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ARTICLE

# The Serowe Riot and the Militarisation of the Bechuanaland Protectorate Police, 1952-1956

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**Abstract**

The royal conflict in the Bamangwato Reserve, which was caused by the marriage of the Bangwato prince Seretse Khama to English woman Ruth Williams, resulted in the Bechuanaland Protectorate Police's (BPP) biggest security challenge of the late colonial era. The conflict, which would culminate in a bloody riot in Serowe in 1952, put the efficiency of the BPP to the test. Placing the events of Serowe riot within the broader context of African uprisings in other African colonies during the post-Second World War period, this article argues that the Serowe riot exposed the weakness of the BPP. It is also observed that the colonial administration and police authorities militarised the force and sanctioned a military-style occupation of the Bamangwato Reserve or tribal territory as a precautionary measure against similar incidents.

**Keywords:** Bangwato Reserve; Bechuanaland Protectorate; colonial police; Serowe riot; militarisation.

## Introduction

In August 1948, the British Colonial Office (CO) requested all colonies and dependencies to submit reports on the strength, efficiency, and equipment of their police forces. The call for these reports was influenced by the recent Gold Coast (now Ghana) riots and the start of the Malayan Emergency, which the Secretary of State described as being motivated by communism (CO to Government Secretaries in the Colonies and Dependencies 5 August 1948, The National Archives (TNA), FCO 141/1176).

In February 1948, the colonial administration of the Gold Coast had faced a security crisis when rioters in Accra and surrounding areas stormed the streets and looted foreign businesses for three days. Although the tensions that led to the riots had been building up for some time, it was the police's fatal shooting of protesters at a political demonstration led by an organization of Second World War veterans that sparked them. The Gold Coast had also been faced with problems of inflation and unemployment, which caused great discontentment among the Africans (Arnold 2020). The British officials failed to recognise the troubles as resulting from anti-colonial frustrations, but instead labelled them as an international communist plot to undermine British political control in West Africa (Rathbone 1993; Anderson and Killingray 1992).

The Malayan Emergency, however, was different from what had happened in Ghana. The Emergency had been declared on 18 June 1948, after the murder of three Europeans in the territory, marking the beginning of an armed insurgency that would last 12 years (Stockwell 1993). The Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) and its armed wing, the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA), waged a guerrilla war against the British-led security forces with the objective of establishing a Communist People's Democratic

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Republic of Malaya. Other objectives of the CPM included expropriation of British property in Malaya (now Malaysia), the nationalisation of monopolistic capital, racial equality, and the restoration of land to the people (Comber 2008). Although the situation in Malaya involved a communist party, which was not the case in the Gold Coast, the Colonial Office labelled both the Accra riots and the beginning of the Malayan Emergency as communist-inspired. Colonial Secretary Arthur Creech Jones, therefore, emphasized the importance of ensuring that police forces around the British Empire were ready and capable of dealing with internal threats of that nature (CO to Government Secretaries in the Colonies and Dependencies 5 August 1948).

In the Bechuanaland Protectorate (now Botswana), however, the colonial government and police authorities were not alarmed by the Secretary of State's Colonial Secretary's concerns about the recent disorders in Malaya and the Gold Coast. Police Commissioner Morley Robert Langley believed that such disorders were unlikely to happen in Bechuanaland because the seed of communism would land on infertile ground. He attributed this to what he saw as the absence of a large African intelligentsia in Bechuanaland and the stereotypes around the peaceful nature of the Tswana people and their natural respect for traditional authority. Since there were no known disruptive influences of a serious magnitude in Bechuanaland, Commissioner Langley argued that there was no cause for the immediate adoption of any elaborate and costly precautions (Commissioner of Police to GS 4 September 1948, TNA, FCO 141/1176). Resident Commissioner Anthony Sillery also believed that the BPP, which in 1948 had 38 European and 214 African personnel, was adequate and that with the help of colonial officials and the *Dikgosi* (Chiefs), the force would easily cope with the localised outbreaks of the kind that were reported in the Gold Coast. Officials acknowledged, however, that based on its numbers alone, it would be difficult for the force to deal with a territory-wide outbreak, especially if the native authorities (Dikgosi or their representatives) were not to actively assist the colonial government (Resident Commissioner (RC) to Acting High Commissioner (HC) 13 September 1948, TNA, FCO 141/1176).

## The BPP and the Serowe Riot

In September 1948, the heir-apparent of the Bangwato *bogosi* (chieftaincy), Seretse Khama, married English woman Ruth Williams, whom he had met while studying in London. This marriage outraged Seretse's traditionalist uncle Tshekedi Khama, who was Bamangwato regent since 1926. Just like Tshekedi, the vast majority of the Bamangwato people were against Seretse's marriage to Ruth and they opposed his ascension and enthronement to *bogosi* for as long as he remained married to her (Hyam 1986) (Parsons, Tlou and Henderson, 1995). Between November and December 1948, two *kgotla* (traditional assembly) meetings were held to publicly discuss Seretse's marriage. At both *kgotla* meetings, Seretse was forced to choose between his wife and the Bamangwato *bogosi* and each time he refused, insisting instead, that the Bamangwato should accept his wife if they wanted him to be chief. At the third *kgotla*, in June 1949, after a moving speech by Seretse, the vast majority of the people had a change of heart and accepted him as their rightful *kgosi* (chief) (Harragin *et al*. 1985). Tshekedi, having lost the confidence of the people, announced his intentions to step down as regent although he was willing to serve the Bamangwato people in some capacity. Together with some of his followers, he moved to the village of Rametsana in the neighbouring Bakwena Reserve, where he vowed to continue protesting Seretse's marriage. There was also some belief among some Bamangwato that Tshekedi wanted to assume the chieftaincy for himself. Historian Neil Parsons states that Tshekedi resigned from the regency and exiled himself in Rametsana to wait for the colonial government to officially install him as the full chief to replace Seretse (Parsons 2003).

The marriage of Seretse and Ruth also had consequences that were related to the politics of the

larger Southern African region. The settler and racist minority governments of Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and South Africa, which had for a long time hoped to annex Bechuanaland, protested the marriage, and their pressure on the British High Commissioner in South Africa led the British government to force Seretse into exile in Britain. To Southern Rhodesia and South Africa, an interracial marriage of a chief just outside their borders was a subversion of the notions of racial, social, and political separation, which they held strongly (Parsons *et al.* 1995). The acceptance of Seretse as *kgosi* by the Bangwato happened just a year after the National Party came into power in South Africa, which marked the official entrenchment of the apartheid system in that territory. The National Party also wanted to distance South Africa from Britain as the colonial power. The British government, therefore, felt that their official recognition of Seretse as *kgosi* would represent a threat to the relationship of South Africa with the Commonwealth. As a result, Seretse was invited back to Britain in 1950. After being asked to renounce his *bogosi* for some money, a request that he declined, Seretse was subsequently prohibited from returning to Bechuanaland (Henderson 1990).

The exile of Seretse Khama caused a lot of discontentment among the Bamangwato people, leading the BPP to eventually find itself involved in the matter. On 21 May 1952, a delegation of six Bamangwato men had returned to Serowe from a futile trip to London, where they failed to convince the British government to restore to them, their rightful *kgosi*. Furthermore, the British government initiated an Order-in-Council to install another royal, Rasebolai Kgamane, as *kgosi* of the Bamangwato. This led to a series of protest meetings in the smaller *kgotlas* where the pro-Seretse people expressed fears that the British government was trying to re-impose the rule of Tshekedi through Rasebolai (Parsons 1990). From 21 to 31 May 1952, a series of defiant actions towards the District Commissioner had led to the ban of all *kgotla* meetings, a ban on hunting permits and ammunition, as well as a prohibition of the sale of beer. By this time, the colonial administration had recognised that the BPP alone, would not be able to cope with the incipient troubles, which was contradictory to what both Police Commissioner Langley and Resident Commissioner Sillery had claimed in 1948. Police reinforcements were, therefore, brought in from the other two High Commission Territories (HCTs) of Basutoland (now Lesotho) and Swaziland (now Eswatini), arriving in Serowe at 4am on 1 June 1952 (Parsons 2003). Later that afternoon, there were major confrontations at the main *kgotla* between the demonstrators and police. The District Commissioner, standing behind lines of police with riot gear, tried to dissuade the protesters with a loudspeaker. The crowd instead, with women (traditionally not allowed in *kgotla* deliberations) at the forefront, advanced towards the lines of police, brandishing sticks, and stones. Tear-gas was fired into the angry crowd and violence broke out in the *kgotla* (Parsons 1990). As the police trucks attempted to evacuate the District Commissioner from the *kgotla*, one African policeman was dragged out of the vehicle and killed by the angry protesters. Two African members of the Basutoland Mounted Police were also chased down and subsequently beaten to death (Parsons 2003).

The outbreak of violence in a territory understood by the colonial administration to be tranquil was a surprise for the Bamangwato and the British alike. On 2 June 1952, reinforcements of the British South Africa Police (BSAP) arrived from Bulawayo in Southern Rhodesia to contain the situation in the Bangwato Reserve. Although no further violence occurred after 1 June, the visible presence of the BSAP detachments in the reserve, together with the BPP and other reinforcements from Basutoland and Swaziland, was instrumental in keeping the peace (HC to Commonwealth Relations Office 18 June 1952, TNA, DO 35/4150). During the riots, however, the BPP and its reinforcements had proved incapable of handling disturbances of that magnitude. The riot had been an embarrassment to the government and police authorities of Bechuanaland, who in 1948, had insisted that the BPP was adequate and capable of dealing with

any sort of localised uprisings that could occur. The fact that the BPP had to be assisted by forces from elsewhere in the region showed that the BPP was not as capable as officials claimed.

**The Militarisation of the Police and Occupation of the Bamangwato Reserve**

Following the June 1952 riots in Serowe, the colonial administration made efforts to strengthen the police force in Bechuanaland and increase its presence in the Bamangwato Reserve as a way of guarding against further disturbances. However, Bechuanaland being the marginal territory that it was, the government's attempts at bolstering the security forces in the Bamangwato Reserve were limited by financial constraints. Lack of adequate funding in Bechuanaland often subjected the colonial administration to the tedious red tape involved in acquiring financial assistance from Britain. Fears of under-policing the Bamangwato Reserve led the colonial administration to constantly request further funding, while the British government reluctantly continued the financial support with the hope that it would not be long before the political situation in the reserve settled down.

The colonial administration's attempts at increasing the strength of the police force in the Bamangwato Reserve came at a time when similar measures were being taken in other colonies. The period between 1946 and 1960 in Africa saw the gradual increase in the strength of colonial police forces, but also the creation of new para-military units designed to supress uprisings and opposition to the colonial state (Killingray 1986). With the economies of different British territories struggling to recover from the effects of the Second World War, the standard of African social and economic life in the colonies gradually declined. Sentiments of African nationalism became even more pronounced during this period, giving rise to some liberation movements that called for the end of colonial rule (Deflem 1994). This informed the decisions by various British colonial authorities to militarise their police forces and create specific units dedicated to combatting unrest in the colonies.

In 1947 for example, the colonial government in Kenya witnessed the biggest workers' strike in the history of the territory. The Mombasa general strike represented the culmination of a series of strikes in the territory dating back to the 1930s. The end of the Second World War had brought with it more pressures on the colonial government as workers demanded higher wages as well as better living and working conditions (Zeleza 1993). In 1948, therefore, as a response to the Mombasa strike, and the growing disturbances in the Kikuyu Reserve that would culminate into the Mau-Mau Emergency in 1952, the Kenyan government created a police reaction unit that was meant to be able to respond swiftly to any uprising in the territory. The Police Emergency Company, as the unit was called, was equipped with light machine guns, rifles, grenades, and armoured vehicles (Percox 2003). In 1949, it was reconstructed and renamed the Kenya Police Emergency Company (Killingray 1986). The regular police, however, continued to struggle with policing the colony as the social and economic changes brought about by the demands of the Second World War had led to a drastic rise in urban crime rates, while the number of convictions declined. Offenses against property in the White Highlands rose from 3,017 in 1940 to 7,274 in 1949 while crimes against persons doubled in Mombasa and some settled areas and trebled in Nairobi (Throup 1992).

In the Gold Coast too, the colonial administration had recognised the inadequacy of the police force. The Gold Coast Police was stretched to its maximum in performing its regular civil duties of detecting and preventing crime, while also policing the growing political activity by the Africans. As regular law enforcement became increasingly difficult, the colonial government either looked the other way, handed over the responsibility to private organisations, or accepted the reality that new legislation was due (Killingray 1986). Considering the deficiency of the Gold Coast Police, the government created the Police Mobile

Force in 1947 to combat impending unrest in the territory. Between December 1947 and September 1951, the Police Mobile Force was used at least 200 times in the Gold Coast, including the Accra riots of February 1948 (Rathbone 1993).

During the early 1950s, the Nyasaland Protectorate (now Malawi) in Central Africa also strengthened its police force as a response to rising nationalist protest in the territory. With growing African nationalism in the territory, African chieftaincy, which was part of the colonial system, was beginning to lose its authority over the people. This manifested in the form of localised riots in districts such as Cholo, Chikwawa and Domasi, where chiefs considered to be sympathisers and supporters of the formation of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland were targeted (Kalinga 1996). As a way of strengthening the coercive arm of the colonial state, the Police Mobile Force was created in 1954 to deal with violent disturbances in Nyasaland, and the unit quickly gained a reputation for brutality. Most of the 14 European officers in the Police Mobile Force were experienced former members of the Palestine Police Force in the Middle East, who had been involved in its violent suppression of the Arab revolt in Palestine between 1936 and 1939. The 200 local recruits were men with a minimum of five years of military experience, many having served in Burma during the Second World War or Malaya during the ongoing emergency (McCracken 1992). In the years to come, the Police Mobile Force would be used to enforce government agricultural policies in the districts and after January 1959, it was at the forefront of combatting the increasingly militant Nyasaland African Congress (McCracken 1992).

Although the political atmosphere in Bechuanaland during this period was different from the British colonies discussed above, the disturbances in the Bamangwato Reserve had similarly warranted the strengthening of the police force in the territory. In July 1952, Southern Rhodesian Prime Minister, Sir Godfrey Huggins made an urgent request for the return of the BSAP contingent that had been in the Bamangwato Reserve for over a month. After some negotiation, High Commissioner Sir John Le Rougetel arranged for the return of 40 BSAP men, leaving behind 37. To Le Rougetel, the release of the entire BSAP contingent would have caused a serious threat to the security of the reserve (HC to CRO 7 August 1952, TNA, DO 35/4281). Police Commissioner Langley felt, however, that if the police presence in the reserve could be strengthened through the acquisition of two armoured trucks, then the services of the remaining 37 BSAP men would no longer be required. In a move to militarise the BPP, therefore, Le Rougetel negotiated with the South African government for the purchase of two reconditioned GMC trucks with side armour for a combined price of £1,800 (Treasury to CRO 20 August 1952, TNA, DO 35/4281).

Until early August 1952, there had been detachments of police from Basutoland, Swaziland, and Southern Rhodesia in the Bamangwato Reserve. Over this period, most of the BPP's total strength of about 250 men, had been also concentrated at that reserve, drastically reducing the number of police available elsewhere in Bechuanaland. Considering it necessary to extensively police the Bamangwato Reserve for no less than 12 months, Police Commissioner Langley called for the creation of a temporary security force comprising three European gazetted officers (Assistant Superintendent and higher), six European non-gazetted officers (Inspectorate), and 87 African constables from all the three HCTs (CRO to Treasury 11 August 1952, TNA, DO 35/4281). Two European gazetted officers were seconded from Basutoland, while the third was recruited from South Africa. The British Treasury Office had sanctioned one supernumerary post of assistant superintendent within the BPP, to allow for the recruitment of an experienced officer from the South African Police to take charge in the Bamangwato Reserve. This was done on the understanding that the officer would be absorbed into the BPP when the temporary security force was dissolved. As for the six European non-gazetted posts, one was seconded from Swaziland, another was obtained locally from the

BPP, while the remaining four were recruited from Britain. These posts too, were on a permanent basis, with the plan that the sub-inspectors would be absorbed into any of the HCT forces when their work in the Bamangwato Reserve was complete (Treasury to CRO 11 August 1952, TNA, DO 35/4281).

To come up with the 87 African constables required for policing the Bamangwato Reserve, 25 recruits were obtained in Basutoland, and after short but intensive training, they were sent to the reserve to relieve the members of the Basutoland Mounted Police who had been there for two months. The 25 recruits were engaged on a permanent basis, to be absorbed into both the BPP and Basutoland Mounted Police as vacancies became available in the normal establishment of these forces (HC to CRO 7 August 1952, TNA, DO 35/4281). The 15 men of the Swaziland Police in the Bamangwato Reserve were retained there for another six months, while the Swaziland Protectorate was authorised to recruit 15 temporary replacements for that period. Concurrent with the arrangements made in the Swaziland and Basutoland police forces, Bechuanaland recruited 62 Africans on a temporary basis for service in the reserve. At the end of six months, it was intended that 15 of these recruits would replace the men from Swaziland, while the remaining 47 would be used in other parts of Bechuanaland to replace the BPP men concentrated in the reserve. The overall costs for the creation of the temporary security force in the Bamangwato Reserve was £19,500, an expenditure which the Treasury Office argued was excessive for policing a single reserve in Bechuanaland (Treasury to CRO 20 August 1952, TNA, DO 35/4281). The CRO, however, impressed upon the Treasury Office, the importance of approving the expenditure involved. As the Bamangwato troubles were far from over, it was important to have a strong security force, not only to effectively deal with any possible uprising, but to also exercise a deterrent influence on those who would otherwise be tempted to once again protest (CRO to Treasury 11 August 1952, TNA, DO 35/4281). What the CRO argued for, was a military occupation of the Bamangwato Reserve, which was meant to help deprive the people of their rightful *kgosi*. It was on these grounds that the Treasury Office approved the expenditure involved in setting up the temporary security force in the Bamangwato Reserve.

When the formation of the temporary security force was approved and financed in August 1952, the colonial administration intended for the force to remain in the Bamangwato Reserve for one year. However, provision had only been made for the first six months of the financial year, with the hope that an improvement of the security conditions in the reserve would make further funding unnecessary (HC to CRO 4 August 1953, TNA, DO 35/4281). After one year, the conditions in the Bamangwato Reserve were slowly settling down. However, with the appointment of Rasebolai Kgamane as African authority, there were some areas within the reserve, particularly Serowe, where there was still resistance to his rule. For as long as Seretse Khama remained in exile, there were those who continued to undermine the colonial government and its chosen African leader, Rasebolai. It was, therefore, necessary to keep the security force in the reserve for a further six months at a cost of £10,000 (CRO to Treasury 10 August 1953, TNA, DO 35/4281). The Protectorate administration once again had to painstakingly go through the bureaucracy involved in sourcing funding from the British government. Still dubious about the necessity for the security force in the Bamangwato Reserve, the Treasury Office approved the required expenditure of £ 10,000 with conditions. The approval was given on the understanding that the situation in the reserve would be reviewed at the end of the financial year, or as soon as the conditions in the reserve no longer required the temporary security force (Treasury to CRO 18 August 1953, TNA, DO 35/4281). Although the Protectorate government had required £10,000 for the rest of the 1952-1953 financial year, it settled for £6,029. This was a welcomed saving for the Treasury Office, which was anxious to see the withdrawal of the security force from the Bamangwato Reserve and for the return of regular civil policing in the Protectorate. The reduced funding, however, did not have any impact on the policing of the reserve as no more disturbances

occurred (HC to Secretary of State 6 November 1953, TNA, DO 35/4281).

In March 1954, the Protectorate government decided that while it would be unwise to dispense with the entire security force in the Bamangwato Reserve, the unit could be reduced. For a further six months, ending on 30 September 1954, the security force in the reserve was downsized to one assistant superintendent, two sub-inspectors and 46 African constables. The cost of maintaining the force at these numbers for six months was estimated to be £5,950 (HC to CRO 23 March 1954, TNA, DO 35/4281). The security force in the Bamangwato Reserve was to be maintained at this strength until March 1955, just a year before the return of Seretse Khama and his wife from exile. When the security force was finally dissolved, the BPP deployed an intelligence field detachment in the Bamangwato Reserve. The intelligence detachment comprised one detective sub-inspector and 16 detectives, mostly Batswana (HC to Secretary of State 17 March 1955, TNA, DO 35/4281). Although there were no further disturbances in the Bamangwato Reserve, the period from 1952 to 1955 was characterised by a tense atmosphere, especially in Serowe.

## The Formation of a Rifle Club Association

In 1953, as part of the militarisation of the police in Bechuanaland, the colonial administration and police authorities had expressed the need to establish a territory-wide rifle association. The objective of the envisaged association was to form the primary support system for the BPP in the internal security of Bechuanaland, and to organise target-shooting competitions for members (Commissioner of Police to Government Secretary 21 August 1953, Botswana National Archives and Records Services (BNARS), S 207/2). It was, however, not until late 1955 that efforts to create the rifle association were initiated, after the Bechuanaland government consulted with that of Swaziland on the running and administration of such an organisation.

It is important to point out here that rifle clubs and associations in colonial Africa were not a new development, especially in territories with settler populations. For example, in the British colony of Natal, rifle associations were first formed in 1862 to encourage shooting amongst members for the defence of British life and property. Membership in these rifle clubs was reserved for white people only. When the colony attained responsible government in 1893, a small volunteer force was formed for the defence of the territory. In 1898, the rifle associations in the colony were officially adopted as a reserve force to assist the Natal Volunteer Force in times of emergency (Thompson 2011). Following the attainment of self-government by the Boers of the Transvaal Colony in 1907, Prime Minister Louis Botha resurrected the pre- South African War commandos as rifle clubs. Afrikaners discharged from the Transvaal Volunteer Force, which was formed in 1902, found a home in these rifle clubs, which were built on republican traditions and offered leadership positions for those disappointed in the Volunteer Force (van de Waag 2009).

In the early 1900s, the white settlers of Livingstone in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), founded a rifle association which had a dual purpose. The association was meant to create an opportunity for European men and women to come together for socialisation, but also to provide security and defence for them in the event of an uprising by the African population (Arrington-Sirois 2017). By 1905, the rifle association was not only a necessary measure for 'self-protection' by the Europeans, but it became an integral component of colonial culture. European men and women in Livingstone were increasingly encouraged to take part in the association and its frequent competitions to sharpen their marksmen skills (Arrington-Sirois 2017). This reflected a militarisation of a settler community, influenced by European fears of African resistance to colonial rule.

Even in non-settler colonies like Nigeria, the first rifle clubs were established in the 1880s as a leisure activity by military officers and colonial administrators. As colonialism extended into the hinterland, rifle clubs began to spread, where Europeans met to socialise and practice their shooting, while Africans

only watched with amazement since they were barred from joining these clubs (Aderinto 2018). The exclusion of Africans from rifle clubs although they could watch or hear the shooting was meant to have a psychological effect on them. It showed the Africans that the Europeans were prepared to defend themselves in the event of an uprising by the former. Following the outbreak of the First World War, the importance of rifle clubs extended further from their recreational purpose. In Lagos for example, the local rifle club was constituted into the Lagos Defence Force, which was meant to defend the colony in the event of a German invasion (Aderinto 2018). As historian David Killingray points out, the small number of Europeans in colonies other than those of white settlement, meant that regular shooting practise had to be maintained, especially after the First World War. This was done through volunteer organisations such as local defence associations and rifle clubs. Rifle clubs began to enjoy government subsidies in the interwar period as a third line of defence in the colonies, but as time passed, some began to disappear. However, whenever there were fears of imminent unrest in the colonies, the Europeans were swift to revive the rifle clubs (Killingray 1986).

In the Bechuanaland Protectorate too, exclusively white rifle clubs had existed in Lobatse, Molepolole, Gaborone, Mahalapye, Serowe Francistown and Maun before the 1950s. The rifle clubs had faced some challenges in the past and could not be sustained because of low membership and difficulties in obtaining ammunition from the cash-strapped government (Bechuanaland Protectorate 21 November 1955, BNARS, S 207/2). Following the disturbances in the Bamangwato Reserve, however, the Bechuanaland government found it necessary to revive these rifle clubs to form an auxiliary force for the BPP. For instance, at a meeting of the European Advisory Council in November 1955, members agreed on the benefit that rifle clubs could bring to the internal security of Bechuanaland and approved their revival (*Ibid*)). It was agreed that to ensure government control, the various rifle clubs would have to be federated into an association under the authority of the police commissioner. In December 1955, the Bechuanaland government issued a draft proclamation of the formation of the Bechuanaland Protectorate Police Rifle Association, which was meant to come into existence in March 1956 (RC to HC 12 December 1955, BNARS, S 207/2).

Placing the rifle clubs under the control of the police commissioner was meant to enable him to call upon them to assist the BPP in the suppression of possible uprisings in the territory. According to the Bechuanaland Protectorate Proclamation No. 32 of 1956, the police commissioner held the power to approve the formation of as many rifle clubs affiliated to the BPP Rifle Association as he deemed necessary, but also to disband any rifle club in Bechuanaland (Bechuanaland Protectorate 1956, BNARS, S 207/2). The membership of the rifle clubs was open to every European male resident over the age of 16. The admission or rejection of applicants into the various rifle clubs laid with the police commissioner, who also prescribed the oath to be taken upon attestation (*Ibid*). The exclusivity of the rifle clubs to Europeans not only reinforced notions of racial superiority and discrimination, but also showed that these clubs were being reinstated out of a fear of African uprising on the part of the colonialists. The language used in the oath of attestation also showed that the BPP Rifle Association was created to form a reserve force for the BPP. Part of the oath stated:

> …that I will serve in any emergency or in defence of life and property in any part of the Bechuanaland Protectorate if called upon by the Resident Commissioner, and that in the event of any such emergency, I will serve under and obey the orders of the Police Commissioner if the Resident Commissioner may deem it necessary for me to become a supplementary member of the Bechuanaland Protectorate Police Force (Bechuanaland Protectorate, nd, BNARS, S 207/2).

The formation of the BPP Rifle Association reflected a reinforcement of the colonial police force but also the militarisation of Bechuanaland's small settler population, which according to the 1946 census, was about 2,379 (Charumbira *et al*. 2015: Schapera 1952). This development was influenced by not only the Serowe riot, but also the numerous uprisings in other parts of the empire in the same period.

## Conclusion

Following the 1948 Accra riots and the beginning of the Malayan Emergency, the Colonial Office warned territorial administrators across the British Empire to ensure that their police forces were prepared to deal with similar problems. The increasing social and economic pressures of the post-Second World War period in African colonies had led to the growth of nationalist movements that began to challenge colonial rule. The rise of anti-colonial political activity in the colonies, therefore, prompted the various colonial governments to create new para-military police units to strengthen the coercive arm of the state and to supress mounting African protests.

In 1952, the colonial government in Bechuanaland began to militarise the BPP following a bloody riot at the Serowe *kgotla*. The 1948 marriage of Seretse Khama to Ruth Williams and his subsequent exile from the territory in 1950, had caused the biggest internal security threat faced by the colonial government in the twentieth century. Rising discontentment among the Bamangwato people with the Bechuanaland government over the exile of their rightful prince, resulted in a violent altercation between them and the colonial police in 1952.

As a result, the colonial government sanctioned a military-style occupation of the Bamangwato Reserve by the BPP, Basutoland and Swaziland police for three years. The colonial government's fear of further disturbances in Bechuanaland also resulted in the 1956 revival of rifle clubs for Whites in the territory, which were placed under the control of the BPP to be called upon in the event of more uprisings. This also reflected the militarisation of the small settler community in Bechuanaland as the membership of the rifle clubs was open to all European male residents of 16 years and above.

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