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— SOME NOTES ON THE POLITICAL ORGANISATION OF  
THE BECHWANA.\*

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The following notes refer mainly to the BaHurutshe and their immediate neighbours in the Western Transvaal and the Bechuanaland Protectorate, but may also be taken to apply, in substance, to most of the other tribes of the Chwana division of the Suto-Chwana speaking group. Moreover, it may be generally assumed that, where there is a marked divergence in any Chwana tribe from the general scheme here described, such divergence is to be regarded as a secondary development, and the practice of the BaHurutshe as older and more characteristic of the group; for this tribe, with its offshoots, is looked upon by all the BeChwana as being the oldest and most archaic of the Chwana-speaking group as a whole.

While the social organisation and the political structure of these peoples are, in a sense, no more than different aspects of the basic lines upon which their common life is grounded, and are in many respects similar, often to the point of identity, yet these two phases of social structure are different in function to a sufficient extent to warn us that we must examine carefully their differences in form, however slight such differences may at first sight appear to be. We must keep distinct our conceptions and our terminologies, distinguishing with particular care the various connotations of the terms used by the peoples themselves in the various connections, in order to keep quite clear the conceptions they imply in the minds of those who have evolved the structures in respect of which the terms are used. For this purpose it might be useful to apply distinct sets of terminologies with reference to the social and the political sides of Chwana life. It is, however, the political side which it is proposed to describe here, and such terms as are used will be used in the political sense only, with no social connotations unless this is specifically indicated.

Politically, then, the BeChwana are organised in tribes, and it will be necessary to make clear to ourselves at the outset

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what we are to understand by that term in the political, as distinct from the social sense, from the ethnic connotation, and, most of all, from the loose sense in which the term is used administratively. As a working definition, we may say that a tribe is a political unit owing allegiance to a chief, and may proceed to examine the applicability of this definition, and the connotation of the terms it uses, so far as the BeChwana are concerned.

That the ethnical definition will not do for political purposes is demonstrated by the fact that many ethnical units are politically distinct and independent, while some ethnically distinct and separate units are politically united and interdependent. We know, for instance, that all those tribes who claim to be descended from the semi-mythical eponymous hero, Mohurutshe, call themselves *BaHurutshe*, and have, in most cases, the same *seboko* (*tswene*, the baboon), the same official title of the chief (*Mohurutshe*), and the same honorific title of a commoner (*Motsweneng*). Socially, they observe many ritual interconnections, such as the order in which the tribes are entitled to perform the ceremony of *go loma thotse*. But, politically, they are often entirely independent of each other. Thus, the BaGananwa of Blaauwberg, originally BaHurutshe, are now entirely separate from the BaHurutshe of Marico, of the Bechuanaland Protectorate and elsewhere. But even such BaHurutshe as are still concentrated more or less in the same area, and whose social ties are still strong, such as the Marico BaHurutshe, are, therefore, not necessarily politically bound up together. The present political position there is, that we have three sections, at Motswedi, Maanwane and Dinokana respectively, senior to each other in that order: but there is complete political separation between the Motswedi and Maanwane people on the one hand and the Dinokana people on the other: and the chief at Motswedi, who by genealogy is actually senior to the chief at Maanwane, is, in fact, politically subject to him through historical causes which we need not here go into. But it is of importance to remark that, apart from this one instance, there is no case of a Hurutshe chief being paramount over another, and this fact is in accord both with the fissiparous tendencies of the tribe and their principle of local autonomy.

Similar facts can be adduced to show that the social lines of cleavage and the political subdivisions are, to use the language of mathematics, independent variables, and it will hardly need any argument at all to show that the loose usage of the word "tribe" in the official designations will not help much either. But all the above will, it is hoped, justify the working definition proposed previously, and by which we shall abide in this paper, namely that the tribe, in the political sense, is a local community, ethnically essentially homogeneous, more or less concentrated in one area, and owing direct allegiance to the person of one chief, whether or not that chief

in turn owes allegiance, politically if not otherwise, to another chief in whose territory the tribe is located.

The political organisation of the Chwana tribe, then, may be described briefly as being androcratic, democratic and gerontocratic, with aristocratic tendencies. Each of these summary descriptions will require some elucidation and comment. It is androcratic, since only males have a voice in the political affairs of the tribe. In this the BeChwana are unlike some other tribes, such as the BaVenda and the BaKwebo, and certain other BaSotho, where women may occupy petty chieftainships and headships over villages or wards, in their own right, and in some rare cases even descending in the female line. This is unknown to the BeChwana. The system is democratic in the sense that all adult males, i.e., all males who have passed through the tribal initiation-schools, have a direct voice in the political affairs of the tribe as a whole. All males have the right to attend and speak at the *pitso* or general tribal meeting, and to express their opinions before the *lekgotla* or tribal council. But the system is also gerontocratic, since the chief factor deciding a man's importance and influence in the tribe is his age, not necessarily his actual age in years but his seniority in his family, his family-group, his ward or his village. It is aristocratic since, in practice, most of the actual political power is concentrated in the hands of the chief, the petty chiefs, the chief's family, and members of other powerful families in the community, as well as in the persons of individuals of importance in the tribe.

With these broad principles in view it will be possible to examine the organisation of political power in more detail. We may commence by describing the instances of authority, showing how they are related to each other. At the head of the tribe stands the chief (*kgosi*), in whom, in theory, the whole power is concentrated. His word is the expression of the general will, and, in so far as it fulfils that function, is supreme and incontestable. It will hardly be necessary to point out in passing that his duties are both administrative, legislative and judicial. He is assisted in all these duties by petty chiefs (*kgosana*, pl. *dikgosana*), each of whom has control over a section or ward (*kgoro*) of the land or village. The larger wards may further be subdivided into smaller ones, each under the jurisdiction of a headman (*mogolwane*, pl. *bagolwane*). Each of these divisions has its council of elders. The land, or the whole village, has the *lekgotla* or tribal council. Each ward has its petty ward council (*lekgotlana*), and even the sub-wards have small gatherings of their own particular elders (*lekgotlanyana*): and appeals lie, in administrative as well as in judicial matters, from any inferior council to the council next above it. In addition to these open councils, at which all adult males may attend, if not always speak, there is one closed council, the *khurutamaga* or chief's privy council, whose deliberations are held in secret (*mo sekweneng*).

Membership to these types of councils is determined broadly on the principles mentioned above in describing the general organisation, and depends on age and status. There is no formal election, either by popular vote or by resolution of the body concerned, but men are either born into eventual membership or gradually grow into it, until such time as they are allowed or invited, more or less informally, to take part in the discussions and deliberations. Thus, to take as an example the constitution of the tribal council, the *lekgotla*, membership in it belongs, by right of birth, to the chief, and a fair proportion of the senior male members of the chief's family, whether or not they are petty chiefs or headmen. It also belongs, by right of status, to other petty chiefs and headmen, to heads of families, etc. (such latter usually quite old men, have the special title of *bagakolodi ba kgosi*, the chief's remembrancers, since it is their special function to remind the chief of the law by citing precedents and the wisdom they have inherited from their fathers). Lastly, there is a class of men who have risen to the dignity of the office by personal merit, and such men are not necessarily confined to tribesmen proper, but may also be foreigners who have settled among the people and have become incorporated in their body politic. All these members bear the title "men of the *lekgotla*" (*banna ba lekgotla*). It is significant here to remark, as illustrating the original constitution of the *lekgotla*, and showing what its actual backbone still remains to-day, that another title of its members is *borangwana'kgosi*, the chief's uncles, i.e., his senior male relatives—senior, not in actual age, but in status relative to his own house or family. There is one curious restriction operative among the BaHurutshe, but somewhat doubtful of application elsewhere even among other Chwana tribes, that a man may not sit in the same *lekgotla* as his own father. But two full brothers may sit together, and of course, uncles and nephews.

The constitution of the smaller councils is similar, but the chief is not a member, its head being in each case the petty chief or headman in charge of the ward, and its members the senior males in that ward only.

The personnel of the *khurutamaga* is much more restricted. It consists only of a few of the chief's most trusted advisers, and the chief has the main voice in their admittance to the council. One member of it is always the chief's right-hand man (*ntona*), who is chosen almost entirely by the chief. The other members are such of the members of the *lekgotla* as have shown outstanding ability, whether or not members of the chief's family, but in practice are more or less confined to that class. Other men may from time to time be summoned to attend its deliberations only, but these are only temporary assessor-members.

It will be seen from the above that there is an essential difference in form between the *khurutamaga* on the one hand

and the various grades of *lekgotla* on the other; and to this difference in form corresponds an equally great difference in function. The *khurutamaga* is a private advisory body of the chief's, its deliberations are secret and informal, its purpose is to predigest matters that have to be laid before the *lekgotla* in full meeting, and its aim is to push its own opinions through such meeting. The *lekgotla*, on the other hand, meets openly, discusses formally, and the result of its deliberations, itself the result of many varying shades of opinion, is binding law as far as the tribe is concerned. Further, while the *khurutamaga* is not competent to handle judicial matters, the *lekgotla* has as one of its main functions the adjudication of cases at law. The smaller types of *lekgotla* have but little administrative power, and their judicial competence is confined to cases of a more or less petty nature within their own wards, including all cases in which the complainant is a resident therein. Such cases can, and, in practice, usually will, be appealed to the great *lekgotla* of the chief.

Mention must be made of the procedure in such councils, and, in particular, of the manner in which decisions are arrived at, since these illustrate at once the democratic nature of the Chwana political conceptions and the status of the chief in regard to his accepted councillors. There is no casting of votes and there are no formal divisions. Each member, from the least important upwards, has his say on the matter in hand: there is no time-limit to his oration, and there are few if any, rules of parliamentary debate. When the last speaker, the *ntona*, has had his say, the chief has to sum up the general trend of the opinions, ranging the arguments on both sides, accepting, rejecting and criticising, and finally delivering his own opinion on the result, usually in some phrase such as "I think So-and-So has hit the mark." It will be obvious that the chief's own opinion as thus expressed will, in the vast majority of cases, neatly coincide with the majority voice: but if the chief's personal opinion happens to be radically different from the general feeling of the meeting, he will debate the question with the members. If a temporary deadlock arises, the matter will be left in abeyance, and, in the meantime, a number of the most influential men, including some of the *bagakolodi*, will visit the chief and "persuade him to agree with the people," as the phrase is. If there is still a complete deadlock, the *lekgotla* will refuse point-blank to carry out the chief's suggestions, and will, in extreme cases, even fine him for contempt of the *lekgotla's* deliberate wish. Of course, matters hardly ever reach such a stage; but one's informants were in no doubt of the theoretical possibilities if they should.

It will be seen, therefore, that the Chwana chief is in his own person no arbitrary despot, unless he is assured of a majority-backing from his tribe. Rather he is the interpreter and executive of the general will, and few, indeed, are the chiefs who would take a decision, even on a comparatively small

point, without consulting at least some of the more important members of their people. This observation applies in the more limited sphere of the *kgosana* and the *mogolwane*, both of whom, incidentally, may also apply to the *lekgotla* in case of a dispute between them and the chief. They take their decisions on the majority-feeling in their *lekgotlana*, and can be over-ridden by that body for the time being; and their only chance of pushing their own views through rests in an appeal to the chief's *lekgotla*, not, it will be remarked, to the chief in person. Pending an appeal all action is naturally suspended, whether the matter be administrative or judicial.

The executive power is in the hands of the chiefs, petty chiefs and headmen, who execute the resolutions of the various administrative and legislative bodies in the chief's name, being assisted, if necessary, by messengers or other executants for that purpose. These messengers may be chosen more or less at will, but if a large or small body of men is required, such as for any action involving physical force, peacefully or violently executed, a demand is made upon one or more of the initiation-regiments (*mophato*, pl. *mephato*), which serve as mobile squads for such purpose. They work under a leader, and act as police, messengers of court, and so forth, being armed with full authority to act as they think fit in any emergency affecting the carrying-out of their orders.

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