Second Field Work Report

My second trip to the field covered the period from November 1933 to February 1934 inclusive. This was after an absence of nearly two years. With the permission of the Executive Council of the Institute I had postponed the trip I was due to make in November 1933 in order to be able to include the majority of the official figures in the Collected State to be a member of the De la Warr Commission on Higher Education in East Africa during the period when I had hoped to be in the field. I must take this opportunity of expressing my indebtedness to the Council for having made it possible for me to avail myself of the opportunity of gaining some acquaintance with the peoples and problems of another part of the Continent. From the Secretary of State, from my colleagues on the Commission and from official quarters in East Africa I have been informed that my inclusion in the Commission as well as my contacts with the people were highly appreciated on all sides. Thus it would appear that the interruption of my field work was worth while from the point of view of all concerned.

Nevertheless it is to be hoped that there will be no further interruption of the work I have undertaken. Fortunately things move slowly even in Africa, and so the picking up of the threads of one's work is not such a formidable task as one might at first sight suppose, while a return to the field after an interval during which one has had time to reflect on first impressions is likely to prove more satisfying.

My proposed plan on this trip was to revisit the Tahidi Barolong area (Mafeking district) which is the centre of my investigations and then to proceed to the remoter parts of the Reserve to visit other sections of the Barolong, especially the RaTlou who have fairly large villages in this area, although the central village of their most important Chief is in another district which I hope to visit in my next trip to the Field. Broadly speaking I was able to carry out this plan successfully and thus to get a firmer outline of Barolong culture as a whole as well as to go more closely into the specific subject of my investigations, namely, the changes undergone by the Barolong Family under the impact of modern conditions. I am convinced that this study of the changing family of the Tahidi Barolong against the background of the more slowly changing institutions of the main concentration sections of the tribe is more remunerative to the student of modern conditions with foreign influences must be continued as it provides suggestive material for the study of cultural processes besides illustrating the efforts which Africans are making to adjust themselves to the new conditions under which they have to live.

Since my last visit to the field two important censuses have been taken among the Native people of South Africa, namely, a population census and an agricultural census. The last population census was taken in 1931. According to the Census Act of the Union, a census of the European population is taken every five years and that of the whole population every ten years. A census of the whole population was due to be taken in 1931, but for financial reasons it was confined to the European population; but when the next European population fell due in 1936, it was decided to make it a whole population census. Although the full report has not yet been published, provisional reports have been issued and so it is now possible to get more accurate figures regarding the Native population in different districts, although the accuracy of the census is not beyond doubt, owing to the antipathy of the Native people to being counted. It is difficult to rid their minds that the results of the Census are going to be used against them in some way or other. The agricultural census was taken in 1937 and the facts recorded for included (a) the number of stock of all kinds, (b) the quantity of produce during the period from September 1936 to September 1937, (c) agricultural implements. This census was, if anything, even less accurate than the population census. But from the point of view of the social and economic conditions prevailing among the Native people, the official figures in both cases are rather interesting. In the Mafeking district, for instance, the population is given as approximately 46,000. Of these fully one-third were outside the Native Reserves in which they have their permanent homes when the Census was taken. This is typical of what is happening all over South Africa. With the rise in the standard of living, the pressure of taxation and for other reasons, many people leave the Reserve for varying periods of time, and the social effects of this migration both on the Reserves and on the areas to which migration takes place require investigation. The agricultural census reveals conditions of dire poverty in the Reserve. I have calculated that among the Tahidi Barolong the average family, according to the official figures, possesses not more than 2.5 head of cattle, 1.5 sheep, 2.5 goats and produces a quarter of a bag of mealies, half a bag of corn, hardly any beans, no vegetables, has practically no meet and very little milk.
Not only must there be serious malnutrition but actual starvation in the Reserve were it not for the traditional sharing of the people, at least in part, with the members of their kinship groups, of all that they have in the way of food. As it is their physical condition is very poor. Traditional foods are being replaced by foods for which one does not have to depend on the uncertainty of agriculture in this arid area. These must be bought with cash obtained as a reward for labour in industrial centres and on European farms. This may mean the breaking of family ties and the weakening of tribal loyalties, to say nothing of the fact that traditional economic activities suffer through the absence of the able-bodied, leading to worse poverty. Arriving in the field, as I did during the ploughing season I spent a good deal of time on the economic life of the Barolong past and present. The main traditional economic activities are stock-raising, ploughing and a certain amount of food-gathering. In the main the activities were carried on at considerable distances from the central village. Stock-raising was in the hands of young men who lived at the cattle-posts as close to good grazing as they could be. During the ploughing season men and women repair to the fields and make that the centre of the life until the end of the ploughing season, when they returned to the central village to engage in house building and renovation, mending implements, etc. Not these activities are interfered with by such things as wage-earning, attendance at school, new desires and ideas such as the unwillingness of traditional servants to carry on these activities while their masters go out to earn money and educate their children. All these factors are bringing about a re-arrangement of life on a new basis, some families making a successful re-adjustment, others suffering from maladjustment leading to conflicts between parents and children, masters and servants, chiefs and commoners.

Further attention was also paid to the political life of the tribe. As pointed out in my previous report the Tahidi Barolong fall partly under Union administration and partly under Bechuanaland Protectorate administration. This arrangement is not working too happily as far as tribal cohesion is concerned. It means that the Chief has got to divide his attention between two administrations and even a Chief may find it difficult, two masters successfully. The Tahidi Chief is showing an increasing tendency to concentrate his attention on the Transfer Farms and to neglect affairs on the Union side. He himself lives more or less permanently on the Barolong Farms within the Protectorate and he has recently embarked on the building of imposing administrative offices for the whole tribe within the Protectorate over thirty miles away from the central village although the bulk of the tribe live within the Union. People are beginning to ask whether he wants the tribe to move into the Protectorate, how they are going to be able to attend tribal assemblies at the new headquarters, why the Chief does not give up the chieftainship of the section of the tribe on the Union side, etc. I suppose in the days prior to European control this might have led to a split in the tribe. Smaller matters than that have led, in the past, to a breaking off of a section and the formation of a new tribe. All these difficulties would of course be obviated by the transfer of all Tahidi Barolong, Tahidi Barolong, to the Union, but that involves the question of the transfer of Bechuanaland to the Union to which the Barolong are no less opposed than other sections of the Natives in the Union and in the High Commission territories. The purely traditional system of administration is not without its complexities. The unit of administration is the kgotla consisting normally of a number of closely related families under the headship of the senior representative of the family units. A number of such kgotla are grouped together and placed under the charge of a senior headman, usually a relative of the Chief. This larger unit has the same name kgotla. At the top of the whole system is the Chief who himself, however, has a number of kgotla under him. This, in brief, is the hierarchy of administrative officers in the central village and represents the normal Barolong system of administrative organisation. Two factors introduce further complications into the system. Firstly, the Tahidi section of the Barolong is really a combination of two sections which although united maintain their separate identity within the central village. When the death of Tau, the last Chief of the Barolong as a single whole, his sons decided to separate, three of them, namely, Ratlou, Seleka and Rapulana set up tribes which have remained distinct ever since.
The other two, namely, Tabidi and Makgetla, decided to remain together and formed what has since become known as the Tabidi section of the Barolong. But the Makgetla section has not been entirely absorbed by the Tabidi, and wherever the Tabidi section has established a settlement, the Makgetla have occupied a separate and distinct section of the settlement and so have not lost their identity. Thus in the central village today the Makgetla section is under descendants of Makgetla as headmen and the Tabidi section under descendants of Tabidi and the Molopo river runs between the two sections, each viewing jealously its rights. By tradition the Tabidi Chief's marry into the Makgetla section of the tribe, so that the latter are known as the begetters of the Tabidi Chiefs. For that reason they are always staunch supporters of the ruling Chiefs in the disputes of the latter with their paternal kinsmen. Many a crisis in the history of the tribe has been averted by the intervention of the Makgetla section of the tribe.

Another fact which affects internal tribal administration is the fact that when Montshiwa, a former Chief of the tribe, found that the Boers of the Transvaal Republic were encroaching upon his territory on the ground that most of it was vacant land, he instructed several of his brothers to establish settlements outside the central village in different parts of what he regarded as his own territory. These men did so, but did not give up or lose their rights within as senior headmen (dikgosana) in the central village. The result is that today some of the senior headmen are in charge of a number of makgetla in the central village as well as of settlements of considerable size outside the central village. While recognising the seniority of the Paramount Chief, these heads of outlying settlements have full authority in their villages and the Chief seldom interferes with their internal administration. These outlying villages are organised on the same lines as the central village, with their own fields and cattle-posts, and any persons from the central village desiring to have a field in their area must approach the headman of the village rather than the Chief. I have not yet worked out fully the relationship of these various administrative units, but hope to make a fuller study of it later.

I continued to attend the tribal court as often as possible in order to gain an insight into the workings of tribal law. This was supplemented by a study of the record of cases kept in the tribal office. For many years the Tabidi have kept a record of the cases decided in the tribal court and these records provide useful material for the study of the development of Barolong law. Here again the influences of culture contact are at work. The tribal court meets once a week, on Wednesday afternoons when there is a half-holiday in the town of Mafeking and workers are free to attend to tribal affairs unless the case is one of great urgency when it may be set down on another day. Curiously enough the case-records are kept in English, although all the proceedings are in Tswana. Whether this is done for the benefit of the Native Commissioner in case there is an appeal against the decision of the Chief, I do not know. I suspect the true reason is that the Secretaries of the Chief have been men who have found it easier to keep the record in English. Again the record is only a summary of what happens in court and not a full report. The records are seldom ever referred to in actual trials. In no case that I have attended have they been referred to.

People continue to rely on their memories for the establishment of precedents, showing how the form of a foreign institution can be adopted without the purpose for which it exists in the foreign society, on the other hand the legal principles on which decisions are based are principles of Barolong law, and now and again in the records one finds the Tswana legal maxim on which the decision was made quoted in Tswana, being apparently untranslatable from the point of view of the recorder. The study of these principles with special reference to the family is proceeding.

The most important person to die during my stay in the field, namely, senior headmen R.D. Lekoko and Mrs Molema, the wife of Dr Molema. Lekoko ranked next to the Chief in order of seniority, his late father having been Regent-Chief of the tribe for many years. Mrs Molema, who incidentally was my hostess, also belonged to the royal section of the tribe. Both of these deceased were fairly highly educated and commanded great respect in the tribe. The funeral rites in both cases provided an interesting example of the inevitable mixture of traditional and Christian rites. Some of the traditional rites are strongly opposed by the Churches e.g., burial within the cattle kraal in the central village, but in most cases traditional practices prevail
The funeral service may be conducted by a Christian minister, the corpse placed in a coffin, etc., but interspersed with these foreign practices will be the traditional practices such as burial in the hut or the kgotla or the cattle-kraal, depending upon the age and status of the person concerned. Some of the cattle-kraals have no more space left for these interments and have on occasion to be widened not because the family has increased its stock but to provide more room for burials. The traditional watching of the corpse before burial, the slaughtering of a beast when a death has occurred, the disposal of the beast and its hide in the customary manner, the meeting of men at the kgotla of the family and women at the home of the deceased after the interment, the washing of hands of all those who attended the burial, etc., are carried on along with the new rites.

Throughout my stay I continued to add to my knowledge of various aspects of the family life of the Barolong—how the family arises, its structure, the relationships of various members of it, its relationship to other families and other social units, how it is dissolved, and so on, both by observation, questioning, by the collection of cases illustrating special points and the study of genealogies of both royal and ordinary members of the tribe. I now have fairly complete genealogies of the families of the Chiefs of the Tshidi from the time of Tau II as well as those of the descendants of Makgetla, and they provide useful documentary material of the rules of marriage. During my visits to the Retlou settlements in the Molopo Reserve at Setlago and Phitshane I pursued the matter and was interested to find that the so-called detribalised Tshidi have not departed to any great extent either in theory or practice from the traditional forms of Barolong family organisation and in some respects they out-Barolong the Retlou.

In my next trip I hope to do further work with the Retlou, especially at the central village of their senior Chief, Meshwete at Khunwana south of Mafeking and at Ganyesa and Morokweng in the Vryburg district as well as to make contacts with the Repulana in the Lichtenburg district of the Transvaal. I want to follow up in these areas the subject of magic of which I have made some preliminary investigations among the Tshidi. The force of magic even among the so-called detribalised Bantu was well illustrated in my recent visit to the field when a female doctor said to be from Basutoland arrived in the district. Soon her presence in the district got to be known and her reputation for effecting cures of all sorts spread to such an extent soon the place at which she lived was overcrowded with clients to such an extent that the police had to intervene, which of course enhanced her prestige among the Barolong. Another 'practitioner' whose reputation rests chiefly upon his skill in the treatment of mental diseases has people taken to him by the Chief himself in his car! The Chief has of course his regular doctor and the people continue to rely upon his help in garden magic. As I say the study of this subject is proceeding.

Finally I must refer to the collection of linguistic material. In my last I referred to the existence among the Barolong of a considerable body of linguistic material in the form of praise-songs of Chiefs and other notabilities in the tribe which required to be collected both for linguistic reasons and for the light which such material might throw on the traditional history of the tribe. I had myself been compelled to pay some attention to this matter, but I felt that this side of the work should be taken up by some one else if we could find him. I was successful in persuading one of my students at Fort Hare to undertake to do so and with the assistance of the Inter-University Committee on African Studies I was able to get Mr. Edson Bokake, B.A., to accompany me to the field. He stayed with me for nearly two months carrying on this work under my direction before he had to proceed to Cape Town where he joined the staff of the African Studies Department as a demonstrator in Sotho and Tswana. Unfortunately Mr. Bokake took ill and had to relinquish his post at Cape Town, but he is making a steady recovery and is now engaged in writing up his material. As a matter of fact he has already sent me a copy of the vernacular text of his material and when it has been properly annotated I feel sure his manuscript will constitute a valuable contribution to Tswana literature.