

# Then and Now

## The Praise Poem in Southern Sotho

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Our task is to relate the present to the past, that facet of the past embodied in the oral poetic genre: the Southern Sesotho Praise Poem

Against the backdrop of parallel developments in the larger territory that engulf this small Lesotho like a rapacious monster landing blows till total defeat, we must pinpoint some moments of historical importance in the social development of the Basotho people of Lesotho as recorded in their immortal praise poems, which dominated, if not entirely, almost the whole Sesotho oral poetic tradition of the nineteenth century.

Confrontation in southern Africa, alienation of the land, the mores of the colonial period, migration of tribes, inter-tribal wars for land, stock, and self-aggrandisement - all, belonging to the sphere of reality, pressed on the artistic imagination of the clan, tribe, whole peoples, and sought expression in artistic images. Suffice it to add that it is the nature of this human effort that accounts for the specific nature of the praise poem wherever and under whatever name it occurs. There lies at the basis of the praise poem epoch-making events, cataclysms. It is permeated with the breath of the era. It bears the mark of immortality because of its popular character, of its popular wisdom, as manifest in the richness of the idiom and its whole gallery of images.

A series of wars has been lost and won on the soil of Lesotho. These have been wars of liberation from foreign, as well as domestic, oppression, although the colonial historians, have mischievously seen in them stock-theft and 'native' savagery. (It is fitting to disclose to the present generation the fallacies of the slanderer's teachings that pose as genuine historiography. It is high time we decolonised our minds, and looked at our past, not as spear-wielding savages, but as of historical necessity.)

In connection with the praise poem in Southern Sesotho, two wars immediately impose themselves upon one's inquiring mind: War of Seqiti (1865) fought at Thaba-Bosiu, Lesotho, and The Gun - (or Disarmament) War which took place from roughly 1880 till 1884. These wars were fought between the Basotho people and the colonial masters.

In particular, the War of Seqiti was a culmination of a number of provocative wars on the part of the Boers and the English. There were border conflicts and cases of stock-theft, which, however, have been exaggerated in favour of the conquering European tribes out to decimate thousands of innocent people out of sheer land and wealth hunger. This was the final heavy war fought between the Boers and the Basotho that sounded the death knell of the autonomy of that mountainous country. Historians and others tell us that the Basotho regiments, under the direct command of the great Moshoeshoe, founder of the Basotho people - and his sons, depleted of their strength and overpowered by the heavy armaments of the Boers, negotiated for a treaty. This paved the way, through the calculated machinations of the missionary, for Lesotho's protection by Queen Victoria's England, which took place on 18th March, 1868. Said King Moshoeshoe: '... to protect me and the lion of my blanket (meaning Basotho people - M.B.) from the encroachments of the neighbouring Boers.'

It is on the occasion of this War of Seqiti that we read, in part, from a praise poem of Lerotholi, King Moshoeshoe's grandson who ruled Lesotho from 1893 to 1913, the following stirring lines:

'Hold your shield tightly, Rasenate's Son:  
Your motherland is in danger of defeat.'

At the Bloemfontein Convention of 1852 it had been agreed by the Boer Government of the Orange Free State, against strong opposition from Basotho, to arbitrarily draw a border line between Lesotho and that State. Lesotho lost what has been known as the Conquered Territory, which includes the now famous and rich South African Maize Triangle. Major Warden was the culprit. Wepener, a Boer Commander, was shot dead in 1865: hence, under the same heading:

He says Moshoeshoe should not leave the scene,  
But rule forever  
Now that giants like Wepener have been vanquished,  
Fighters that fight overseas...

And further:

Mokhachane's Bulldog, Lekena,  
Is chasing Bloemfontein Boers around the mountain,  
He chases them till they turn their heads  
Towards the West, where the sun sets...

About Mokotoko, Makhahane's son, we hear the following:

On that day the deep waters billowed:  
Waves of the sea moved in a dance,  
And rivers swiftly flowed,  
Blooming forth with summer lilies!  
Animals forgot to graze,  
Herds of cattle sang us a war song;  
They began a song that echoed afar,  
Even Shaka, the Ndebele, heard the tune  
And said: Hail! Thesele's Son,  
Child of royal blood, you have reaped  
A hundred times!

It is significant that Shaka, who has been very much maligned, figures in this piece. This shows the respect that he commands among his people as the hero who welded various clans and tribes into a tremendous, formidable, military force.

Ntsokoane Ratefane, who shot dead a Boer known as Maphats'oe, says:

Ntsokoane chases Maphats'oe;  
Maphats'oe also chases him!  
Below the hut of Sehapi's daughter  
We heard a Boer weep at sunset.

The year 1880 saw a protracted, vicious War drench Lesotho in blood. Letsie I, Moshoeshoe's son, was ruling the country after his father's death in 1870. The sole aim of the War was to disarm the Basotho people, thereby exposing them to the gunpower of the bellicose Boer. Lesotho had been annexed to the Cape in 1871; and this despite Letsie's vociferous protests to Her Britannic Majesty's Government of the day.

Events in southern Africa, then, seemed to have been patterned in the spirit of the Berlin Conference. Starting with the Isandhlwana of 1879, under Cetshwayo; continuing with the Xhosas under Sandile in the same year; and following with Moorosi at Mokotjomela, Lesotho, the road to colonial butchery and slavery was open. Basotho men had been working on the mines and getting better guns in much larger quantities in order the better to defend their homeland against the Boer, and English, inroads. It is this weapon, superior to the one of the Cape Rifles, that the Governor of the Cape, Sir Bartle Frere, figuring in Sesotho praise poems as Mabeke-beke, feared. The running dogs of the Establishment in Lesotho conspired: notably Sprigg, alias Sepiriti, and Major Bell, alias Majorobela.

Chief Jonathan, contrary to the firm stand of Paramount Chief Letsie I, abided by the rule of the Cape, thereby taking with him to the enemy camp some minority. Despite this split, the undaunted, valiant Basotho men fought with their backs against the wall. The whole Government fuss petered out without a formal treaty. So fierce was the resistance and so well marshalled were the spiritual powers and iron determination of the people to defend their inalienable right!

The Gun War was the climax of popular heroism and selfless dedication before the foe, the testing ground on the threshold of nation building, of the solidarity of the nascent nation at the death of tribal formations and the birth, in the form of the whiteman's force of arms, of the new, depersonalised social formations.

The praise poem of this period, then, is replete with the meritorious qualities of the Basotho people, for, then, the umbilical cord between chieftainship and the people did exist. There was a commonwealth of interests, a unity of purpose that expressed itself in the unquestionable and wholehearted acceptance of all the injunctions and directives that flowed, through appropriate organs of popular power, from chieftainship as a social and historically conditioned institution.

Says Chief Maama during the Gun War:

Black lightning of Secise's family  
Burnt Maseru after midday  
Trower ran away in fear  
Late the same afternoon!  
Would you see, Bartle Freere,  
Hoping you see, Bartle Freere,  
When regiments exchange fire!  
The soldier on a grey horse lay down:  
Why are you scoring, European child,  
In such pouring rain?  
Someone has been eaten by Luvale's Vulture  
Has been eaten by Raserate's Raven,  
Vulture of Sekhobe's and Makhabane's family,  
Son of heavenly lightning, Maa-a-Rafolatsane  
He-guns collided,  
He collided with the ram of Sprigg!  
With a whiff of a bullet I shot a European down  
He fell in front of the steed,  
He fell in front of my steed, in front of Kolobol  
His kin in vain picked him up,  
They took up a stone-dead body,  
Wrapped it and threw it into the wagon,  
Pretending that he would return to life!  
Dark blood from blood vessels in the head  
Of the Cape white  
Escaped our notice before we could write,  
Before even telling them by the word of mouth.  
It told his kin near the sea,  
It told his kin where abound schools of fish,  
Where waters congregate  
That: In this manner we have been to war;  
We have been to the violent flames at Bamabilikoe's,  
Not so far, at Mafa's and Bamabalikoe's,  
Not so far, at Suhlane's and Bampor's,  
At the neck of Boleka and Mathebe.  
As we were playing, someone fell down  
Being 'Mamojela's son, I've killed people,  
I have killed people with my left hand;  
Maybe it's because I'm left handed,  
Maybe I can give them stomach ache!

And further:

A white beave left his home swearing,  
Beaming with confidence and beating his chest,  
Going to the extent of taking off his hat,  
He stamped on it with his boots,  
He trampled on it with his feet:  
"Submit your guns, you Kaffirs!"  
And we refused to submit ours.

Says Rafolatsane Letsie:

Cannon against foe, Mokat's son,  
Being thrown by Lekena Ralets'abisa,  
It scattered the lines of white braves;  
They ran helter-skelter, overflowing the hills,  
Sugar and beer stayed behind,  
Coffee remained on the open veld;  
Wagons have fallen into the river,  
They fell into River Caledon,  
They crossed in a hurry,  
They crossed the river in a hurry  
Upon reaching the other bank of the Caledon,  
They looked over the veld this side  
Only to find their kin flat on the ground,  
Victims to a flight of birds of prey  
Flying closely to the earth  
I am Makhachane's disobedient son, Chesetsi,  
The one crossing the river at high tide  
To disorganise European ranks,  
Fighting among European ranks,  
He pierced with the handle of a spear,  
Making a feast for birds of prey;

Crows dragged him on the ground,  
Insects entered into his eyes,  
Vultures tore his chin  
Ravens cut his tongue!

Sashiphe Bantancella had this, in part, to say:

Brown lightning of 'Malesaona'<sup>16</sup>  
Sent a flash across Khomokhoana;  
He generated a fur-reaching lightning flash  
The other shaft of it penetrated at Mabaleha's,  
At Mabaleha's, at Khanyela's son  
The Lion fights facing the dog!  
Letsoka's son, springbok of corn lands  
Has caught a springbok with a spear  
Above the shoulders,  
Paralysing its forearms and shoulders  
And throwing it to the ground!  
Lion's son, be lioness, Seshophe!  
He has broken the bones of bullocks,  
Abandoning them, uttering the veld!  
Buttery of shields, Seshophe,  
He has snicked into Mooketsi's pocket  
And playfully gnawed his private parts!

With Theko Letsie we observe continuation, as it happens in folklore:

Be on the alert, Males's hero,  
Your motherland is in danger of defeat!  
The Government is displaying the force of arms

Chief Lerotholi, already referred to in connection with the onslaught of 1865, is a unique phenomenon in Southern Sesotho praise poem, his imagery is at once larded with deep revolt against the enemy, patriotic zeal, straightforward attack and deep feeling of human dignity and indignation at the wrongs meted out to his people. With his words seem to turn into a thousand lethal weapons, sharp as a razor blade, hurled like a grenade at an advancing enemy. He calls himself 'Semamarela', one who holds tenaciously to the task, one who smokes out the foe.

Let him speak:

Mohat's Semamarela, Lekena,  
One-who-smokes-out-people;  
Smoke out Sprigg's people!  
Knock down people with shields  
That chalk may blur their eyesight!  
Deep in his pool the crocodile glared,  
He glared with his blood-red eyes,  
And lo, the young white braves drowned!  
The young white braves fell into the jaws of  
the snake,  
The black snake, King's 'khonyapa',<sup>17</sup>  
Spouted out a shaft of lightning flash!  
Rainbow of Moshoeshe's land  
Supported both the clouds and the earth,  
When the earth trembled,  
Fall upon the foe at hand,  
Make short work of them, Sesotho way,  
With your spears  
Kill them in thousands upon thousands  
That ravens may perch on them!

Concerning the allegations against stock-theft, he has this to say twice in one praise poem:

Stop stealing my cattle, Sprigg,  
And I shall stop stealing yours!

He continues:

Boers, never try to try.

<sup>16</sup> In Southern Sesotho the prefix 'Ma', which is *Mama*, denotes the name of a woman, in this case: Mother of Lesaona. Then it was common to swear by one's wife or wives, often complicating the issue by referring to the latter with the male name acquired during the rite of maiden puberty. Moshoeshe calls himself:

Mokali's husband, a tiger,  
Mokali's husband and I, lions!

<sup>17</sup> A huge water snake supposed to 'kill' people by merely glaring at them.



The culprit here is Queen Victoria and, through her, the Cape Government which was instrumental in bringing about untold hardships to the Basotho people in particular and the other Bantu-speaking peoples of the south in general. The image of the Queen has been grotesquely caught by the pen of the poet.

This is an instance of the old dictum: Art binds peoples together. Ours in the south, alas, is art forged on the anvil of stark reality!

What lessons could be learnt from a close study of the Southern Sesotho praise poem as an embodiment of a people's views and aspirations, as pages from the past?

The treasure trove of Sesotho culture needs systematic and scientific study so that we may know ourselves the better. We must needs open the image of our forefathers, for the battle they won on the battle-field is fast being lost behind the smoke-screen of diplomatic talks, where the politician - Down with his slogans! - is a rogue infested with power-hunger like leprosy. Then dissemination must follow among the rising generation, for are they not tomorrow's nation!

In the moment of trial, like the present one when Thaba-Bosiu has turned into the scene of political massacre of civilians; when, with the upsurge of national consciousness, we seek to build a truly national culture based on genuine tradition that incorporates world culture, the praise poem, *thoko*, comes to the fore in our oral art. Its influence on contemporary Sesotho literature, fiction and non-fiction, is obvious. However, the chief, after years of indirect colonial rule, has shifted in the scale of generally accepted values. He has grown anachronistic, and superfluous. The new force, dynamic and disciplined, has yet to emerge to dislodge this boulder.

In fact, the present constitutional arrangements in ex-colonial Africa do prove that the chief is now a figurehead and nothing more. These arrangements are not to be taken seriously, for they are the master's designs serving him: till we are bled snow-white!

In Sesotho literature the praise poem seems to have found fertile soil in the idealistic cast of mind of some poets: Aziel Makara's collection of poems is nothing short of apologetics at the service of Faith. The high style of the praise poem lies in direct conflict with the insignificant content.

Makalo Khaketla has used the praise poem in his historical drama, published in Sesotho, 'Moshoeshoe and Missionaries' (1947). Only that the playwright has been out to extol the missionary effort to the detriment of the heroic figure of Moshoeshoe. Historical truth has been distorted; the drama lacks action and conflict. This is a conformist piece of literature. His collection of poems, 'Lipshamathe' (1954) bears the same mark of cringing and kowtowing. He glows with sentimentality towards Granny Victoria and King George VI, placing the latter on the same level with Moshoeshoe.

It is fair to mention that Makalokhaketla's political activities in the fifties owed much to the praise poem and all that it stood for. His political journalism, high-powered and biting, in his own political journal, 'Mohlabaani', (Warrior) took shape behind the battle that became its epigram: Lerotholi's

"Hold your shield tightly, Rasenate's Son;  
Your motherland is in danger of defeat."

This was true, and the choice could not have been more opportune. There are some flashbacks of this historic past in his novel, 'Meokho ea Thabo' (Tears of Joy).

J. J. Machobane's romantic aspirations have led him to the green pastures of the praise poem in his poetic romps, 'Maphats'oe' and historical novel, 'Senate, Shoeshoe ea Moshoeshoe', (Senate, Moshoeshoe's Lily). In both these works he is not free from Thomas Mofolo's influence. Thomas Mofolo's 'Chaka', a controversial novel,

is replete with the praise poem from both Sesotho and Zulu. Thomas Mofolo's achievement has been in the field of depiction of action, where he effectively makes use of the Sesotho verb. The synonym, with all its nuances, has been aptly exploited. There are instances of rhythmic prose with repetitions of whole phrases and sentences just as in Maama's, Griffiths', or Jonathan's praise poems. Mofolo also labours the adjective, which is the epithet of folklore. He scatters metaphors like the Milky Way all over the pages. The English translation in possession of the present author lamentably fails to deliver Mofolo at his best. However, 'Chaka' is not all praise poem; it is folk tale and fiction. Only that historical truth has been blurred by a mysticism and a Euro-Christian ethos that has lopped Chaka off his pedestal. Critics who have been opining about Mofolo's religiousness expose their own narrow-mindedness and one-sidedness. They have never related him to his social milieu, and the history of the writing of the novel in question has not been studied. He was working on two novels at the same time: 'Pitseng' and 'Chaka'. Hence, some over-lapping of themes and identity of characters. His pen portraits of the heroes, concentrating on the external features, is in the tradition of folklore, though not exclusively so.

From such a past one anticipates a bright future.



A BASUTO WARRIOR FULLY ARMED.

Note: The snippets that have been quoted give a rough idea of the body of Sesotho praise poems. The onerous task of perfectly rendering in foreign idiom an esoteric culture, a series of experiences unknown to the language of some other era, is beyond the capability and aspiration of the present writer. (Part of the praise poem beginning 'Mothato's Semamarela, Lekena', is available in English translation in Ezekiel Mphahlele's article in 'African Culture Trends' in 'Independence' edited by Peter Judd (New York, 1963). My sources of Sesotho originals are memory and Z. D. Mangoela's collection published at Morija, Lesotho in 1921.