

**LERALA: PORTRAIT OF AN(OTHER) AFRICAN VILLAGE.  
RAIN CULTS, ANCESTORS, STATUS AND CHRISTIAN CONVERSION,  
C1870-1930**

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### Introduction<sup>[1]</sup>

Lerala is a village of about 2000 people near the base of the south-eastern foothills of the Tswapong Hill range, in eastern Botswana. South and west of the village lie agricultural lands, with those of the patrilineally defined majority, the "BaPedi", some distance from those of the minority, the BaKhurutshe. Their graveyards are also separated. Several miles away in all directions the wealthier families have their cattle-posts.

The present geographical position of Lerala is the last of a series of Leralas through which the chiefly lineage (BoMoroka), in settling them, has so defined itself. In the nineteenth century BoMoroka moved repeatedly, along a southerly vector, away from the cluster of villages with interlocking history that dot the (northern) Tswapong Hills. At some point BoMoroka broke off as the senior faction from the village of Mosweu. On its way south BoMoroka attracted other families who settled under them; several hundred people lived in the village by the time it shifted from the Thakaneng to the Gale River, really a stream in a fold of the Hills. There it remained until around 1935 when people began settling on their lands to the south. In 1952 the present *kgotla* and primary school were built in that area, the Lerala of today. It is said that "Lerala" derives from *go ralala*, to pass through.

The name of the Hills' oldest village, whose chief is still the *primus inter pares* in Tswapong, is Moremi. BoMoroka are cousins to Moremi's chief, who is patrilineally descended, like most Tswapong BaPedi, from people in the Transvaal in the area around Blaauwberg and Pietersburg (BaGananwa) and south of it (other BaPedi). There may well, in addition, be an ancient connection to the "BaTswetla", the people now called Venda. [2] Today, the old people who participate in the *komana* cult in Moremi look back to Moremi's "first" chief as their ancestor and the personification of Tswapong cohesion, as opposed to Ngwato and other imperialisms. The old people who are not so keen on *komana*, and who recall why it was unnecessary before around 1915, do not join in this view. In my discussion below I call the former BoRamosoka, and the latter BoDialwa (see genealogy).

The MaTswapong, as they were collectively known by the BaNgwato, were subject to variable levies by the Ngwato state. They also buffered Ndebele raids in the nineteenth century, and traditions lionize this service. It was perhaps one such attack that scattered Lerala in mid-century; but it may have been famine, or the BaNgwato who sacked the village in 1859 and threatened to in 1866. [3] In any case, a junior member of BoMoroka, Molebatsi, acted as regent and put Lerala back together again. He brought back from the Ngwapa Hills two sons of the most senior man in BoMoroka whom he could locate, Mpeo.

Unfortunately the true heir [4], Mokakapadi I, had fled with his son to the village of Mmalebogo, among the BaGananwa. "Mmalebogo" was a chief and great rain-maker, widely known and even patronized by the BaKgatla and BaNgwato. [5] Mokakapadi died among the BaGananwa, and there his son grew up, a local chief on the Mogalakwena River. His name was Dialwa.

## Dialwa

In 1894 the ZAR dispatched a force under General Joubert to besiege and break Mmalebogo, or Kgalushi ("Xamush"), Mmalebogo being a name-title. Dialwa and his retinue crossed back into Tswapong before Kgalushi, or perhaps an impostor, was captured. [6] They first settled at some distance from Lerala, probably to sow, but Magosi, then Lerala's chief, insisted that Dialwa move back to the village. He most likely saw Dialwa as an ally against his younger but senior brother, Ramosoka, then contesting the chiefship.

Traditions say that Magosi went to King Khama and said, "What shall I do? My elder brother Dialwa has come." Khama then established a political *modus vivendi* between them which BoDialwa describe differently from BoRamosoka. These and other similar traditions about lineage disputes and "Khama" are not western history, but, rather, they record the previous existence of serious disputes, in a way that reflects the achievement of a hazy consensus after many and varied discussions over pots of beer. Certainly BoDialwa were friendlier to Magosi than to Ramosoka, who succeeded Magosi around 1912. A partnership of sorts evolved between Magosi and Dialwa, one Khama would have frowned on. Dialwa as true senior presided over rain-making and other operations concerning the ancestors, while Magosi retained judicial supremacy.

In making rain, Dialwa revisited the BaGananwa and Mmalebogo", to participate in a cult there. [7] Since not only Dialwa, but at some point all BaPedi of Tswapong, had come from the direction of the BaGananwa, Dialwa went and "took rain" on behalf of the people of Moremi and its subsidiary villages in the north as well as for Lerala. Dialwa's duties involved a seasonal trip back to the east, to BoMoroka's origins, and is recalled in images of pathways, of movement through the veldt to the opposite pole of the Christian Ngwato kingship to the west: namely, the place of ancestors. I will talk about the means by which the cult in "Mmalebogo" functioned, but it is enough to write here that Dialwa and his helpers brought back a gourd of snuff-tobacco which could not be opened until they had crossed the Limpopo (Oodi) River. This method successfully produced rain.

Around 1912 Ramosoka took the chiefship, and soon after Magosi died, some say suspiciously. Ramosoka destroyed Magosi's estate and discouraged Dialwa's activities. After Dialwa's death in 1916, Ramosoka spatially centralized the village and left Dialwa's sons with little besides the headmanship of their sub-ward. From around 1910 the Ngwato (LMS) Church had placed a teacher-evangelist in Lerala as part of Khama's hegemonic attempts to bind together his inter-ethnic kingdom. Christian ideology clashed with regional autonomy and concomitantly, ancestor practice. After a brief period of resistance [8], however, Ramosoka adopted the Christian rain-prayers sanctioned by the Church as his primary means of ensuring rain and productivity; for BoDialwa, this meant "doing nothing". Dialwa's son, Koboatshwene, then spent most of his time in self-imposed exile at his cattle post. He sometimes travelled through the forest to water-holes and himself made rain, in a desultory fashion. Neither he nor hardly any of Dialwa's male descendants became Christians; the ancestors are their only link to the chiefship.

Some time in the 1920s the *komana* cult in Moremi came to prominence, in the void after the cessation of Dialwa's activities. [9] *Komana* adepts drum through the night and consort with the ancestors, bless seeds and pronounce injunctions on agriculture. Like the BaPedi of the Transvaal [10], BaTswapong practise *go phasa*, a healing rite in which they exhort the ancestors, by speaking words (*mafoko*) and blowing (*go foka*) beer on to the sick person. This, too, is done in the presence of the *komana*. [11] *Komana*'s yearly rain-agricultural activities attracted representatives from several Tswapong villages, but not from Ramosoka's Lerala (nor Ratholo, the BaPedi village with the largest Christian community). Some of BoDialwa today malign or dismiss *komana*, but it is interesting that during the drought in 1983 the *komana* adepts let it be known that they required "Dialwa" to be present. The Moremi chief dispatched a deputation which inquired in Lerala as to who BoDialwa were; BoRamosoka then leapt into the breach, only informing Koboatshwene's son, Bonnetswe, of

the *komana* invitation later. Lerala today sends six or eight men and women to Moremi each year. Bonnetse, who has since visited *komana* for a *mophaso* healing, stresses that the ancestors who speak in the cult come from Mmalebogo and "BoPedi", invited by "telephone" by Moremi's ancestors. BoRamosoka are less inclined to recall this connection, and emphasize the ritual primacy of Moremi village.

In the 1930s Bonnetswe went to work for a Boer in some orange groves near Piprust, Transvaal. Men from Tswapong worked in the mines in South Africa in the late 1930s, but many also had worked in the Tuli Block and Transvaal farms from the 1910s on, continuing to do so at pathetic wages in order to be closer to their families or avoid the rumoured peril of going underground. In the grove Bonnetswe joined a healing church among the workers, which he barely recalls as "[*kereke*] *ya Paulo*". Bonnetswe and a friend from Moeng, a village in which he had relatives, went back to Tswapong around 1941 for four months to recruit labour for their boss, and tried briefly to convert people in Lerala. At this time there were no churches in Lerala independent of the Ngwato Church. Bonnetswe's efforts were unsuccessful and somewhat mysterious. People remember him wearing a white gown and pausing by the sides of paths to kneel, recalling his father and grandfather in their mastery of the paths leading back to the ancestors. Bonnetswe is no longer a Christian.

### Selato

Besides the chiefly ward (Mpeo) and Dialwa's (Monneng: Place-of-the-junior-brother), there are also two wards of commoners in Lerala, with their own headmen: the "BaPedi" Matalaganye, and the "BaKhurutshe" Moatshe, although today commoners may also be found in the royal wards, and as wives, of course, anywhere. For the past several decades immigrants have come from South Africa and the Tuli Block, and many are important members of the community. The BaPedi commoner family of Selato, however, are not immigrants of recent decades but, like some few others, have ancestors who travelled with BoMoroka at least 150 years ago. As commoners they do not really lay claim to their own history as a group, because they are by definition subordinated to an older and richer lineage in charge of the village. None the less, Matalaganye's headman argues that commoners were in the Hills before BoMoroka; "Mpeo" (i.e. the BoRamosoka forebear) found them quarrelling amongst themselves, incorporated them and adopted their *sereto* (mascot or "totem"), the rock rabbit.

As far as I can gather, most of the earliest Christians in Lerala were either commoner BaPedi or ethnically "settlers". Kaludi and Nakedi, perhaps the very first Christians, were MoKaa and Mokhurutshe, respectively; Selo Mafoko and Lebogang Selato were BaPedi from Matalaganye ward. Nkgetsi Ntokwe was a MoKaa, and his wife, Kedisaletse, a MoPedi commoner. *Moruti* Samuel, who taught reading to catechumens, grew up outside the village; he arrived after a small community of Christians had established itself, probably with links to Ratholo. Mogame Bokhurung (a MoKhurutshe) and his wife, Gafalefhi, were important members, and Mogame supervised the Church as senior deacon until his infirmity. In the 1930s Lebogang became the head deacon, replacing Mogame. By the 1920s the great majority of catechumens were women and girls, including wives and daughters of BoRamosoka who joined when lay preachers from the Ngwato capital came on evangelical campaigns, at one point telling people they would be bitten on the face by locusts if they did not sign up. [12] Increasingly the men in Lerala's congregation saw themselves as leaders, and the women became their flock. At the top stood Lebogang Selato (Samuel Maremane left by 1923), their *moruti* until his death in 1943. It was he who interpreted enquirers' dreams, evaluated their behaviour and essentially allowed them into the congregation.

Kindly feelings did not always reign between Christians and non-Christians in Lerala. Occasionally Christians might offer prayers in non-Christian funerals or wedding parties, but this was rare. The "heathen" had their own priests, and might look to Dialwa's sons for rain. Lebogang's son recalls that Christians despised the discordant tones of heathens' songs, in



contrast to their own mellifluous hymns. Underlying this conflict, both types of singing sought to act upon the world with words (*mafoko*) in what R Horton has called an “instrumental” fashion. Women sang rain- and agricultural songs as part of the *komana* cult and in other rain-making rituals as well. Yet it was the Christians who had co-opted the *kgotla*, or chiefly court, for hymns and prayers because Khama’s Ngwato/Christian control over his kingdom extended through this political space. *Thuto*, Christian teachings, had a close association with “*rutegile*” [13], civilized in the sense of *civitas*, the centre of which was the *kgotla*. The congregation could make use, with due notice given, of any headman’s *kgotla* - even Bonnetswe Dialwa’s - for evangelical purposes, relying on the headman to gather his people. Most importantly, however, Christians dominated the *kgotla* when the time came to call forth rain. Kaludi, for instance, had a half-brother, Maletse, who was a *ngaka*, or priest-healer; Maletse’s son, Samuel, joined the Church, and was able to officiate in *kgotla* rain-prayers like his uncle, Kaludi, while his own father was frozen out.

The prayers were held around November if the rains were delayed, following, the practice instituted by King Khama in the Ngwato capital. Ramosoka would send word to the village’s *baruti* to gather the Christians, and his headmen called everybody else to the *kgotla*. There the *baruti* read in the bible “words [*mafoko*] having to do with rain”, and prayed, *Modimo wa rona re nesetse pula*: Our God, cause rain for us. Women raised their voices and sang hymns, written in the 1870s specially for praying for rain, from the LMS hymn book. Lebogang enjoyed a certain degree of power and prestige in these services, which he and his family, as commoners, would never have attained in rituals pertaining to the ancestors. Ramosoka was not entirely reconciled to his position as facilitator. Beyond initially opposing Samuel Maremane’s activity [14], according to one respected old man, Chief Ramosoka once “forbade” the BaBirwa of Maunatlala to the north from beating their drums to make rain: they made noise too early and frightened away rainclouds. Ramosoka’s assertion of ritual supremacy over Maunatlala failed, but he made it at a time when Lerela was being supervised by Maunatlala in Church affairs. The Rev Monyeki Mashabe lived there and “fed the sacrament” to all northern Tswapong villagers east of Lecheng. Ramosoka had at least one more episode of restlessness. A prophet in the 1930s, who claimed to have some connection to Ngwale Nkulu (Mwali), used to travel through Tswapong and “bless” people’s seeds; around 1937 Ramosoka sent one of Dialwa’s sons to him with a black goat to ask for rain. The resulting deluge spoiled a great deal of the harvest, and that year is recalled as the Year of Black Sorghum, surely a rebuke for the chief’s folly in deviating from Christian prayer.

Lebogang had a senior brother (his “elder father’s son”), named Lenz. Lenz Selato went to Johannesburg to work in the gold mines, and became a convert either to the Seventh Day Adventist church or to some emulation of it. This was common; as one man told me, “we were troubled working under the ground [laughs], there is danger and you must think about the Lord”. In the mid-1930s Lenz returned to Lerela, and began proselytizing for this new faith, called *Sabbata*. Lebogang Selato then went off to Serowe and lodged a complaint against Lenz before a representative of Tshekedi. Tshekedi ruled on the issue in the same manner as he did for followers of Anglicanism in Serowe. Like his father, Khama, Tshekedi disallowed all public Christianity outside the LMS, the institutional prophylactic for the Ngwato Church. Lenz was told he could only worship with his immediate family in his own yard. He continued to pray separately in this way with his wife and children on Saturdays, until his death in 1945. Needless to say, Lebogang and Lenz were not on good terms.

Lenz’s son, Ramatlapama, later became one of the first members of the Faith Gospel After Christ (FGAC) Church in the early 1950s, when alternative churches were first tolerated. It is worth noting that the FGAC, which is based in Ratholo, suffered some degree of persecution from Ratholo’s chief, who was a member of the Ngwato LMS Church. [15] For this reason, the FGAC in Lerela guarded themselves against any possible similar attack by quickly promoting Ramosoka’s surviving daughter, happily an FGAC member, to the position of “great *moruti*”.

## Mogame

Selebogo Mogame's father's lineage was the first, and originally the sole, BaKhurutshe family to settle in Lerala. Most likely one Motati came with his (putative) sons, Matsutsubane and Madoko, and families, some time in the mid-nineteenth century. The old BaKhurutshe men encode their deference to the greater Tswapong ethnicity in the tradition in which "Mapulana", Moremi's ancient chief, told them to move to Moeng in the centre of the Tswapong Hills. They did so and then migrated across Tswapong to a series of sites, encountered the regent-chief of Lerala, Molebatsi, and settled with him.

Traditions further record that Matsutsubane was murdered on Khama's orders by a section of an age regiment from Serowe, evidently because he was a "strong man". This occurred in the time of vaguely recounted troubles in the mid-nineteenth century when Lerala either first emerged as a village unto itself, out of Mosweu, or dispersed from famine and attacks and then reintegrated under the regent Molebatsi. Dikakanyo, Matsutsubane's son-in-law and a junior in BoMoroka, fled Lerala with BoDialwa and Macheng, returning later. Matsutsubane's descendants, however, remained in Lerala and became the village's earliest and most fervent Christians: Nakedi, probably Bokhurung, and definitely Maemo, Mogame and Motsamaye were in the Church, as were their wives, many unofficial "deaconesses".

This is notable, for as a rule the BaKhurutshe and BaPedi kept apart. Mogame stayed in his own *kgotla* for juridical affairs; "like the Israelites we kept to ourselves", said Selebogo Mogame, his aged daughter. Their "customs" (*mogkwa*) were different from the BaPedi. Specifically, the BaKhurutshe were not party to any of the agricultural rituals held in place by the BaPedi's shared ancestral origins. The main exception to their isolation was their participation in the Church, with BaPedi and the people of other ethnicities, who also tended to be Christians. Among Mogame's friends was Lebogang, who visited him at home. Selebogo in her adolescence was friends with Omphile Senwedi, Samuel Maremane's wife. Omphile's younger sister, Fetang (née Senwedi) Mogame, then married Selebogo's brother.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Lerala held perhaps 500 souls. Not every family had a plough, and the eldest of several brothers, who perhaps did, would lend his plough and oxen out to his brothers' families for their adjacent fields. Usually he would do this in order of seniority, villagers told me. This meant that some people ploughed some days after the first rains, when the soil had hardened, suffering a loss in production. According to Schapera and Mahoney, BaTswana made reciprocal "contracts" both outside and within close kin-relations for ploughing, to overcome this problem. It was very difficult, however, to transport oxen and plough to contractual jobs more than a few kilometers away. [16] Mogame's family had no patrilineal ties to other groups and, probably before around 1930, no plough. Their lands were some distance away from BaPedi lands.

It was therefore quite important to them that other Christians "ploughed for my father", according to Selebogo, and otherwise provided reciprocal aid, for many BaTswapong were in fact still hoeing their land in the 1910s. Women levelled their difficulties by offering one another assistance in harvesting and threshing crops; this assistance normally came through matrilineal links, but BaKhurutshe initially had few of those. Again in this circumstance Christians helped one another. "If someone's child was ill, another Christian woman would take her place in the garden."

Mogame's children, now old, and his cousins' children, also adults, are still LMS (Ngwato) Church members. Even old Ditaola Motlhagodi, who worked in the Tuli Block for £1.10s. a month and board, remains firm in his orthodoxy. In their children, however, family loyalty to the Ngwato Church has been exhausted, and they have joined many of the newer healing churches in Lerala.

## Conclusion

It should be seen that in Lerala attitudes about the Ngwato Church, the ancestors, and rain cults turned on the exigencies of local relationships, and more subtly - in terms of who laboured outside Lerala and who had a plough - on economic factors. There was no single dynamic. The Church appealed to a transcendent system of social organization, and drew some people away from the local rootedness of ancestor practice that delineated BaPedi from BaKhurutshé and at times lineage from lineage. The BaPedi ancestors, however, survived in altered form and re-emerged as the *komana* cult, embodying a sacred if contested history and expressing an anti-hegemonic unity. *Komana* reorients an old ritual practice to the north. In terms of signification, however, the regional-ethnic unity of the Tswapong Hills fell on one end of a cosmological spectrum that many BaTswapong construe and express as spatial. To the east lie the ancestors, the direction that BaPedi corpses face in their graves. To the west lay the Ngwato kingship and the fountain of Christianity.

From around 1910 to 1940, people's decisions to convert to Christianity (or not) grew out of the transformative intervention of Ngwato religious hegemony in local social and cultural matrices. Religious practice was consonant with people's selective negotiations of the elements of authority and opportunity around them. This much did not change. The key factor in the development of independent churches in Lerala (ca. 1945-55), was the withering of the Ngwato kingdom and of the authority of the Church, in a time of increasing experience in the South African economy. Social forces within the village accelerated and particularized the Church even as non-literate people drew on models from outside it; they built small, kin- and proximity-based congregations. In short, when the thread broke that had tied together *kgotla*, Church and kingdom, Lerala, the mobile village, embarked again on a creative religious path.

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## Notes

- 1 Owing to constraints of space, I have not footnoted the fifty or so oral interviews which comprise the primary source for the paper. I am indebted to the village of Lerala, to Baruteng Onamile, and to a US Dept of Education Fullbright award.
- 2 Schapera reports, *The Ethnic Origins of Tswana Tribes* (London, 1952), p 72, that Nswazwi's people, known by themselves and BaTswapong BaPedi to have migrated with other BaTswapong and then separated, claim to be originally "MaTswetla [Venda] or Mabulane". Can it be coincidence that there was a Ramapulana chiefdom of the southern Pedi; that old men in Lerala also claim Venda roots; and that Moremi's chiefs before the turn of the century were called Mapulana, almost certainly a name-title?
- 3 From my reading of the traditions, I suspect that the village partially dispersed not in 1859 (when they were first punished) but in 1866, from a rumour of attack when they, for a second time, harboured Macheng, a claimant to the Ngwato throne.
- 4 I base this judgement, an explosive one in Lerala's politics (so please, let no one tell them), on a basic agreement between BoMoroka's and BoDialwa's (see below) stories about Mokakapadi's/Dialwa's birth. They differ but all in effect admit that Mpeo's

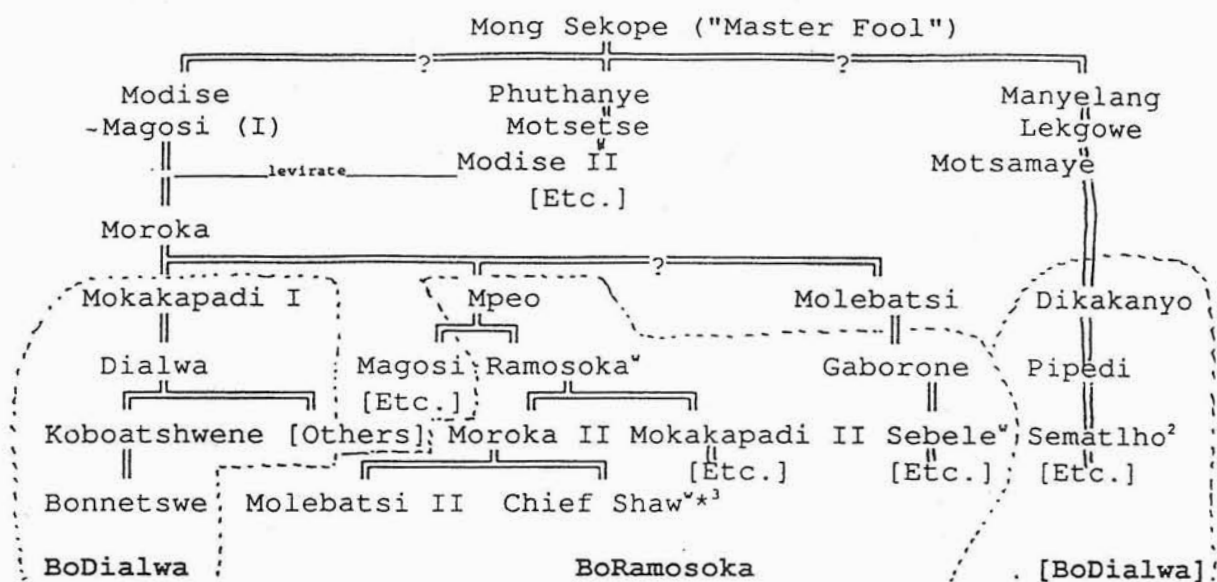


lineage is legitimate only through an act of realpolitik. In addition, there is a fragment of tradition on Dialwa's return to Lerala in everyone's, even BoRamosoka's, account: Magosi says *Nkone o tsile*, "My elder brother has come".

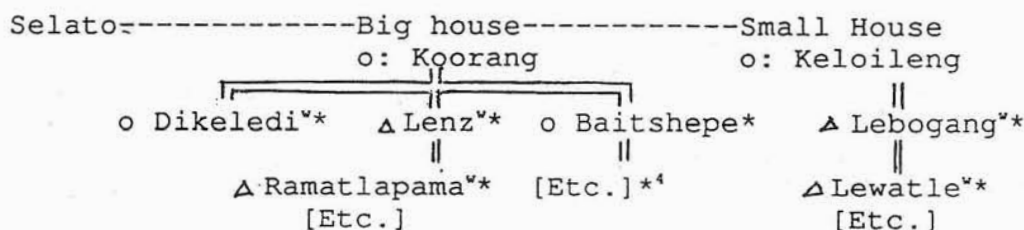
- 5 I Schapera, *Rain-Making Rites of Tswana Tribes* (London, 1971), pp 44, 117.
- 6 See British War Office, *Native Tribes of the Transvaal* (Pretoria, 1905) "*Bakhananwa*" (whence "*Xamush*"); and Colin Rae, *Malaboch or Notes from My Diary on the Boer Campaign of 1894* (Cape Town, 1898), pp 170, 180, and note 6 ("Kgalushi"). I heard an odd tradition of the Boers letting Malebogo go free, and Rae also thought Malebogo may have slipped away.
- 7 It is noteworthy that the BaGananwa traditions say they received rain-skills from one Modjadji and a princess from a "tribe" with a "chieftainess rainmaker" (Lobedu-Venda?): N Roberts, "The Bagananoa or MaLaboch", *South African Journal of Science*, 12 (1915), pp 241-56. Thanks to Dick Werbner this source.
- 8 Khama III Memorial Museum, Khama Papers, H/59/ "loose papers", S Maremane to Khama, Lerala, 29 August 1912.
- 9 This connection was stated to me by Makwesa Leso (nr. Lerala, 20 June 1990), a *komana* adept and the senior member of the Moremi chiefly lineage.
- 10 H O Monnig, *The Pedi* (Pretoria, 1967).
- 11 I do not maintain in this case that BaTswapong use the term *go foka* to describe *mophaso*. My point is to underline the physical and oral nature of the word "word", *lefoko*. See Guthrie, CS 1602 "\*pung" and J T Brown, *Setswana Dictionary* (Johannesburg, 1925 ), p 89.
- 12 See Rev. 9:4.
- 13 J Comaroff, *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance* (Chicago, 1985), p 62.
- 14 See note 7.
- 15 Ratholo had had the strongest Tswapong congregation from its days under the mission-appointed *moruti*, Petlano Noke.
- 16 I Schapera, "Contract in Tswana Law", in M Gluckman (ed), *Ideas and Procedures in Customary Law* (Oxford, 1969); N Mahoney, in "Contract and Neighbourly Exchange among the Birwa of Botswana", *Journal of African Law*, 21, 1 (1977), pp 56, 62-63.

Partial Geneologies

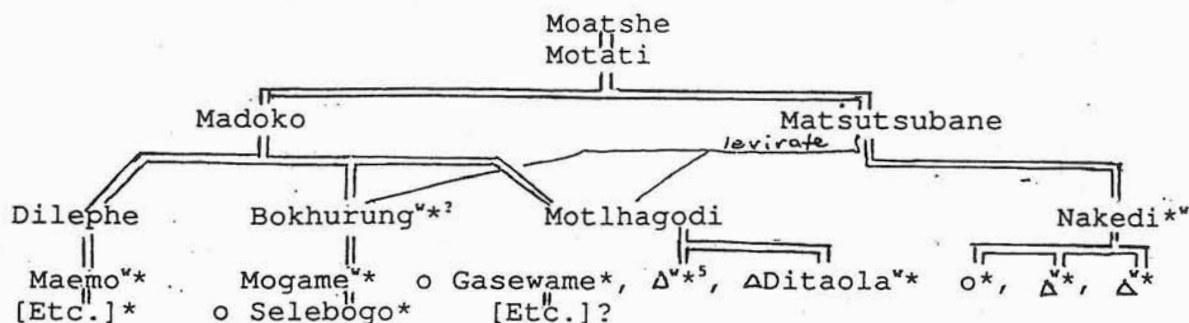
BoMoroka<sup>1</sup>



Selato



Mogame (the BaKhurutshe)



\*Christian

<sup>v</sup>Wives almost certainly Christian

<sup>1</sup> Although Moroka is not the "first" ancestor, the two parallel lineages identify with him and maintain only "shadow" *kgotlas*.

<sup>2</sup> The men in this row were born 1890-1910.

<sup>3</sup> The men in this row were born 1920-30.

<sup>4</sup> Baitshepe, like some other members of the Selato family, married into the Mathare family, a prominent Christian FGAC family in Lerala. Her descendants are all Christians.

<sup>5</sup> Motsamayē. His wife, Gorerwang, was a deaconess in the 1940s.