

**HISTORIES OF
LETLHAKENG VILLAGE,
BOTSWANA**



Jo Helle-Valle

Professor, Development studies, Oslo and
Akershus University College
of Applied Sciences

Picture on cover:

The UCCSA church, built 1960. Oldest standing building in Letlhakeng.

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FOREWORD

This small book on the history of Letlhakeng has a long history of itself. My interest in the subject rapidly evolved as I started by fieldwork in the village in 1990. I knew little about the village before I arrived there and I was confused by the existence of several languages in the village – which at that time consisted of less than 4000 inhabitants – and the relative animosity between various wards. Thus, I saw that to know what was going on in what was then current social interactions I needed to understand their historical roots.

However, this proved to more difficult than I had imagined. For one, there were no written records of local village history, and due to the very turbulent last two centuries in Southern Africa the more overarching historical narratives of the region most often has little bearing on local conditions. Moreover, to my surprise very few villagers had extensive knowledge of Letlhakeng's history. It took me quite some time to track down the handful of persons who actually had more in-depth knowledge of local history. The second challenge was that I very early on found that the versions presented to me very often were contradictory. Those with knowledge within a sub-group of the village would normally agree on one version but the different sub-groups would very often have very different histories to tell. It gradually dawned on me that the main reason for these discrepancies were linked to ongoing political issues, first of all an ongoing conflict about who had the right to be the village's *kgosi*. I will relate my historical account to these present conflicts at the end of the book.

I recorded several hours of interviews with key informants. I transcribed and systematized them and had the opportunity to give a paper on it at the Department of History at University of Botswana in November 1993. This resulted in a publication the

following year (Helle-Valle 1994). I submitted my doctoral thesis in 1996, requiring additional analysis of historical dimensions of local life (Helle-Valle 1996). This has been the basis on which this book is built. Moreover, I have returned several times during these decades, most notably in 1998 and 2015 to 2016. On all these trips I have sought to get updates on the significance of history in Letlhakeng.

This book would not have been possible to make without the invaluable help of several individuals. First of all the handful of *banna bagolo* I interviewed in Letlhakeng in 1990, 1992 and 1993. Most important was the late Eyes Reokwaeng of Moiphisi ward, former MP and one of the truly historical persons of Letlhakeng. He was extremely knowledgeable, had great patience with my at times repetitive queries and it was also a joy to spend time together with him. Also elders in the other wards, Molehele, Modimo, Mokwele, Tshosa and Shageng, did their best to educate a true novice in their groups' historical trajectories. I thank them all. And last but not least, my assistant and friend Queen Pipadibe.

Also, during fieldwork in 2015 and 2016 I and my research colleague were fortunate to take a field trip to the various historical sites in and around Letlhakeng together with three kind and knowledgeable men and narrated lively about the histories of the different groups that now constitute the village. This proved to be very enlightening. For this trip I thank Max Motswanyeni, Basupang Mpolaaketswe and Kapaletsi Reokwaeng.

Lastly, I must thank my colleague and partner, Dr. Ardis Storm-Mathisen for her invaluable companionship. Her significance cannot be overestimated.

The nature of this work will necessarily leave a lot of readers dissatisfied with the book. Different persons see Letlhakeng's

history differently and it is simply not possible to give all versions equally solid treatment. What has been my main guide in the writing in this book is to critically consider the different narratives I have heard and make assessments of their reliability. Thus, most of what I have been told is left out; I have tried to distil inputs so as to make a comprehensible, relatively unitary history. I apologize to those who feel that their perspectives have not been sufficiently represented. Nevertheless, I do believe that this book might have a role to play. For one, all people and localities should have their histories put down on paper simply to record and hence make tangible that they are unique. As this has not yet been the case for Letlhakeng I hope that this book can serve such a purpose. Secondly, I hope that it can spark an interest that can encourage others – including villagers – to work further on recording Letlhakeng’s past. Obviously, the present work is full of holes, and most likely flaws, and it is only by critically following up on the weaknesses of this work that we can hope that the village sometime in the future can have their own historical account which can serve justice to its truly exiting and complicated past.

Gaborone, November 2017.



Lethakeng village in 1990 – a view from Molehele ward, across the valley towards Moiphisi ward. (All photos Jo Helle-Valle.)



A view from Moiphisi of the centre of Lethakeng in 2016.

INTRODUCTION

This paper has two aims. First, I give an account of the actual histories of the peoples of present-day Letlhakeng – a medium-sized village in Kweneng West, Botswana. That is, I present the stories that the elders in the different wards told me. The contents of the different narratives vary a great deal and are partly contradictory. For reasons that will be evident, my emphasis is on the migratory patterns and the leaders of the different groups of people that now constitute Letlhakeng.

Secondly, I will argue that given the lack of objective evidence the stories told must not only be treated with a great deal of scepticism but also understood as formed by the interests of those who tell them. I believe that there is a contradictory situation when it comes to villagers' attitudes to their own history. On the one hand a great majority of the villager know very little about the historical background of the village. The paper suggests that this almost collective amnesia in the village can be explained by the stigmatized position the ethnic group they are said to belong to have in present-day Botswana. On the other hand, I hold that different individuals and groups in the village use (and do not use) history as means for reaching current political goals. A dispute over who should be the rightful village headman is used as the main case. This case, which has been dragging on for several

decades, seems to have created a renewed interest in local history – at least among segments of the local population.

This general lack of knowledge among villagers has had methodological implications. There were only a handful of old men in the village who have been able to tell their own history well. Other elders knew some, but only bits and pieces and they were often very unsure about details. Thus, my main method in this connection has been long, informal interviews with the few key informants I could find in the village. This is then supplemented with the (very meagre) academic production that has any relevance to the history of Letlhakeng's inhabitants. When it comes to the current disputes where history is put to use, I have used the typical anthropological approach: participatory observation, combined with informal interviews with a number of different villagers – including key actors in the different disputes.

A BRIEF REGIONAL HISTORY

To understand Letlhakeng's historical development it is necessary first to take a look at the wider social context. Regional and global forces upheaved the whole of Southern Africa for more than 400 years. Thus, Letlhakeng, being one small dot on the map, has been thoroughly affected by forces far away from this locality.

From the 16th century there seems to have been a steady population increase all over southern Africa. Stronger groups expanded and occupied virgin land and/or took over land previously inhabited by other, weaker groups. As a general pattern, the expansion was from the south and east, towards the north and west. Early in the nineteenth century these migrations, fissions and fusions, culminated in a new, very turbulent period in southern Africa. This was the *dif-eqane* – a period which had its roots in the sudden and violent expansion of the Amazulu kingdom instigated by their great king Shaka (1787 - 1828). There was a virtual domino-effect of displaced groups. Those near the Zulu kingdom were forced to flee, thereby displacing groups further away, etc. The effects of the *dif-equane* were dramatic and violent and affected the whole of southern Africa. Whole groups were slaughtered, displaced and robbed of their means for survival, and a general famine erupted in the area. In Botswana the first impact was felt in 1823, and waves of intruders created raids, wars, famine and migrations for several decades (Ngcongco 1982a: 161ff).

In Botswana the effects of *difeqane* concurred more or less with the first mission activity, the Boer expansion (white settlers) from the south and also a growing impact of white trade in the area. Foremost in the effort to Christianise the Tswana were the missionaries from London Missionary Society (LMS), and the spiritual and ideological effects of their activities were of fundamental importance

for the development of southern Africa. They not only preached their religion but introduced formal, modern education to the Batswana so that the converts could read the Bible (which was translated into Setswana as early as the mid-nineteenth century). This education did, of course, have important effects outside the realm of religion: the mission was an essential medium of, and forerunner to, colonial articulation; it was *the* significant agent of ideological innovation, a first instance in the confrontation between the local system and the global forces of international capitalism (Comaroff 1985: 27).

In addition, the missionaries' activities were not merely of a spiritual nature. They were also traders and often explorers and were thus instrumental in bringing about the political and economic transformation that took place throughout the continent. In reality it is impossible to separate the missionaries' different motives or to distinguish the political and economic effects of the mission activity from those of traders, the military and colonial powers (cf. Comaroff & Comaroff 1991: 4-11). Not only did they introduce industrial goods but were often mediators in political issues; sometimes they also took their own initiatives and played decisive roles in political and military conflicts. For instance, it was the famous missionary Moffat, in command of Griqua gunmen, who in 1823 defeated *dif-eqane* groups who attacked the Tlhaping and the Tlharo (Tlou & Campbell 1984: 130; Comaroff & Comaroff 1991: 266).

The Boers trekked into Botswana from the south in search of land and the effects of their arrival were mixed. On the one hand, it was the Boers who drove the marauding Amandebele (an offshoot from the Amazulu) out of Transvaal and southern Botswana. On the other hand, the Boers' own thirst for land was a threat to Tswana peoples, and fights occurred within their territories (Tlou & Campbell 1984: 116, 143ff). These fights had turned bloodier than they had been earlier because trade made guns available to most of the warring parties. Traders – first Griqua and then white – had started to trek up from the Cape area to exchange guns and other industrial produce for ivory and skins (Nangati 1982). This trade had tremendous social effects. Apart from the new and bloodier types of war, one important consequence was that the *dikgosi* (kings) gained a more absolute power. They monopolized trade and were thus in control of an important means of power – guns (ibid.). This power was then used both to conquer or drive away other groups and to attract more people to the *morafe* (nation) by bonds of patronage and serfdom, creating tighter and more absolute control. The latter measures were motivated both by external threats, and by the need to secure and increase internal political control (cf. below, section 7.2.). Thus, the nineteenth century was a period of growth for the different kingdoms in Botswana. This meant that smaller social groups, like the different groups that were termed Kgalagadi, were either incorporated into the greater political structures (voluntarily

or by force) or forced to retreat into less hospitable areas – like the Kalahari desert.

Diamonds were first discovered in South Africa (Kimberley) in 1867. Soon, other deposits were located and some decades later gold was also found in large quantities. An enormous mining industry grew up in South Africa. Its thirst for manual labour was limitless and the mining companies had to establish recruiting offices all over southern Africa – including Botswana. Before this development, the British had considered Botswana (Bechuanaland) politically insignificant and economically a net loss. Therefore, they had for decades refused the pleas of several Tswana kings to be included in a British protectorate. (The Tswana's reason for asking for this protection was their fear of the Boers.) However, southern Africa's growing economic importance made the British change their minds. The Germans and the Boers showed a growing interest in the land, and the significance of the whole region as a labour reserve made the British declare Bechuanaland a protectorate in 1885. The effects of this political change were minimal for the first decades. The British did not want to spend money on the protectorate, and their policy of indirect rule meant that they allowed indigenous political structures to remain – they wanted only the traditional leaders' loyalty in matters that were considered by the British to be important. Its main significance lay only in that which it prevented: invasion, annexation and exploitation by the Boers.

Economically, colonisation facilitated increased labour migration into the mines in South Africa and Transvaal. Roads were improved and the logistics were provided for a maximum flow of labour from Bechuanaland. The first labour migrants came from Bechuanaland as early as the 1870s (Tlou & Campbell 1984: 147). Their numbers grew, in a matter of decades, to a veritable wave of young men from the protectorate to the mines. The importance for ordinary Batswana of this labour migration cannot be overestimated – not the least is this the case for Kweneng District and Letlhakeng.¹ Notwithstanding the fact that the labourers were grossly underpaid – considering the enormous profits the mining companies made – these wages were lavish for the ordinary peasant. They made more by working as miners than they could in any other way. The money earned found its way back to the communities of the workers, and a substantial part of it was handed over to senior kin (as traditional relations of authority required), thus putting it into local circulation. The labour migration from Botswana – and its economic importance – has continued into the present, even though its relative importance has diminished, both in terms of money and personnel, in the last decades.

¹ In fact, the mining companies had a recruiting office in operation in Letlhakeng until sometime in the eighties (cf. Hesselberg 1985: 229). And there was still one in Molepolole in 1990.

In all, the changes that have taken place in the last century and a half fit into the general history of colonialism, capitalist expansion and globalization. It is a more or less directed change – a change that in practice is revolutionary; it has changed the societies that have been affected in a fundamental and irreversible manner. The details vary, but the trend is the same: they have been incorporated into a world system.

LETLHAKENG

Letlhakeng is the capital town of the sub-district Kweneng West. By 2015 it had approximately 10 000 inhabitants and lies on the fringes of the Kalahari Desert. It has grown steadily during the years – from less than a thousand people at independence, just above 4000 in 1991 and in 2011 more than 8000 inhabitants were registered (Botswana Statistics 2014). Through all these years the village was, for those who lived further into the Kalahari, the closest ‘modern’ town while for those further east, it was seen as a dusty and backward village in the desert.

Botswana is divided into three ethnic groups: Tswana², which constitute the majority, is on top of the social hierarchy; Kgalagadi is

² Botswana’s official language is Setswana, which is a prefix language. Thus, linguistic information and precision is given by varying the prefixes. E.g. *kgalagadi* is the name of the group, *mokgalagdi* is a person belonging to that group, *bakgalagdi* is the latter’s plural while *sekgalagadi* is the name of their language.

clearly below them in status, while the Sarwa (Bushmen) is such a lowly category that its members are barely considered human beings at all. According to outsiders, the villagers of Letlhakeng are Bakgalagadi. This might be true, but the term reveals nothing substantial since it only means ‘people of the Kalahari’ (from *kgalagale*; ever dry). In fact, the term conceals a diversity and fluidity which is maybe more profound here than in most other parts of Botswana. This has first of all to do with two facts: (i) those who were weakest politically and economically were the ones who were forced farthest out in the desert – i.e. their lack of political and thereby military strength repeatedly made them victims to others’ expansions and migrations. (ii) The same political weakness and their location in the desert made these groups of people more mobile because their movements were not hampered by political control to the same degree as those further east and they also had better reasons for being mobile. The history of these groups has been formed on the one hand by resistances to the repeated attempts to subjugate them to the stronger kingdoms and, on the other hand, by scarcity of water and their reliance on a broad and varied economic base (hunting, gathering, agriculture and animal husbandry). Broadly described, political considerations pushed them westwards, economic considerations pulled them eastwards. So, even if the villagers of Letlhakeng were the serfs (some say slaves) of the Bakwena (a Tswana kingdom), the biography of each of the sub-groups that now constitute

Letlhakeng is one of oscillating between freedom under harsh ecological conditions and political oppression in friendlier ecological environments.

But this is not one great group moving in unison through the desert. In order to understand present-day Letlhakeng it is important to acknowledge the fact that the village is composed of a number of different groups with widely varying backgrounds. The different groups have very different ethnic and historical backgrounds and the village – as a single village like it is today – is young. In fact, many claim that it is not more than 70 years old (see below, note 9).

The first known, massive migration of Bantu groups into the area of what is now Kweneng is said to have occurred around A.D. 1500 and consisted of the Kgwatheng who came from Transvaal (South Africa). This era is known to have been an especially turbulent time in which different groups split, fought and drove each other away (Legassick 1969: 98ff in Comaroff & Comaroff 1991: 127). Consequently, a complicated web of migration routes emerged. It is beyond this context to give a detailed exposition of these (but see Campbell 1982; Ngcongco 1982b; Tlou & Campbell 1984), however, the migratory routes of the groups which later settled in Letlhakeng will be dealt with.

The Kgwatheng – who are considered to be the forefathers of what is now the Moiphisi ward and perhaps also Mokwele and Tshosa wards (see below) – were settled in the area around Molepolole ca. 1500 (Okihiro 1976: 130). They were «tillers of the soil, stock-owners, and builders in stone» (Campbell 1982: 18). They were driven away from the area around A.D. 1550 by expanding Kwena (a Tswana group). The latter were soon forced to withdraw from the area for a period, but around 1640 they reentered the Molepolole region, left again some decades later, and returned again; from around 1800 they gained a more permanent control of what is now Kweneng District (Campbell 1982: 18; Caister 1982: 89). This increased control was due to a continuous process of growth, expansion and fissions which the different Tswana groups underwent and which took place from the 16th century (Comaroff 1985: 19). This centralisation was especially strong from the end of the 18th century and led – in spite of the marginal ecological conditions in which they existed – to some of the greatest and most centralised kingdoms in Africa (Gulbrandsen 1991).

From the 16th century also other Kgalagadi groups settled for shorter or longer periods in what is now western Kweneng. This will be evident from what follows, but it is best to start with an overall and simplified picture. What all these Kgalagadi groups had in common was that they were victims of the expansions of bigger and stronger political systems. The overall picture was that Tswana

groups drove Kgalagadi groups west and northwards, while the latter forced San groups even further into the desert. To the extent that the groups were politically intermingled, the relative political strength meant that Kgalagadi enslaved San, while Tswana groups enslaved Kgalagadi and San. However, the actual migration routes and ethnic mixing were the results of the dilemma between political and economic considerations. The wish to avoid violence and enslavement pushed groups westwards. But these migrations into drier and less fertile areas had to be weighed against the need for an environment that could feed them and their cattle. Thus, on an overall, political level, there is a pattern of oscillation between submitting to stronger groups in the east and westward migrations in order to be free. This was a dynamic situation where one group's movement had consequences for neighbouring groups, and the actual movements of specific groups generated complicated patterns of migration routes east and west, north and south.

Until around the turn of the millennium Letlhakeng consisted of six wards.³ They are Moiphisi, Shageng, Mokwele, Tshosa, Modimo and Molehele.

³ During the last years the number of wards has suddenly more than doubled. All the old wards have been divided into one or several additional wards. The main reason given for this is that the population growth has made the work load for the *kgosana* unmanageable.

The Moipisi ward claims they were a Kgwatheng group living among the baRolong, originating from South Africa, near Leshoto but were later part of the Bakgatla nation. (They liken this with the fact that they now consider themselves as both Bakgalagadi and Bakwena.) But when elders are asked about their ethnic identity most of them say they are Bakgwatheng. Due to pressures from the south, they migrated northwestwards and arrived in Dithejwane (cf. also Tlout & Campell 1984: 103) – just outside Molepolole (the district capital, about 4 km east of Letlhakeng) – ca. 1500 (Okihiro 1976: 130). It is unclear whether they lived permanently in Dithejwane for the next 300 years or whether they were driven out by the Kwena and then later returned (cf. *ibid*: 130ff). In any case the relations between the Kwena and the Kgwatheng seemed to worsen gradually, and the latter feared servitude under the Kwena at the beginning of the 19th century. At that time Seiso was the chief of the group. He was killed when he refused to acknowledge the supremacy of the king of Bakwena, Sechele I.⁴ The group, which was now lead by Moipisi, fled westwards, trying to escape the patronage of the Kwena. They came to a place some distance east of where Letlhakeng is today.

⁴ Seiso was summonsd to the *kgosi* of the Kwena but said that if he wanted to talk with him, he would have to come to the Moiphisi *kgotla* since he was a chief in his own right. This controversy ended in the killing of Seiso. (Seiso's other name is not known by my informants.)

This place is called Monwane. This was probably around 1830.⁵ According to Baiphisi elders, they moved to Letlhakeng area some years later, at a place called Matlotleng.



Two elderly Moiphisi women who themselves grew up at Matlotleng visits the deserted and now mostly invisible village in 2016.

⁵ This approximate dating is arrived at by counting the number of generations from Moiphisi to the present time. An informant who was born around 1920 is the 4th generation after Moiphisi. Moiphisi's second son, Pitshane was set to rule Letlhakeng. His eldest sons in succession were Kapaletswe, Reokwaeng and Eyes Reokwaeng. Moiphisi's oldest son, Dire, became the chief of Monwane as it was considered at that time more important than Letlhakeng. However, as Letlhakeng grew in importance Dire's line reclaimed the village about half a century later. If we assume that Moiphisi was a relatively young man at the time they fled and that there were approximately 30 years between generations we arrive at 170 years. This would mean that they arrived in Monwane at about 1820. However, if it was Sechele who killed Seiso, and he was at that time a chief it could not have been earlier than 1829.

At this time there were no other people in the Letlhakeng valley area. (With the probable exception of bands of Basarwa using the area from time to time.) Letlhakeng was chosen as the site to live because at the time the Letlhakeng river had water all year round (cf. Campell 1982: 15): “... it is probable that some areas of the desert, like ... Letlhakeng valley ... were reasonably well watered”) and there were thus good conditions for animal husbandry and hunting and gathering in the surrounding areas.



Drawing water from a hand-dug well near Letlhakeng in 1990.

The next group to arrive in the area were either the Mokwele or the Shaga. The Mokwele claim that they came to the area approximately around 1870. (Mokwele was the man who led the group to Letlhakeng and he is the great grandfather of the present chief.)

This accord nicely with the account Mr Reokwaeng, a Moiphisi and former Member of Parliament for Kweneng West, provided to the author in 1990. Mr Reokwaeng appeared to be the main authority on the history of Letlhakeng at the time. He claimed that the Mokwele people came during the reign of Pitshane, Moiphisi's son. Elders in Mokwele say they and the Tshosa are Bakwena, and that they migrated more or less directly to Letlhakeng from Molepolole. This, however, is contested by Bakwena in Molepolole. But the fact that the Mokwele and the Tshosa, in contrast to the other wards in Letlhakeng, have Setswana as their first language give at least some support to their claim.

The Bashaga (of the ward Shageng), on the other hand, hold that when they came to the site of the present-day village, only the Baiphisi had settled in the area. Unfortunately, the elders of this ward knew very little about their own group's history. They knew only that they came from South Africa long ago and first migrated westwards to Kang before they turned east again and eventually came to Letlhakeng. This is also in line with for instance J. Solway's account of the Bashaga of Dutlwe (Solway 1986). According to Reokwaeng, the Bashaga came to Letlhakeng well after the Bakwele, while the 2nd generation after Moiphisi ruled (Kepaletswe), i.e. late in the 19th century.

The ward Tshosa was probably formed from the Mokwele ward. Tshosa was, according to Batshosa elders, a younger brother of Mokwele and they split after they arrived in the area.⁶

The last two wards, Modimo and Molehele, belong to a major sub-group of the Kgalagadi called Bolaongwe. They claim they originate from the Maletse people. They fled from Transvaal to south-eastern Botswana because they were troubled by Amazulu. At that time their chief was Mokgwambe. They went to Mabuasehube near Tsabong (south-west Botswana) because they were troubled by Bakwena raiders. After some detours, they came back to Mdikwe, near Mafeking. From there they went to Molepolole. The elders of the wards who were interviewed by the author claimed that there were no people in the area they settled in. (However, this is disputed by other informants.) After some time they had fights with the Bakwena who defeated them, as they had done earlier. They explained that the Bakwena had superior weapons (iron). They therefore fled back to Mabuasehube. These events seem to be during the pre-difeqane era. At this time Modimo was their leader. Again, the Kwena (some say Ngologa) troubled them and they first fled to a place close to Kang and then later to Ghanzi. From there they went to Maun, probably in

⁶ Again there are differing accounts; the Baiphisi claim that Tshosa was the younger brother of Moiphisi and that they split when Seiso was killed in Ditshegwane, i.e. before they arrived in Letlhakeng. Thus, this makes also the Tshosa Bakwatheng.

search of grazing and water. In Maun they had clashes with Sebetuane, the strong army leader of the Matebele (an offshoot from the Amazulu, also called Amandebele).⁷ They therefore went south to Xhusi, close to Metsiamanong. Again they were troubled by the Matebele so they decided to ask Bakwena for protection. They sent a delegation to the Bakwena with skins and ivory and they became their servants. At Xhusi, Modimo had died and his eldest son Seloilwe became chief. It was then that Modimo's father's younger brother Molehele split off with his followers. This was probably in the early 19th century.⁸ The Badimo, under Seloilwe, stayed in Xhusi for a considerable time (during the reigns of Seloilwe, his oldest son Makuke, and his oldest son Seloilwe II). It was under Seloilwe II that they headed south. They went to Metsibotlhoko, approximately 15 km west of Letlhakeng. This was around 1910.

⁷ One Moiphisi informant dismisses this information, saying that the Babolaongwe never were engaged in fights with the Matebele (they did not have the guts for that). He claims that the Moiphisi was the only group who has killed any of the Matebele. This was at a time with frequent raids by bands of Matebele. The Baiphisi had made a fort on the edge of the valley (whose stone foundations still can be seen in the valley). At what was then the main well in the Letlhakeng valley (5-10 km west of the present village) some Moiphisi women had come to fetch water. A Matebele warrior was lying there drinking water and the women used his sword to kill him. After this event the well was named Matebadimo. (*-badimo* is shorthand for *badimo ba jwa batho*, which was what the Matebele were called locally. *Mate-* means salvia, a metaphor for blood, and the meaning is thus 'the blood of the Matebele.)

⁸ However, the Molehele elders claimed that Molehele died in Okavango (i.e. Maun?) fighting the Matebele. Thus, this should indicate that the two groups split earlier than the Modimo claim.

In the meantime, the Balehele headed south-west to Dutlwe and from there some of them went east to Metsibotlhoko where they met the Modimo people. Because of the salt water there they moved on to the Letlhakeng area. As to when this happened there are different accounts. Some claim that the Badimo left for Letlhakeng first, about 1920 and that the Balehele did not come before 1940, while others say that they went to Letlhakeng together.



The remains of the main well for the Baiphisi who lived in Matlotleng, named Mateabadimo because it is said that Baiphisi women killed a Ndebele warrior there – see note 7.

In all, there is a great deal of confusion and contradiction within and between the oral accounts, both in relation to the routes through

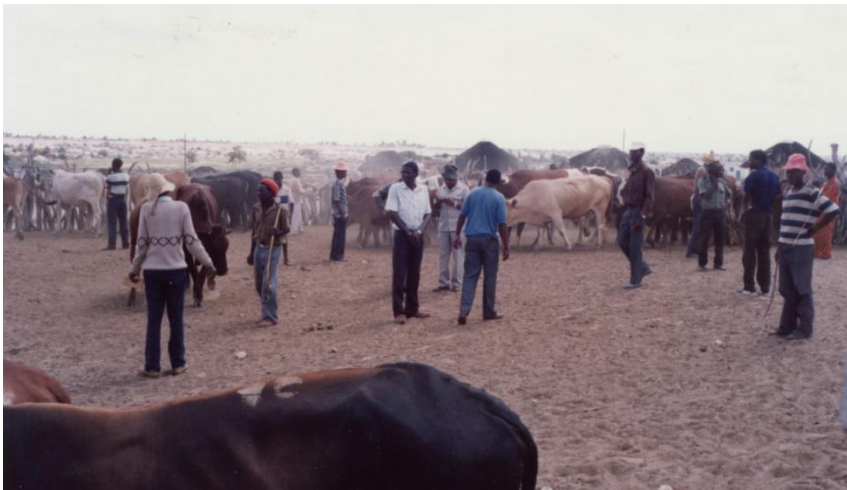
the Kalahari and as to when the different groups arrived in Letlhakeng. Table 1 is a simplification based on the information I believe is most reliable. It differs from information provided in Okihiro (1976: 128-143) in some respects.

One cause for this is that the term Letlhakeng is being used in varying ways. Some refer to the catchment area comprising Sesung, Metsibotlhoko, Monwane, Khudemelyape etc. while others refer only to the village area. This variation in use of the term is partly due to the fact that the different wards were settled over a much larger area then than now. Most of the Moiphisi people lived in Monwane, about 10 km east of the present village and had their lands where the village is now. As we have seen, the Babolaongwe lived for a long time at Metsibotlhoko and the Mokwele and Tshosa lived in different places north of Letlhakeng to some time before 1940. This is an important factor, to which I will return later.

Table 1. Identities and dates of arrival in Letlhakeng of the different wards.

	<u>Moiphisi</u>	<u>Mokwele</u>	<u>Tshosa</u>	<u>Shageng</u>	<u>Modimo</u>	<u>Molehele</u>
Ethnic identity	<u>Kgalagadi</u> , <u>Kgwa-</u> <u>theng</u>	<u>Kgalagadi</u> or Tswana, <u>Kwena</u> or <u>Kgwatheng</u>	<u>Kgalagadi</u> or Tswana, <u>Kwena</u> or <u>Kgwatheng</u>	<u>Kgalagadi</u> , <u>Shaga</u>	<u>Kgalagadi</u> , <u>Bolaongwe</u>	<u>Kgalagadi</u> , <u>Bolaongwe</u>
Arrival in Letlhakeng area	c. 1830	c. 1870	c. 1870 or later	c. 1890?	1910-20	1920-40

However, one implication of this spread settlement pattern over the catchment area was that there was not one common *kgosi* (king, chief, headman) for all the wards. Of course, the wards had their own headmen but the hierarchical relations between the wards seem to have been unclear and in any case loose. According to Baiphisi informants, the Bakwele, Batshosa and Bashaga were under the *kgosi* of Moiphisi. This is partly contested by these groups. However, even many Baiphisi agree that the Bollaongwe was an independent social unit, ruled first by Seloilwe II and then by his son Gaoonwe.



Cattle auction by the main *kgotla* in Letlhakeng 1990.

According to my informants, the *kgosi* in Molepolole sent a chief's representative to Letlhakeng around 1935. His name was Dibetse Ntsono. Thus, for the first time, the *kgosi* of Kwena had

extended his political tentacles directly to Letlhakeng.⁹ Also the next three chief's representatives were Bakwena sent from Molepolole. They were Tolo Sebogise, Gaselabone Kgalaeng and Bonewamang Sechele. When the latter became king of Bakwena in 1970, Letlhakeng got its first indigenous chief's representative. Surprisingly, he was not a Moiphisi.

I say surprisingly because the basic principle in traditional politics is seniority. Not only does the rule imply that the oldest son should take over a chieftaincy, but the same principle also implies that those who are senior in relation to settlement are those who "own the land" and therefore have the right to rule the area. Thus, according to this principle, the chief's representative should be the headman of Moiphisi since they were the first to settle in the area. However, the fact that the villagers were subjected to the

⁹ Some of my informants claim that the reason for forcing people to move close together in the valley to form one village was motivated by welfare considerations; water, schooling, health and other services could be better utilized this way. Others claim that political and economic control was most important: *maitemela* (cattle gone astray and therefore the property of the chief or the king) and other cattle were supposedly stolen and illegal hunting was rampant (cf. also Hitchcock & Campell 1982, Silitshena 1982, Gulbrandson 1991). And some, very knowledgeable villagers claim that there was an extremely absurd reason for the centralization that was forced upon them. According to them, the then acting chiefs of the Bakwena went to Letlhakeng some time in 1942 or 1943 and said that *kgosi* Kgari, who was at the time in Europe taking part in World War II, had ordered the people in the area to move closer together in Letlhakeng valley. If what these informants said is true *kgosi* Kgari, when returning from Europe, denied ever having given this order and the bluff from the deputy chief's part was motivated by the fact that he himself had a shop in the valley and needed more customers.

overlordship of Bakwena meant that the latter's *kgosi* had the right to choose his local representative. Usually the villagers are given a say in such matters – and they were – but it seems that the village was deeply divided on the issue. The division was mainly between the Babolaongwe and the rest of the wards. The discussions had historical roots and I shall return to their content below. Suffice to say there, that it was a combination of disagreements on who really were the right heirs to the chieftaincy and scepticism towards some of the candidates' competence. Underlying these conflicts, however, is the fact that the different wards feel they have little in common. As we have seen, they have very different backgrounds, they did not freely choose to settle together and most villagers claim that there were many conflicts between the wards. And according to some, there was no intermarriage between the wards before the 1950s. These conflicts were also fuelled by the fact that many villagers claimed that the headman of Moiphisi was not an energetic and competent man. Thus, the different wards could not agree on who should be their chief. So Sechele chose Tamelo Puleng, a Molehele, as a compromise candidate. Puleng died in 1974, and again the controversy surfaced. The same fronts emerged and the same arguments were used and this time Sechele chose an outsider: Mr. Mokgwathi, a Molehele from Khudemelapye, a neighbouring village. His reign lasted until he died in 1995. Tumelo Puleng (Tamelo's son) then took over as acting chief for some years until Itsoseng Gaoonwe, from

Modiomo, took over as chief of Letlhakeng. As these lines are written Gaoonwe is still the *kgosi*.

REFLECTIONS

Much information is missing in these narratives and on many points there are inconsistencies and contradictions. Obviously, a trained historian with local knowledge would have closed many of these gaps and contradictions. Thus, the main strength of this paper does not lie in my empirical findings as such. (Even though I would strongly emphasise the importance of written accounts of local, oral histories that might very well disappear quickly.) Rather, my interest – and the value of this paper – lies in how these histories have significance and are used in present day Letlhakeng. But before I venture into this theme, I must briefly discuss what social positions and functions history (can) have.

As an academic discipline, the main criteria for proper history is to record and analyse the past facts. Thus, the first rule is to get objective data and put them together in ways that give the reader an understanding of how past occurrences have led to present social conditions. This falls of course within academic ideals about objectivity and reliability. But what is the wider social functions of history as an academic discipline? Rhetorically, the legitimation lies in the belief that by knowing the past we can

make the present a better place to live: by learning from our mistakes and successes,, we can use this to improve our future lives.

In addition, a more realistic function is that history plays a fundamental part in creating wee-functioning nations (Anderson 1983). It is not a coincidence that societies' interests in their own historical roots are most acute in times are most acute in times when nationalism is rising in a state. Thus, in my own country Norway, our own historical heritage became known to almost every Norwegian in the 19th century when Norway rid itself of its dominators. But the paradox is that it is at this moment, when history becomes everybody's property, that the historians lose their power to define history. At such times, it becomes part of politics and ideology and is therefore necessarily distorted and formed so that it fits the needs and goals of those who use it.¹⁰ It thus becomes a positioned narrative. As such, truth is no longer the criteria for good or bad history; it is how well it fulfils the functions as a means for nationalistic or ethnic goals that deter-

¹⁰ This point is taken up in an article by Goody & Watt (1963). They claim that in non-literate societies history is open for manipulation to a far greater extent than in literate ones due to the fact aht the latter have much less leeway for bending history to their own ends. Later reactions to this point have modified these claims, and also discussed the problematics of degrees of literacy, accessibility of historical sources and other factos' influence on the possibility to interpret freely (e.g. Halverson 1992). Furthermore, there can exist a discrepancy over time between the historian's history and folk history. However, the main point about literacy's faculty of fixation of historical accounts still seems to stand.

mines its success. And it is at this point history becomes interesting for the anthropologist. Thus, for us history is first of all relevant to the extent it enters into the subjects' minds and thereby influences actions in the present.¹¹

And it is primarily in this way that the history of Letlhakeng is interesting to me: to what extent and under what social circumstances does a society remember? And who is it that remembers, and in what ways? It follows from what I have already said that the answers to these questions depend on the social functions histories have or do not have. In the case of Letlhakeng, I contend that (i) historical knowledge has played a diminishing role in the village, and (ii) that there are factors that suggest that it will play a greater role in the future.

In traditional societies in Botswana, emic history has, as far as I can understand, been important. Nations and ethnic groups have

¹¹¹¹ This bold claim must be conditioned. Historical facts can influence actors' behavior in ways that they themselves are not aware of. For instance, the historical fact that a group of people have been severely oppressed over a long period of time can well be an important factor in explaining seemingly irrational behavior in the present even though the actors themselves are not aware of the causes of their behaviour (cf. some Basarwa in Botswana). On the other hand, there are anthropologists (e.g. structuralists) who claim that historical factors are irrelevant to anthropological studies. My own view is that the main reason why anthropology has not used history more is that the typical anthropological object of study lacks reliable historical records. Thus, histories are more treated as myths which can be analyzed for the structures, not for the actual historical content.

been in contact, but lived on as separate entities (Barth 1969). Thus, a society's history has been used as a means for defining oneself in contrast to others. The brave and heroic pasts were used for creating self-identity and self-esteem (cf. Schapera's book on praise poems; 1965). Also one needed historical knowledge in order to determine political succession; it was essential to know who was senior to whom. In addition, the 'supreme' elders, i.e. the ancestors (*badimo*), had to be known by people because they had an important position in the fabric of social structure. They were consulted and could influence the fate of people (Schapera 1953; Kopytoff 1971). Thus, history was a necessary and ingrained element of society and it is reasonable to assume that the fact that the past was a recurrent and discussed issue hindered it from wandering too far from actual historical facts.

Today, however, it seems that most people in Letlhakeng do not care about their own history. There exist only oral sources and few villagers can be said to be experts on their own history. When I, in my fieldwork, started to ask about the wards' pasts, I was surprised by how few people who knew anything at all about their own group's background. Even some of the headmen hardly have any knowledge at all about their own past. Only a handful of some of the oldest men seem to have any substantial knowledge about these matters. Thus, much of the traditional knowledge is

simply lost and in addition corrective milieus are lacking. There are few contexts in which history is transmitted and discussed so that deviances are eliminated.

It is reasonable to assume that the rapid diminishing knowledge is linked to the transformations Botswana are going through. In a matter of decades, Botswana has changed from a relatively traditional, kin-based society to a society in full speed towards modern capitalism and parliamentary-bureaucratic society. Thus, traditional societies have been subsumed under a modern state and the modern ways of governing have rendered the traditional systems obsolete. The *kgotla* (the site for traditional political activity) and the *kgosi* has lost most of its power and much of its authority and the loss of the latter has been enhanced by the new values modern life brings. It is the urban centres that epitomize the future, namely the enticing affluence of the modern era. Thus, more and more people look at what was as archaic and dead. With this dismissal of tradition, society's history becomes uninteresting for its most.

However, such social processes do not go uncontested or without occurring together with its opposite tendency. And the case I shall present shows precisely how such contradictory processes go hand in hand. During the early 1990s a row has developed over the position as chief's representative for Letlhakeng. Several

kgotla meetings have been held and at one the deputy chief for Kwena was present. The initiative was taken by some Babalaongwe elders. They claimed that the great grandson of their former chief Seloilwe II was now ready to take the position as the chief of Letlhakeng and that the present chief therefore should step down. They said that the present chief was a compromise candidate who was installed so that he could function until the people of Letlhakeng could agree on their own candidate. Furthermore, they claim that there had been meetings both in 1974 and in 1992 where the village's political leaders and prominent ward elders had agreed that their candidate, from Modimo ward, should be the future chief of Letlhakeng. According to them, the main reason for the instalment of the present chief was that their candidate was too young at the time and there was therefor need for a temporary chief. The reason why their candidate should have position as *kgosi* is that, according to them, the chief of Kwena, Sebele II, had come to Letlhakeng in the 1920s and announced in the *kgotla* that Gaoonwe, the son of Seloilwe II, was to be the chief of the whole area because Seloilwe had proved himself to be a great chief who was renown all over Botswana. Furthermore, he had been active all his life in assisting the chief of Bakwena in the *kgotla* in Molepolole. And so had his son Gaoonwe. Conversely, the Baiphisi chiefs had always proved themselves to be incompetent and lazy and were therefore not fit to rule the area. All this according to Badimo elders.

This version is vigorously denied by most of the elders of Moiphisi and also by the other non-Babolaongwe wards. Those who were supposedly in the meetings referred to by the Badimo elders deny that there was ever any agreement on who should take the post in the future. As to the claims about who was given what powers by Sebele II, they do not contest that Gaoonwe was given powers as a *kgosi* but they claim that this was only as a chief over the Babolaongwe, not the rest of the wards. They remain silent on the issue of competence but claim that it would be absurd to let the ward which came to this area last be the one that should rule all those who came before them.

The Babolaongwe, on the other hand, do not contest the fact that the Baiphisi came to the *area* first. What they do question, however, is whether it can be said that the Baiphisi came to Letlhakeng first. They point out that the Baiphisi did not live in the Letlhakeng valley but in Matloteng, they only had the valley area as their lands. Thus, Letlhakeng was not really inhabited when they came, all the other wards lived in other places, although nearby.

Here we see the reason why locality and the term Letlhakeng is used differently. It is in the interest of the Babolaongwe to define the term Letlhakeng as only comprising the actual valley, where

the village now lies, not the entire area. Conversely, it is in the interest of the Baiphisi (and the other non-Babolaongwe wards seem to support them in this) that when one speaks of Letlhakeng, it is the entire catchment area one is referring to. Thus, both parties use historical arguments for claiming the chieftaincy. However, they actively use and interpret history so that it fits their own case best. These are in other words positioned narratives.

Let us look more closely on how they use them strategically in order to further their own current political ends. It is obvious that the Baiphisi seem to have the most obvious case which is supported by this principle – no one disputes the fact that they came here first. This is no doubt a strong argument, and that this is so is also reflected in the fact that this is the sole argument that the Baiphisi use. It seems to be a sound strategy. They hold on to this fact and dismiss all other arguments as irrelevant.

The Babolaongwe probably see that it is no use disputing the fact that the Moiphisi came to the area first. The oral histories of the different wards are too unambiguous on this point. They also seem to accept the fact that their case becomes a very weak one if they ignore this *sine qua non* of Botswana politics. So they are forced to accept this as the basis for arguing their case. Obviously then, they need to focus on the arguments on different ways of

interpreting the principle – not so much the facts. Thus, they need to introduce the distinction between the area and the specific site of the village. However, if I interpret them right, they see that this is a rather weak argument by itself. Therefore they need supplementary arguments. As I have already mentioned, they use Sebele II's personal instalment of Seloilwe and Gaoonwe as maybe their main argument: since Sebele and the Bakwena ruled them, then his support to them has a say for the future *bokgosi* succession.¹² I contend that the idea of seniority also underlies this argument.¹³ The point is that if the village is seen in the wider political context of being part of the Kwena kingdom then the most senior authority is the *kgosi* of the whole kingdom, the Kwena king. He is the senior person in the senior line in the senior ward of the kingdom. He is the embodiment of seniority. Moreover, if he decided that the Badimo should rule then it is within his powers and rights to do so.

However, the Badimo have done a further stroke of genius. In one of the *kgotla* meetings, one Modimo elder stood up and said that he thought it was very surprising that it was the Baiphisi that were making all the trouble, although they knew that they were

¹² The fact that the paternal uncle of a new ruler will – if he drapes the royal leopard skin around his brother's son's shoulders – transfer the chiefly line to this man's line for all future (Barei 1992: 11-12).

¹³ This is well in line with political tradition in Botswana: Comaroff & Comroff (1991: 139) stress "the dualistic nature of Tswana society ... from within, it appeared highly ordered, yet fluid ... yet eminently negotiable".

not competent to rule. According to his judgement, it was the Mokwele ward that had the best reasons to oppose the claim from Modimo ward because it is the Mokwele who are most closely related to Bakwena. According to him, Mokwele is a Kwena ward and could therefore claim the chieftaincy themselves since it is the wards most closely related to the most senior ward of the kingdom. And in that sense the Mokwele ward is locally the most senior. What he did by saying this was to focus attention on the kingdom as the proper context in which to interpret the seniority principle – and interpretation that counters the arguments of the Baiphisi. And he knew he could take this chance of introducing another candidate to the contest because he knew that the leaders and elders of the Mokwele ward are not strong enough politically to actually follow up this opportunity. The headman of Mokwele at that time was considered by many to be neither ambitious or an active and good headman and therefore not a realistic candidate to the post as chief's representative. Thus, without taking any real risk the Modimo elder could highlight an interpretation of the seniority principle which would eventually strengthen the Modimo line of argument – namely that Kwena is the most senior party to the issue and that their appointment of the Modimo royal line as rulers of Letlhakeng is what decides who shall rule.¹⁴

¹⁴ There are parallels between this case and the different lines of arguments by the parties in the Kwena *kgosi* succession dispute in 1962-63 – see Barei 1992.

The case is not resolved. The two parties have obviously not been able to agree: and to me it is difficult to see how they can. When deputy paramount chief Kwena Sebele (of the Kwena kingdom) left the kgotla in Letlhakeng, he told them that they would have to agree among themselves and then send him a letter which he then would consider. As it stands, it seems improbable that they can agree even though there is a rumour of a letter that has been sent to Molepolole. However, the present chief's representative in Letlhakeng has not signed the alleged letter (he has obviously no reason to speed up the matter) and I doubt that anyone of the Moiphisi faction has participated in the making of the letter. And as usual, political conflicts like this take a long time to resolve. It has been going on for decades now, and few would be surprised if it took decades more to resolve.

But another striking feature of this conflict is that in spite of the fact that the position as chief's representative harbours almost no power, a substantial part of the villagers are very interested and agitated about the case. There is no immediate political or economic gain for ordinary villagers, but they nevertheless frequently discuss the matter and the discussions can become very heated indeed. How can this emotional engagement be explained? I see basically three reasons for this.

Firstly, the institution of *kgosi* has in all times been a central element of people's lives. That was where power resided, and every man aspired to take part in the political life in the *kgotla* (Kuper 1982; Comaroff & Comaroff 1990). Thus, in spite of the substantial loss of power the institution still has a strong appeal to most Batswana – it seems to be part of a man's idea of 'the good life'. (And it is mostly men who are interested.)

Secondly, the position as *kgosi* (not by the term chief's representative) is symbolically important to Bakgalagadi in defining their relationship vis a vis Bakwena. One does not have to be long in Letlhakeng in order to sense the resentment most Bakgalagadi have towards the Kwena. They have been their oppressors for hundreds of years and Bakgalagadi resent the fact that they still are so, in the sense that they are under the paramount chief of the Kwena. Furthermore, the fact that most of the chiefs in Letlhakeng have been Bakwena royals and that they have not yet had their own, proper chief is provoking (see also Barei 1992: 18). Thus, the present controversy should also be understood as being linked to the ethnic contrast between the Kwena and the oppressed Kgalagadi. Thus, even though the conflict is between groups of Kgalagadi it signifies at the same time a contrast between the wider ethnic terms. This might seem contradictory but the following factor will hopefully substantiate this claim.

Thirdly, the conflict has an even wider relevance. When I discussed this theme with villagers most of them link the controversy with an idea of independence from the Kwena. This independence shall be in the form of making this new *kgosi* of Letlhakeng a paramount chief and that this should be accompanied by the creation of a new district. To my knowledge, those in Molepolole are not aware of this link. For them, this is a simple matter of deciding who is stepping into an existing position and not creating new positions and new structures. Villagers, on the other hand, want their new *kgosi* to be a paramount chief who will sit in the House of Chiefs in Gaborone on equal terms with the one from Molepolole. And he shall be chief of the Bakgalagadi. This idea of a political-administrative independence from the Kwena does hand in hand with a focus on their own ethnic identity. Contrary to what many outsiders think, it is common for people in the village to talk about themselves as Bakgalagadi. But what they do is to change the term – which has been strongly derogatory – appropriate the term and define it in their own way. They want to change it into something that is positive and in this way they symbolically oppose hegemonic views on how status differences are, thereby asserting competitive versions of social reality. And this symbolic manipulation is tied to their more tangible aim to make Kweneng West (which today is a sub-district) into a separate district for the Bakgalagadi. Villagers, including some local

politicians, argue that the sub-district has been ignored by the east and that if they could become a district a lot more resources would be allocated what is now Kweneng West.

CONCLUSIONS

In sum, it can be said that the villages' very different backgrounds create little common identity and have generated a lot of conflicts within the village. The quarrels over the position as *kgosi* is but one. On the other hand, the definition by people in the east of these peoples being Bakgalagadi have to some extent created a counter-hegemonic reaction where one effect has been an emerging common identity as Bakgalagadi. Locally, the term has strong connotations to oppression.

It is some of the social practices that have emerged from these contradictory factors that I have discussed in this paper. These strategies are ongoing, some are realistic and immanent, others seem far-fetched and unrealistic. However, the main point in this context is the fact that they rely heavily on historical arguments in their strategies. These are based on past occurrences but their aim is not to reach objective facts but to use bits and pieces of history as means to present-day ends. And it seems that in Letlhakeng history is in this way instrumental in building up an identity which they use in order to politicize their relationship to the country's centre. It is an active, creative reaction to a devel-

opment in which they feel that they have been left out and have truly become a periphery. And it is in this sense history may well become a central element in people's minds in the future. If history turns out to be a powerful political tool in connection with ethnically based rights, land rights, etc. then people are bound to be more conscious of their own pasts. It should be kept in mind, though, that this is not the kind of history that would pass in academic circles but folk histories which by necessity are positioned narratives. But I guess that this is a small price to pay if increased interested in history leads to increased sense of self-identity and increased political participation among ordinary villagers.



Letlhakeng – a place of contrasts (2015).



New technology



New commercial centre of Letlhakeng, 2016.



New road lighting, 2017.



Kgosi Mokwathi and Village Police man in front of Letlhakeng's new administrative building 1998.



Rural Administration Centre, Letlhakeng, 2016.



Lethakeng *kgosi* Itsotseng Gaonwe and the author, 2015.



Eyes Reokwaeng and unknown *monna mogolo*, 1990.

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