

MIGRANT LABOUR AND THE PEDI BEFORE 1869

by

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Pedi involvement in migrant labour dates back to the 1840s. The 1850s saw a significant increase in the number involved, and in the 1870s large numbers of Pedi responded to the demand for labour created by the opening of the diamond mines. In the above periods migration, by and large, took the form of working as long as required to earn sufficient to purchase specific commodities, in particular guns and cattle. This area was not, however, to escape the "slow decline into rural stagnation", with the accompanying necessity for longer and more frequent periods of migration that other areas of Southern Africa witnessed, and Cooper (2) has ably charted the progressive closure of economic options, other than the sale of their labour, to the Africans of this area in the years after the turn of the century.

The aim of this paper is not to chart the whole of this process but to examine one of its very earliest phases, the hitherto largely neglected (3) flow of men from the Northern Transvaal seeking work mainly in the Cape Colony but also in Natal and the OFS, prior to the development of a migrant labour system focussed on the diamond mines. In particular, it seeks to examine the role that Pedi men and the Pedi polity (the heartland of which lay between the Oliphant and Steelpoort rivers) played in this system. The information presented in this paper has, in the main, been culled from published and unpublished Berlin Missionary sources. These sources are not adequate to provide an overall view, and this paper can claim to be little more than an incomplete attempt to draw some of the possible material together; a more convincing account must await further research, both archival and oral, in South Africa.

Merensky, writing in 1862, commented on the fact that each year hundreds of men travelled to the Cape Colony, secured work, and with the money they earned bought guns and ammunition before returning home. (4) Indeed, this movement of men southwards was so regular that Nachtigal attempted to use it as a way of getting post back to Germany. (5) The Pedi contributed significant numbers to the flow of men, and it was "unter den Bapell und allen in ihrem Reich wohnenden Basutos jetzt als feste sitte anzusehen, dass jeder Jüngling, wenn er erwachsen ist, für ein oder mehrere Jahre nach der Colonie geht" (6) (among the Pedi and all the Basutos living in their kingdom now regarded as established practice that each youth, on reaching maturity, went to the Colony for one or more years). This may well be an overstatement on the part of Merensky, but it does give an indication of the extent of Pedi involvement in migrant labour and it seems probable that, of the major groups of the Northern Transvaal, the Pedi were the most committed to this system. They were, however, by no means the only society to participate: they constituted an important part of a much wider system which included significant numbers of Sotho and Tsonga from north of the Oliphant River. (7) While the Venda do not appear to have been involved, some Lobedu certainly were (8), and by 1870 Zoutpansberg was peppered with individuals who had some grounding in NGK teachings from the Cape and Natal. (9) To the north-west, the Transvaal Ndebele

under Mapela participated (10), and there are also references to men from just north of Pretoria. (11) Just to the south of the Pedi domain both the Kopa under Boleu and the Transvaal Ndebele under Mabhogo were involved. Men from the societies to the north and north-east, at least, passed through the Pedi area en route. Merensky believed that it was no exaggeration to state "dass in manchem der Letzten Jahre an tausend Gewehre mit Zubehör in und durch das land zu den nördlich wohnenden Stämmen gegangen sind" (12) (that in many of the last years up to a thousand guns with accessories have come into this area and through it to the tribes living to the north).

Men travelled from the Pedi area in groups as large as 200. (13) These groups had to travel for fifteen days before they reached the first kraals of Moshweshwe, by which time there was little, if anything, left of the bag of cooked maize that each man carried as provisions for the journey. (14) From the southern Sotho area, after securing the necessary exit permit or pass from Moshweshwe (15), these men, presumably in smaller groups, moved on into the Cape Colony. There appear to have been groups of Pedi in Port Elizabeth and Uitenhage (16), and englischen kustenstadten (17) (English coastal cities) are suggested as the principal destination of these men. However, there are also references to individuals who worked in Colesburg (18), Victoria (19) and some indications that men may have travelled as far south as Cape Town. (20)

The length of work period appears to have been basically as long as required to save sufficient to buy a gun. Jonas Podumo, on the first of his two trips to the Cape Colony, worked for eight months, in which time he is reputed to have earned 3 heifers and 6 sheep. He bought an old "English soldiers gun" with the proceeds of the sale of one of these heifers. (21) Others appear to have spent as much as two years away before returning. It is difficult to establish precisely how these guns were procured. Podumo, on his second trip, was defrauded by a "Koranna" of approximately three pounds with which he was attempting to buy a gun. This piece of dastardliness took place in the area of Philippolis. (22) There are also accounts of Pedi returning from Port Elizabeth who travelled to the Griqua before returning home (23), and it may be that the Griqua were one of the sources for these guns. It is also likely that returning migrants bought guns from the southern Sotho. Men usually waited in Moshweshwe's area until sufficiently large numbers assembled to make the hazardous journey north. Merensky suggests that the size of these returning groups ranged between 200 and 500 men. (24) I have not encountered a reference to an actual group larger than 200 men (which does not mean that there were none), and clearly smaller groups were still making their way back, no doubt at considerable risk. The most detailed description of a returning group is of "Matabelen von dem Volke des Hauptling Mangkopane ... Es waren hundert dreissig Mann. Sie hatten alle Gewehre auf der Schulter, ausserden noch mancherlei Gepäck ... auch funfzehn Pferde waren mit dem in dem Züge" (25) (Matabele from Mangkopane's [Mapela's] tribe ... There were one hundred and thirty men. They all carried guns over their shoulders and besides these they also had many kinds of baggage ... also fifteen horses were with the group).

The large size of these parties was dictated in part by the dangers of attack. Apart from the prohibitions on Africans possessing guns and horses, in 1853 Potgieter had attempted to establish how Africans were arming and had concluded that the bulk of guns were acquired by work in the English colonies; thenceforth Africans were forbidden to cross the Vaal. (26) Some of the earlier, smaller parties were attacked and disarmed. Men travelled through areas of white settlement by night and, with the development of larger parties, effective resistance was put up by these parties against attempts to disarm them. (27) By the 1860s, one's major impression is of the inability of the authorities at Lydenburg and elsewhere to do much more than harass these groups. Indeed, the recurring complaint was not of attack by whites but of attacks by Mabhogo (28), and to a lesser extent Boleu (29), whose areas lay to the south of Sekhukhuneland. Mabhogo's capital appears to have lain on the route to and from Moshweshwe, and he staged regular attacks on these labour parties. It is clear that the object of these attacks was to secure guns and other goods (not cannibalism, as outraged Pedi informants told Nachtigal). Mabhogo's and Boleu's people, while also participating in migrant labour, lived at the southern end of the area from which labour came and could thus afford to derive this double benefit. It is also possible that Mabhogo was attempting to contest Sekhukhune's hegemony over this system. By the late 1860s there is some evidence that Mabhogo and groups of trekkers were collaborating in joint ambushes on these parties. (30) Sekhukhune was plagued by complaints from his subordinate chiefs

and from members of groups from further north about these attacks, and they appear to have been one of the factors (31) that persuaded the Pedi to join forces with a commando sent to attack Mabhogo's stronghold in 1863.

Perhaps the major question is why were men sufficiently motivated to undertake these arduous journeys and lengthy work periods. Obviously, a critical dimension was that of resistance to attacks and demands for labour and tribute. In the case of the Pedi, while some individuals had gone south from as early as the 1840s, the beginning of migration in large numbers appears to have dated from the early 1850s. (32) In 1851 the Pedi beat off a Zulu attack, and in 1852 they narrowly withstood an attack led by Potgieter and Joubert on Sekwati's stronghold at Phiring, but lost large quantities of stock. These attacks and the resistance put up to them had amply demonstrated to both the Pedi and their attackers the effectiveness of the then seemingly small numbers of firearms that the Pedi had in their possession. (33) Merensky suggests that "Als Hauptmittel, sein Volk in den Stand zu stellen, dem Andringen den Weissen zu widerstehen, erkannte Sekwati die Einfuhrung der Pferde und der Feuerwaffen" (34) (Sekwati perceived the importation of guns and horses as the chief way of placing his people in a position to resist the advance of the whites). There are indications, then, that in at least this case the large scale flow of labour was actually initiated and to some extent organized by the central political authority. These groups do appear to have had some kind of formal structure (35) and men of high rank appear to have travelled with them. (36) Equally, the bulk of the men going south appear to have done so shortly after initiation, and it may be that to some extent the Pedi regimental system was being utilized, although at this stage it is pure speculation to suggest that this was so. An added incentive to newly initiated youths may have been the possibility of investing cash earned over and above the amount needed for a gun in cattle, to be used in bride wealth payments, particularly as this area had been denuded of large quantities of stock by the attacks mentioned above. One thing is clear, however: that by the early 1860s the Pedi had made quite remarkable progress in terms of the acquisition of firearms. "Das Volk war wieder erstarckt; durch zahe Ansdauer war erreicht worden, dass etwa die Hälfte alle zum kriege tauglichen Männer mit Gewehren bewaffnet war" (37) (The society was again strengthened; through tough perseverance, the point had been reached where almost half the men fit to fight were armed with guns).

In addition to their military significance guns, equally obviously, were important in hunting. Modern ethnographers tend to project the lack of hunting activity into the past and hence to assign it no more than marginal significance. (38) In contemporary nineteenth century accounts, hunting is given an equal prominence with agriculture and cattle keeping as the economic basis of Pedi society. (39) The product of the hunt played an important part in day to day subsistence and may have been critical in times of crop failure. This kind of usage of firearms would, however, depend on the ready availability of powder and lead. Skins, horns and ivory were important trade goods and there is evidence that there were regular organized hunting groups that left from the capital, presumably going to the game rich area surrounding the Oliphants River. (40) There were also individuals in the society who achieved eminence specifically in the role of hunters. The fascinating life story of Jakob Makoetle (41) is a case in point. He does not appear to have been born of high rank. While there is a certain amount of confusion in the sources as to whether he acquired a gun by working in the south or by participation in Trekker hunting parties (clearly he did both), get one he did. He set up as a hunter in his own right in the area round the Steelpoort River, where, because of the prevalence of tsetse fly, big game still abounded. He appears to have operated with a group of followers; but just what the composition of this group was is, unfortunately, not clear. His greatest feat was to shoot five elephants in one day, and he became "der liebbling des konigs Sekhukhune" (42); the latter is supposed to have said to him that, in the event of his having to take refuge from his enemies, Makoetle would be the man to stand guard outside his hiding place. (43)

The problem remains of why the Pedi and other groups adopted this strategy to circumvent the attempts of the ZAR to retain a monopoly of arms and ammunition. Part of the answer with the Pedi could be that the ivory that van Rooyen suggests that the Pedi had earlier traded to the coast in exchange for arms and ammunition (45) was diminishing, with the eradication of elephants in the areas around the Pedi domain. Equally, with the movement of Potgieter and his followers to the north and the emergence

of Zoutpansberg (46) as the focus of the ivory trade, the Pedi were by-passed and the opportunities of their earlier collaboration with hunters operating from Ohrigstad (47) for acquiring guns temporarily, or permanently, were lost. It may well be that it is the continuing vitality of the ivory trade from Zoutpansberg and the key role that the Venda played in the hunting of elephants which explains their apparent lack of involvement in this labour system. As has been pointed out earlier, however, the Pedi do not appear to have accumulated large quantities of arms until after 1852. While guns may have been traded, indeed probably were from the neighbouring white farmers, it was hardly in the interests of the Pedi to be dependent on their rivals and potential enemies for their supplies of arms and ammunition. Equally, it was a risky business for smugglers to attempt to bring guns into the area, which, amongst other things, must have inflated the cost, and the absence of ivory may have removed much of the incentive. What is clear, as Merensky points out, is that by going to the Cape in these kinds of numbers the Pedi could accumulate infinitely more guns than smugglers could supply. (48) Much more needs to be known about the nature of trade links to Delagoa Bay, the activities of traders, and the terms of trade, however, before an adequate assessment can be made of the options that were open to, and the costs that they entailed for, the Pedi and other societies in the northern Transvaal.

It also appears likely that this labour system was integrated with wider patterns of exchange, both within the Transvaal and beyond it to the southern Sotho. The "Baperis" that Arbousset encountered in 1837 in the southern Sotho area had skins with them (49), while a party leaving in 1862 to travel to Moshweshwe carried kirris made from rhino horn, riding whips made from hippo skins, and rhino skins, to trade with the southern Sotho. (50) There also appears to have been a metal trade. Arbousset commented of the Baperis: "Iron abounds in the country. The natives forge out of it pickaxes twice as heavy as those of other Bechuana and Caffer tribes that we have known and twice as good." (51) While the Pedi produced their own iron goods, Merensky suggests that the "Barroka", who lived in the foothills bordering on the lowveld, were the dominant iron workers in this area of the Transvaal. (52) The actual iron and copper smelting and working that Merensky and Nachtigal observed on their journey to the north appears to have been in the Phalaborwa area, and here they witnessed the production of hoes, axes, spears, arrow points and ornaments of various kinds. (53) Nachtigal commented that the iron goods manufactured here were better than the average English goods. (54) Extensive trade was conducted with all these goods: according to Merensky, for example, many war axes went to Moshweshwe's land each year. (55) Presumably he was aware of this in part because these goods passed through Sekhukhuneland on their way south. The same group in 1862, mentioned above, carried such axes as "presents" for Moshweshwe. Many Pedi were in possession of these "Barroka" axes, and they were highly valued. (56) It may well be that individuals and parties coming from the north on their way down to the Cape used iron goods both to meet tribute requirements and to exchange for food, both in Sekhukhuneland and in the southern Sotho area. For the Pedi area at least, there are numerous references to exchanges of hoes against grain. Equally, it may have been Pedi groups travelling south who provided one of the links between this "Barroka" iron industry and the southern Sotho. It is possible that the 1850s and 1860s witnessed the transformation of a trade route into a labour route but that its trading character was not only not lost but perhaps, in terms of the volume of goods, boosted. The southern Sotho area and the northern Transvaal appear also to have been linked in a direct arms trade. As has been suggested above, the southern Sotho were probably one of the sources for guns purchased by returning migrants. There is a reference to a group of Matlala working in Bloemfontein who intended to use their earnings to buy guns from Moshweshwe. (57) Merensky also refers to individuals who had travelled to Moshweshwe to acquire guns but were not involved in going further south. (58)

The critical role of Moshweshwe and Sekhukhune in this labour system resulted in large part from their position as rulers of major independent African areas, bordering on areas of white control. This was a situation which both could exploit to their material and political advantage. Pedi passing through Moshweshwe's area are supposed to have had to work in his gardens before he would grant them an exit permit, although this may have been possible to circumvent by tribute payments. On their return journey from the Cape, Moshweshwe had "the right to take the chief's portion out of their earnings, and this invariably consisted of munitions of war" (59), although to what extent this right was exercised is not clear. Sekhukhune equally probably derived benefits both from tribute payments made by individuals passing through his domain and

by those made by Pedi. Indeed, Merensky has listed presents from travellers as one of the most important sources of a chief's income. (60) Certainly, by 1862 Sekhukhune appears to have been in possession of considerable quantities of cloth and blankets, and had his own arsenal. It is not clear, however, to what extent these were the direct result of the labour flow. Clearly groups could not leave the area without obtaining the Paramount's permission: according to the missionaries, shortly after his accession Sekhukhune sent out armed men to turn back individuals who attempted to do so (61), and this may in fact have represented Sekhukhune asserting his control over this process.

It also appears that Moshweshwe and Sekhukhune, and probably Sekwati, had come to some kind of arrangement. There is the suggestion that Sekwati had formed a matrimonial alliance with Moshweshwe (62), and such a marriage would have provided for institutional expression of the relationship. The significance of Moshweshwe in Sekhukhune's view of the southern African situation is reflected in the two letters he despatched on his accession. One went to Lydenburg, the other to Moshweshwe. (63) Maletsul, who carried the letter south, subsequently returned with two individuals, described as "the sons of Moshweshwe", who were feted and entertained to military displays by Sekhukhune. (64) With these men on their departure went 200 Pedi going down to the Cape Colony to work. (65) Presumably part of the purpose of the letter and the visit was to renew the arrangement regarding the flow of men and arms.

It was not Sekhukhune alone, however, who had established links with Moshweshwe. Mapela had sent a daughter to Moshweshwe and had sent requests for a missionary through him. (66) Mabhogo was also given to sending letters to Moshweshwe (67), and these links may well have been duplicated in other cases. Clearly Moshweshwe's role in this movement of men and arms does much to explain his considerable prestige in the northern Transvaal and, combined with the continuous flow of information it must have provided, illuminates the extent to which Moshweshwe's example was used by rulers in the Transvaal as a model for their own choices and strategies. Sekhukhune also enjoyed considerable prestige in the areas to the north of his own. For the missionaries on their travels to the north, the fact that they were Sekhukhune's "teachers" in many cases guaranteed them safe conduct. In the Lobedu area it actually saved their lives. The migrant labour system, apart from playing a part in enhancing the prestige of the Pedi, may also have provided Sekwati and Sekhukhune with an additional lever to use in coercing groups on the periphery of the Pedi domain into coming under the umbrella of the paramountcy and so securing their route to the south.

It would appear, then, that in the 1850s and 1860s there was a significant flow of labour from the northern Transvaal. It was integrated with wider patterns of exchange and played a part in shaping relations of conflict and alliance both within and beyond the Transvaal. To an extent it was channelled through the Pedi and southern Sotho polities, the rulers of which derived some economic and political advantage from it. This labour system was to give way in the 1870s to one focused on the diamond mines. Its existence, however, does something to illuminate the scale and quickness of the response of Africans of this area to the development of this new demand for labour. This later flow of labour and the attempts of the ZAR to control it played a significant part both in the expansion of Pedi power and in the escalation of conflict in this area that led to the war of 1876. There is just a touch of irony in the fact that it was in part through an increasing involvement in migrant labour that the Pedi succeeded in preserving their political independence. At the same time it was the fact of this independence that enabled the Pedi to avoid the controls the ZAR attempted to place upon this labour flow.

Notes

- (1) W. G. Clarence-Smith and R. Moorsom, "Underdevelopment and Class Formation in Ovamboland, 1845-1915", Journal of African History XVI, 3, 1975, p. 365.
- (2) C. Cooper, "Land and Labour in the Transvaal", University of London MA thesis, 1974.
- (3) Not completely, though. A. Atmore and C. Saunders give valuable information on it - see "Sotho Arms and Ammunition in the 19th Century", JAH XIII, 4, 1972, p. 538 - as does R. Wagner, "Zoutpansberg: some notes on the dynamics of a hunting frontier", ICS Seminar Paper (SSA/74/5), p. 7.
- (4) Berliner Missions Berichte 1862, No. 21, p. 356.
- (5) Berliner Missions Archiv. Abt. 11, Fach 3, No. 1, letter from Nachtigal to his father, dated 10th September 1861.
- (6) BMB 1862, No. 21, p. 357.
- (7) T. Wangemann, Die Berliner Mission im Bassuto-Lande (1877), p. 48; and BMA, Nachtigals Tagebuch, 3rd September 1861, Abt. 11, Fach 3.
- (8) A. Merensky, Erinnerungen aus dem Missionleben in Transvaal (1899), p. 143.
- (9) R. Wagner, "Zoutpansberg", p. 7.
- (10) BMB 1865, No. 7, p. 99.
- (11) A. Merensky, Erinnerungen, p. 211.
- (12) BMB 1862, No. 21, p. 356.
- (13) BMB 1862, No. 15, p. 258.
- (14) BMB 1862, No. 21, p. 357.
- (15) A. Atmore and C. Saunders, "Sotho Arms", p. 538.
- (16) T. Wangemann, Lebensbilder aus Südafrika (1876), pp. 15, 28-29.
- (17) T. Wangemann, Die Berliner Mission, p. 48.
- (18) BMB 1868, No. 15, p. 233.
- (19) BMA, Abt. 11, Fach 3E No. 2: manuscript Zwölf Jahre ein Missionar, by C. Endemann, p. 11.
- (20) BMB 1862, No. 2, p. 357.
- (21) BMB 1868, No. 15, p. 233.
- (22) BMB 1868, No. 15, p. 237.
- (23) T. Wangemann, Lebensbilder, p. 29.
- (24) BMB 1862, No. 21, p. 357.
- (25) BMB 1865, No. 7, p. 99.
- (26) T. van Rooyen, "Die Verhoudinge tussen die Boere, Engelse en Naturelle in die Geskiedenis van die Oos-Transvaal tot 1882", Archives Year Book for South African History XIV:1.
- (27) BMB 1862, No. 21, p. 357.
- (28) BMA, Abt. 11, Fach 3 No. 1. Nachtigals Tagebuch, 20th October 1861.
- (29) BMB 1862, No. 23, p. 382.
- (30) BMB 1868, No. 16, p. 259.
- (31) BMA, Abt. 11, Fach 4, No. 2. Merensky: Tagebuch der Station Khalallolu, 31st December 1862.
- (32) BMB 1862, No. 21, p. 356.
- (33) T. van Rooyen, "Verhoudinge", p. 98. BMB 1862, No. 21, p. 354.
- (34) BMB 1862, No. 21, p. 356.
- (35) BMB 1862, No. 21, p. 357.
- (36) BMA, Abt. 11, Fach 3 No. 1. Nachtigals Tagebuch, 20th October 1861.

- (37) A. Merensky, Erinnerungen, p. 129,
- (38) H. O. Monnig, The Pedi, pp. 174-5.
- (39) e.g. T. Wangemann, Maleo en Sekukuni, p. 35.
- (40) A. Merensky, Erinnerungen, p. 172.
- (41) Ibid., pp. 120-2. T. Wangemann, Lebensbilder, pp. 184-202.
- (42) T. Wangemann, Lebensbilder, p. 195.
- (43) Ibid.
- (45) van Rooyen, "Verhoudinge", p. 95.
- (46) R. Wagner, "Zoutpansberg", pp. 1-7.
- (47) Hunt, "An Account of the BaPedi", Bantu Studies, Vol. 4, p. 289.
- (48) BMB 1862, No. 2, p. 357.
- (49) T. Arbousset, Narrative of an Exploratory Tour (1868), pp. 173-4.
- (50) BMB 1862, No. 6, pp. 95-96.
- (51) T. Arbousset, Narrative, p. 175.
- (52) A. Merensky, Beiträge zur Kenntniss Sud-Afrikas (1875), p. 106.
- (53) T. Wangemann, Die Berliner Mission, p. 65, and below.
- (54) BMA, Abt. III, Fach 4, No. 2. Nachtigals Reise Tagebuch, 14th August 1862.
- (55) T. Wangemann, Die Berliner Mission, p. 65.
- (56) Merensky, Erinnerungen, p. 208.
- (57) R. Wagner, "Zoutpansberg", p. 7.
- (58) Merensky, Erinnerungen, p. 39.
- (59) Atmore and Saunders, "Sotho Arms", p. 538.
- (60) Merensky, Beiträge, p. 107.
- (61) BMB 1862, No. 6, p. 95.
- (62) Atmore and Saunders, "Sotho Arms", p. 538.
- (63) Merensky, Erinnerungen, p. 84.
- (64) BMB 1862, No. 15, pp. 253-4.
- (65) BMB 1862, No. 15, p. 255.
- (66) Wangemann, Maleo en Sekukuni, p. 171.
- (67) BMB 1864, No. 15, p. 263.