

Fred Morton, *When Rustling Became an Art: Pilane's Kgatla and the Transvaal Frontier 1820-1902*

Claremont, South Africa: David Philip, 2009, 314 pages, ISBN: 978-0-86486-724-7

In *When Rustling Became an Art*, Fred Morton weaves a richly textured history of Bakgatla-ba-Kgafela focussing on the tumultuous years between 1820 and 1902. The detailed historical account highlights the astute political, military and diplomatic engineering of a lineage of three Bakgatla *dikgosi* namely Pilane Pheto, Kgamanyane Pilane and Linchwe I. The book depicts the trio as leaders with savvy and vision.

Morton's portrayal of the Bakgatla *dikgosi* lends them a great deal of agency. The book presents the nineteenth century *dikgosi* and the people they led not as hapless victims of invasive turbulence but as perceptive historical agents capable of initiating action, not only for the survival of their group but also to strategically pursue independence and prosperity.

To ensure that their *morafe* (ethnic group) remained united, secure and prosperous during an era of conflict, the *dikgosi* had to employ stealth and force. The force of circumstances was such that Bakgatla were compelled to adopt means other than virtuous to build and consolidate an independent and thriving *morafe*. The book's key observation is that the practice of cattle rustling was central to the project of achieving Bakgatla independence and prosperity.

Morton observes that the cattle rustling prowess of Bakgatla has been overlooked. His book casts Bakgatla as the pre-eminent cattle entrepreneurs of the nineteenth and early twentieth century western trans-Vaal region. The volume draws attention to the context in which Bakgatla developed proficiency in cattle rustling. The book paints a charming picture of Bakgatla as adroit cattle rustling artists.

Morton marshals compelling evidence to show how over a period of eight decades Bakgatla pastoralists increased their herds by running cattle raiding and smuggling operations. The book further argues that it is leaders such as Pilane, Kgamanyane, Linchwe and Isang who introduced the art of cattle rustling to the trans-Vaal. The practice of cattle rustling goes back to rulers like Molefe (1790), Makgotso (1795) and Pheto (1810) who presided over invasion and looting of cattle from their Bafokeng, Batlhako, Bakwena, Bangwaketse and Bahurutshe neighbours.

Pheto's son Pilane, having saved Bakgatla from Kololo and Ndebele invasion re-invented his group into a raiding force. His successor Kgamanyane, the *kgosi* who led Bakgatla from Moruleng to Mochudi, proved to be a spirited cattle rustler. Kgamanyane's reign was followed by that of Linchwe who ran the greatest cattle raiding operations. His regiments stole cattle from Maburu (Boers) during the South Africa (Anglo-Boer) war of 1899-1902 and Bakwena during the intermittent eight-year long battle between Bakgatla and Bakwena.

After Pilane, came the reign of another specialist cattle rustler, Isang. Isang was affluent. His wealth comprised droves of cattle, several farms in the trans-Vaal, a tractor, bank accounts in Rustenburg and Mahikeng. Isang ran a lucrative cattle-smuggling racket. He smuggled cattle into South Africa. Isang ploughed the proceeds of smuggled cattle into development projects and schemes in Mochudi, including progressive landmarks such as the Bakgatla National School. Bakgatla, in 80 difficult years, managed to build a united and prosperous *morafe* thanks to intelligent, shrewd and far-sighted leadership. Through their strategic alliances with the Boers and other groups in the region they fended off the Ndebele of Mzilikazi, engaged with Boer land usurpers, Dutch Reformed Church missionaries, London missionaries, and with the British colonial administration under trying circumstances.

Bakgatla used their acumen to gain access to land, accumulated cattle and grain, and established flourishing settlements. They did not only rely on military force and cattle rustling. They knew the value of diversification. Bakgatla also studied the alignment of forces in the region and honed diplomatic skills of communicating with both allies and enemies. They established trade connections and learnt modern skills

from the groups they interacted with.

When Rustling Became an Art offers useful insight into the resourceful leadership that built a solid foundation for the Bakgatla as a proud, fiercely independent, and enterprising group with bases in Botswana and South Africa.

The book is written in a reader-friendly style. The chapters are arranged in splendid order. The book also contains a twelve-point instruction manual detailing the rubrics of cattle rustling, several maps and illustrations, lists of Bakgatla male regiments, Pilane's genealogy, a glossary of Bakgatla terms and as well as comprehensive endnotes and a bibliography. All things considered; the volume displays fine scholarship.

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