

Obituary

TSHEKEDI  
KHAMA

GREAT AFRICAN LEADER

Tshekedi Khama, the former Regent of the Bamangwato Tribe in Bechuanaland, died in hospital in London early yesterday at the age of 53.

His death deprives Africa of one of the greatest of her sons. He was a man of immense drive and vigour, who also brought a quality of happy living to everything in which he engaged. Alike in Westminster and among the cattlemen of the Bamangwato he was respected as one whose word was his bond. More than once in his life he was involved in great controversies, but he was without bitterness. For an African chief reared in primitive surroundings, he had a remarkable mastery of the British political system and scene, which served him in good stead at the time of his banishment. He was also greatly admired by other Africans in leading positions up and down the continent. He believed that white and black had to live together and his advice was always given on the side of moderation, negotiation, and faith in the future.

Tshekedi Khama was born in Serowe in 1906, the younger son of the great chief Khama of Bamangwato, the dominant tribe in Bechuanaland. Circumstances thwarted him in the full development of his talents and capacity for administration but he had opportunity enough to show that he inherited the qualities which made his father one of the most respected and admired of Southern African Chieftains in the nineteenth century. Tshekedi was educated at the Church of Scotland College at Lovedale in the Cape. He was still a student at Fort Hare Native College when in 1926 he was summoned by the council of the Tribe to become Regent for his four-year-old nephew. Seretse, son of Khama's eldest son, Sekgoma. There was some unrest in the Tribe at the time and an attempt was actually made on Tshekedi's life.

Though only 21, Tshekedi almost immediately embarked on a course of administrative reform which secured the strong loyalty of the majority of leading members of the Tribe, but made enemies of an influential minority. Among the most important reforms he initiated were the establishment of communal granaries and a secondary school for Bamangwato children. He also supervised the upbringing of his nephew Seretse, and jealously watched over his interests and the interests of his Tribe, even to the successful resistance of an attempt by the Chartered Company to exploit the mineral wealth of Bechuanaland in the exercise of a concession granted to them by Khama the First.

Tshekedi's name first came into real prominence when in 1933 he ordered corporal punishment for a white man in Serowe whose misbehaviour with African women was a public scandal. Admiral E.R.G.R. Evans (later Lord Mountevans), then Acting High Commissioner, led a force of armed Marines from Simonstown to Serowe and, under their guns, summoned a council of the Tribe and deposed Tshekedi. There was an immediate outburst of indignant protest in Britain and Tshekedi was reinstated within a month. This incident was an example of Tshekedi's determination to uphold the privileges of the Bamangwato Tribe and Chieftainship (though in this case, as he acknowledged, he exceeded his jurisdiction), and his determination occasionally made relations between himself and local British officials difficult.

There seems to have been no basis whatever for the suspicions occasionally heard before the Seretse crisis that Tshekedi was consolidating his own position as Chief and would resist Seretse's assumption of power. He encouraged Seretse in his education and sent him to Oxford to study law. Seretse's engagement to an English girl, Ruth Williams, without consultation with the Tribe, was obviously as great a shock to Tshekedi as it was to the Tribe and to the British Government. Tshekedi called a full KGOTLA (Council) of the Tribe and put it to them that Seretse should obtain the Tribe's consent for his marriage. They concurred and refused their consent. When Seretse returned to Bechuanaland, however, he called another KGOTLA which consented to his marriage. A dangerous situation was obviously developing in the Tribe for there were signs that opponents of Tshekedi and of Seretse's accession were encouraged by the dispute to reopen old tribal quarrels.

The British Government intervened by withholding recognition from Seretse as chief and banishing both him and Tshekedi from Bamangwato territory. It was the contention of the Labour Government then in power that they took these steps purely for tribal considerations. But it was widely believed that they had in mind the wider issue of the effects on liberal opinion in South Africa of the mixed marriage and the repercussion which the alienation of such opinion might have upon the relationship of all three High Commission Territories with the South African Government. Tshekedi came over to Britain and secured the support, while in opposition, of the Conservative and Liberal parties.

Once the Conservatives came into power, Lord Ismay, the new Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, allowed him back into the Reserve as a private person. Tshekedi scrupulously fulfilled his part of the bargain, not to take part in tribal politics. He was allowed to take part in Protectorate politics. The final denouement came when, as a result of a reconciliation between him and his nephew, Seretse also was allowed to return. Both were at liberty to take part in politics but not to claim the chieftainship. In recent years, Tshekedi had been very active in public affairs. He was one of the three <sup>man</sup> ~~team~~ which early in 1958 negotiated with mining companies in London about mineral rights in Bechuanaland. The agreement was signed last week. He pursued political as well as economic advancement and was a strong advocate of the formation of some form of legislature for the Protectorate. He was instrumental in bringing about the contemplated review of the constitution, which was announced last April.

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