

SOME NOTES ON MARRIAGE CUSTOMS AMONG THE PEDI  
AND COGNATE TRIBES.

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INTRODUCTION.

The term Pedi is generally used to include all the Sotho-speaking tribes of the Transvaal, but I shall use it in this Paper to refer to tribes living in Reserves situated in the Middelburg, Lydenburg and Pietersburg districts. (The Middelburg area now falls under Groblersdal) When considered as a whole these Reserves go under the general name of SEKHUKHUNILAND because although there are tribes of different ethnic origin living in them, there was a time in the past when their inhabitants all owed allegiance to one Paramount Chief, namely Sekhukhunê, the great chief of the Bapedi. It may be observed that in the records of the European administration in the country the name Sekhukhuniland includes only places in the Lydenburg district, which to this day, at least from the administration's point of view, owe allegiance to the chief of Maroteng, the capital of the Pedi proper. The local headquarters for their administration is Schoonoord. The tribes in the middelburg district are administered from Nebo.

The Pedi in Sekhukhuniland are best classified according to their totemic groupings. Following this method of grouping we may divide these tribes into three main divisions, viz.- Bapedi proper, Batau, and Bakone. (The first-mentioned are rightly called the "Pedi proper" because their grandparents conquered Bopedi, i.e. land of the Bapedi, and, having subjugated the inhabitants, adopted their name. Their great chiefs are the direct descendants of Thulare, Sekwati and Sekhukhunê. Their totem is Noko, the porcupine. The Batau revere the lion and the Bakone, the wolf.) Tribes of other totemic groups are commonly grouped round either of these main groups according to their nearness to the main group concerned, or according to their historical affiliations. These tribes are highly mixed because of the effect of early inter-tribal wars. Their heterogeneity may be judged by the fact that even within the same village, under the same chief, are found people with different totems living side by side. For instance, under Chief Lešalabe

Maserumulê of Pokwanin~~in~~ we find the following totemic groups:

PEOPLE	TOTEM
Ba-Rakxwadi	Hlaxahlaxane( ? ), also Phiri (wolf); they are the rulers.
Ba-Mašifana	Pêba (a white rat that lives along river banks).
Ba-Malokê	Tau (lion).
Ba-Moxajana	Thôlô(Koedoe).
Ba-Ranthô	Phuthi (Duiker)
Ba-Tladi	This is an Nguni group that joined the tribe in recent times - approximately 1899. They have no totem.

As a rule there is no prohibition against intermarriage between members of these groups, though there is a tendency for individuals to marry members of their own totemic groups. Members of the ruling class especially prefer marriage within the group. The Mašifana people, who were conquered by the Rakxwadi people within living memory and robbed of their independence, do not favour marriage with other groups. Members of the first five groups are reluctant to intermarry with members of the sixth group (Ba-Tladi). The latter are derogatively referred to as "Ke Matêbêlê, ba hlôka kxomo ba ja motho" (They are the Matebele who when they lack cattle eat human beings).<sup>x</sup>

Similarly the Pedi proper do not favour marriage with members of other tribes whom they despise as their social inferiors. Thus they are wont to refer derogatively to the Bakone as "Barwa" i.e. people from the South. (The same word is used to refer to Bushmen). The term "Barwa" also ~~refer~~ used to refer to detribalised Africans. On the other hand the Batau believe themselves to be physically and morally stronger than the Bakone and therefore avoid marriage with them as far as possible. They always boast that they are as strong and as brave

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<sup>first</sup>  
<sup>x</sup>Traditional history has it that when the Pedi/met them they were cannibals who lived on human flesh., Since they are despised, one of their men is employed as the "Thipane" (surgeon) during initiation.

as the lion, which is their totem, and despise the Bakone because of their association with the Wolf. Nevertheless inter-tribal marriages do occur, and where they do, the custom of the group to which the bride belongs, determines the nature and proceedings of the negotiations relating to the marital union.

The Pedi consider marriage an essential step for every normal person to take. The adult who deliberately chooses to remain single is virtually unknown among them, and would be regarded as failing in his duty to provide for the increase of the tribe. A woman who remains unmarried when most of her age-mates and those younger than herself have married, is referred to, somewhat contemptuously as, "Lefetwa" (pl. Mafetwa; that is, one who has been passed by). Men of the same category are called "Dikxôpê" (sing. Kxôpê). After the death of such a man a stick is burnt on one end and pushed through the anus of his corpse. "Ba re ke mofêfa, O rwele boamo." (Mofêfa in Sepedi has reference to someone who may be considered as the embodiment of misfortune; boamo refers to anything undesirable. Therefore the above words seem to carry the implication that the deceased is the incarnation of misfortune and the undesirable since he has failed to discharge a sacred duty, that of marrying and bringing up children. My informants were generally vague as regards the origin of this practice. When asked to account for its origin they repeatedly said: "It is an old custom.")

## II. The choice of a mate.

Marriage among the Pedi is a union, not so much between two individuals as between two lineage groups - that of the bride and that of the bridegroom. As a matter of fact the two individuals directly concerned may be taken as a means to effect this union with the primary purpose of bearing children and thus increasing members of the extended family. Among the Christians this view is modified by the fact that to contract a civil or a christian marriage, both spouses are by law required to appear before a marriage Officer.

The choice of a mate lies in the first place with the parents. Among the Pagans this is true especially in connection with the first customary union. Hence in their case such a union may be arranged without the knowledge or consent of the individuals concerned. As far as the prospective wife and prospective husband are concerned, theirs is not to reason why but to obey. It must be observed that such <sup>an</sup> action is more to the disadvantage of the woman than the man because, although the latter cannot refuse to respect such a union, he is nevertheless free to make his own choice later. Such a choice must traditionally receive the sanction of the parents - unless the man concerned is a man of substance and does not require other people's help. For the heir apparent to the chieftainship the choice lies in the tribe as a whole. The tribe decides who is to be their "tribal candle" (Tima-mollô).

Preferred and Prohibited degrees of marriage: Among both Pagans and Christians ~~apaxam~~ a man may marry his mother's brother's daughter, father's sister's daughter, or father's brother's daughter. Marriage with non-relatives, although increasingly becoming popular with the younger people, is not favoured by the older people. Marriage with mother's sister's daughter is strictly taboo in both communities. "Such a union is incestuous and it is believed that its offspring is invariably afflicted with certain physical or mental deficiencies." Nevertheless cases are on record in which it has occurred and where there were no observable physical defects or mental deficiencies in the offspring - some of them are of recent occurrence. Similarly sexual intercourse between a man and his mother's sister's daughter is regarded as incestuous. When it results in pregnancy the woman may be given certain herbs to bring about abortion. When condoned the paternity of the offspring is commonly kept secret. Only near relatives are admitted into the secret and when asked about it they often reluctantly say: "The woman herself does not know who made her pregnant. How could I possibly know." Besides it is believed that a marriage with one's mother's sister's daughter is invariably short-lived and unsuccessful - "because

it does not enjoy the blessing of the gods." Two men took the opportunity to explain to me how they had married such relatives in the teeth of much opposition, and then laconically concluded: "We have now divorced these wives because we could not get on together. The old people were not stupid to introduce these taboos."

Among Pagans, if a man dies before he has married a wife, or if, having married a wife, she does not bear male children (even after his death), one of his kinsmen may marry a wife in his name. The obligation to marry a wife in the name of a dead kinsman is invariably carried out when the dead man has any close kinsmen to interest themselves in "saving his name from oblivion." This applies only to initiated males. Such a woman cohabits with one of the kinsmen of the deceased - the choice being made for her by <sup>a</sup>senior relative of the deceased, or by general agreement among members of the family. The following incident is illustrative. It occurred in April-May, 1947.

Phatane, the only daughter of Marêmê and Pôtôkô, was betrothed to Tilo, the only son of Modilati and Sexome, without the consent of either partners. Sexome was a rich man and threatened to disinherit Tilo if he dared to refuse the match arranged for him. The latter, unwilling to be disinherited, acquiesced. On the other hand Phatane made it clear to her parents that she would have nothing to do with such a match since she was already in love with someone else and had no intention to abandon him. Her parents, who were looking forward to getting many cattle in the form of Maxadi from ~~the~~ Sexome on the occasion of their marriage, remained adamant on the point. They accordingly accepted the cow of "closing the gate" (Kxomo ya xo thiba seferô) from Sexome, thus concluding preliminary negotiations. All of a sudden Tilo died of heart-failure. He was buried in the usual way and mourned for traditionally. Now, according to custom, since Phatane was already engaged to the deceased, she was by this death widowed and had to undergo all the ordeals and perform all the rituals connected with such a crisis. Firstly, the hair on ~~her~~ her head had to be shaved ritually

while she lay down <sup>a</sup>willing and weeping according to custom. Just when the razor blade touched her scalp she yelled once and collapsed - probably because of extreme anger as she had refused to undergo this ritual. In fact she is reported to have said: "I would prefer death rather than be widowed in this manner." Needless to say this tragic death was ascribed to witchcraft.

It must be emphasised that in the olden days the choice of a man's wife (especially his first wife), was primarily the responsibility of his parents. A boy was from early youth trained to look upon such an action as natural and to expect it. Whenever the girl they preferred approached, they would point at her and say: "There is your wife." If the girl's parents were agreeable they made it a point always to send her on errands to the place of her prospective people-in-law. In adolescence, when he had a pseudo-wife in some other girl's, they would never tire of reminding him that his real wife was awaiting him. Thus both parties grew up in the knowledge of what was to happen. Under the circumstances it is not surprising that many unions were concluded in the absence of the young men concerned. Since at no stage in their marriages was the presence of the bride and bridegroom essential, it mattered very little whether they were present or absent. Apart from the consent of the parents, the payment of the "Maxadi" cattle was the only other essential factor to legitimise the union. They went further. If the young man was absent from home for many years, they did not only marry him a wife, but appointed a kinsman to raise up seed for him. He was not expected to oppose such an arrangement when he returned home. On the contrary he might be prevailed upon to pay a cow to the seed-raiser (called "Kxomo ya mokôkôtlô")<sup>\*</sup> "in order to reward him for his services." The children born were his own and not their natural father's. Nowadays young men are increasingly asserting their right to choose their own wives. Their claims are strengthened by the fact that they

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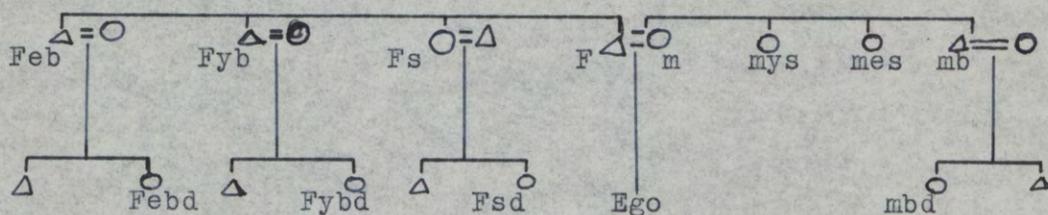
\* cf. "Kxomo ya mokôkôtlô;" mentioned by Harries in his "The Laws and Customs of the Bapedi and Cognate Tribes; Johannesburg, 1929; Hortors Limited; p. 37.

often work hard to get the necessary Maxadi cattle - their parents being too poor to provide them. Besides life today is so expensive and young wives demand so much that parents find it extremely difficult to maintain them without the help of their sons.

Preferential mating: The following were a man's traditional wives, i.e. preferred:<sup>\*</sup> mother's brother's daughter, father's elder brother's daughter, father's younger brother's daughter, and father's sister's daughter. The order in which they are mentioned above is recommended by some informants as the order of their seniority.

Figure 1 may make this point clearer.

Figure 1.



KEY:

- Feb = Father's elder brother.
- Febd = Father's elder brother's daughter.
- Fyb = Father's younger brother.
- Fybd = Father's younger's brother's daughter.
- Fs = Father's sister.
- Fsd = Father's sister's daughter.
- F = Father.
- m = Mother.
- mys = Mother's younger sister.
- mes = Mother's elder sister.
- mb = Mother's brother.
- mbd = Mother's brother's daughter.

\*It is still the rule among chiefs because one of them must be his chief wife, called in characteristic language, "the tribal candle" (Ke Lebônê). However it must be observed that many chiefs marry "tribal candles" from among the daughters of neighbouring chiefs - especially daughters of the more important chiefs. These are in effect diplomatic marriages and have been a matter of practical politics since the days of Sekhukhunê, the great. They are also still practised to a certain extent among pagans. The percentage of those who marry relatives among the Christians is lower%.

It is taboo for Ego to marry mother's sister's daughter. Such a union is condemned as incestuous.

Of the four women above, namely.- Febd, Fybd, Fsd, and mbd, who are Ego's traditional wives (i.e. preferred), the most popular one is marriage with mbd. Where this kind of preferential marriages is practised, it is generally assumed that a man is going to marry the daughter of his mother's brother, unless he or his parents indicate that the idea of such a marriage is not entertained by them, or the two families are known to be at logger-heads. For that matter, it is common for Ego's father to send a beast (commonly referred to as the "bull," quite regardless of its sex) to his mother's brother while the latter's daughter is still an infant, as it were in anticipation. Two things are implied by such an action. The first and the most obvious is that the beast gives Ego the sole and exclusive right to marry mbd. It is also said in characteristic Sepedi: "He has closed the entrance" (Q thibile seferô). The second is of more importance. It is that in case Ego marries more than one wife, mbd will rank as the senior wife. She it is who is the household's candle and on the occasion on which she is formally received at his home, any others already there must extinguish their fires. A ritual fire is drilled by the lešana method from which the other co-wives take embers for purposes of making their own fires, thus formally recognising her as their senior. † Besides, if by the time Ego is old enough to marry a wife, mbd is still too young and the "bull" is sent to her father, he may marry any other. However before building the latter's homestead, the side on which mbd's homestead is to be built in the future will first have to be selected and duly marked. It is from this site that the one for the junior wife will be determined.

On the other hand it may happen that by the time mbd is of marriageable age, Ego is still a minor (i.e. has not yet gone

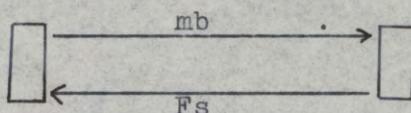
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† cf. "Now, every chief is designated for his future office by the ceremonial drilling of a new fire, when his mother, the "wife of the country," is brought into the capital." Eiselen, W. The Sacred Fire of the Bapedi; S. Afr. J. Sci., Johannesburg, 1929; p.551.

through the traditional initiation school). This state of affairs does not hamper proceedings. mbd will be married in the usual way but instead of Ego observing the "Xo lata" custom, a kinsman will be nominated to do it on his behalf and thus raise up seed for him. The children born from such an arrangement are considered legitimate and not illegitimate - because in characteristic language, "it is the cattle that beget children." They belong to Ego and not to their natural father. When Ego comes of age, this woman will formally be handed over to him by a group of his near relatives, and the seed-raiser will be remunerated for his services. The usual payment is a cow, called "the cow of the spine" (Kxomo ya mokôkôtlî). (Harries Op. cit. p.37.)

These parallel and cross-cousin marriages complicate the kinship system of the parties. Thus when a man marries his mother's brother's daughter, she is both his wife (moxatšá) and cross-cousin (motswala). Her father is both his father-in-law (moxôxadi) and mother's brother (malome). Conversely, he is to his wife both husband and cross-cousin. The boy's mother is to the girl mother-in-law (matswalê) and at the same time father's sister (rakxadi). Similarly the girl's brother is to her husband cousin (motswala) and at the same time brother-in-law (molamo) and vice versa. It must be observed that when one party moves to mother's brother's family, there must be a corresponding partner moving in the opposite direction; i.e. to father's sister's family. Figure 2 may help to make the position clearer.

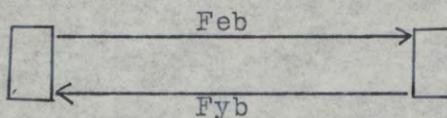
Figure 2.



Their behaviour patterns must of necessity be adjusted accordingly. Similarly when a man marries his father's elder brother's daughter, she is both wife (moxatšá) and classificatory sister (Kxaetšedi). Her brother is at the same time brother-in-law (molamo) and classificatory brother (morwa-rrê). Her father is at the same time father-in-law (moxôxadi) and father's elder brother (ramoxolo). Conversely he is to her husband (moxatšá) and classificatory brother (kxaetšedi). His father is at the same time father-in-law (ratswalê) and father's younger brother (rangwane). His sister is

- because her father is younger than hers at the same time classificatory sister (sammê) and sister-in-law (moxadibô). When a man marries his father's younger brother's daughter, she is both wife (moxatša) and classificatory sister (kxaedtšedi). Her brother is at the same time brother-in-law (molamo) and classificatory brother (morwa-rrê). Her father is at the same time father-in-law (moxôxadi) and father's younger brother (rangwane). Conversely, he is to her husband (moxatša) and at the same time classificatory brother (kxaedtšedi). His father is at the same time father-in-law (ratswalê) and father's elder brother (ramoxolo). His sister is at the same time classificatory sister (moxolle - because her father is older than her own father) and sister-in-law (moxadibô). Thus when one party moves to father's younger brother (rangwane), there must be a corresponding partner moving in the opposite direction; i.e. to father's elder brother's family. Figure 3 may help to make the position clearer.

Figure 3.



In this way cattle rotate within the family. Hence the expression: "Child of my father's younger brother, marry me so that the cattle may return to the kraal" (Ngwana wa rangwane nnyalê, 'kxomo di boêlê 'šakeng). This double relationship normally strengthens the kinship system and makes for social solidarity. These four relatives, namely father's elder brother (ramoxolo), father's younger brother (rangwane), father's sister (rakxadi), and mother's brother (malome) constitute an executive council in deciding the affairs of a man - especially in matrimonial affairs. Other members of the council are mother's elder sister (mamoxolo), and mother's younger sister (mangwane). If a man offends against one of them, the offended party may "hold him dikxaba."<sup>x</sup> Each one of them is expected to

<sup>x</sup>In Pedi theory there is a mystical link connecting all relatives - paternal and maternal. This mystical link depends on the friendly relations that exist among them. When friendly relations exist, there is a state of equilibrium. When unfriendly relations occur, a state of disequilibrium ensues. Now, the success of the couple in married life depends on whether friendly or unfriendly relations exist among members of the family. Thus when a man's marital affairs are being discussed, there must be absolute unanimity otherwise a state of disequilibrium ensues. Unless equilibrium is restored, in this case by prevailing upon the dissentient to fall in with the majority, such a state of disequilibrium may be an ill-omen to the couple concerned. It is believed that if any of these

make a substantial contribution to his "Maxadi cattle." In future when one of his daughters gets married, each is entitled to a share of the Maxadi cattle paid, no matter how small the apportionment. When ever he slaughters a beast, he is expected to give each one his legitimate share of the beast.

For the sake of maintaining peaceful relations it is advisable for a man not to marry more than one of these traditional wives. For instance, if he marries mother's brother's daughter, he should in future avoid marriage with father's sister's daughter as such an action immediately raises the much vexed question of seniority whereas the dividing line between them is vague indeed. As a rule mother's brother's daughter is ranked senior. In matters of ritual, it is one of the members of this executive council who must officiate. When all are present, it is the nature of the ritual to be performed which decides. When there are doubts, the traditional doctor is invited to diagnose the right person.

Prohibited marriages: It must be observed that some persons are not competent to marry at all. Persons who have not passed through the traditional initiation schools are regarded as not sufficiently mature to enter upon marriage. Although the betrothal of infants and even unborn children is permitted, such unions are not consummated until the persons concerned have passed through the traditional initiation schools. Among the Christians only full members of the Church are permitted to marry. Today there are a few individuals of undefined status who have reached physiological maturity

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near relatives strongly objects to the marriage of a man to a particular woman and is reluctantly forced to acquiesce, such a relative will "hold the couple dikxaba" as the expression goes. Either this woman will not conceive, or if she conceives, she will miscarry. Therefore as soon as a woman fails to conceive or miscarries, a traditional doctor is invited to diagnose the relative responsible. Once such a relative is made known, an appeal is made to him "to cure the woman." He may do so by merely saying: ~~maaxitaxix~~ "Do conceive and bear a child, my so-and-so, if I am the one holding you dikxaba." As a rule he is expected to spit when uttering these words. Certainly the spitting imitates the "dikxaba" going ~~out~~ out of his mouth.

baby

Similarly if the ~~mother~~ does not show any sign of good health e.g. does not cry or sneeze after birth, the traditional doctor is called in to diagnose the relative "holding the baby." Supposing the father's sister is diagnosed as the one responsible, they give her water in a "Lekopêlô" (a broken piece of clay-pot) in which she washes her hands. The same water is used for bathing the baby. This, it is believed, will automatically relieve him of the "dikxaba and no earthly medicine can perform the miracle.

but are neither professing Christians, nor graduates of the traditional initiation schools. Some of them have contracted customary unions with initiated persons. Where the parents of a woman have refused to sanction such a union, they are known to have condoned it after lapse of some time by accepting Maxadi cattle from the man. Others have contracted civil marriages with professing Christian girls. Although the number of these non-conformists is at present negligible, there are reasons to make one believe that their number is bound to increase in future. Secondly, mentally defective or insane persons are not allowed to marry. It must, however, be observed that traditional law is vague on this point. Thus if X, a man, enters into a customary union with Y, a woman, and X subsequently becomes insane, Y cannot use X's insanity as a ground for divorce, since theoretically the cattle paid and not X contracted the union, as they are wont to say: "Mosadi ke wa dikxomo". Other infirmities such as blindness or physical deformity do not constitute a bar to marriage. The truth of the matter is that much depends on the individual. Traditionally if one person decides to marry another quite regardless of the latter's infirmity, the Pedi take the point of view expressed idiomatically in the following words: "If a child insists on playing a mokhura trumpet, carve it and let him play on it" (Ngwana a llêla nakana ya mokhura, sêhla o mo neêlê a letšê). This is another way of saying: You may do just as you please but remember that we allow you to do so under protest.

### III. Negotiations for marriage.

After initiation, or confirmation in the Church, every Pedi youth looks forward to getting married and bringing up children. Those for whom girls were betrothed in infancy, may fix the time of their marriage. Some of them marry immediately after completing the "Boxwêra" session of initiation. Most young men, however, prefer to work for one or two years before getting married. The latter is absolutely essential among Christians because among them, according to custom it is the bridegroom who must buy the wedding dress for the bride and where possible, for the bridesmaids as well. In addition he is expected to buy a travelling rug for the mother-in-law (Kobô ya

mma'xo ngwana). It is easier for the Pagan youths because once the Maxadi cattle have been paid, the marriage is considered complete. For the latter, as already stated, it is not necessary for the bride or the bridegroom to be present for the marriage to be concluded.

The young man's mother may take the initiative and approach the mother of the girl she fancies as suitable for her son and informally negotiate for their marriage. Similarly the young man's father may approach the father of the girl informally to negotiate for their marriage. This is called "sounding the pools" (Ke xo hlôtle madiba), and is done in order to avoid  $\phi$  public disappointment. On the other hand when a young man has fallen in love with a girl he is expected to inform his mother about it. The mother, if agreeable, will put the matter before the father. The latter will then call him and harshly test his sincerity in the matter. When mother and father are agreeable they may adopt either of the two methods mentioned above, or straight away engage the services of an official go-between (Maditsela or Motseta) to proceed with formal negotiations. He proceeds to the father of the girl and introduces the matter by saying: "I have seen a little dog in your courtyard" (Ke bone mpyanyana ka lapeng la xaxo). Other appropriate expressions are: "Preserve me one of your little dogs" (Mpeêlê e ngwe ya dimpyenyana tša xaxo); or "Beget me" (Ntswaleng); or "I have come to ask for a gourd of water" (Ke tlile xo kxopêla sexô sa meetse). At first the father of the girl will pretend astonished by such vague phrases. Even when he has already accepted the informal negotiations of the young man's father, he is not supposed to show knowledge of the matter at all. As a matter of fact he is not expected to show keenness in the matter. Very often he will dismiss the go-between most unceremoniously. The go-between, on the other hand, is required to be patient and to repeat his visit as many times as possible, depending on the circumstances of the case or the temperament of the father.

As a rule after dismissing the go-between the girl's father will discuss the matter with his wife. Together they look first and foremost to the family or "house" to which the young man

belongs. They raise questions regarding the lineage stock (lešika) of that particular family, examining both maternal and paternal relatives. People of the Royal line of descent do not favour marriage with commoners, or with serfs, or with strange groups that have become attached to the tribe - especially those of Nguni stock. Questions relating to sorcery or the practice of witchcraft in the family are examined very carefully. Special attention is also paid to the character of the young man. Is he industrious or lazy? neat in habits? obedient to authority? Does he respect his elders? Is he courteous in speech and manners? and so forth. Very often his industriousness or his father's wealth greatly outweighs other considerations.

Having satisfied himself that the go-between is sincere and well meaning in his mission, the girl's father, if agreeable, will send him back saying: "Go in peace, I shall meanwhile inform her owners." (i.e. the group consisting of near relatives) If he is not at all in favour, he will reply: "Others have already come before you." This is a polite way of indicating that he is not willing to give his daughter; as they are wont to say: "A man's refusal is not necessarily an out-right No." (Xo xana xa monna xase nnang). Whatever the reply may be, the go-between is expected to report everything to the young man's father. Nowadays it is common that, having conferred with his wife, they may call the daughter to sound her opinion on the matter. The idea here is to ascertain whether the young man concerned has already approached her on the matter. A good mannered girl is expected to reply: "You know best." If the three of them are in full agreement, a meeting of their executive council is convened for the purpose of discussing the matter. They deliberate at length regarding the young man's family and the young man himself as indicated above. If they are in favour, their next job is to nominate a suitable go-between. However this is mere formality as such a one holds the position by virtue of his birth. In future when the go-between from the young man's place comes, he will accordingly be directed to his opposite number on their side.