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Historical Narratives as Political Discourses of Identity

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In December 1979, a group of twelve history students from the University of Botswana carried out one week of oral interviews in the Tswapong Hills region of east-central Botswana. Their teacher, David Kiyaga-Mulindwa, wrote that the aim was twofold: 'To train UBS history undergraduates in field methods currently used in African historical research' and 'to contribute to the history of the Batswapong through the collection and analysis of oral traditions'.² The initial product of the project was three volumes of verbatim transcriptions in Setswana of the recorded interviews with English translation.³ No effort was made to interpret or analyse these extensive oral data which are presented 'for interpretation and use by interested historians'.⁴ I would like to take up that offer and examine these historical texts in two ways. My first goal is to read these interviews as 'identity narratives'.⁵ These dialogues between the university students and the interviewed residents of the Tswapong region provide a wealth of material about the way people in the region interpret their lives, what conceptual frameworks they employ to make sense of their relations to others, and how their construction of the 'self' and the 'other' relates to shifting relations of power and domination within and beyond the region. In tracing this indigenous discourse my goal is to show how people articulate social boundaries verbally, to outline the system of meaning that lends significance to collective identities, and, ultimately, to explore how the subjective significance of ethnic categories is produced. I wish to show that ethnic categorization itself was altered in response to changes in the political economy of the region and that until independence ethnic differentiation provided an idiom for limiting access to power and control over land. While official discourse in the post-independence era has claimed to

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- 1 My research was supported by the National Science Foundation (US), Sigma Xi, and by a Sachar International award granted through Brandeis University. The historical arguments in this paper are extended in P. Motzafi-Haller, 'Transformations in the Tswapong Region, Central Botswana: National Policies and Local Realities', Ph.D. thesis, Brandeis (1988), and 'The Politics of Ethnic Categorization in Contemporary Botswana,' *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* (forthcoming).
 - 2 Tswapong Historical Texts, vol. 2, 'Politics and Society in Letswapo' (1980, p. *i*), on file in University of Botswana Library.
 - 3 In some cases only the English version was provided. As will be shown below much of the significance of the indigenous discourse is lost in the process of the translation. In fact, some of the more interesting insights about these dialogues emerge from comparing how the students chose to translate the Setswana idioms expressed by the interviewed villagers.
 - 4 *Ibid.*, *ii*.
 - 5 I borrow the term from Denis-Constant Martin, 'The Choices of Identity', paper prepared for the Grahamstown conference; Martin follows Paul Ricour, 'The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text' *Social Research* (1971), pp. 529-562.

have subsumed notions of ethnic groups under the unified idea of a national community, the last decade has seen ethnic categorization and subjective definitions of collective identities argued and reconfigured in novel and unexpected ways.

But a textual analysis that leaves the political context which defines the discourse is not very useful. My second analytical goal is to develop an analysis of such indigenous discourse in the aftermath of the 'post-modern challenge' to the manner in which ethnographic and historical knowledge is produced.⁶ My particular interest here lies in addressing the post-modern critique of anthropological representation and authorship, and in accessing various efforts to 'recapture anthropology'.⁷ In staying very close to the texts, and presenting the dialogues as they unfolded in time, I wish to enable the reader to hear how people in the region debated, reflected upon and ultimately crafted anew their own subjectivity. In treating this oral evidence as central to my presentation, I also respond to the recent call for placing our text 'on the table' in order to avoid the danger of 'its complete and final replacement with our words'.⁸ Following up on Herzfeld, Reed-Danahay suggests that 'This perspective involves a humbling of our own claims about the validity of our ideas as well as a growing respect for the ideas of our informants'.⁹

Texts and Contexts

In 1982-83, as part of a larger ethnographic work, I carried out interviews exploring the political history of various groups and settlements in the Tswapong region. But, unlike the students who had 'a repertoire of knowledge and expectations, or a common culture, that was shared with participants and created in interaction with them',¹⁰ I was an outsider, initially working through a translator. My interviews, therefore, produced a different interaction with Batswapo and, thus, oral data of a very different nature which I use to disaggregate the relations of power and politics embedded in the texts.¹¹ I quote comparatively long segments of exchanges given in the texts and provide the Setswana original in order to retain the flow of the recorded dialogues. For these dialogues, as processes of verbal interactions, are themselves the very sites in which knowledge was produced. And the 'dialogical situation' as Ricour¹² reminds us, is 'based on the immediate reciprocity between speaking and hearing'. A few introductory facts about the immediate context of these 'dialogical situations' are necessary.

6 James Clifford, 'Histories of the Tribal and the Modern', in J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 189-214; G. Marcus and M. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Chicago, 1986); S. Tyler, 'Post-Modern Anthropology', in P. Chock and J. Wyman, *Discourse and the Social Life of Meaning* (Washington, DC, 1986), pp. 23-561.

7 Lila Abu-Lughod, 'Writing Against Culture', in Richard Fox, *Recapturing Anthropology* (Santa Fe, NM, 1991), pp. 137-163; Robert Borofsky, *Making History: Pukapukan and Anthropological Constructions of Knowledge* (New York, 1987); Richard Fox, *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present* (Santa Fe, NM, 1991); Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington, *Twisted Histories, Altered Contexts: Representing the Chambri in a World System* (New York, 1991); Michael Herzfeld, *The Poetics of Manhood: Contest and Identity in a Cretan Mountain Village* (Princeton, 1985); Paul Rabinow, 'Representations Are Social Facts: Modernity and Post-Modernity in Anthropology', in J. Clifford and G. Marcus, *Writing Culture* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 1986), pp. 234-262.

8 Dennis Tedlock, *The spoken word and the work of interpretation* (Philadelphia, 1983), p. 335.

9 Quoted by Deborah Reed-Danahay, 'Talking About Resistance: Ethnography and Theory in Rural France', *Anthropological Quarterly* 66, 4 (1993), pp. 221-229; see also, M. Herzfeld, *Anthropology Through the Looking-Glass: Critical Ethnography in the Margins of Europe* (New York, 1987).

10 Bennetta Jules-Rosette, quoted in Tedlock, *The Spoken Word*, p. 323.

11 I carried out interviews in 14 villages. Some of my findings are published in my 'The Duiker and the Hare: Tswapong Subjects and Ngwato Rulers in Pre-colonial Botswana', *Botswana Notes and Records* 25, pp. 59-72.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 546.

The student interviews were carried out in the course of one week in December 1979. Many villages in the region were beginning to feel the direct effects of state reforms and policies promulgated a decade earlier. The most critical of these was the establishment of locally elected Land Boards which assumed the right to allocate land hitherto held by traditional chiefs. But the position of local chiefs, despite these seemingly dramatic legislative reforms, was more affected by another state-induced change, namely that village chiefs were to be paid by the state. Only one person could be officially recognised by the state as the village head and paid, but the question of who is *the* village head is not simple in the segmented local political field in many Tswapong villages. Heated struggles and debates in which local groups and segments redefined themselves and articulated their collective right to leadership and resources ensued. The students' oral project was carried out in the midst of this atmosphere. In this context, the questions posed by the young students are often imbued with the democratic and modern values they came to adopt as the most educated people in their young nation. They often challenge, although half jokingly, the interviewees about traditional practices that involved magic, and banter about old restrictions on choice of mates and relations between the sexes. While they accept and share with their interviewees many basic notions regarding rights of groups to land, ideas of hierarchy, and legitimacy of power, they also question such notions and make their elders reflect upon and conceptualize them more concisely.

It is also important to realise that the students presented themselves and were treated as professional outsiders. The students were hosted by Moeng College located in the Tswapong region; they met there at the end of each day to discuss points difficult to put across to 'informants'. The interviews were open-ended and informal but the students all attempted to cover standardized points of reference in their daily interviews. The research team of twelve consisted of eight men and four women, in addition to their teacher. The 'ethnic' origin of the students is not known. In interaction with the Tswapong villagers the students' own background was never discussed. But it was clear that none of the interviewing students associated him or herself with the 'Tswapong people'. The students often used the terms 'Batswapong' or 'Bapedi' to refer to the main group of Tswapong residents as opposed to the local use of 'Matswapong' which has pejorative connotations.¹³ The main distinction was between young eager-to-learn outsiders and knowledgeable elders. Students often addressed their elders with terms like *malome* (my maternal uncle); the interviewees replied with the respectful *rra* (sir) or *mma* (madam), but one also sees playful references to *motshegare* (young woman or maiden) and paternal compliments for the student who 'understands well' and proceeds to ask the 'appropriate questions'.

The two interviews I selected for closer examination are recorded both in Setswana and English. Both appear in the second volume of the three 'Tswapong Historical Texts' produced by the project.

A Short Overview Of Regional History

The inclusive label Batswapong (often Matswapong) appears for the first time in missionaries' accounts at the critical moment in the history of the region, around 1860, when the regional population came under the crossfire of two rising powers, Amandebele to its north-east and Bangwato to the south-west. In these early accounts,¹⁴ and in historical compilations largely

13 The prefix *ma* indicates low status because it connotes non-human objects.

14 John Mackenzie, *Ten Years North of the Orange River* (Edinburgh, 1871); W. C. Willoughby, Archives of Selly Oak College Library of Birmingham, files 713, 734, 770, 794, 1898.

based on these accounts,¹⁵ the population of the Hills is described as industrious and defenseless iron workers and cultivators who could not effectively resist the military might of the expanding Ngwato lineage coming from the south. Oral evidence suggests that residents of the Hills had never attempted to resist Ngwato domination but in fact invited protection against the more destructive raids of Ndebele armies.

During the first two or three decades of domination (c. 1840-1870), and while the Ngwato lineage was consolidating control over its expanding territory, the population of the Hills was accorded a large measure of local autonomy; tribute in the form of wild animal skins was a symbolic token of deference to a higher remote centre of power. The 'subject tribe called the Machwapong' writes one missionary in the late 1860s 'renders a certain tribute to the Bamangwato, but are permitted to enjoy, after somewhat precarious fashion, their own flocks and herds and other property.'¹⁶ Control over the trade routes to the north rapidly enriched the emerging Ngwato centre in Shoshong, south west of the Tswapong region, thus transforming the nature of such domination. This subject tribe at the periphery of the expanding Ngwato state supplied the changing needs of the center; when elephants and game all but disappeared from the region by 1880, Tswapong cultivators paid tribute in grain. The advent of the centralised Ngwato state in the last quarter of the nineteenth century formalised the process of dispossession by extending taxation, limiting access to land, and progressively confining the autonomy of local leadership.

In the historical process which defined relations among Ngwato rulers and the various ruled populations each developed a new awareness of its distinct collective identity. In the dominant discourse of the ruling Ngwato the population was divided into free citizens and vassals. Free citizens were members of other Tswana polities who joined the Ngwato core due to agnatic competition and segmentation. These *batlhanka* were integrated into the nesting hierarchy of political units as wards, sections, and age sets. Vassals, like the conquered population of the Tswapong, were kept apart as locally independent yet materially exploited subjects. At the bottom of this differentiated hierarchy of groups were *Basarwa* (Bushmen). Capturing this dominant discourse of ethnic differentiation, a colonial official reported in 1888:

The Bachwapong and Bakalahari speak a dialect of Sechwana and are of lower and inferior rank; many of their chiefs own flocks and herds and they are to be distinguished from the still lower Masarwa by these possessions and the cultivating of gardens.¹⁷

Yet this categorization was inherently ambiguous and open to contestations as groups and individuals were continuously engaged in a process of redefining their socio-political status within this hierarchy. It is instructive, for example, that Schapera – who attempted to map out the 'ethnic composition' of the 'Batswapong' category – needed to revise his categorization several times.¹⁸ His suggestion that some groups in the region – e.g., the Bakaa – are now becoming known as Tswapong reveals just how the external definition of collective group identities can and did change according to the political and economic fortunes of a

15 Isaac Schapera, 'The Ethnic Composition of Tswana Tribes', *Monographs on Social Anthropology* 11 (London, 1952); *Tribal Innovators* (London, 1970); Anthony Sillery, *The Bechuanaland Protectorate* (Oxford, 1952); Q. N. Parsons, 'The Economic History of Khama's Country in Southern Africa,' *African Social Research* 18 (1973), pp. 643-75.

16 Mackenzie, *Ten Years North of the Orange River*, p. 366

17 Botswana National Archives, HC 24/15.

18 Motzafi-Haller, 'Transformations in the Tswapong Region, Central Botswana'; Schapera, 1952.

group.¹⁹ What we see in the oral texts presented below is that people in the Tswapong region resist and challenge this dominant external discourse which defined them as ethnic subjects.

First Interview: 'I am Relating our History'

The first interview was carried out in the village of Lerala, one of the two largest villages in the region on 11 December 1979. A village of about 1,800 residents at the time of the interview, Lerala was founded by a group of Pedi people not related to the Bapedi of Mapulane, the man known to be the 'owner of the Hills'. The headman of Lerala, Shaw Moroka, was present at the interview but the main ward represented that day was that of a Khurutshe origin. The four key informants are all of Moatshe ward; their totem is *phofu* (eland) which marks them as members of the Khurutshe group. The only history they are willing to relate is that of their own group: 'You can ask those of Lerala ward [for their history] I am relating our history, we the Bakhurutshe' (*nna kana ke bua letso la gaetsho la Bakhurutshe*) says one speaker emphatically. The interview sheds important light on the way group boundaries were constructed and redefined in the changing political history of the region. The speaker opens with a careful mapping out of the position of the Bakhurutshe-ba-ga-Moatshe, the group resident in Lerala, within the larger political geography of groups in the region and beyond.

Q: Where did you live before coming to settle in Lerala?²⁰

A: Yes, keep quiet I have understood. We were from Selepeng, which is very far away. We followed the line of rail and finally settled at Palapye in Ngwato country. We came together with Bakhurutshe.²¹

It is first established how the breakup from the original home of the larger Khurutshe group had occurred. The term used is Bokhurutshe, the prefix *bo* indicates location, *ba* indicates people, thus Bokhurutshe is the land of Bakhurutshe, like Botswana is the land of Batswana. The student and the speaker share the knowledge of the original Bokhurutshe home, a place called Selepeng.

Q: But what do you say made you leave Selepeng in Bokhurutshe area?

A: Motshweneng had fought with Mongwato

Q: Were those royals and one did not want to be under the other?

A: No, I am saying that Motshweneng (one who[se] totem is the baboon) who remained at Selepeng had himself and his people beaten for the baboon by Masilo's father, the chief. He then left with his regiment. We came together with Bangwato and Bakwena but split on the way. We then left Bangwato at Shoshong.

The split from the main group which remained at Selepeng occurred between a father and his rebellious son. The son left with his regiment (*mophato*). The break-away group then joins

19 Eric Worby, 'The Politics of Dispossession: Livestock Development Policy and the Transformation of Property Relations in Botswana', M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1984, p. 40.

20 In this and following dialogs, **Q** designates a question put by a student interviewer and **A** designates the answer.

21 The last sentence is ambiguous. Such translation might suggest a separation from the Bakhurutshe and 'us'. The Setswana reads *Re tlile re le Bakhurutshe*, 'we came; we were Bakhurutshe'.

the Bangwato and the Bakwena, two other prominent Tswana groups. A second split within the Khurutshe group occurred soon after. (The speaker says *re etla re kgaogana kgaogana*, ‘we arrived and we separated’). This splitting, like the first one, is marked in reference to a place – ‘we had left Kgama [Khama III, the Ngwato ruler] at Shoshong’ – and as part of another agnatic rivalry.

There were people called Bakhurutshe-ba-Rauwe. Rauwe was a junior to his brothers from the senior house, Bakhurutshe-ba-ga-Moatshe. The Moatshe faction of Bakhurutshe sent Rauwe to go and look for a doctor who could make rain (*gore a ye go ba batlella dingaka tsa dipula tsa bogologolo*)²² but Rauwe felt they were not treating him well – and instead went to look for his own people.

The story of this second internal breakup, which led to the migration of one segment of Bakhurutshe into the Tswapong region, is a common tale of rivalry between two brothers who fought for power.

Q: What was the doctor wanted for?

A: So that he (Rauwe) could kill his brothers and become chief himself.

The losing segment, named after its leader Bakhurutshe-ba-ga-Moatshe, was forced to leave in order to establish its independent political existence; it ended up in the Tswapong region. In speaking about the segment left behind, the Bakhurutshe-ba-Rauwe, the speaker uses the term *morafe o mongwe*, ‘another *morafe* – a separate group of people’. The term *morafe* is used here, and throughout the interview to indicate political boundaries. Once two brothers create their own groups and split, they become two separate *merafe* (plural of *morafe*). In order to exist as a separate *morafe*, a group must be defined in relation to space. After a detailed account of the dispute between Rauwe and Moatshe the speaker continues:

So they left Rauwe at Shoshong and came to settle here. On their way here they came through Mogapi but left on account of thirst (lack of water) and went to gooMangadi where there is found the Motemane River. It was here that they (the Bakhurutshe-ba-ga-Moatshe) found Mapulane. Kgama was then at Palapye.

The constitution of a new *morafe* is firmly marked in space. The point of break-away occurred in Shoshong. A detailed list of the places where the group resided on its way to the present location is then provided. But the entry into a new territory must entail new relations with groups with established rights to that territory. At the point of entry into the region the social geography of the Bakhurutshe-ba-ga-Moatshe includes two important relations – with the ruling group of the territory into which they ventured, and with the increasingly powerful Ngwato lineage whose control extended into this hills region. Political relations to both groups are marked in space: they ‘found Mapulane’ in their new settlement next to the Motemane river and ‘Kgama was then at Palapye’. The nature of group relations at that critical moment of entry into the region is explained in the following exchange:

Q: You say they found Mapulane at Motemane. Was he the chief? (*A e ne ele ene kgosi foo?*)

A: Yes, he is the owner of these hills (*mong wa lentswe le*).

22 ‘They sent him to look for the “doctors of rain of olden times”’.

Q: Do you mean that he was the owner of the Tswapong Hills? (... *mong wa mantsewe a a Tswapong*).

A: Yes, it is Mapulane's land/country. (*Ee, ke lefatsho la ga Mapulane*).

The student's use of the term *kgosi*, which he translates 'chief', produces the more definite term *mong wa lentsewe*, 'owner of the hills', and finally the most explicitly assertive statement 'this *is* Mapulane's land' (in the present tense – almost a century after the moment of entry of this Khurutshe group into the region). Forced as he was, due to the persistent probing by the student to make such a statement, the Khurutshe speaker finds himself in a position of defending his group's historical right of residency in these 'Mapulane lands'. He proceeds without delay to tell the following story. (I first quote the English translation as provided in the text and then return to the Setswana narrative for further analysis).

Mapulane then ran short of sorghum and men had gone out hunting when they found Bakhurutshe living along the Bolowa River and they went back to tell him about them. Mapulane then went to Kgama at Palapye and told him that there were people who had settled in his lands but were foreigners and did not belong there ... Then Kgama sent out men to see the people Mapulane was talking about and he later told Mapulane that the people were in fact of their stock and he should live side by side with them.

Several key features of the structure of group relations in the region are suggested in this narrative: Mapulane's people were predominantly agriculturalists; hunting was taken on only when the harvest of sorghum was insufficient; The territory over which Mapulane laid claims was large enough to allow a group to settle in the region unnoticed for some time; Although Mapulane was known as 'the owner of the hills', the remote political centre of Bangwato and their leader Kgama had by then the ultimate power over the region. Groups who entered the region had to report to Mapulane. But Mapulane could not expel outsiders. The power to do so rested with the remote Ngwato ruler.

A closer reading of the original transcribed Setswana narrative provides a better understanding of the subjective way group boundaries were drawn and hierarchies articulated. For example, the hunters reported to Mapulane: *go thibeletse morafe o e seng wa letso la bone*, 'they had found a group of people whose origin²³ was not known'. The term *mogwe morafe* – a 'different morafe' – is also used by Mapulane when he reports to Khama. This 'different morafe', Mapulane reports, was found 'at my place' (*kwa game*)²⁴ but, he insists, *ga se morafe wa mono*, 'it is not a *morafe* of this place'.

While the hunters, in their report to Mapulane, express the 'foreignness' of this separate group of people by indicating that the 'letsho', the origin or identity of the group, is not known, Mapulane is only concerned with relations to place – this is not a *morafe* of this place. The issue is right of access to land defined in political terms, not the 'cultural' or 'ethnic' affinity of the incoming group.

This ambiguity about group boundaries, about what establishes the Other to the subjectively defined Self of the 'Mapulane people' is confusing to the student who stops the speaker's narrative at this point to inquire: 'What tribe were Mapulane's people?' The answer is: 'They were Bapedi coming from the south'. The Setswana term the student uses in his ques-

23 The student's translation glosses over the Setswana idiom by indicating the name of the group - 'when they found the Bakhurutshe living along ...' When I collected oral histories in the region I was introduced by my assistant as the woman who wants '*ditso*', plural form of '*letso*'. The term was used to refer to a group history of origin. I am not sure if the infinitive '*go itse*', to know, is also related to the term.

24 The French *chez mois* is a closer translation.

tion about the 'tribal' identity of the *batho ba ga Mapulane*, 'the people of Mapulane' is *e ne ele bakae*, literally 'they were of where' – *ba* indicating human prefix, *kae* is where.²⁵

Khama's independent inspection of the group concludes authoritatively: *ke ba garona* – 'they are of us, part of us'. However, who is 'us' in Khama's reply (as reported of course by a Khurutshe speaker) is never specified. Still, the message is clear: what you (Mapulane) define as *mongwe morafe*, 'group of others', must not be excluded from access to land because they are part of a larger group of 'us', the boundaries of which are defined by the Ngwato ruler and from his perspective. Interestingly, the student translates *ba ga rona* as 'of their stock', using the English 'stock' which connotes more than mere political inclusion implied by Khama.

The nature of the political hierarchy among groups at the time is conveyed by the speaker who uses direct quotations in reconstructing the exchange between Khama and Mapulane. Khama is said to have addressed Mapulane as *monna* (man or chap) rather than as *rra* (sir) the appropriate term of respect. His command to Mapulane is cryptic 'stay still and don't bother them.'

But despite this order from above to accept the presence of the incoming group the relations between Mapulane and the Khurutshe group are far from peaceful. Mapulane can not directly challenge the authority of the remote Ngwato power, but he finds ways of making life difficult for the newcomers. The speaker describes how, after the settlement of the Bakhurutshe in Mapulane's land, Mapulane's sorghum harvest was meager (*go ilhoka mabele*) while the harvest of the incoming Bakhurutshe was large (*ba bolaya mabele* – lit., 'they kill sorghum'). When that happened the second year around, the relations between the two groups became very tense. Mapulane said (to Khama?) *morafe oo tileng o o na le mokgwa*, 'the group of people who came here has destructive powers' (they bring bad luck to me – as the student translates). 'I plough but I see no sorghum, only melon' (*ke a lema mme ga ke bone mabele, ke bona marotse fela*). He concludes: they 'kill me' (*baa mpolaya*). He begins to make life hard for the group (which he never names), forcing them to migrate away from his residence, perhaps to reduce the danger of their *mokgwa* power over his crops.

The Khurutshe group is made to migrate from one place to another. But in all its settlements it continues to thrive. In one such location their harvest was so large that 'Bangwato would come along for beer and *bogobe*' (porridge).²⁶ When Mapulane continued to argue that the group is still 'too close' (*Mapulane are ba sa ntse ba le gaufi*), Khama interjected and put an end to Mapulane's claims. He evinced (again addressing Mapulane as *monna*) 'if you only ploughed you will do better'. Mapulane was not heard from after that. This Khurutshe group has remained in the Tswapong Hills ever since. The informant ends the story with *ke eme foo*, 'I stop here'.

Several important points emerge from this oral text. The most crucial is the way social distance between units is constructed. A group of people is defined in reference to two unifying symbols – its totemic emblem and its leader. Thus we hear about *Batho ba ga Mapulane*, the people of Mapulane, and about the Bakhurutshe-ba-ga-Moatshe. The group's totem is often selected by its leader at the point of separation from a larger unit. In the case of the Bakhurutshe-ba-ga-Moatshe the baboon (*tswene*) was adopted by the break-away unit. A similar story describes the choice of the hare (*kgope/mmutla*) by Mapulane when he broke away from his senior prior to his migration into the hills. The splitting group becomes

25 *Ba* is the plural form, *mo* is the singular for nouns of person. *O makae* is 'you are of what place' and is commonly used to ask for one's group or totemic identity.

26 I am not quite clear what this connotes. My guess is that this statement suggests that Bangwato socialised with their social equals, the prosperous Bakhurutshe. Consuming beer together is very different from tribute paying by the low status resident group.

a *morafe* when it establishes its relations to its own social space. The *letsho*, or story of origin of a *morafe* begins at the moment of its separation and continues through a detailed social geography of its various locations of residence and the reasons for moving away from each such station. The administrative position of such a group – as a ward within a larger village ‘ruled’ by another group, or as an independent village settlement – is a reflection of the social geography of the group within the matrix of group relations in the region.

The second important point that emerges from this text is the way such social geography of groups is constructed. Two key elements define such hierarchy: the order of entry into the region and the group’s relations with the remote Ngwato centre which extended its control into this region by the late 1860s. The right of the late-comer Bakhurutshe-ba-ga-Moatshe to their land in Mapulane’s land is justified on grounds of their relations with Bangwato despite the resentment of the original ‘owner of the hills’.

In sum, a *morafe* is a social unit defined by its *letsho*. A *morafe* is essentially a political unit associated with a totemic leader who established his group’s right to land in the context of competing claims by other similar units. It is not an ‘ethnic group’ with distinct ways of life or customs. As a result the boundaries of such *merafe* and relations among them are continuously debated and reconstructed in the context of shifting relations of power within and beyond the region.

Second Interview: The Chieftainship is the Chief

The second interview took place in the village of Ratholo on 22 December 1979. The single interviewee was Mr Hanyo Moso of Mangadi ward. The village of Ratholo was in the midst of a dramatic struggle over the central position of the village head in the aftermath of state reforms of patterns of local leadership. Mr Moso and his Mangadi ward contested the installation of a village headman from the Ratholo ward, a man of Bakaa origin. It is important to note that the long interview with Mr Moso (pp. 178-200) was carried out five days after another group of students had interviewed several residents of the village, all of Bakaa origin, including the brother and nephew of the installed chief. The articulate, at times passionate, replies of Mr Moso to the student’s questions seem to have these other interviews in mind. Mr Moso, in other words, was conversing not only with the eager university student but also with his fellow villagers at a heightened moment of political rivalry. The explosive nature of the interview is evident from the outset. To the student’s standard opening question, ‘What [do] you mean or understand by chieftainship?’. Moso replies:

Our chieftainship is that all the village that you see here belongs to Mapulane.²⁷ We are his people (*re batho ba ga Mapulane*). We were his juniors (*bomonnawe*) before he dispersed us along these rivers/streams.

The student had evidently not expected that answer. He tells Moso:

‘It appears that you have not understood me well’, and proceeds to explain the generic nature of his question. But Moso persists in his unconventional, and loaded, replies. He says: *Bogosi re raya motshwara – motse o re leng mo go one*,²⁸ – ‘by chieftainship we understand the “owner/holder” of the village’. The student exclaims: ‘In that case do you imply that chieftainship is the chief?’ Moso replies in a calm *Ee*, ‘Yes!’

27 He says *yo motona ke Mapulane*, ‘the oldest, biggest, most senior is Mapulane’.

28 The translation provided by the student is inaccurate. It reads ‘By chieftainship we mean the leadership of a people’.

From the very opening of this oral exchange it is clear that Moso's historical account is steeped in a very tumultuous present. He is continually engaged in a dialogue, an argument with his foes in the village, and with different cultural interpretations of leadership, power, and rights which he perceives as threatening. Thus for example, he simplifies his definition of chieftainship by pinning it to the office holder, a comment perhaps on the threat to that position at the time of the interview. His insistence that all the villages in the area 'belong to' Mapulane, and that 'we are the people of Mapulane' is also, as we shall see shortly an argument that has a particular force at that moment of time.

When the student tries to 'explain' to Moso the nature of his inquiry of *bogosi*, the institution of chieftainship, he refers to 'ka Setswana', to Tswana custom,²⁹ to the shared community that 'often talks of chieftainship'.³⁰ Moso is not interested in such 'ka Setswana' definition, his formulation is directly linked to the political, economic, and moral distinction between 'us' – the people of Mapulane,³¹ and 'them' – in this case the Bakaa and the remote Ngwato rulers. Although the student poses his question in the most hypothetical (and thus ahistorical) form asking, 'If you are a chief, normally your people will expect you to do something for them, what was the chief expected to do for his people?' Moso's reply is historically specific and pregnant with cultural inflection about the political and moral status of the Mapulane people whose land this is vis-a-vis the remote ruling Bangwato. Moso replies: 'A chief was expected to bring his people messages (*mafoko*, words) from the [Ngwato] chief in Serowe'. After several other confusing attempts to get 'straight' answers to his question regarding the role of the chief, the student catches on to Moso's underlying message. Addressing Moso as *malome* (my maternal uncle), he finally asks the question in the proper fashion. He acknowledges Moso's historical charter:

According to your information it is quite obvious that the Pedi had ruled themselves before becoming the subjects of the Bangwato ... How was chieftainship then before you were under Ngwato authority?

The distinction between indigenous chieftainship during the times *pele ga le nna kafa tlase ga puso ya Bangwato*, 'before you were under the rule of the Bangwato', and those after the political subjugation to the Ngwato is central throughout the subsequent exchange. Moso begins his account with: *Bogosi e ne ele taolo ya kgosi a laola rona*, 'Chieftainship is the "act of governing" by the chief (*kgosi*) who "governs" us'. The duties of the subjects include providing their labour for *masotla* (a special field for the chief) and paying cattle when fined in court (*fa o dira molato*). When the student asks, only partly jesting, 'Is this why you find that most of the chiefs are rich (after 'eating' the cattle paid in fine)', Moso replies serenely, 'This refers to the old days' (*kwa tshimologong*, in the beginnings) 'and these were *our* laws' (*molao wa rona o ne o ntse jalo*). Moso makes it clear that unlike this former legitimate indigenous rule, the chieftainship of the Ngwato was, and is, a one way street.

Q: After becoming the subjects of the Bangwato, what did you do for them?

A: We paid taxes, we gave them the matimela [stray] cattle which were not claimed. They also took the fines from the trials at our kgotla.

29 This is common usage to form a contrast to non-Tswana things.

30 *Ke gore ka Setswana re tlotla go nna re re bogosi.*

31 He uses the possessive form *morafe wa gagwe*, 'his' *morafe*.

Q: Did the Ngwato chiefs do anything for you in your village?

A: We never saw anything of that nature.

Q: You only carried large sums of money to Serowe without any returns?

A: Yes.

The strong undertones of resistance to Ngwato overrule are developed further in the same interview when the student inquires about the origins of the Mapulane people. He asks, 'Where were you from before you settled at GooMangadi?' and receives in answer, 'We came from GaMapulane [the place of Mapulane]. Our greatest chief is Leso of Letlhakeng'. Inquiring into the more remote past the student discovers that all the people under Mapulane's rule came from Bopedi (the country of Bapedi), to the east. He then asks what proves to be an explosive question.

Q: What happened which then made you to become Batswapong? (*Go tsamaya jang gore jaanong lo fetoge Batswapong?*)

A: Lestwapo is the name of this hill (*Letswapo ke leina la lentswe le*).

Q: From your description I get the impression that you found these hills already called Tswapong?

A: It is quite difficult to say (*go thata*).

But the student persists.

Q: My question is whether you named these hills Tswapong or you found it already called Tswapong Hills?

A: It was the Bangwato who called it Tswapong as a sign of looking down at [on] us or despising us.

The answer in the vernacular is *Lentswe le le ne le bidiwa Tswapo ke ba Gammangwato, e le tshotlo, fela jaaka Mosarwa*. A close translation is: 'The hill was named Tswapo by the Ngwato as a ridicule, an insult, simply like Mosarwa'. The student does an honest job of translating the term *tshotlo* to mean 'looking down at us or despising us' but he omits the reference to Mosarwa which the speaker includes in his reply. The reference to 'Mosarwa' is a culturally pregnant idiom in contemporary Botswana, referring to peoples classified as uncultured, uncouth 'Bushmen' who have no rights to land and may be enslaved; in this context, it is an insult. It is used again by Mr Moso to refer to the acting village chief, whose right to rule he disputes.

Here the narrative moves to depict the internal struggle, unfolding at the time of the interview, between two ward units of the village – Moso's Mangadi ward, and the newly-installed chief's Ratholo ward. The exchange opens with yet another generic question by the student, 'I would like you to explain how a chief is chosen according to your tradition?' (*ka Setswana sa lona?*). Moso answers, 'There is nothing like choosing a chief, but a chief is born. You do not put anybody just like making a bull; Moipei our chief is a born chief.'³²

32 Moso's words are, *Go tlhophiwa ga ke go itse fela keitse gore kgosi e a tsalwa*, 'I don't know about elections; I only know that a chief is born;' and then *Ga e beiwe-beiwe fela jaaka fa e ka re o na le Moipei jaana ba tsetswe*, translated by the student as given in the text.

When asked how different are the ways of the past (*bogologolo*) from the present (*matsatsi ano*), Moso replies bitterly (p. 189): '[There is a difference] because now anybody can become chief irrespective of birth'.³³ The student continues:

Q: Do you think that this is acceptable?

A: It is not good because I would not be ruled by a Mosarwa.

Q: Do you not think that even a Mosarwa can rule people as long as he is reasonable and capable?

A: As long as he understands that we are his masters, not for him to do what he likes only because he is capable of being chief.

Q: Have any of your chiefs been chosen on this criterion?

A: Yes, we now find ourselves being ruled by someone we do not even know.

Q: Do you suggest that the present chief is not a chief by birth?

A: Moipei is the only legitimate chief (*Moipei o tsetswe*, 'Moipei is born').

When the student asks for a clarification pointing to the fact that there is another chief of the village, not Moipei, Moso states: *Moipei ke ene mong wa lefatshe*, 'Moipei is the "owner/master" of the land', adding *yo o mmolelang yoo ke mohaladi hela*, 'the one you are talking about is merely a fugitive'. When asked what is the origin (*ke motho wa letso lefe*) of the installed village chief, Moso answers:

'He is of Kaa origin' adding with no delay, 'they [the Bakaa] found us here long ago. They came as fugitives (*bafaladi*) from Shoshong'. The student poses another provocative question, 'Do you outnumber the Bakaa?' The answer is a resounding '*Nnyaa lefatshe ke la rona ka botsalo*', No, [but] the land is ours by birth! (the student translates 'by right').

In describing the relations between the 'owners of the land' and the Bakaa 'refugees' Moso relates:

because the koodos were disrupting the waters of the stream, Setlhabi [father's father of the present Mokaa village headman] and his people were asked to go there, because they were hunters. They paid tribute to Mangadi in the form of chests of animals. This process was later stopped when Setlhabi married Mangadi's daughter.

This short historical account concludes with an immediate return to the present: 'The ruling chief today in Ratholo is hired, he also knows that well. A chief is born'. But the relations between the two local groups are framed, much like the situation depicted in the first interview, by their respective associations with the remote Ngwato power centre. From the perspective of the Bakaa ward the issue is simple – they owe their right to reside in this region to the Ngwato rulers. In a separate interview (14 December 1979) a week before the one recorded here with Moso, people of Bakaa origin (including the brother and the nephew of the acting village chief) told another student, 'We have always been under the Bangwato chief'.³⁴ Tension between the two groups is suggested by another terse comment, 'the people

33 Moso uses the same metaphor of cattle born or installed. The student's translation captures the idea communicated without translating the Setswana idiom used by Moso who says: *Go farologanya ka gore jaanong lo tsaya kgomo ya mnopa lo e dira ee tsetsweng*.

34 Earlier another informant makes the same statement, 'The Bangwato chiefs had always been our rulers ever since our arrival in this territory'. These earlier interviews in the village were recorded only in English.

of the area, the Batswapong, who we met at GooMangadi, did not trust us. They thought we might rule them'.³⁵

Moso frames this triangle of power and segmented group identities in a much more vivid way, 'The Bakaa, who were mere refugees (*bafaladi*) came to rule Ratholo village today because of their relations with the Ngwato. While we kept on saying "this is our land", they (the Bakaa) made themselves known to the Ngwato and thus became our rulers. Yet such rule is as ridiculous as that of a "Mosarwa" who thinks he is smart enough to govern'.³⁶ Being 'known' by the ruling Ngwato is contrasted with the situation of those remote from power who are thus described as non-human, mere wild animals (*diphologolo fela*). This oral text brings up and develops several themes evident in the first text. Groups are defined by their totemic leader and in reference to space. A distinction is made between owners of the land, fugitives, and remote rulers. Regardless of their origin, all the interviewees note the historical position of the totemic leader Mapulane as the 'owner of these hills'. Mapulane, in these historical accounts, entered the hills when they were 'empty', he thus established his inalienable right as the *mong wa lefatshe*, 'the owner of the land'. All his descendants, to this day, have thus the inalienable right not only to the land in the region, but to rule themselves. Other groups of later arrivals, like the Bakaa, are forever *bafaladi* (fugitives) and their position upon settling in the region is one of subordination. But shifts in political relations among groups are also acknowledged; for example, tribute payment stopped when Setlhabi, the Kaa leader, married Mangadi's daughter.

Resistance to remote Ngwato rule is depicted here with great intensity. Unlike the indigenuous rulers of the hills, Ngwato rulers did not fulfill the criteria of mutual responsibilities between a leader and his people. From the perspective of the Batho-ba-ga-Mapulane, the growing power of those defined as *bafaladi*, supported by the Ngwato rulers in the past and by the contemporary state, is a blatant violation of their moral right as owners of this land. Again the stress is on political seniority and rights to land as the key criteria which distinguish one named group from the other and not on 'cultural' or 'social' markers of difference. But the importance of such indigenous political hierarchy, even if debated and continuously shifting, must not be underestimated; held up by a powerful moral code this political cosmology defines not only relations among groups but the very definition of what constitutes a social and political entity. Indeed, if the internal order prescribed in this political cosmology is eclipsed (as when the owners of the land lose their moral right to rule and *bafaladi* or even Basarwa gain local power), the very definition of the collective self is in question. Thus owners of the land who do not rule themselves are *diphologolo fela* (mere wild animals).

Taken together, these texts work to define social boundaries and the political rights implied in such entities in several key ways. First, the ethnonyme, Batswapong, is never used as a self referent; it is a collective term used by the dominant Ngwato centre to suggest the uniform low status of the inhabitants of the region. Those known as 'Batswapong' choose to identify themselves as Bakgopeng, in reference to their totemic emblem, or as Batho-ba-Mapulane, the people of Mapulane, their totemic leader. Those who fall outside the owners of the land category construct their partisan collective identities in a similar fashion. They trace their history to their totemic leader's entry into the region and to the manner in

35 It would be interesting to know how the notions of 'people of the area' and 'the Batswapong' were expressed in the vernacular.

36 This is my own translation of the following Setswana text. *Ke gore Mosarwa a feta a itira bothale a dire ditiro tsa puso, rona re diilwe ke gore lefatshe ke la rona. Ba tlabatlabo kwa Gammangwato gore Bangwato ba bo ba itse bone rone re le diphologolo fela.*

which their right to land was established within the hierarchical order within and beyond the region. In rejecting the ascribed dominant definition of Batswaping for the subjective totemic and named-leader labels the inhabitants of the region communicate two important political messages. Internally, the multiple group-specific local histories reflect the ongoing struggle among groups and sub-groups (all the way to local villages and to competing claims by segments within a village) to redefine political seniority. The second message is directed outwards toward their former Ngwato rulers. Such a message is most critical in the case of those who view themselves as the legitimate rulers of the hills. By beginning their historical accounts at the time of Mapulane and prior to their subjugation, these accounts stress that their relations with Bangwato were originally based on a political agreement struck between two independent leaders and are not a result of military conquest. In this version, Ngwato political hegemony is accepted while meddling with the local hierarchy of groups is resented. What we see in these texts is in fact a dialogue between the dominant Ngwato discourse which has already defined the inhabitants of the region as ethnic subjects and the discourse of those remote from power who resist it. Yet, as Abu-Lughod suggests,³⁷ defiance and subversive discourse are fairly common in the world. The interesting question is how is such resistance to domination articulated in specific social and political contexts. It is instructive, for example, that these historical accounts dwell mainly on the pre-colonial era when relations between Ngwato rulers and the ruled were defined in terms of totemic difference and political relations between groups were in flux. Very little attention is paid to colonial times where such difference was hierarchicized and fixed ethnic differentiation seemed unyielding.³⁸ The point is that time is used selectively in these oral accounts to convey opposition to dominant discourses. It is also obvious that the other for the Batho-baga-Mapulane self in this process of self-definition is still – more than a decade after independence – their former Ngwato rulers.

From the perspective of those inhabitants of the region who do not belong to the owner of the land group, such a hierarchical model of group relations is not the whole story. The Bakhurtshe and the Bakaa versions of the regional political history stress the limited power of Mapulane vis-a-vis the higher Ngwato ruler and their own direct links to this remote centre in order to legitimize their respective rights to land in this region. What one sees in these texts, then, is an internal dialogue and a struggle to define political seniority and for control over land in the region. These historical narratives, to borrow from Martin,³⁹ are essentially ‘political discourses expressed in the form of historical accounts’. In these internal discourses, while attempting to reproduce their ideas about ancestry and proper ways of social action, people develop a new sense of place and redefine the local hierarchy of groups.

Conclusions

The politics of constructing a collective memory is a critical issue in contemporary Botswana. These oral interviews illustrate a great deal about how people articulate their subjective identities, and that of others; what conceptual frameworks they employ to make sense of their relations with others, and how they define leadership, hierarchy, control over land, and social distance. An examination of this indigenous discourse provides an excellent avenue into understanding the subjective significance of social categories and of the system of meaning

37 Lila Abu-Lughod, ‘Shifting Politics in Bedouin Love Poetry’, in Catherine A. Lutz and Lila Abu-Lughod, *Language and the Politics of Emotion* (New York, 1990), pp. 35.

38 See John Comaroff, ‘Of Totemism and Ethnicity: Consciousness, Practice and the Signs of Inequality’, *Ethnos* 52, 3 (1987), pp. 301-323.

39 ‘The Choices of Identity’, p. 22.

that lends legitimacy to, (or, to borrow from Said, 'renders natural'⁴⁰) notions of self and other. I would like to close with the following three observations.

First, while several important ideas about totemic group founders, order of arrival, and the administrative representation of group diversity in the ward system are clearly evident in these oral history accounts, I find great variability and inconsistency in the way actors who are differently situated in the social field employ these categories. In other words, we do not find a solid uniform core of 'Tswapong' culture but multiple overlapping and ambiguous domains of meanings, open for contestations and reformulation by social actors. What we do find is that persons define themselves not as members of given fixed primordial groups but according to their relative access to political authority and rights to land. The boundaries of such socio-political entities are said to be shifting according to changes in power relations.

Let me state this point at its simplest and proceed to outline its theoretical implications. I suggest that people in the region, unlike the anthropologists who represented them or the administrators – colonial and postcolonial – who dealt with them, have a more fluid and less essentialist sense of their own subjectivity. Looking closely at the way persons constructed, debated and in the process redefined their sense of difference suggests that their historical experience, even when they were waging struggles of empowerment, was constructed of connections and shifting boundaries and not of rigid separate abstract categories.

The texts show that the late 1970s was a particularly critical moment when cultural and ideological instability was produced. A central feature of these texts is their palpable portrayal of tensions in the region during the time of the interviews, tensions resulting from state intervention in local patterns of authority and leadership. But notions of self and collective identities are continuously shifting. By the late 1980s, notions of collective identities in the region were dramatically shifting.⁴¹ In 1993 during a short follow-up research trip in the Tswapong hills region, I discovered that the ethnonym Batswapong was now widely used by inhabitants of the region who take pride in their 'Tswapong' identity. This crystallization of a more inclusive regionally-based ethnic identity using the assigned label Batswapong was emphasised to me by a university educated young man who told me that 'A Motswapong is a shrewd person, someone who can manage' and that people are proud of being 'Batswapong'. Such reactive objectification is particularly interesting in light of the adamant and emotionally-charged resentment of this ethnonym articulated in the oral texts only a decade earlier.

What brought about the change in the way people in the region perceive and articulate their collective identity? I have begun to explore this question in a separate paper (1994). The critical lesson emerging from the forgoing analysis is that the 'other' against which the various groups in the region defined themselves in the late 1970s was 'the Bangwato' in their role as former rulers of the hills, and *not* the modern state. In other words, although local circumstances were altered at that point in time due to state-wide legislative reforms, the frame of reference for the inhabitants of the Tswapong region was deeply ensconced in pre-independence times. I suggest that frames of reference had altered dramatically over the last decade or more. In the new circumstances, the 'Batswapong' emerge as one among many 'ethnic groups' within the large encompassing national entity.⁴²

40 Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, 1983).

41 Annie Rushton (recorded by Tjako Mpulubusi), 'The lore and oral history of the Tswapong Hills and the Bobirwa people', National Museum, Monuments, and Art Gallery, Gaborone (1992).

42 This message of liberalism is expressed in statements like 'Botswana is a plural society composed of a number of ethnic groups with strong historical and traditional links and a shared language'. I provide a detailed analysis of such national discourse in my 'The politics of ethnic categorization in Botswana' 1994. The recent elegant booklet produced by the National Museum based on Mpulubusi's interviews is another good example of such liberal 'multi-culturalism'.