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THE RATSHIDI BAROLONG

A REPORT OF FIELD INVESTIGATIONS INTO THEIR POETRY

I.

The Ratshidi (-Makgetla) branch of the Barolong tribe live in the Molopo Reserve, and have their administrative headquarters at Mafeking. The Molopo Reserve is situated North-West of the Cape Province. The soil is of a sandy nature and although not infertile, yet the scanty and unreliable rainfall, the often excessive heat, render peasant-farming a precarious mode of existence. The Reserve has a numerical strength of eight thousand four hundred Ratshidi (-Makgetla) Barolong. Other branches of the tribe living within the Reserve are the Rapulana of Lotlhakane (eleven miles from Mafeking), they number roughly seven hundred souls; portions of the Ratlou are settled at Tshidilamolomo and Phitshane, their number is roughly one thousand three hundred souls. The approximate population of Disaneng, a Motlharo settlement, is about five hundred persons. From these figures the total population of the Reserve, not including people who live in the Mafeking Municipal location, may be estimated at ten thousand nine hundred souls. Of these ten thousand nine hundred people approximately seven thousand live in the large central stad of Mafeking. The remainder live in smaller villages at varying distances from the administrative headquarters.

The Barolong Tribe consists of four distinct branches which are named after their founders, the four sons of Chief Tau:

- (1) the Ratlou;
- (2) the Ratshidi;
- (3) the Seleka; and
- (4) the Rapulana.

Each of these eponymous divisions constitutes an independent tribal unit, and each possesses a judicial and political system whose effects are strictly local.

The earliest known chief of the Barolong, and of whom nothing much is known, was a man called Morolong. There is no doubt but that the tribe is named after him. The fact is significant for it serves as a landmark in the history of the Batswana. Morolong was the founder of a new tribe, a tribe which from that day became quite distinct from other Tswana tribes, the tribe to-day known as Barolong. The honorific title of the tribe confirms the statement that Morolong was its founder. The title refers to three men: Morolong, Thole in the title, probably a figurative use of the more familiar term Tholo; Noto, son of Morolong; Morara, son of Noto.

We have already pointed out that the tribe is named after Morolong, but equally important is the fact that it is frequently referred to by his successor's name, Noto (tshipi).

The term Morolong derives from the name Tholo (a koodoo), an animal which the whole tribe venerates and has as its principal totem. It is reported that Noto taught the Barolong to work with iron (tshipi) making spear-heads, garden hoes and other implements, and to perpetuate his memory the tribe adopted tshipi or noto as a secondary totem. Thus one often hears these people speak of themselves as Babina-tshipi or Babina-noto.

The honorific title of the Barolong reads as follows:-

Nemane tsa Thole, Barolong!
Tse li jang mogope di o lala!
Ba ga mogogore wa loso,
Ba ga gogomela,
Ba ga Morara A Noto, Barolong!

The following is a free translation:-

Hail, you calves of (the) Koodoo, hail, oh Barolong!
Which destroy the sleeping-hut they lie in!
You of the Valley of Death!
You of 'project beyond',
You of Morara, son of Noto, hail Barolong!

After the death of Tau, which took place a little before or after the year 1760, the Barolong experienced a serious split. The main reason for the division was a dispute in which Ratshidi, Seleka, and Rapulana refused to acknowledge Ratlou as the rightful chief of the Barolong. Two bulls cannot remain in one kraal. Ratshidi, Seleka and Rapulana, rather than remain petty chiefs or mere headmen under their much younger, though senior, brother, preferred to hive off with portions of the tribe over which they would be sole lords. And so there occurred the historic split which created four branches in the tribe. The present geographical distribution of these branches is as follows:-

The main body of the Ratlou live in the Setlagole Reserve, smaller groups of them are found in Phitshane and Tshidilemolomo in the Mafeking District, and also in Lichtenburg and Vryburg; the Ratshidi branch occupy the Molopo Reserve side by side with the Makgetla line. More Ratshidi Barolong are found in Maretsane and Lobatsi; the Seleka have made their home in Thaba Ntšho; the Rapulana occupy Lotlhakane in the Molopo Reserve, and more of them live in Lichtenburg.

One word about the Makgetla people. They are the decedents of Makgetla who was a contemporary of the men by whose names the four branches of the tribe

are known. He also was the son of Tau, the father of the same four gentlemen. But he, it seems, did not strike out for independence and freedom, and his descendants to-day form the subordinate member of the Ratshidi-Makgetla alliance. This alliance of which I speak probably dates back to the time when Ratlou's all too frequent cattle raids and military expeditions were a great threat to the survival of the small groups. Ever since, the Makgetla people have served the Ratshidi, and have defended the latter's interests at all times. But their social position is not that of serfs. It is, however, one of honour and privilege. From this section of the Ratshidi-Makgetla have come the queens of the branch, a practice which has become almost customary; from this section have come the chief's ambassadors, his right hand men, his special favourites, and so on; the relationship between the two has been and is one of the warmest and most intimate of friendships. Sometimes the sections were distinguished thus:-

The Ratshidi as "Ba ntlheng ya Odimo", and

The Makgetla as "Ba ntlheng ya Tlase".

II.

I spent six weeks among the Ratshidi Barolong, from the 18th December, 1937, to the 29th January, 1938. This research visit was made possible by a grant from the Inter-Universities Committee for African Studies. I spent the time in collecting praise-poems, war-songs, a few work songs, and in drawing up explanatory notes on them. Prior to setting out to the field, I had no first-hand acquaintance with the Ratshidi, and almost no experience at all of exact methods of field research. Under the guidance and inspiring supervision of Mr. Z. K. Matthews, I was not long in acquiring a technique which gave valuable results. My close association with Mr. Matthews enabled my relations with the people to be free and easy, and more fruitful of results. To such an extent did I gain the confidence of some that my Sotho birth simply did not matter.

The original Barolong culture has, through contact with Western Civilization, been subjected to profound as well as less profound changes. Change has been profoundest in the people's religious life. The Christian religion is the tribe's accepted religion and practically nothing is remembered of the old ancestor cult. It is, however, interesting to note that the mortuary rites have not been so completely rooted out. The forms

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and places of burial are, for instance, in a large number of cases still as they were in the olden days: in the cattle kraal, in a hut, or under the lolwapa wall, according to whether the deceased is a man, a child, or a woman, respectively. Christian rites blend with heathen ones. Various important changes and modifications have taken place throughout the fabric of old Serolong life.

The decay which has overtaken the military organization and life must here receive our special attention for out of its military experience there blossomed the tribe's most treasured form of literature -- bold, heroic verse.

The military life of the Ratshidi is dead. Contact with European races has stripped this tribal branch of all military independence, significance, or confidence. They are a despondent people and lack the poetic vigour of their forefathers. The men are content to remain DIKGOSANA or peasant-farmers. An aspect of the original Ratshidi military organization which has remained in a modified form is the regimental system. To-day the only function of the regiments is to serve as a labour battalion. Each regiment is in charge of a single KGOSANA who is responsible to the KGOSI. Note the ploughing of the chief's PHATSA (patch of land) in this connection.

With the decline of the people's military activity there set in a corresponding decrease in the out-put of the praise-poets. War had been the chief event which gave the inspiration to compose verses in praise of valour; verses which shed a ray of glory and honour on the dutiful soldier; spontaneous verses which won for him the eager admiration of youthful recruits, the warm respect of older soldiers and the fear of the enemies' fighters. Indeed war was glorified. The brave warrior alone, he whose spear had not slept but had claimed victim after victim, deserved and received the highest praise, approving public gesture, the envy of colleagues, and the sympathy and encouragement of relatives. Custom had, in the name of tribal security, established his rights to these privileges; and war-chiefs had in their wisdom enjoined the observance of these peculiar rites. The coward was never sung; the brave killer killed remained for ever extolled unextolled in verse; only the living brave, the killer who returned home with the army became a tribal hero. From this it is clear that every young man had a strong motive to become a soldier and that every soldier's burning desire was to become a LEITAYA-TSHWENE of no mean order and so to gain inter-tribal

fame through the often extravagant praise of the poets of his homeland. In those troubled days the praise poem was of immense social and tribal value. It was a kind of glorified military decoration which was not easily gained but approved by the whole tribe. Its spirit warmed the blood of a soldier, maintained the morale of the army or regiment; its sole aim was to keep the tribe intact from the destructive forces of wars and battles.

In the realm of praise-poetry the chief occupied a special position. He was the father of his tribe and he was the strength of it; the army won its battles through his might and the tribe remained secure through his 'strength'; what need was there that he should gain the honour of war like the common soldier? There was no need so the chief was praised though he may never have been near a battle-field.

A tribal bard was often recognised and even an inter-tribal one. Rapeana, Tlhabanelo-a-Tau and Tikanyane were among the most outstanding poets of the Barolong. While the tribal bard was free and confident enough to compose lines ranging in subject matter from the greatness and generosity of the "Person of the People" himself right down to the nervous achievements of the latest recruit, the minor bard confined his poetic efforts within his family circle, praising those of his male relatives as had gained distinction in battle. Thus the minor poet's work did not often gain the wide publicity and fame of the tribal poet's. It had a narrower appeal on account of its author's relative obscurity.

Theoretically, the bard's fee was a beast (GO RUFA) for each occasion that he rendered his services; in practice, however, he received any gifts that his clients could afford.

Usually, first public performances took place when the army returned from battle. The regiments approached the chief's KGOTLA with the deep strains of a blood-curdling war-chant rolling in their chests and red flames leaping out of their eyes. On a nearby eminence the woman stood, rending the air with shrill ululations (BA LETSA MEGOLOKWANE). All is anxiety among them, all hope that their men have returned safely. Out of the steadily advancing army a "killer" leaps forth and performs the energetic steps of a war-dance, he cries:

"Who dares to hold me back?"
(Ke tšhwarwa e mang?);

and if they saw him kill, nobody moves forward to hold him back. He is now free to be praised in verse. When he has been praised he darts back into

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his place in the regiment and another "killer" comes forth to receive due public recognition and acclamation. He performs the war-dance, darting this way and that, working his spear and shield menacingly as if at an enemy, if he is a veteran "killer" he recites his former praises and the poet may add a few stanzas more in honour of the present occasion. The war-song is kept on until the whole army has reached the tribal KGOTLA where the chief sits, silent, waiting.

The Ratshidi war-songs consisted of two parts: The solo-part and the chorus. The solo-part words of the same war-chant varied a great deal according to the poetic and musical genius of the soloist. The chorus parts of the songs were, however, more stereotyped; the words and music of the same chorus parts were more stable. I was not able to record the music of the war-chants.

That was in the days of inter-tribal cattle-raids and determined struggles against interfering European adventurers.

To-day a chief or a commoner may attain praise-poem fame through his outstanding ability in handling public affairs or for some other quality which is approved by society or for whatever reason that seems fit to the poet. The work of this "new school" is necessarily feeble and restricted in quantity. There is much uncertainty and lack of spontaneity among the new school of poets. They lack confidence and are reluctant to show their work, the excuse always being that the work is still under revision (a sa tlhatswiwa). I met two poets in Mafeking; I read the works of one of them but could only listen to the compositions of the other. It may be added, in passing, that the "new school" tries to copy the old in all things, thus it is new only insofar as it draws its inspiration from different circumstances.

Those who learned poems off by heart depended solely on their ears. Frequent repetitions impressed the lines on the learner's mind. All girls preparing to go through the Initiation School were taught the praises of their fathers and uncles by their mothers and they recited these on a specially appointed day to a large and appreciative audience. The reward received by a girl who had "washed her uncle's heart" was often a beast.

A type of verse there was which we may call "Boys' Verse". It was boys' play and it ended on emergence from the Initiation School. It was

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bombastic in tone, extravagant and fanciful in spirit, but often quite ingenious in technique.

The "Verse of Animals and Things" was far more important than "Boys' Verse". Note poems on such animals as the buffalo, the rhinoceros, the lion, the leopard, etc., and also note that certain rivers, trees, etc., received special attention in song and poetry. Almost all things that gave satisfaction and joy received due honour in some tribal song or poem.

I have ^a small collection of work-songs (words only) which can be tremendously enlarged. I have, also, in my collection one piece on the "Beast" (Kgomo) in some form of Sekgalagadi.

All things now exist as mere relics from a past less soulless than the present. Only the old men and women remember these things, to them alone they have meaning.

III.

Acting on advice received from Mr. Matthews I did not commence work as soon as possible after my arrival in Mafeking. I spent approximately two weeks trying to gain experience of Serolong tribal life in the stad: I met all and sundry, made friends, observed the ways and manners of the people, tried to gain insight into their general view of life, and so on. This method proved highly effective in the long run. In this way much valuable time was saved for much fruitless and stupid argument was avoided. To my special informants I was particularly friendly and obliging, and during the process of conversations with them I would unostentatiously let them into the secret of my mission to Mafeking. I may here remark that it is most difficult to obtain information from the Ratshidi folk. They look with suspicion on all foreigners who are for ever ferreting around for this custom and that custom and what-not. Part of the solution to this problem seemed, in my experience, to lie in being as useful as possible to valuable informants, always remembering to act as if according to custom.

I always worked with one informant at a time. I took down poems as they were recited, line by line. My method of eliminating errors was to read each poem to my informant as I had set it down and wherever my reading indicated an error, he or she corrected it. Further, mistakes were weeded out while an informant recited a poem for the second time.

Although, as a general rule, I used to take down explanatory notes on each poem immediately after recording it, yet often I was forced by my informants' mood to adopt other methods which were, perhaps, less satisfactory.

If my man or woman answered questions hesitatingly and with "Ga ke itse" (I do not know) prefaced too frequently to their remarks then I always let them dictate as many poems as they wished to and on leaving them I sought out other reliable informants to supply the required information. I never neglected to return to my original informant for his confirmation or otherwise of information supplied by others.

Whenever possible I obtained representative varieties of one and the same poem. I found that differences of grammar in the various versions were slight while those of ununiform order of stanzas, omission of stanzas, and varying vocabulary, were quite prominent.

I wrote down annotations in Setswana. These were on historical events, persons and animals, geographical features, customs of the Barolong referred to in poems, and other problems which appeared as features of each particular poem. It was not easy to obtain the names of authors who lived before the reciter's time unless they were poets of wide fame, far above the stage of minor poets.

Since my return from the field it has become apparent that there are gaps in my annotations and I have been compelled to try and fill up these by enquiries conducted through the post.

The material I collected while I was out in the field is fairly numerous. I humbly submit, however, that a second and longer research trip to the same field would unearth more abundant and valuable material and would serve in a highly supplementary capacity to the first.

(Sgd.) EDISON M. BOKAKO

KIMBERLEY

March, 1938.