. I lived in Sebina but schooled in Nkange as Sebina had no school at that time'.

1 <http://static.phxfeed.com/commonShare?originUrl>, accessed 12 September 2020.

2 See SM Tumed, ROB Nhlekisana and N Ndana, and 2010 (eds.), *Lips & Pages: Botswana Traditional Music as Socio-Political Commentary*. Gaborone: Pentagon Publishers.

Does she speak Ikalanga, then? I enquire.

'I used to speak the language', she says, jocularly adding (and speaking quite fluently): '*Imi ndi Nkalanga dumbu*' ('I am a true Kalanga') and: '*Ndo dziba ku ti nthu ndi ani*' (I know who the person is').

However, Sebina/Nkange was not to be Sephiri's home forever for another relative named Matuwe (son to another one of her uncles, Motshwanaesi), asked that she and a cousin of hers be taken home to Serowe where they were to continue schooling. 'I remember arriving in Serowe not knowing the people there', she says.

Sephiri's life seemed to be forever destined to be disrupted, for after completing her primary school education in Serowe, she could not proceed to do further studies. It was around this time that she was engaged to Phokoletso from Botalaote kgotla; an engagement about which she hastens to say: 'But I can't remember whether Phokoletso directly proposed marriage to me or whether it was an arranged affair'. What she remembers, rather, is that Phokoletso, who used to work in South Africa, was indeed a good suitor who took care of her as his fiancée; and that her Botalaote in-laws-to-be used to shower her with love.

Perhaps, a major twist in Sephiri's fate came after Phokoletso had asked for permission to travel with her to Johannesburg in South Africa. Sephiri's parents had then assumed the two lover birds were only going to *Johane* to buy the necessary wedding outfits. Naturally, they had blessed Phokoletso's plan. However, their expectations only came to zero with the end-result of Sephiri's and Phokoletso's trip to South Africa being the birth (out of wedlock, of course) of their firstborn son, Bapati. A second son named Boikepo was also to follow later.

It was after Boikepo's birth that Phokoletso, the loving husband-to-be disappeared to South Africa and was never to set foot in Serowe ever again. '*Kana motho a ba a tsena ka serite; a sa nteletse; a sa bue le nna; a sa ntirele sepe. Jaanong ke sheleketa hela ka bone, bana*' ('The man just disappeared; he would not call me; he would not talk to me; he shirked his responsibility. I just had a hard time raising the children alone'), Sephiri emotionlessly relates her fiction-like story. 'We heard that he was frequently changing female partners out there in *Johane*, and that at the end of such relationship every one of these women would just take off with his things, his property. Here, we never saw him again', she reluctantly adds, wishing to dwell less on such negative details about the father of her first two sons. Eventually, the Botalaote were to wash their hands of their son's irresponsible behaviour. Their son had simply turned into a *lekgwelwa* (a migrant worker who fails to return home or returns after many years/decades), they believed. '*Nna re paletswe jaanong ka motho yo*' ('We have given up on this man'), they told the Molosiwas, thus allowing Sephiri to marry another man elsewhere, should she find a suitable suitor. However, that was a wish never to be realised as Sephiri had to think more about how to take care of her fatherless children.

A brief look at socio-anthropological research proves that Mme Sephiri Molosiwa's brush with the adverse effects of the element of *bokgwelwa* under the migrant labour system of that era was by no means a unique experience. Researchers have often examined this issue and their findings include a trail of 'broken homes, husbands deserting wives and sons deserting parents' and even 'causing women to be unfaithful to their husbands' (Schapera 1965). It is a consideration of such issues, for instance, that led a Mokgatla poet Klaas Segogwane to write the piece, 'Praise Poem of Molefi Kgafela', an extract of which is cited below:

*Batla matimela, ngwana a Makuka*  
*Matimela a batho o a gorose*  
*O etse dikgomo o tswa go di batla*  
*O ba faphole ka ditelekarapa*  
*Ba bangwe ba utlwala ka kwa Dikapa*  
*O kwalle komisinara ya Kapa*

(Seek the strays, child of Makuka,  
 Bring home the human strays;  
 Do as with the cattle you've just sought  
 Search for them by telegraph.  
 Some are heard of in the Cape[s];  
 Write to the Commissioner of Cape Town

*O re re batliseng, re batla batho  
Ba bangwe ba bolelwa ka kwa Natale  
Ba na le Dikobe ngwana a [ga] Ntshite  
Bontsi ba bona bo mo Johane  
Ka fa Tlhabane go atile basadi  
Basadi le bona o ba phuthe ba tle*

And say, ‘Help us seek, we seek people’  
Others are said to be in Natal,  
They’re with Dikobe, Ntshite’s son.  
Most of them are in Johannesburg.  
At Rustenburg women are increasing:  
Collect the women also, let them come.)

Well, after losing her children’s father to the cruel element of *bokgwelwa*, Sephiri had no other alternative but to become her family’s bread winner during an era when most women were solely economically dependent on their husbands. With the Sengwato royal blood running through her veins and arteries, she worked as a *house-help*, serving two (colonial) district commissioners (the first had recommended her to his successor). At one time she worked for the family of Patrick van Ransburg of the Swaneng fame (see Fred Morton’s review of his biography in this volume); and lastly, working for one more employer: working hard to maintain the two children that her *ampr* husband had abandoned, plus the others that she had been blessed with during her amazingly long life. ‘*Ba ne ba le nine, go tsamaile five, ke setse ka four*’ (‘I had nine, five are deceased, I’m left with four’) Sephiri says as she concludes the story of her eventful, yet fulfilling life. And as to how she has managed to live for more than a century (by the way, at age 102 Sephiri still reads with her ‘naked’ eyes) all she says is that ‘It is just by God’s amazing grace’.

Sephiri-a-Mooratsatsi-a-Molosiwa-a-Kgama I is, indeed, ‘not only an uncommon woman but an extraordinary one’. And perhaps one of the most interesting sides of this story is that it was her nephew, Johnson Mpho-a-Mmolaatlou McDonald-a-Mokudinyane-a-Molosiwa-a-Kgama I (who legally exists as Johnson Mpho-a-Mmolaatlou McDonald-a-Seema) who saw this attribute and virtually ‘sang’ it to the author of this item until she had to take action. Table 1, 2 and Table 3 below are an attempt at the genealogy of Mme Sephiri.

**Table 1: Summary of Mme Sephiri’s Genealogy**

No.	Mme Sephiri’s Children
1	<b>Bapati Motalaote</b>
2	<b>Boikepo Motalaote</b>
3	Kebaineye Molosiwa
4	Gaorongwe Veronica Tsie
5	Kabelwa Molosiwa (deceased)
6	Yame Molosiwa (deceased)
7	Two others who died as infants
8	Gaotsewe Molosiwa (deceased)

**Table 2: Children of Mooratsatsi and Kejeleng**

No.	Name
1	Gabotoswe (deceased)
2	Dithunya (deceased)
3	Sematho (deceased)
4	<b>Sephiri</b>
5	Mmantho (deceased)

**Table 3: Children of Molosiwa-a-Kgama I**

No.	Name
1	Sedimo
2	<b>Mokudinyane*</b> (Johnson aka Mpho's paternal grandfather)
3	Motshwanaesi
4	<b>Mooratsatsi</b> (Sephiri's father)

The highlighted names (in bold) in the two tables are those more frequently mentioned in this article.

\*It should be noted that two sources have placed **Mokudinyane** at position 2, while one placed him at position 1, and yet another put him at position 3.

#### Acknowledgment

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#### References

- Tumedi, SM, Nhlekisana, ROB Ndana, N 2010. Lips & Pages: Botswana Traditional Music as Socio-Political Commentary. Gaborone: Pentagon Publishers.*
- Schapera, I 1965. Praise Poems of Tswana Chiefs. Oxford: Clarendon.*