

The role of royal women in BaNgwato politics under the regency of Tshekedi Khama, 1926–1949

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In precolonial times, women had a very limited public role in Tswana politics, despite a few notable exceptions. Under the colonial government, the role of royal women increased and female regents became less uncommon. In GamaNgwato, the death of Sekgoma II was followed by a power struggle in which royal women including Baboni, Oratile, and MmaKhama were leading opponents of the young regent Tshekedi Khama. The colonial government backed Tshekedi. These struggles were essentially personal, but later in the colonial period greater political participation by ordinary women developed.

The role of women in Bangwato politics has largely been ignored since in traditional Tswana society political activity was formally the monopoly of men. Women in Tswana society had little chance of involving themselves in political activity. They did not go to the *kgotla*, while the chieftainship was hereditary in the male line.¹ Women were always kept at home. The Setswana saying that "ga dike di etelelwa ke manamagadi pele" helps us to understand the status of women in Tswana society. Literally, this is translated to mean that they are never led by the female. What this actually means is that women can never come before men or take a leading role. During the colonial period, some *merafe* breached this general law and appointed women regents. Bangwato on their part held on to tradition, but some royal women within the Bangwato came to play a very significant role in Bangwato politics during the regency of Tshekedi Khama. The aim of this paper is to look at the political role played by these royal women and examine how they attempted to achieve their political goals. The paper will also show that these royal women actually used the colonial administration in their endeavour to achieve their political ambitions. Finally, the paper will also show that it was as a result of the problems brought about by the marriage of the heir to Bangwato throne, Seretse Khama, that women of common background were introduced into Bangwato politics. These common women emerged as political opponents of Tshekedi. For the sake of precision the paper will be divided into various sections.

Precedents in other Tswana merafe

During the colonial period, two *merafe* had women regents. Amongst Bangwaketse, two women, Gagoangwe and Ntebogang, became regents during the minority of the heir, Bathoen II.² Gagoangwe, wife of Bathoen I, was the regent from 1923 to 1924. She was succeeded by her daughter Ntebogang. Ntebogang was regent from 1924 to 1928. Gagoangwe and Ntebogang intervened in Ngwaketse politics because it was felt that Bathoen's position was not safe under the regency of Tshosa. Tshosa's competency as a regent appeared to be doubtful and as a result he had to be removed.³

Amongst the Batawana, Mohumagadi Moremi became the regent after the death of Moremi III. Her appointment in 1947 was necessitated by the fact that Batawana were now disillusioned with male regents who had proved to be incapable.⁴ As the District Commissioner pointed out, the history of Batawana chieftainship after the

death of Mathiba in 1933 reveals a succession of insufficient, weak and corrupt regents.⁵

During the colonial period, therefore, there was a marked change as regards the political status and role of women in some Tswana *merafe*. It must, however, be emphasized that these women did not have full chieftainship status. They were assisted by a group of councillors. These women regents basically did not go to Kgotla, but remained at home. Power was, therefore, still in the hands of men. This was, however, a significant development as royal women were now allowed to feature in the political arena. This situation, however, did not ease the positions of women because women regents were appointed only when the morafe was facing a period of political crisis. This is particularly the case with Gagoangwe, Ntebogang and Mohumagadi Moremi. Failure to give women regents all the political rights meant that the political status and role of women had not changed radically. These changes in Batawana and Bangwaketse were, however, quite significant when we consider that amongst other Tswana *merafe* this never happened.

Precedents in Gammangwato

Before Tshekedi's regency, two Bangwato royal woman played a significant role in Bangwato politics. These women are MmaKhama and Besi. MmaKhama was the first wife of Kgari. Besi was the eldest daughter of Khama III. MmaKhama appeared in the political scene after the death of her son, Khama II, in 1834. The rightful heir to the throne after Khama's death was Macheng, Khama's brother. By the time of Khama II's death Macheng, was still too young to ascend the throne as he was born after the death of Kgari.⁶ The birth of Macheng was a legitimate one and was in accordance with tradition. Tswana law provided that "a dead man could continue to beget children by his wife, a deputy being appointed to act in his stead so that the family tree may flourish."⁷

MmaKhama sought to act for her son. In her effort to achieve this goal, she came into conflict with Macheng's half-brother, Sekgoma (Sekgoma I). Sekgoma wanted to be the chief. In 1834 this political conflict resulted in a succession war between MmaKhama and Sekgoma I.⁸ Sekgoma was victorious and MmaKhama fled with Macheng to the land of Bakwena. In 1858 Macheng managed to oust Sekgoma I, but MmaKhama does not appear to have played any role here. MmaKhama had thus wanted to protect her son's political right and position. If it were not for her, Macheng would have been swept under the political carpet by Sekgoma I and never appeared on the Bangwato political scene. Macheng was, therefore, able to become chief because his mother had taken the initiative to protect his political position.

Besi was another royal women who played a significant role in Bangwato politics. Her brother, Sekgoma II, had been engaged in a dispute with their father, Khama III. It was during this time of misunderstanding between Sekgoma II and Khama III that Besi's political role surfaced. Though not of primary importance to this paper, the dispute between Sekgoma and Khama was caused by Khama's marriage to Sefakwane in 1896.⁹ Sekgoma saw this as a threat as he was the only son of Khama. Sekgoma also believed that his father had poisoned his mother, MmaBesi, who died in 1889.¹⁰

Besi saw Sekgoma's action as being a product of ambition on the part of some Bangwato men. She tried to persuade her brother not to be misled by these men, but Sekgoma was adamant. Sekgoma, after leaving Serowe with his faction in 1898, finally confessed in a letter to Besi that he had actually been misled by people who

were against Khama.¹¹ These men were now deserting him. Had he listened to Besi's advice, this would not have happened. During this dispute, Khama wanted to make Besi or her sons, the Ratshosa brothers, his successors. Bangwato would not allow this to happen. Besi knew that Khama's hope would not be realised. She then sought to make Khama have another heir. In 1900 she encouraged her father to marry Semane.¹² This was a threat to Sekgoma's position as any son born to Khama and Semane could become the heir to the throne. Sekgoma was, however, fortunate because Besi died in 1902 and the son to Khama and Semane, Tshekedi, was born in 1905. The death of Besi robbed her of a chance of putting her plans into practice as regards the Bangwato chieftainship. In 1916 Sekgoma was finally reconciled with his father. The role of Besi in Bangwato politics was, therefore, that of one committed to the preservation of peace and stability within the morafe. Her political role as the opponent of Sekgoma was thus a product of her attempt to achieve this goal. Despite the fact that they were women with no formal political position, MmaKhama and Besi played a very significant role in the politics of their society.

The implications of the death of Sekgoma II

In 1926, Tshekedi became the Regent of Bangwato. This followed the death of Sekgoma II in 1925. Seretse, the son of Sekgoma II, who was born in 1921, was still too young to ascend the throne and succeed his father. According to Tswana tradition, when the chief dies whilst the heir is still young, it is the heir's closest paternal uncle (Rangwaneagwe Kgosi) who becomes the Regent. Tshekedi was the only brother of Sekgoma II. He was, therefore, the closest uncle of Seretse. His appointment as the Regent was, therefore, in line with tradition. Tshekedi, however, encountered opposition during his regency. This opposition came from some people who did not want him to be the Regent. Amongst these people were Khama III's daughter, MmaKhama and Baboni. (This "MmaKhama" was probably named after Kgari's wife.) These royal women came from Kgama's first house whilst Tshekedi came from the fourth house. The other royal woman opposed to Tshekedi's rise to power was Sekgoma's daughter, Oratile. These royal women sided with those people who, for one reason or another, were opposed to Tshekedi. These royal women played a very significant, though informal, role in Bangwato politics during the regency of Tshekedi.

The rise of Tshekedi came as a threat to some members of the royal family who stood to lose as a result. Amongst these people were the already mentioned daughters of Khama III and Sekgoma's daughter. They felt that power and influence was now moving away from their house to a more junior house of Semane. One thing for certain is that these women knew that they would have to be under Tshekedi's domination for fifteen years or more for it was only by then that Seretse could take over and reassert the supremacy of the Sekgoma house. These women could not accept this and they were totally against Tshekedi's rise to power. Whilst these women felt a loss, Tshekedi's mother, Semane, knew quite well that this was a positive development on her side. She would now gain more influence and importance as the mother of the Regent. The whole conflict within Khama's family was therefore, a matter of trying to preserve and protect one's interests.

This conflict of interest emerged immediately after the death of Sekgoma in 1925. Immediately after Sekgoma's death, a group of women invaded Semane's house and attempted to assault and kill her. Commenting on this incident, Tshekedi said,

at head of these people were my sisters, Baboni in particular having taken a prominent part. The allegation was that Semane had killed Sekgoma in order that her son, Tshekedi, would be the next chief.¹³

Tshekedi's sisters did not want to accept Sekgoma's death as being a natural one, but instead they saw it as a product of Semane's tricks and plans to prepare the way for Tshekedi. For them, this was a political struggle in which they were determined to win.

The attack on Semane according to Tshekedi was not to avenge Sekgoma, but was sparked off by a concern over his rise to power.¹⁴ The question of the ownership of Khama's property came to aggravate the already existing conflict. The question of the ownership of Khama's property would continually crop up and become the source of conflict between Tshekedi and his sisters. Tshekedi pointed out that the problem with his sisters was concerned with Khama's property. Further on he said,

and that property could only be got if my right of succession was in some way denounced and I was quietly shunted off to a humbler position.¹⁵

Being the Regent, Tshekedi knew that he was going to have more access to Khama's property more than his sisters. The Khama daughters wanted to have a share of their father's wealth. They felt insulted when they realised that a young man from the junior house was going to be the one benefiting more from their father's wealth. Although Tshekedi was supposed to act as the custodian of the property which was to pass to the heir, Seretse, the sisters knew that Tshekedi was going to have a chance to accumulate more wealth for himself. This struggle for wealth within Khama's family expressed itself in the political sphere.

The Ratshosa affair and the exile of the sisters

Tshekedi's problems with his sisters and his niece soon came into the open with the Ratshosa crisis of April 1926. The incident began with Oratile putting a claim to certain Basarwa. Oratile was married to one of the Ratshosa brothers, Simon. Oratile said the Basarwa belonged to her and that Tshekedi had taken them without her consent. Tshekedi called the Ratshosa brothers, Jonny, Simon and Obeditse to come and present Oratile's case. The Ratshosa brothers did not go to kgotla. The instead went to Mogomotsi Morwe's wedding at the Ditharapa ward in Serowe. On the same day Simon was supposed to be out with other members of the Mathogela regiment, but he decided to absent himself. Ratshosas, in their failure to respond to the Regent's call were in actual fact showing that they did not accept his political power and authority.

Tshekedi then ordered the three Ratshosa brothers to appear before his kgotla in the afternoon. At last they came. He found them guilty of disobeying his order and sentenced them to be thrashed. Simon and Obeditse managed to escape, but Johnny was thrashed. Simon and Obeditse ran to their home, seized their guns and came back to the kgotla. They fired at Tshekedi, but the bullets injured Kgositintsi and Gopolang, who were with Tshekedi.¹⁶ Simon and Obeditse were arrested. Meanwhile Tshekedi had their property destroyed and their houses burnt. After the trial they were sentenced to ten years hard labour, but the Resident Magistrate later reduced it to four years.

Underlying the Ratshosa incident was the claim to the regency by Sekgoma's daughter Oratile and the feeling of loss of influence by the Ratshosas. Oratile is said to have claimed "the position by virtue of her birth position as the only daughter of Sekgoma."¹⁷ Oratile had approached Chief Sekgoma at the time of his illness in 1925

and asked him to declare his heir, but Sekgoma refused and maintained that his only heir was Seretse and that Tshekedi would act if he, Sekgoma, died whilst Seretse were still too young to ascend the throne.¹⁸ Oratile had thus lost the contest for succession. Oratile was now using an economic tool in the claim of these Basarwa to show Tshekedi that she did not respect his authority. Basarwa were treated as property by Bangwato and other Tswana groups and thus the struggle for the ownership of these Basarwa had political overtones and was used to camouflage Oratile's claim to the regency. Oratile, her endeavour to avenge for having lost the contest, found a very powerful alliance: the embittered Ratshosa brothers.

The Ratshosa brothers had a reason to resent the rise of Tshekedi. Apart from being the sons of Khama's daughters, Besi, their family had always held a very important position in Bangwato politics. Ratshosa, father of the Ratshosa brothers, was the secretary of Khama and also Khama's right-hand man.¹⁹ Mockford states that Ratshosa was well educated and understood the technicalities of European administration.²⁰ Ratshosa retained this position until his death. After his death, Johnny stepped onto his father's shoes only to be deposed by Tshekedi when he came to his regency in 1926. Tshekedi dissolved the council that had been set up to help Gorewang Kgamane, who acted before Tshekedi came back from school.

For the Ratshosas, this was an end to their dream and they realised that they were being deprived of any positions of authority by Tshekedi. The council of twelve that Tshekedi dissolved was for Simon one of the ideal methods of ruling the people, and he knew that through their membership of it, they would gain and wield political power and authority. Tshekedi on the other hand believed that "if he were to rule meaningfully, they had to be deprived of all influence."²¹ Tshekedi was in this manner too ambitious. His action was not appropriate. He should have found a way of integrating the Ratshosas into Bangwato politics, rather than throwing them away like this. It was this step by Tshekedi that led to an attempt by the Ratshosas to assassinate him in 1926. The Ratshosas did this as an act of vengeance.

Informants on the Ratshosa crisis have varying explanations. Whilst Radiphofu Moloi Sekgoma feels that Oratile actually wanted the regency, others felt that it was Simon who wanted the position. They believed that the "Ratshosas were ambitious and wanted to use Baboni and Oratile to further their own claims."²² They consider that the Ratshosas wanted to shift political power and authority onto their own side as Oratile's leadership would place them at an advantage. In this regard, Oratile would just have been used as a tool by the Ratshosas. The most important thing to note is not whether Oratile was acting under the manoeuvres of the Ratshosas or not, but to realise that she became a serious threat as an agent of political agitation. Oratile wanted to further not only her own interests, but also those of her husband. Oratile and the Ratshosas had a common goal, which was to remove Tshekedi from power and shift power to their own side.

The Resident Magistrate felt that Baboni, MmaKhama and Oratile were the leading factors in the Ratshosa disturbance. He based his argument on various facts. These women had always declared in the open that "Tshekedi was their servant and they would never go to his *kgotla* or recognise him as Regent."²³ Furthermore, the Resident Magistrate stated that these women were wandering all over the Bamangwato Reserve and that they had just been to the Bakaa in Shoshong with the sole motive of mobilising a faction which would be opposed to Tshekedi's rule.²⁴ These women had a common goal. This was to oppose and if possible depose Tshekedi. The Resident Magistrate hoped the administration would help Tshekedi in dealing with these

women.

After the Ratshosa disturbances, Baboni, Oratile and MmaKhama sent a petition to the High Commissioner. As a result they are known today amongst Bangwato as the women of the petition. In the petition the pointed out that since the death of Sekgoma they have never had peace with Tshekedi.²⁵ They attributed this lack of harmony between them and Tshekedi to the political intrigues of some people whom they said were against the house of Khama.²⁶ They placed the Ratshosa crisis in historical perspective and stated that it was caused by men who have always been ringleaders in riots, including the famous revolt of Sekgoma against his father in 1898.²⁷ They wanted to explain the Ratshosa crisis as not being sparked off by them, but instead by some people who had sought an alliance with the Regent in order to achieve their political goals. These women were no doubt cunning in their political approach. They also attacked Tshekedi in the petition and said he was not good enough to be the Regent.

As regards the claims to the chieftainship, they pointed out that;

It is a big mistake for our Administration to think that we are claiming the chieftainship or regency—which we could do without fear, had we that intention, surely we have a rightful claim, but we never had such wish although we see some of our neighbouring tribes as chieftainness...²⁸

They were referring here to Bangwaketse who were ruled by Ntebogang. Incidentally, Ntebogang was related to the Ratshosas as she was their step-mother, but she had returned to the Bangwaketse after the death of Ratshosa.²⁹ From their words, these women did not see themselves as being inferior. This is why they stated that they had a rightful claim to the chieftainship. They even went to the extent of stating that they felt insulted because they were not consulted when Tshekedi was made Regent. It is not in accordance with Tswana custom that women are consulted when it comes to such political issues. These women wanted to show to the High Commissioner that they were against Tshekedi's installation as the Regent. They wanted to use the colonial administration to remove Tshekedi from power. Before the colonial period, no such avenue of challenging the chief's power existed. The colonial period thus offered these royal women a new weapon of challenging Tshekedi's political power.

The Resident Magistrate in Serowe felt that the Bangwato would never be settled and that Tshekedi would never be able to rule effectively unless and until these women were eliminated.³⁰ The preservation of peace and order would only be maintained through their banishment from the Bamangwato Reserve. It must be realised that as these women came from the royal family, their actions could not be undermined. One informant stated that these women were influential by virtue of their birth, which they could use to divide the *morafe*.³¹ The threat posed by these women also appeared in a letter from the Resident Commissioner. He stated that Tshekedi could not rule satisfactorily when he was faced with a lot of factions.³² Further on he said that these women would cause division if allowed to remain in the reserve. They would be in this manner be a threat to peace in the *morafe*. Tshekedi recommended that these women be moved to another Reserve as they were women and also widowed. Baboni and MmaKhama were widows. The Colonial Administration decided to back Tshekedi. The policy of the Administration was to back the chief to the last point. Whenever the Administration felt the Chief was right, they backed him.

A problem arose as to where these women would be sent to. No chief would accept such politically involved people. There was a fear that they might continue with

their activities in exile and thus create problems for the chief who had offered them sanctuary. It was against this background that Baboni and MmaKhama were not accepted by the Bakwena. Chieftainess Ntebogang, however, accepted them on the condition that "they would be practically careful and would not listen to tale bearers."³³ Ntebogang wanted to help these widowed women. In helping them, she was also helping Tshekedi. Tshekedi would now be able to consolidate his power and the threat to his position would be reduced. Banishment orders were served on Baboni and MmaKhama in September, 1926. Simon and Obeditse were in prison. Oratile and Johnny were banished to Francistown in October of the same year, 1926, but given four months to make arrangements for their property.

The act of sending these women out of the Reserve did not silence them. Oratile continued to challenge Tshekedi. In 1930, when she was still in Francistown, she brought before the Resident Magistrate a certain paper which she claimed was Sekgoma's will.³⁴ The alleged will was dated 4 June 1911. This document entitled Oratile to five of Sekgoma's cattle posts. This document is questionable. Firstly, one wonders why it was only brought up so long after the dispute between Tshekedi and Oratile. Daughters were also not normally given such a large share when the estate was divided as they were given their share when they got married. This document was also not witnessed, but just had the supposed signature of Sekgoma. One of the reasons Oratile gave for producing this will was that she said she had no money. Oratile no doubt wanted to have a share of Sekgoma's estate and she was also aware that if she succeeded, this would make Tshekedi unpopular. The document was dismissed as a forged document. Oratile was fully aware that the estate belonged to Seretse, but just wanted to inconvenience Tshekedi by bringing up unnecessary court cases against him. She wanted to use the legal system provided by the Colonial Administration to discredit Tshekedi's reputation. The new legal system was thus a good weapon for Oratile. It was a new political avenue through which she could channel her economic and political claims. Before the colonial period, women had no access to the legal system. The legal system provided by the Colonial Administration thus enabled people like Oratile to further their own economic and political claims. Baboni was to follow the same direction in her endeavour to achieve her political goals.

MmaKhama resorted to silence in her banishment, but Baboni continued with her attempts to undermine Tshekedi's power. Baboni, for example, illegally entered the Bamangwato Reserve in 1928 and went to Serowe without the consent of Tshekedi. Fortunately, she did not appear to have caused any trouble whilst in Serowe. The author has no information on any secret contacts that she may have made whilst in Serowe.

Baboni and the Gasetshwarwe conspiracy

Baboni, on realising that her previous attempts to depose Tshekedi had failed, used her perspicacious nature and found other means of resisting Tshekedi's rule. Baboni, on Tshekedi's recommendation, had been allowed to re-enter the Reserve. The banishment order imposed on her was withdrawn in 1930. MmaKhama was still in exile (her banishment order was withdrawn in 1937). The issue at hand pertained to the estate of Baboni's son, Mogomotsi. Mogomotsi Morwe died in 1927. On 12 September 1931, Tshekedi went to the Ratshosa ward and divided Mogomotsi's estate. He divided it amongst the mother, Baboni, Mogomotsi's wife and Mogomotsi's daughter. Baboni got 170 head of cattle, Mogomotsi's wife 170 and the daughter got 23 head of cattle.³⁵ Prior to the division, Tshekedi had informed the members of the Ratshosa ward about

his intention to divide Mogomotsi's cattle. All those who were present agreed with Tshekedi.

Baboni objected to the division, and said that she wanted her daughter-in-law to remain with her so that they could both benefit from the wealth.³⁶ Mogomotsi's wife objected on the grounds that Baboni was now selling Mogomotsi's cattle, and she said Baboni was wasting the estate.³⁷ In his division of Mogomotsi's estate, Tshekedi acted as the father of the whole *morafe*. He wanted to protect the interests of all the interested parties so that each could waste what belonged to her. Tshekedi's political opponents used this dissatisfaction on the part of Baboni to challenge Tshekedi's power. Baboni, as usual, had strong political rivals of Tshekedi on her side like Dingalo Nthebolang, Lebang Raditladi and Ratshosa Setlalekgosi. Baboni lost the case after a long enquiry was held. It was agreed that Tshekedi had in fact done the right thing by dividing the estate. The sole aim of Baboni was to create misunderstanding and mistrust between Tshekedi and the Administration. Baboni and her followers were fully aware that by continually taking Tshekedi to court, they were taking much of his time and in this manner Tshekedi did not have enough time to attend to the problems of the *morafe*. They hoped Tshekedi would not be able to rule the people well and in turn become unpopular.

Baboni, in her submission, claimed that the present dispute between her and Tshekedi was a product of her action in bringing Sekgoma's son, who had been living in Shoshong, to Serowe. She stated that

the Chief does not want him to come to Serowe because in effect he is a chief and wants him concealed at Shoshong. I think the chief is taking this attitude in order to avenge himself against me as he and the boy are in disagreement.³⁸

We already have a hint about the claim to the chieftainship by Sekgoma's illegitimate son, Gasetshwarwe, and this is the preparatory stage of the "Gasetshwarwe conspiracy" which took place a year later, in 1932. The dispute over Mogomotsi's estate was, therefore, more than just a struggle to amass wealth: it was a means used by Baboni to test Tshekedi's authority. The matter between Baboni and Tshekedi was a denial of Tshekedi's right to rule the Bangwato.

Baboni came to be involved in the Gasetshwarwe conspiracy of 1932, which actually dates back to the time of Sekgoma's illness in 1923. It is necessary at this point to explain who Gasetshwarwe was.

After Sekgoma divorced Kelathehile, Oratile's mother, he married Kgamane's daughter, Serero. Kgamane was the brother of Khama III. Sekgoma and Serero were cousins. Serero was not able to bear children. It so happened that Serero had come with her sister, Mary, when she got married to Sekgoma. Sekgoma later became interested in Mary and this resulted in the birth of Gasetshwarwe in 1905. According to Tswana law and custom, if a woman is barren like Serero, a *seantlo* is brought in so that she could bear a son in the house, and this *seantlo* is usually the woman's younger sister or a very close relative of the woman.³⁹ This was not the case with Mary. She was not a *seantlo*: her relationship with Sekgoma was an informal one. Above all, Sekgoma had never legitimised the son, Gasetshwarwe, or shown him to Bangwato as the potential successor.

Despite his illegitimacy, Baboni put Gasetshwarwe forward as the heir during Sekgoma's illness in 1923. In 1923 when Sekgoma was ill, Baboni brought Gasetshwarwe to Sekgoma so as to induce him to declare him his heir.⁴⁰ Sekgoma did

not agree, but instead maintained that his only heir was Seretse. He gave Baboni an answer similar to the one he had given to Oratile by saying that Tshekedi would be the regent. The struggle for the recognition of Gasetshwarwe came up again in 1932 and this time the issue was a very serious conspiracy.

The Gasetshwarwe conspiracy shows how a woman, Baboni, came to play a very considerable role in Bangwato politics. The conspiracy was backed by strong political opponents of Tshekedi including Kesebonye. Kesebonye, for his part, was against Tshekedi because Tshekedi had prevented him with the people of his Ditharapa ward from seceding to Machaneng.⁴¹ Kesebonye wanted to be independent. In October 1930, Kesebonye together with eleven other prominent Bangwato men sent a petition to the Resident Commissioner in Mafeking. In the petition they complained of what they alleged to be Tshekedi's despotic rule.⁴² They said Tshekedi forced people to work for him. The dispute between Tshekedi and the petitioners started when Tshekedi called for regimental labour in order to build a dam. The real objective behind the petition was to remove Tshekedi. The petitioners also wanted the Tswana type of government to be annulled and a new government brought in.⁴³

The Gasetshwarwe conspiracy was, therefore, supported by men who wanted to depose Tshekedi. Baboni was aware that in order to achieve her goal of removing Tshekedi, she had to align herself with Tshekedi's political opponents. Dingalo Nthebolang, who was one of the key plotters, actually confirmed to me that Baboni and Kesebonye were the leading figures in the conspiracy.⁴⁴ It is thus clear that Baboni was the main architect of this conspiracy. Baboni was quite determined to do all she could to remove Tshekedi from power.

The Gasetshwarwe conspiracy was a very serious act as there had been an attempt to topple recognised authority. Kesebonye and Gasetshwarwe were arrested. They were found guilty of sedition and sentenced to seven years imprisonment with hard labour. The conspiracy did not only threaten Tshekedi's life, but, had it succeeded, the Bangwato would have experienced a rebellion which might have torn the *morafe* into pieces. All this was a product of a woman, Baboni.

Bagakgametse and the Raditladis

In 1937, Tshekedi accused Leetile Raditladi of having a child with his wife, Bagakgametse, and sought a divorce for her. Tshekedi had married Bagakgametse in 1936. After an inquiry was conducted at the *kgotla*, Tshekedi applied to the Magistrate so as to divorce Bagakgametse. He also sought the banishment of Leetile from the Bamangwato Reserve. Although the question of whether Bagakgametse was guilty or not still remains unanswered, the supposed disloyalty of Bagakgametse was itself a political liability for Tshekedi. He knew that any instability within his own family worked against his political career. Leetile saw the case as a political one masquerading under the cloak of a divorce case.⁴⁵

Accompanying the divorce case was the charge that Bagakgametse and the Raditladis had bewitched Tshekedi's mother, Semane, and Bonyerile. Although witchcraft cases are difficult to prove beyond reasonable doubt, the present case had political overtones. Firstly it was an echo of past political struggle between Khama III and his brother from the seventh house, Raditladi, in 1894. Secondly it was an echo of the ever-increasing political dispute within the royal family.

In 1894-5 Khama III and Raditladi were involved in a political conflict. The conflict pertained to the state control of the church, with Raditladi feeling that it should not be under the state.⁴⁶ The main issue, however, was that Raditladi wanted to assert

his own political autonomy, which he could only achieve by instigating a rebellion against his brother, Khama. The Raditladi generation that followed also wanted a role in the political sphere. For them, the weapon was not the church, but Tshekedi's wife, Bagakgametse. Bagakgametse was for the Raditladis a highly profitable political asset. It is not clear why Bagakgametse came to be identified more with the Raditladi's while her brothers, Radiphofu and Ngwato, were always on Tshekedi's side.

Buchanan, Tshelkedi's advocate, felt that the sole aim of the Raditladis was to overthrow the house of Khama through the division of the village.⁴⁷ Lebang confessed that he had stated that they would divide the village and would not be like the Ratshosas who were just playing. The dispute between Tshekedi and the Raditladi was a struggle to gain political power and the conflict revolved around Bagakgametse.

The alleged relationship between Bagakgametse and Leetile provided a ground for the rekindling of the political dispute between Tshekedi and the Raditladis. The words by Lebang on to the effect that they would divide the village point to the political tone of the case between Leetile and Tshekedi.

The fact that the paternity of Bagakgametse's child is still unresolved poses a problem and limits our understanding of the whole conflict between Tshekedi and the Raditladis. At one level, it can be said that Bagakgametse became a political weapon that Tshekedi was able to use to eliminate his political rivals, the Raditladis. This can be seen in the fact that he did not only divorce her, but also sought the banishment of Leetile and his parents from the Bamangwato Reserve. The alleged act of witchcraft brings Bagakgametse's role to another level. At this level, she emerges as a political weapon which could be used by the Raditladis against Tshekedi. Tshekedi saw Bagakgametse in this manner as a threat to his life. Bagakgametse, no doubt, was a controversial figure at the centre of Bangwato politics. She will continue to remain a controversial figure in the political life of Tshekedi until the mystery surrounding her alleged relationship with the Raditladis is resolved. Bagakgametse, though a woman, had an impact on the politics of Bangwato under the regency of Tshekedi in this regard.

Seretse's marriage

The period between 1937 and 1948 saw Tshekedi in firm control. This was due to the fact that his opponents like Kesebonye, Simon and Johnny were dead. His women opponents were now old and he was now successfully married to Ella Moshoele. This period of peace and stability for Tshekedi was shattered by the emergence of another woman, an English woman, Ruth Williams, who married the heir to the throne, Seretse Khama.

The marriage of Seretse resulted in Tshekedi's voluntary resignation from the regency and his self-banishment to Rametsana. Tshekedi, and the Bangwato at the outset, did not accept Seretse's marriage. They felt that Seretse had not asked for permission from them. This was also an extraordinary situation for the Bangwato because no Motswana had ever married a white. The situation, however, later changed when the Bangwato decided to accept Seretse and his wife. This was due partly to Seretse's appeal for support, and also the feeling on the part of the Bangwato that Tshekedi actually wanted Seretse's position. They felt the marriage dispute was just a camouflage. In response to this allegation, Tshekedi decided to leave the Bamangwato Reserve. He said he would not go to the Batawana or the Bangwaketse as they were junior *merafe*, but would go to the Bakwena where he would be ruled.⁴⁸ Tshekedi wanted to show that he was not as ambitious as the Bangwato thought. The question as

to whether Tshekedi was really against the marriage or not is not the subject of the paper. The significance of the marriage crisis in the context of this paper is that it illustrates the fact that the fall of Tshekedi from the regency was indirectly a by-product of a woman who had married into the royal family. The marriage crisis also brought in a new era in the political life of the Bangwato by integrating common women into Bangwato politics.

The extension of political rights to common women

Bangwato were now faced with a serious problem which threatened to shatter the unity of the *morafe*. At this moment of uncertainty, Bangwato women came to the forefront and fought for the preservation of peace and stability in the *morafe*. On 9 August 1949, fifty-eight women from Mahalapye and surrounding areas wrote and sent a petition to the Resident Commissioner in Mafikeng.⁴⁹ They demanded the expulsion of Tshekedi and his followers, and wanted Seretse and his wife. They stated that Seretse's right to the chieftainship was a fact known to all and that it should be realised that that chief was for all the people and not men only.⁵⁰ These women were showing signs of political maturity and concern for their *morafe*. Were it not for the availability of the Colonial Administration, these women would not have been able to channel their political views. The colonial period, therefore, transformed the whole political machinery and enabled women to have a chance to advance their own views and criticisms.

Mrs Manyaphiri, one of the petitioners, states that they were against Tshekedi because they felt he was standing on Seretse's way.⁵¹ She states that it was because of the feeling that Tshekedi was ambitious that so many women were opposed to him. She dismisses the theory propounded by some historians like Neil Parsons who attribute Tshekedi's unpopularity amongst women to the beer issue.⁵² Mrs Manyaphiri pointed out that the consumption of beer had long been abolished by Khama III. Tshekedi was thus just carrying on the practice.

It was during this marriage crisis that women were for the first time allowed to attend *kgotla*. Women started going to *kgotla* where they participated in the debates.⁵³ The men did not show a negative response. Women were, however, only allowed to go to *kgotla* when the Resident Commissioner was present.

Another example of the integration of common women into Bangwato politics is illustrated by the visit of some observers from Britain in 1951. The delegation consisted of a former Member of Parliament, a trade unionist and an academic. The delegation came in connection with Tshekedi's desire to return to the Bamangwato Reserve as a private citizen.⁵⁴ In a meeting that these observers held with women in Serowe, it became quite clear that these women were still opposed to Tshekedi.⁵⁵ This incident shows that women were now being recognised by the society and were now being consulted on a major political issue. The Seretse marriage crisis, therefore, brought a radical change for Bangwato common women as it enabled them to appear in the political scene.

The problem of Seretse's marriage crisis led to a vacuum in the Bangwato political arena as Seretse had to renounce the chieftainship. This he did. The Bangwato had to find someone to fill this vacuum. Oratile, one of the royal women who had always opposed Tshekedi, was suggested by some people as the one who could become the acting chief. In 1951 a full *kgotla* meeting was convened to designate a new chief and Oratile's name was amongst those suggested. Apparently, Oratile was reluctant to accept the position. It is not clear why. It is, however, quite likely that she refused

because she was now old (she was in her late forties). Another woman who was mentioned was Seretse's half-sister, Naledi. The Bangwato had now realised that even a woman could rule. This fact had long been realised by the Bangwaketse and Batawana who had women regents. Bangwato were now disillusioned with male regents because of the experience they had with Tshekedi during the marriage crisis. Keaboka was, however, appointed as the acting chief because Oratile had refused to take over the position.

Conclusion

The regency of Tshekedi Khama witnessed a substantial level of political participation on the side of women. Any study of the political history of the Bangwato, especially under the regency of Tshekedi, would be incomplete if it did not take into account the very considerable role played by royal women in Bangwato politics. The situation may appear to be abnormal, but we have to realise that the colonial period brought in changes in the whole political machinery. New kinds of legal system were set up which did not discriminate against women and women took advantage of these new institutions to further their own political goals. There were also some men, such as the Ratshosas, Gasetshwarwe, and Kesebonye, who had realised that an alliance with such royal women would be highly profitable. The role of Bangwato royal women, however, was not aimed at liberating women, but at serving the interests of these women and their relations like the Ratshosas. The sudden coming in of common women in Bamangwato politics was however a positive step towards the liberation of women. Further research is however, needed to go into detail and look at all the economic and political changes that were taking place within the Bechuanaland Protectorate. Changes had taken place, as is illustrated by the fact that even Bangwato royal women like Oratile were actually asked to become regents.

Notes

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¹ Isaac Schapera *A Handbook of Tswana Law and Custom*, (London: Frank Cass, 1977), p. 28

² This subject is discussed in R.K.K. Molefi's "The Regency of Chieftainess Ntebogang of Ngwaketse, 1924 – 1928" (B.A. Dissertation, University of Botswana and Swaziland, 1978). p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 6

⁴ BNA S177/3 District Commissioner Maun to Government Secretary, Mafeking, 3 March 1947.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Q.N. Parsons "Khama III, the Bamangwato and the British with special reference to 1895–1923", (unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 1973), p. 14

⁷ Julian Mockford, *Seretse Khama and the Bamangwato* (London: Staples Press, 1950), p. 57

⁸ Parsons "Khama III" p. 14.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 212

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 213

¹¹ Mockford *Seretse Khama and the Bamangwato*, p. 168.

¹² Parsons "Khama III", p. 375.

¹³ BNA DCS 27/8 Statement by Tshekedi Khama before a meeting of the Bangwato *Morafe* held at the Kgotla in Serowe in 10th May 1937.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Interview with Radpiphofu Moloi Sekgoma, Leletamotse, Serowe, 7 June 1984. This informant is the son of Moloi and the grandson of Sekgoma I. He is the brother of Bagakgametse, but he did

not want to comment on his sisters relationship with Tshekedi and the resultant conflict.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Mockford, *Seretse Khama and the Bangwato*, p. 177

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Michael Crowder "'I want to be taught how to be govern my country, not to be taught how to be governed': Tshekedi Khama and his opposition to the British Administration in Bechuanaland Protectorate. Paper presented at the University of Botswana History Workshop on 9 November, 1984.

²² Interview with Lenamile Lesego, 93 years, Serowe, 1 June 1984

²³ B.N.A. S 11/5 Resident Magistrate Serowe to Acting Resident Commissioner Mafeking, 18 June 1926.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ BNA S11/5 Petition to High Commissioner sent and signed by Baboni, Oratile, Milly and MmaKhama, 21 June 1926

²⁶ *Ibid*

²⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸ *Ibid*

²⁹ Interview with Sekhuteleng Kgamane aged about 111 years, Shoshong, 9 July 1984. This informant is the sister of the Ratshosa brothers, Simon, Obeditse and Johnny.

³⁰ BNA S11/5 Resident Magistrate Serowe to Acting Resident Commissioner Mafeking, 18 June 1926.

³¹ Interview with Kerapetse Phaphe, 79 years, Shoshong, 10 July 1984.

³² BNA S11/5 Resident Magistrate Mafeking to High Commissioner, Cape Town, 18 June 1926.

³³ BNA S11/5 Resident Magistrate Kanye to Government Secretary Mafeking, 28 August 1926.

³⁴ BNA DCS 8/15 Document claimed to be Sekgoma's will, dated 5 June 1911.

³⁵ BNA S261/5 Baboni Morwe's case against Tshekedi: Baboni's evidence, 17 Sept 1931.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ BNA S261/5 Statement by Pshvee, Mogomotsi's wife at the Resident Magistrations Office, Serowe, 5 Oct 1931.

³⁸ BNA S261/5 Baboni's case against Tshekedi; Baboni's evidence, 21 Sept 1931.

³⁹ Schapera *A Handbook of Tswana Law and Custom* p. 15.

⁴⁰ BNA S302/1 Statement by Edirilwe Seretse and the Resident Magistrat's Office, Serowe, 13 Nov 1930.

⁴¹ BNA S261/6 Findings on individual cases submitted for the inquiry held in Serowe by the Resident Magistrate, 13 Nov 1932.

⁴² BNA S485/1/3 Petition to the Resident Commissioner Mafeking, 9 Oct 1930.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Interview with Dingalo Nthebolang, 78 years, Serowe, 13 June 1984.

⁴⁵ S450/2 Leetile Raditladi to the Resident Commissioner Mafeking, 7 March 1937.

⁴⁶ BNA S485/1/3 The dispute between Khama and Raditladi (1984-95), 16 Dec 1937.

⁴⁷ BNA S485/1/3 Raditladi Enquiry: Buchanan's submission, 16 Dec 1937.

⁴⁸ Interview with Shaw Mokgadi, 58 years, Serowe, 7 June 1984.

⁴⁹ BNA S529/1/1 Petition sent by Mahalapye women to the Resident Commissioner, Mafeking, 9 August 1949.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Interview with Mrs Relathanye Manyaphiri Ikitseng, 78 years, Mahalapye, 11 Dec 1984. Mrs Manyaphiri's husband was the headman of Mahalapye and the grandson of Sekgoma I.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ BNA S529/4 Meeting of women held at Central School in the afternoon of 17 August 1951.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

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