

# THE SEROWE KGOTLA RIOT OF 1952: POPULAR OPPOSITION TO TSHEKEDI KHAMA AND COLONIAL RULE IN BOTSWANA

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It also means that the wishes of the Bamangwato, clearly expressed as they have been, are to be disregarded, who, in any case, are the Bamangwato to have wishes? Let them know their place.

*Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg)  
Editorial, 8 December 1951.

The viciousness of the attack can be ascribed to drink and the part played by women.

PRO-DO 35/4149 (Draft Note for  
Cabinet by W A W Clark, 7 June 1952)

## Introduction

Botswana in southern Africa is, as Pope John Paul II told the world on a September 1989 stop-over, "an island of peace in a troubled sea". [1] Besides military incursions by its neighbours (in 1900, 1976-79, and 1985-88), there has been only one incident of civil violence leading to death over the course of the last century - the Serowe kgotla riot of 1952.

The riot in the kgotla (public forum or courtyard) at Serowe, on Sunday 1 June, 1952, was the climax of ten days of unrest and a weekend of demonstrations. Six delegates of the Bangwato people had arrived back at Serowe on Wednesday 21 May from a futile trip to London. They had flown off to persuade the British government to restore to them their rightful Chief, Seretse Khama, who had been debarred from accession to the chieftainship by the fiat of a Labour government in March 1950. But the Bangwato delegates of 1952, led by Keaboka Kgamane and Peto Sekgoma, were baulked by a new Conservative government which pre-empted their move by announcing that the ban on Seretse was permanent. The delegation had to return home empty-handed. Moreover, it had alienated Seretse himself, then living in exile in south London, by calling on him to divorce his English wife - and thus, supposedly, to remove the cause of his rejection by the British government. [2]

The British colonial administration of the Bechuanaland Protectorate (Botswana) seized the opportunity of dampening down Bangwato popular resistance to its diktat once and for all. The Conservative government had decided to go all out for the accession of their own candidate, Rasebolai Kgamane, as Chief. District Commissioner Batho of Serowe first refused the returning delegates permission to report back to the kgotla of the town. Then, on Thursday 22 May, he announced the "resignation" of Keaboka Kgamane as the interim leader of the Bangwato. The next morning the BBC overseas service announced an order-in-council to regulate the "Bamangwato succession". This was followed by protest meetings in the smaller kgotlas of the town's wards, where fears were voiced that the government was trying to reimpose, through Rasabolai, the rule of the much feared Tshekedi Khama, who had been forced to resign his twenty-five year regency for Seretse Khama in 1950. There was disorder in the national church on Sunday 24 May, when a leading supporter of Tshekedi was expelled by the congregation. On the Monday the District Commissioner, in his capacity as Acting Native Authority, addressed a large kgotla assembly of Bangwato men. Nearly the whole assembly rose and turned their backs on the speaker's rostrum. When opening prayers were called, two opposing preachers stood back to back, one facing the assembly and one the

DC, chanting contrary prayers. The DC tried to address the kgotla against uproar: his interpreter eventually throwing down the loud hailer in disgust. At this point a large group of women marched into the kgotla, traditionally though not exclusively a male preserve, and threw taunts and insults at their white Chief on the platform.

A kgotla meeting on Tuesday morning expressed the bitter disappointment of the people at the failure of their delegation to London, determined to stand by Seretse while he lived, and agreed to revert to the 1950 complete boycott of the colonial administration - i.e., suspension of the "tribal" mechanisms of justice and tax collection which supported colonial rule. These resolutions were incorporated in a memorandum that afternoon, addressed to the colonial administration and signed "Your obedient servants" by 68 leading Bangwato.

The gauntlet had been thrown down, and the colonial administration determined on Draconian measures in response. On Saturday 31 May, DC Batho travelled round the town in a loud-speaker van, announcing bans on all meetings in kgotla, on ammunition permits for hunting, and on all drinking of alcohol (including corn-beer). Police then marched into the kgotla and arrested Peto and other leaders, who, however, were released next morning. Police reinforcements, brought by train across South Africa from the British colony of Basutoland, arrived in Serowe at 4.00 a.m. on Sunday morning. While a small number of Bangwato walked to communion service at the national church on the other side of town, a great crowd assembled in the kgotla for hymns and prayers of their own. [3]

At this point the narrative becomes unclear because of conflicting, different sources. [4] There appear to have been two confrontations between the police and the crowd. First, there was a minor clash with demonstrators who refused to clear the kgotla after the morning service. A woman leader was beaten while assaulting a white policeman from Swaziland, and a man was permanently blinded by smoke from a tear-gas cannister. Then, after lunch, there was the major confrontation with lines of police standing next to their trucks in riot gear. A white-washed line had been painted in the dust across the mouth of the Kgotla as *ne plus ultra* for the Bangwato. But the crowd, with women at the forefront, surged across the line with sticks and stones to attack the district officer, who was warning them off with a loud-speaker attached to a car battery. Tear-gas was fired into the crowd. While District Commissioner Batho stayed at the back near his dark blue Ford truck, BPX 66, District Officer Rutherford leapt into the front or on to the back of a police lorry which drove into the crowd and caused pandemonium to be let loose. One black policeman was killed as he fell off, or was dragged off, the lorry; some sources claim he was crushed under the wheels of another lorry following behind. Two other black policemen were certainly clubbed or stoned to death after being chased from the mêlée - one in nearby housing, and another after being chased for, maybe, a mile. Meanwhile, while District Officer Atkins faced the infuriated mob with considerable bravery - for which he was later given Britain's highest civilian award, the George Medal - the main body of police retreated on foot up and over the steep slopes of Serowe Hill, at the back of the kgotla.

The outburst of violence in a normally peaceable civic society clearly stunned both Bangwato and British, and restrained further violence. Though a spate of arrests followed that week, for incitement, riot and murder, no Bangwato took to the use of any of the numerous firearms available in Serowe. Oral tradition tells of the restraint of a veteran of the Matebele Wars from grabbing his gun. [5] Meanwhile, High Commissioner Le Rougetel, the senior British official in southern Africa, insisted that no ammunition be issued to the police at Serowe, who were being strengthened by reinforcements being flown in from Southern Rhodesia as well as from Basutoland and Swaziland.

Nine days later the Secretary and the Under-Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations made statements in the House of Lords and in the House of Commons, respectively, on the Serowe riot. The riot, they said, had all been the work of a minority (Keaboka, Peto, *et al*) playing on drunkenness and women in the crowd. Drink and women, retorted Jennie Lee, MP: Were the women drunk? The government explanation was most unclear. "Many of us

were impressed by the members of the delegation to this country. They seemed responsible and, in fact, distinguished men, and therefore it is very hard for us to accept the impression given in the statement that this was just an unrepresentative rabble and that the women taking part were drunk.”

Two days after the parliamentary statements, the Commonwealth Relations Office in London received cabled intelligence from Pretoria: “Women were in state of extreme excitement but there is no evidence that this was due to drink.” But no correction was made to Parliament. The men who ruled Britain, like the men who ruled Bechuanaland, seemed to find the combination of minority agitation, drink and women to be a perfectly adequate explanation of the otherwise inexplicable breakdown of moral fibre in Bangwato society.

The ultimate cause of the Serowe riot of 1952 was, of course, the barring of Seretse Khama from rightful succession. Most Bangwato held, and still hold, that to be the sole cause of all the trouble between 1949 and 1956. However, successive British governments were obliged to gloss over this fact out of political expediency, and to find other causes. The Harragin Report of 1949 was officially suppressed because it would have revealed extraneous motivation of Seretse’s ban coming from South Africa and Southern Rhodesia. The Commonwealth Relations Office and Bechuanaland Protectorate officials were obliged to produce a string of alternative explanations for the continuing Bangwato political crisis, to divert attention away from Seretse Khama as an individual.

### Minority Agitation

The basic tenet of official explanations of the Bangwato political crisis was that support of Seretse Khama was sectional and unrepresentative of the Bangwato people as a whole. The underlying purpose was to secure acclamation by the Bangwato of an alternative chief: under colonial law in Bechuanaland, a (Paramount) Chief had to be acclaimed by the tribe in kgotla as a legitimate *kgosi e kgolo*, as well as being recognised as Native Authority by the colonial administration. Flying in the face of obvious majority support for Seretse - the legitimate heir by all established rules of primogeniture - the British, in effect, exacerbated and aggravated all the factors that they identified as alternative “causes” of the 1949-56 political crisis.

The first “cause” of the crisis was identified by historians within the colonial administration as a dynastic feud between royal houses. Seretse was the grandson of Khama the Great (d. 1923) by a wife who predeceased him; Tshekedi was the son of Khama by a wife who outlived him. The historian Anthony Sillery, first as Resident Commissioner of Bechuanaland and later as an Oxford academic, remained convinced that the tangled web of dynastic alliances dating back a century or more, to the time of Khama’s own father, was the key to an understanding of internal Bangwato conflict. This view, reduced to a crude historical determinism of irreconcilable hereditary factors by Sillery’s superiors, was actively promoted by Tshekedi. But a check-list of Tshekedi’s royal supporters shows them to have been motivated more by long-standing allegiance to Tshekedi, with youth or previous personal quarrels with Tshekedi, rather than family ties, predisposing other royals to vocal support for Seretse. [6]

A second explanation for political crisis, also pressed by Tshekedi, was the cleavage between the dominant minority of “true” Bangwato clans and the subordinate majority of various “alien” or “allied” clans. The distinction had been used as a divide-and-rule ploy by the British against Tshekedi in the 1930s, but Tshekedi was now confident that this silent majority was backing him against Seretse. Again, Tshekedi was deluded: the subordinate chiefs and headmen of the “allied” clans who backed him were usually Tshekedi’s place-men, some of them not even from the clans they claimed to represent. The “allied” tribes, notably Bakalanga, Bakhurutshe and Bokaa, proved, on the whole, to be the most persistent supporters of Seretse. [7]



The third, linked, explanation offered by Tshekedi and picked up by successive British governments was that the June 1949 popular acclamation of Seretse and subsequent events were expressions of "mob rule". During the 1948-49 kgotla assemblies on his marriage and right to succession, Seretse had successfully played on majority support - up to four thousand men had risen for Seretse against fewer than forty notables already standing for Tshekedi, at the climactic moment on Wednesday 23rd June 1949. Tshekedi, echoed later by Winston Churchill as Leader of the Opposition at Westminster, dismissed the acclamation of Seretse as Chief as "mob rule" and purely "sentimental". The Labour government set up its Harragin Commission to prove that kgotla assembly was unrepresentative of the Bangwato as a whole, including "allied" clans. After the commission failed to supply the desired opinion, three British "observers" - a retired trade union leader, a professor of colonial history, and an independent MP - were sent out in 1951 to investigate Tshekedi's continuing contentions. (Tshekedi had been exiled from the Bangwato Reserve after resigning his Regency in 1950, but now claimed the right of return on the basis of majority support.) The "observers" convened sectional meetings in outlying areas and concluded that, while young pro-Seretse royals, led by Keaboka, held the centre, the majority in the Reserve was implacably hostile to Tshekedi. [8]

The fourth line of explanation of the continuing crisis was arrived at reluctantly by the Labour government in 1950, and was confirmed by the "observers" in 1951. It was that Tshekedi himself was the cause of the trouble. His enlightened but autocratic rule for so many years had alienated too many sections of the Bangwato. Tshekedi himself had pointed to the grievances against him of ex-servicemen and of younger age-regiments. Bechuanaland, in general, and the Bangwato Reserve, in particular, had supplied more men proportionate to able-bodied population than any other British-allied territory in the Second World War. Many of the men in kgotla meetings were ex-soldiers wearing old uniforms - while in the 1952 riot the expertise of former members of army smokescreen units proved invaluable for evading the effects of tear-gas. Tshekedi feared that these old soldiers blamed him for the interminable official delays in payment of demobilization benefits. He also knew that age-regiments that had fought in the war, and the younger age-regiment of Seretse who had not been old enough to fight, bitterly resented their direction by Tshekedi into forced labour. They had been forced to work without pay between 1946 and 1949 on Tshekedi's pet project - Bamangwato College, set in the remote valley of Moeng. [9]

We can elaborate further on the popular grievances identified by Tshekedi in latter-day opposition to his rule, in relation to the war effort and the more recent push to build the college at Moeng. Traditional tribute labour on royal fields had been revived and transformed into "warlands" cultivation during the Second World War. This gave a "peasant" grievance for women, children and the aged left on the lands by their migrant menfolk, particularly those on more productive lands for cultivation, such as the Bakalanga. On the other hand, obligatory levies of cattle - to raise £100,000 for the Moeng project - raised a "pastoralist" grievance against Tshekedi among older, more propertied households after the war. Peasant and pastoralist grievances had, in fact, come to a head in 1947 when John Nswazwi, a headman of the Bakalanga, "spoke out like a man and suffered as a scapegoat" in objecting to Tshekedi's harsh enforcement of tribute and levies. [10]

When Tshekedi and 242 male taxpayers - the "cream" of his tribal administration, plus household retainers - retired from the Bangwato Reserve into nearby exile in 1949-50, the British administration therefore did not rush to beg him to return, as he expected. The power vacuum at Serowe was filled by younger or disaffected notables who had not enjoyed Tshekedi's patronage. By the time the three British "observers" arrived in July 1951, there was clearly a "Big Five" in power, led by Keaboka. It was this "Keaboka crowd", expanded to include leading representatives of "allied" clans, which masterminded Bangwato affairs from the boycott of colonial administration in March-September 1950 up to the Serowe kgotla riot of June 1952. It saw itself almost in revolutionary terms as a provisional government awaiting the restoration of Seretse after the downfall of Tshekedi. [11] It

certainly played on popular fears of brigandage by Tshekedi's supporters, whose habit of riding round in blood-red (kgapamadi) trucks bristling with rifles led to a spate of scares. As a Serowe police official reported in August 1949:

It would appear that quite a number of people are allowing their imaginations to run riot, and are firmly convinced that when out walking in the village at night ... others are following with the intention of committing murder, and that the people who are following them must be the supporters of Tshekedi. [12]

Such "great fear" of retribution by the once all-powerful Tshekedi helps to explain the popular instability which manifested itself in violent mass demonstrations against small numbers of "kgapamadi" who came to collect their personal possessions at Mahalapye and Serowe in July 1951. The British, however, arrested the leaders of Seretse's age-regiment as the agitators of events, rather than tackling the "Keaboka crowd" at the centre of Bangwato society. [13]

### Drink and Women

It is against such a background of mass fear and possibly loathing against the figure of Tshekedi that one must consider explanations of the proximate causes of the 1952 Serowe Kgotla riot. Popular resistance to colonial rule cannot be separated from popular resistance to the rule of Tshekedi Khama, because after initial dramatic clashes the two systems of rule had become inextricably bound up with each other. The princely resistance of the 1930s had been reborn as popular resistance in the 1950s, after the accommodation of the prince and the alienation of the people in the 1940s. [14]

This paper argues that the essential factor that led to the murderous riot of June 1952 was the decision of the British government a few months earlier to seize the initiative. It did so because of tactical and strategic errors by the "Keaboka crowd", which cut them off from Seretse's leading young supporters and from Seretse himself. Keoboka *et al* then indeed became desperate men, and saw their only option as the incitement of popular protest, canalizing deep-seated popular resentment against recent British rule. That resentment may well have had its origins against Tshekedi, but had become increasingly targetted directly against British rule since Tshekedi had been out of power for two to three years. This can be clearly seen by focussing on the issues of drink and women raised by the Commonwealth Relations Office explanation of the riot.

The issue of alcoholic drink is relatively easily explained. Tshekedi had indeed tried to maintain the bans on brewing and drinking of spirits and corn-beer which his father, Khama the Great, had initiated in the previous century. Beer-brewing and drinking had come out of the closet with Tshekedi's resignation from the Regency in 1949-50. The riot of Sunday 1 June 1952 followed within twenty-four hours of the District Commissioner's renewed ban on beer. That some men were still groggy, or even drunk, after a heavy Saturday night's drinking was hardly surprising - a combination of defiance of authority with depletion of stocks before police destroyed them. [15]

The issue of women's involvement in the unfolding of events between 1948 and 1952 is much more instructive about the nature and dynamics of Bangwato society. The first hint of a women's revolt against Tshekedi came in November 1948, when he made the claim that all male adult Bangwato (i.e. those with rights in kgotla) were opposed to Seretse's marriage. Seretse had just arrived in Serowe, and was being greeted by many women and children. The situation was repeated when Ruth Khama arrived in Serowe to join her husband in July 1949, by which time Tshekedi had concluded that Ruth, rather than Seretse, was his bitterest enemy. On 9 August, 58 women of Mahalapye got together to petition the Resident Commissioner on behalf of Seretse (and, therefore, on behalf of Ruth). They were led by

Relathanye M Ikitseng, the wife of Manyaphiri, who continued to play such a part in the political crisis that perhaps we should refer to the Big Six, rather than Five, to include her. The petition first showed political acumen by deploring the influence of South Africa and Southern Rhodesia on the whole issue. They admitted "slight fear of correct approach" to Seretse's European wife, but said "we have accepted Mrs Seretse as our Chieftainess, and this we showed when we gathered in the Chief's Kgotla with our school children. May we request that Mrs Seretse be handed over to us: we will teach her all our daily work as Africans" - though "queens have no heavy work to do". They disputed that Tshekedi had any rights, and asserted that "we are women, and we also put forward our request as such because a Chief is for us all and not for men only who speak in Kgotla; Seretse Khama is our only Chief." Some sense of prevailing bitterness against Tshekedi also comes through in the insults of Dichetse Balang, a 40-year old woman in Serowe, who complained of the colonial government "making Tshekedi proud, as he was born poor and not entitled to be Chief, and like a dog with a long tail, and that he did not know his grandfathers".

Emotional scenes attended the temporary return of Seretse to his wife, on a flying visit to Serowe in April 1950, after Seretse's exile had been announced. Hundreds of women and some men sat around the Serowe house in silence. "Shyly a spokeswoman came to the front and stood near to Ruth. Raising her voice, she said: '... All the women and children want Seretse! Today we do not mind if the Government kills us all! Indeed, unless the Government let us have Seretse and his wife as our Queen, it has finished us!' Old, skinny women began to sway in a ritual dance in front of husband and wife. The dancers' hands waved and they contrived to express in gesture a great longing for both Seretse and his wife. Then, as gently as it began, the dance ended." [16]

It was during the political crisis that women began to take their places in kgotla. The assembly that greeted the Commonwealth Relations Secretary, Patrick Gordon-Walker, in February 1951, was "the first gathering at the kgotla ground where women attended in strength and gave the moduduetsa, the trilling fire-bell greeting.... Little children sat at their mothers' feet and fiddled with toys made from cigarette-tin lids and packing-case wire". In the July 1951 disturbances, "the women took over the running from the men. Their screaming, wide-eyed participation in the disorders was the index of the tribe's desperate misery over the exile of Seretse." The women of Mahalapye, led by Mrs Manyaphiri, forced Tshekedi's local supporters to shelter in the police camp. Mr Manyaphiri and the men held their own meeting, which decided to let the Bo-Rametsana return to their homes, but were apparently overruled by the women, who mockingly demanded "Give us your trousers!" (17)

When the three British "observers" appeared in Serowe, a special assembly of 1,200 to 1,500 women was held, at the women's own request, to present their views. The "observers" (all three male, though a woman had originally been invited to join) were quite taken aback by the emotional scenes in Kgotla, and especially by the strength of the women's vituperation against Tshekedi. The message was put across that, if Tshekedi tried to return home, he would be subject to "acute personal danger, particularly from women". Certainly the women were prepared to resort to the "feminine" tactics of wailing and "rending their garments", but they were also prepared to resort to "masculine" tactics of physical violence as well. One symptom of Keaboka's weakness in government eyes was that "women, at the head of whom was the wife of Manyaphiri, headman at Mahalapye, sentenced a woman to receive corporal punishment in public and administered that punishment". It is scarcely surprising, therefore, that women played such a strong role in the Serowe kgotla riot of 1 June 1952. Of the 167 people arrested after the riot, 40 were women. 48 people were eventually convicted, of whom at least six sentenced to one year's imprisonment were women. [18]

Why were the women so strong in their support for Seretse and Ruth Khama? One is tempted to suggest that Ruth Khama was for African women the opposite of what she was for white men. For white men, a white wife for a black man turned topsy-turvy all assumptions that a man should dominate a woman, because white should dominate black. For African women, maybe, Ruth might have been a symbol of potential women's equality with men.



What is very clear from all evidence is that strong support for Seretse and Ruth Khama was a continuing women's revolt against Tshekedi which was redirected against the colonial administration. Why? The chance remark in a Commonwealth Relations Office minute of January 1952 by W A W Clark, a friend and admirer of Tshekedi, is the only clue to be found in British government files: "The 'Mahalapye women' dislike Tshekedi because of his periodic campaigns to clean up the morals of the railway townships." [19] This was no doubt Tshekedi's own view, and is coloured by Tshekedi's concept of the moral order into which women fitted. But it may be instructive to ask what was the "immorality" that Tshekedi had in mind and why this breakdown of the moral order did occur.

Here we come back to the linked issues of women and drink. Tshekedi, a strong teetotaler, was cracking down on the "immorality" of beer brewing, which led to beer parties and so to other moral excesses and sins. (One suspects that the railway towns were centres of infection for the epidemic of venereal disease that rose with the tide of labour migration.) Beer-brewing parties were no doubt linked to the demands of labour migrants, who characteristically spent freely on their return, and even on their departure, by train. But, more importantly, beer brewing, as has been shown by a number of more recent studies of Botswana, was the characteristic way in which independent and semi-independent women could make a living.

Much has been made in international aid circles in recent years of Female-Headed Households, a concept that can be traced back to Bond's work on Botswana agriculture in 1974. The concept has even been conflated with that of "matrifocality", abstracted from ex-slave societies in the Americas. The concept has probably been overworked, and has put undue emphasis on gender rather than function in a household. In particular, it may have obscured the importance of age as well as gender in households, since female heads are usually older women while young, unwed women with children remain living with their own parents. But the concept of Female-Headed Households has brought attention to the widespread occurrence of independent and semi-independent women who, in the stereotypical "patriarchal" view of society, should not exist. When, then, did such independent women emerge? The importance of the women's revolt against Tshekedi is that it represents a mass outburst of such independent-mindedness on the part of women. And this outburst was a reaction, we suggest, to Tshekedi's restriction of the economic self-sufficiency of the growing numbers of independent and semi-independent women. [20]

Why and when did this phenomenon of independent and semi-independent women emerge? The obvious general answer is that it was caused by the growth of male labour migration. Not only did adult men leave the country, and sometimes never come back, but the age of male marriage was raised till men had earned sufficient money from many years of labour migration. This not only increased the rate of unmarried motherhood, but also increased the incidence of widowhood as older husbands died long before their wives. Such trends were evident in the Bakgatla Reserve of south-eastern Bechuanaland during the fieldwork of the anthropologist Isaac Schapera between 1929 and 1934, and were recorded by him in his classic *Married Life in an African Tribe* (since reprinted by Penguin Books many times), though as aberrations from the norm rather than as new social trends. Read from a modern perspective, *Married Life* reflects widespread marital crisis in the Kgatleng, and reads in part almost as a feminist tract, since Schapera was careful to base the book on the intimate written statements of younger women. Given that Bakgatla, straddled across the South African border, were locked into the South African economy as a labour reserve by the nineteen twenties/thirties, we may expect such trends to emerge among the Bangwato by the nineteen thirties/forties. Extensive labour recruitment in the Bangwato Reserve took off in 1933-34, when the boom in gold production on the Witwatersrand (caused by a guaranteed world price, however much output was raised) led to more intensive labour recruitment by the Native Recruiting Corporation at Palapye and Mahalapye, and the opening of offices at Francistown of the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association to take labour from the northern Bangwato Reserve. By 1942-43 about 60 per cent of tax-payers (i.e. adult males) from the Bangwato Reserve (and other Reserves, too) were outside Bechuanaland - a little

more than half of these in the army overseas, the rest mostly in South African mines.

The trend towards Female-Headed Households helps to explain the increasing anomaly noted by the Census-takers of Bechuanaland - a so-called "masculinity ratio" that indicated almost equal numbers of males to females, or even an excess of males over females. This was in complete contrast to universal demographic trends elsewhere in the world, where females exceeded males in peasant societies but began to approach parity in industrial societies (so long as there were no wars). The excess of males over females appeared in the first Census of 1904, and was remarked upon during the Census of 1921. Khama III was asked to explain it, and answered that he had complained to the Resident Commissioner "about the number of young women that were leaving his country, and that this is now the result". When the Sample Census of 1956 had a similar result (115 males : 100 females), the social scientists conducting it offered the same answer of large-scale, unrecorded female out-migration, but also suggested an increase in the number of "widows" not counted by the Census. That, of course, was the problem, one of enumeration, whereby the Census count was linked to the exclusively male taxpayers' role. A cursory look at the figures indicates that, whereas in the early Censuses it was infant females that were under-enumerated (for reasons of low prestige in the household), in later censuses it was older females who were under-enumerated. The increase in infant enumeration may indicate the increasing status of females in Botswana society. [21]

Casual observers sometimes remark on the relatively equitable status of women in Setswana culture, by comparison with neighbouring countries - pointing to the precedents of property succession and child custody established in customary law since the nineteenth century. An alternative view links education with economic status in explaining the changing role of women in Botswana society. In a dry-land country, cultivation has always been marginal, and women's role as hoe-cultivators was therefore limited. The widespread, and by at least the 1930s universal, adoption of the plough for cultivation reduced the role of women in agriculture still further, as men nearly always until recently took the role of ploughmen with the oxen. Meanwhile, the growth of labour migration abroad intensified the role of boys, rather than men, in cattle herding. The result has been the anomaly in Botswana, as seen in universal and pan-African terms, of an excess of girls over boys in school ever since the last century. [22]

At this point we can no longer speak solely in terms of gender, but also of social class. It was upper-class boys who could go to school still young and climb the educational ladder higher, because of the family servants that looked after cattle for them. And it was upper-class girls who benefited not only from education but from legal reforms instituted by Khama III, which gave them the right to inherit property, to be present in kgotla cases that directly concerned them, and even to be given personal cattle on marriage. [23]

As for the poorer majority of women, they largely constituted the peasant component in what Jack Parson has called the "peasantariat" - the combined peasantry and proletariat of "worker-peasants" that kept the South African economy going. In other words, the largely female peasant part of the "peasantariat" subsidized the largely male migrant proletarian part of the "peasantariat", so that the cost of labour for capitalist employers in South Africa was even cheaper than that needed for the reproduction of the labour force. If that is so, then we can see the rise of independent, non-peasant women in Bangwato country as the further penetration of proletarianization into the "peasantariat". In that sense, the women's revolt against Tshekedi was not resistance but adaptation to proletarianization. As has been noted of England in the eighteen thirties and eighteen forties, outbursts of feminine assertion tend to happen at times of familial stress, when the effects of an industrial revolution have percolated throughout society as a whole. [24]



## Grasping the Nettle

The Commonwealth Relations Office was well prepared for the new Conservative government in October 1951, urging decisive action to settle Bangwato affairs to exclude Seretse Khama permanently. The basic premise was that Seretse's return would "enflame ... white South African opinion" and make the South African government apply "overt and completely crippling sanctions" on the British territories of Basutoland and Swaziland as well as Bechuanaland. The new Minister, Lord Ismay, was much taken with the notion of the necessity of sacrificing one (good) man for "the future happiness and well-being of 1,000,000 Africans", and pressed it on his colleagues in cabinet. [25]

Tshekedi flew over to lobby Ismay, successfully, for the right to return to live in the Bangwato Reserve. In making this concession to Tshekedi, Ismay rode roughshod over the advice of his High Commissioner in Pretoria, who warned that "serious disorder" would follow Tshekedi's return. [26] An office minute by Clark on the first working day of 1952 suggested that the CRO grasp the initiative from the Bangwato "before they have time to recover". Clark's view was reinforced later in the month by two developments at Serowe, one a shock and one a pleasure, which suggested that the time for action was approaching.

The shock for the CRO, and particularly for the British government, assiduously hushed up from the public, was the unprecedented revolt of the Serowe district administration against British government policy. On 10 January 1952, three district officers at Serowe addressed a memorial to the Secretary of State protesting at the impending return of Tshekedi and at the injustice of British policy towards the Bangwato. The result was fury in higher quarters. Ismay, correctly, saw the connivance of other local colonial officials in the Serowe protest. Clark recognised that the root of the problem was the public cover-up of the real reasons for Seretse's banishment. [27]

The pleasurable surprise for the CRO in early 1952 was hard evidence that Bangwato support for the "Keaboka crowd" was ebbing away. Following earlier hints by Tshekedi to Clark, five leading, young, educated Bangwato - Seretse's friends and strongest supporters - approached the temporary district commissioner at Serowe on 29 January. They strongly dissociated themselves from Keaboka et al, whom they characterized as corrupt, and called for democratic local government. On receiving this intelligence in London, Clark crowed: "at last the emergence of a third party" - and suggested it could be rallied to a "new deal" tribal administration under Rasebolai. [28]

It was the "Keaboka crowd" that actually hamstrung itself in preparing for a grand delegation to London. It conceived the grand, secret and unrealistic strategy of getting Seretse to divorce his wife and thus ensure his return. It never told the Bangwato this, but Walter Pela blew the gaff to Seretse by a letter sent before the delegation arrived. Awareness of declining support made the "Keaboka crowd" all the more reckless. The British authorities watched all this with glee. The Pretoria office advised London to wait "for the enzymes to work" at eating away Keaboka's support. The only active voices in support of Keaboka seemed to come from the women of Mahalapye, who could be dismissed as marginal. [29]

It was the imminent arrival of the Keaboka delegation in London which pushed the CRO into action. The timetable had been to announce Seretse's permanent banishment in July, once a tough new administrative regime was established in Bechuanaland. But the groundwork was almost ready, with new administrators in place and a promise of extra troops in emergency secured from the prime minister of Southern Rhodesia. [30] On 18 March the new Secretary of State, Lord Salisbury, in process of taking over from Ismay, wrote to Churchill as PM: "I am in favour of grasping the nettle now." [31]

Seretse's permanent banishment was contained in an Order-in-Council of 23 March, and was explained in Parliament on 27 March. Ismay broke the news to Seretse in person but refused even to acknowledge the Keaboka delegation in London, while Salisbury received post-bags

of mail, mostly hostile and sometimes vitriolic, from the British public. [32]

## Conclusion

The Keaboka delegation returned home empty-handed, without any convincing explanations. The Bangwato at Serowe were now baited by continuous breaches of faith to beyond breaking-point. But, once they had broken into murderous fury, they were shocked and silent at their own excess. As military reinforcements poured in from Southern Rhodesia and the "Keaboka crowd", there was bewilderment and apprehension. As the Johannesburg *Star* correspondent remarked four days after the riot: "the fight now seems to have been knocked out of the Bamangwato". [33]

The political crisis following from Seretse's deposition and banishment blew the lid off developments in Bamangwato country. It revealed underlying tensions between sections in politics and society, and the drama of the Serowe kgotla riot acted as a catharsis of violent frustrations.

It has been argued elsewhere that the Bangwato succession crisis of 1948-53 was an acceleration of the gradual "transmutation" of Botswana politics from tribalism in districts to nationalism in the country as a whole. [34] That much can be seen in the history of political ideas in Botswana between 1931 and 1965. [35] But such political arguments focus only on the political elite, who took no direct part in the Serowe kgotla riot of 1952. The historical significance of the riot is that it reveals underlying developments in wider society - the "tribe" becoming a "nation" in terms of class, gender and race.

The race issue can be seen in the Serowe Kgotla riot in the clash of black assertion and white authority. In this there are obvious affinities with the contemporaneous history of neighbouring countries in southern Africa. Issues of gender are raised by the new female assertiveness before and during the riot, though it was a new, broader voice for society as a whole rather than for women alone. Questions of gender lead on to questions of "class", in that women expressed the interests of rural households from which so many men had become alienated by patterns of labour migration, which articulated Botswana society into the regional economy of southern Africa. Questions of "class" formation are also raised by the competition for feudal dues and property between Tshekedi's followers and the "frustrated feudalists" led by Keaboka, and by the aspirations of the new, educated elite for liberty and the pursuit of property. Far from being an island at this stage, Botswana was part of the troubled sea, with a history of "peasant" and female resistance and of a rising "petty bourgeoisie" parallel to neighbouring areas of South Africa and Zimbabwe. [36]

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## Notes

- 1 Derrick Mercer (ed), *Chronicle for the Year 1988* (London, 1989), p 108.
- 2 This was wildly unrealistic. Though the British government had originally acted to appease South African and Rhodesian white opinion, it had persisted in vehement and mendacious denial of this since March 1950. See Ronald Hyam, "The Political Consequences of Seretse Khama: Britain, the Bangwato and South Africa, 1948-1952", *The Historical Journal* (Cambridge), Vol 29, No 4 (1986), pp 921-47; Neil Parsons, "Seretse Khama and the Bangwato Succession Crisis, 1948-1953", in Jack Parson (ed), *Succession to High Office in Botswana: three case studies* (Athens, Ohio - in press)
- 3 My major source is Peter M Sebina, "From My Note Book" (Serowe, 6 June 1952 - manuscript in Tshakedi Kham Papers, formerly at Pilikwe, now at Khama Memorial Museum, Serowe, Box 58 - hereafter TKP 58, etc). See also "Summary of Events in the Bamangwato Reserve from the Middle of May to 7th of June 1952" (Resident Commissioner's Office, Mafeking - copy in TKP 58).
- 4 The account of the riot that follows is a provisional patchwork of sources that needs to be cross-checked with eye-witnesses. Sources so far consulted include interviews with leading Bangwato participants, but not yet with key colonial officers.
- 5 Interview of Thomas Tlou with Mothusi Serogola, Serowe, 28 January 1984.
- 6 Hansard, House of Commons, 10 June 1952, col 46; "Bamangwato Affairs Draft Note for Cabinet" by W A W Clark, 7 June 1952, and High Commissioner, Pretoria, to Commonwealth Relations Office, 12 June 1952 (PRO - DO 35/4149 "Official Statements relating to the Serowe Disturbances, June 1952).
- 7 See Q N Parsons, "The Bangwato Political Crisis 1948-1953: another stab at social history", University of Botswana, Department of History Workshop on Bangwato Politics under Colonial Rule, 10 November 1984.
- 8 Hansard, House of Commons, 26 June 1951, cols 1198-1326; PRO - DO 35/4136.
- 9 "Report on Tribal Meetings held at Serowe ... 20th to the 25th June 1949" by V F Ellenberger, dated 29 June 1949, in BNA (Botswana National Archives, Gaborone) - S 170/1/1; Audits of Bamangwato National Treasury, BNA - S 529/2/2.
- 10 K T Motsete to Fabian Colonial Bureau, 18 June 1951, in RHL (Rhodes House Library, Oxford) - Mss Brit Emp s 365/91/4.
- 11 The ideologue on the edge of the "Keaboka crowd" was K T Motsete (1899-1975), London University graduate and former clergyman, educational pioneer and pioneer nationalist in Malawi as well as Botswana. He returned from years abroad to be spokesman of the Bangwato before the three British "observers" in July-August 1951. With a mixture of Whiggism and populism, he saw Botswana as following the course of English constitutional history away from Tory absolutism, symbolized by Tshakedi, towards popular democracy - see Neil Parsons, "The Idea of Democracy and the Emergence of an Educated Elite in Botswana 1931-1960" (University of Edinburgh, Centre of African Studies Conference on Botswana Politics, Culture and Education, 15-16 December 1988 - proceedings in press).
- 12 Report by Assistant Superintendent of Police, Serowe, 27 August 1949 (BNA -



S 170/1/1).

- 13 Possibilities of agitation from outside were not followed up by British authorities. Seretse had been supported by petitions from Bangwato and other Batswana clerks elsewhere in Bechuanaland, and workers in Johannesburg, Kimberley and Cape Town in South Africa. Seretse was in general supported by younger elements in the ANC of South Africa and Tshekedi by its older leaders, such as A B Xuma and Z K Matthews. The only South African directly involved in Bangwato politics was Walter Pela, regarded by Tshekedi as a communist because of his connections with communist lawyers in Johannesburg, but who proved to be closest to Paramount Chief Sobhuza of Swaziland. The Seretse Khama Fight Committee in London, founded in 1950, had a communist secretary before the committee was replaced, with tacit government approval, by Fenner Brockway's Seretse Khama Campaign Committee.
- 14 See Michael Crowder, *The Flogging of Phineas McIntosh: a tale of colonial folly and injustice, Bechuanaland 1933* (New Haven and London, 1988), for a classic account of Tshekedi's early resistance to colonial rule.
- 15 Nettelton to Priestman, 1 November 1948 (PRO - DO 35/4113); District Commissioner, Serowe, to Resident Commissioner, Mafeking, 1 June 1949 (BNA - S 169/15/4); Petition of 58 Undersigned Women of Mahalapye, Relathanye M Ikitseng *et al.*, to Resident Commissioner, 9 August 1949 (BNA - S 529/3/1); Statement by Dichetse Balang of Ramatuba, Serowe, 18 September 1949 (BNA - S 170/1/4)
- 16 John Redfern, *Ruth and Seretse: "A very disreputable transaction"* (London, 1955), p 139.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp 145 and 167. See also High Commissioner's Office to Commonwealth Relations Office, 19 January 1952 (PRO - DO 35/4137); interview with Mrs Relathanye M Ikitseng, Mahalapye, 11 December 1984.
- 18 Women's Kgotla at Serowe, 16 August 1951 (PRO - DO 35/4142); High Commissioner to Commonwealth Relations Office, 2 October 1952 (PRO - DO 35/4136); "General Matters of Law and Custom" by Tshekedi Khama, n.d. (BNA - S 529/1/4); PRO - DO 35/4310 *passim*.
- 19 Minute by W A W Clark, 18 January 1952 (PRO - DO 35/4137); Curtis.
- 20 Pauline Peters, "Gender, Developmental Cycles and Historical Process: a critique of recent research on women in Botswana", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol 10, No 1 (October 1983), pp 100-22; Carol Kerven, "Academics, Practitioners and All Kinds of Women in Development: a reply to Peters", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol 10, No 2 (April 1984), pp 258-62; Cathy Bond, *Women's Involvement in Agriculture in Botswana* (Gaborone, 1974).
- 21 Isaac Schapera, *Married Life in an African Tribe* (London, 1940; and Harmondsworth, 1971).
- 22 Census Reports of 1921, 1936 and 1946: BNA - S 17/7; S 86/23/2; and BNB 486).
- 23 Theophilus K Mooko, "The Role of Women in Bangwato Politics, 1926-1949", University of Botswana, Department of History Workshop on Bangwato Politics under Colonial Rule, 9-10 November 1984; Q N Parsons, "Education and Development in Pre-Colonial and Colonial Botswana to 1965", in Michael Crowder (ed), *Education for Development in Botswana* (Gaborone, 1984), pp 21-45.

- 24 Jack Parson, "Cattle, Class and the State in Rural Botswana", *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol 7, No 2 (April 1981), pp 236-55; Jack Parson, *Botswana: liberal democracy and the labor reserve in southern Africa* (Boulder, Colorado; and London, 1984); Sally Alexander, "Women, Class and Sexual Differences in the 1830s and 1840s", *History Workshop Journal*, No 17 (1984), pp 125-49.
- 25 CRO briefing paper for new Commonwealth Secretary, 29 October 1951 (PRO - DO 35/4136); Draft Cabinet Paper, c21-22 December 1951 (PRO - DO 35/4137).
- 26 High Commissioner's Office to Commonwealth Relations Office, 23 November 1951 (PRO - DO 35/4137).
- 27 P Cardross Grant, James A Allison and Dennis Atkins (Serowe) to Secretary of State, 10 January 1952; CRO to HC, 15 February 1952; Minute by W A W Clark, 6 February 1952; Minute by W A W Clark, 13 February 1952 (PRO - DO 35/4139).
- 28 Mout P K Nwako, L M Seretse, D B Gareitsanye, K R Masthware, and G K S Koma to District Commissioner, Serowe (R A R Bent), 29 January 1952 - copied to CRO, Tom Driberg, MP, Tshekedi Khama, *et al*; HCO to CRO, 21 February 1952; Minute by W A W Clark, 13 February 1952 (PRO - DO 35/4138); Parsons, "The Idea of Democracy".
- 29 HCO to CRO, 1 March 1952; HC to CRO, 5 March 1952; HCO to CRO, 10 March 1952 (PRO - DO 35/4138).
- 30 CRO to HC, 18 February 1952; Minute by W A W Clark, 18 February 1952 (PRO - DO 35/4138).
- 31 Lord Salisbury to Prime Minister, 18 March 1953 (PRO - DO 35/4138).
- 32 PRO - DO 35/4145; 35/4146; and DO 121/151.
- 33 *The Star* (Johannesburg), 6 June 1952.
- 34 Parsons, "Seretse Khama and the Bangwato Succession Crisis", p 76.
- 35 Parsons, "The Idea of Democracy".
- 36 cf Andy Manson, "The Hurutshe Resistance in the Zeerust District of the Western Transvaal 1954-1959", *Africa Perspective* (Johannesburg), No 22, 1983, pp 62-79; Terence Ranger, current work on Matabeleland.