

An account of the rise of the Bafokeng

B. Mbenga and A. Manson, “People of the Dew”: A History of the Bafokeng of Phokeng Rustenburg Region, South Africa, from Early Times to 2000

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The Bafokeng, whose capital Phokeng is situated adjacent to Rustenburg, have been enriched by the platinum mines developed on the farms they acquired in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today their mineral-generated wealth is being invested in extensive residential, commercial, environmental, tourism and educational projects underway and planned for implementation into the mid-twenty-first century. A large display of this vision may be viewed in the foyer of the Royal Bafokeng Administration headquarters in Phokeng.

Mbenga and Manson’s *History of the Bafokeng* is an account of the rise of the Bafokeng to prominence and briefly put, argues that the good fortune that came their way was in large measure the result of thoughtful leadership over successive reigns of their *dikgosi*. The volume was initiated and financed by the Royal Bafokeng Administration (p vii). There is a chronological account that discusses Bafokeng origins; the period of Boer control; land acquisition; the advent of mining; politics during the apartheid era; and struggles with mining conglomerates.

The strength of this *History* is its detailed account of the royal house’s skilful defiance of Lucas Mangope’s attempts to aggregate Fokeng platinum to Bophuthatswana’s largesse, resulting in *kgosi* Edward Patrick Lebone (Lebone I)’s self-imposed exile to Botswana and the repeated harassment and arrests of his wife Semane and members of the Bafokeng Women’s Club. Mangope’s recruitment of ethnographer R.D. Coertze (author of *Bafokeng Family Law and Law of Succession*) to his campaign to delegitimise Lebone, which echoed N.J. van Warmelo’s involvement in a 1950 Bafokeng succession dispute with the Bantu Administration, is particularly revealing. Interestingly, the Bafokeng found ethnographer P.-L. Breutz, who worked under Van Warmelo, very helpful in realising Lebone’s succession a few years later. Meanwhile, Lebone (d. 1995) and his son and successor, Mollwane Bokanyo Molotlegi (Lebone II), proved adept at wresting increasingly better terms from Impala Platinum.

Mbenga and Manson avoid discussing the implications of community ownership of mining rights in the post-1994 dispensation and on the last but one paragraph of the conclusion note without comment, the Bafokeng’s self-designation in 1996 as the “Royal Bafokeng Nation” (p 157). Also unclear are the particulars of land acquisition before and after the 1913 Land Act, a period encapsulated by the “long and influential rule” (p 55) of Molotlegi. During his reign (1896 to his death in 1938), the Bafokeng acquired “at least 11 farms” between 1904 and 1931. Yet the process and details of land purchases, based largely on Native Affairs (NTS) files, are rather jumbled and sometimes confusing, if not contradictory. The farm lists, which appear in tables 4.1 to 4.5 are of little help in this regard. Post-1937 farm numbers are used without the pre-1937 equivalents. Perhaps a clearer picture would have emerged had the authors consulted the farm registers (RAK) in the Pretoria Archives and included maps reflecting the farm boundaries.

Also hard to understand is the authors' claim that the farms were acquired "virtually all under the leadership and direction of Kgosi Molotlegi" (p 101), whereas Molotlegi's tenure was marked by a decline in his popularity in 1906–1907 (p 65); the subsequent rise of Ethiopianism (p 63); protests against his use of public funds in the 1910s and 1920s (pp 67–72); his short term as a "mental patient" in 1927 (p 72); and his poor health thereafter (pp 72–73). Elsewhere, we learn that local DRC missionary Penzhorn considered Molotlegi "pleasant and good natured" but lacking "his grandfather's (Mokgatle) vibrant energy" (p 65) and that one of his people testified in court that Molotlegi "had no education and could not read and write ... consumed alcohol to excess and was very frequently under the influence of liquor" (p 113).

"*People of the Dew*" provides a useful summary of secondary sources to account for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Somewhat mystifying, however, was the authors' dependence on Schapera's *Handbook of Tswana Law and Custom*, which pertains to the Tswana bordering the Kalahari, to describe Bafokeng pre-colonial society.¹ Since 1992, it has become clear that the pre-colonial peoples of the Rustenburg area are quite distinct from the western Tswana in their settlement patterns and use of the landscape.² The section on Bafokeng-Boer relations is particularly interesting and demonstrates complex and competing interests as revealed in vignettes of Mokgatle's dealings with the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek and its officials. This section is more descriptive than analytical, but will be important for scholars delving into this still largely unexplored dimension of nineteenth-century Transvaal history.

One caveat: the authors translate Bafokeng as "People of the Dew" citing a "well-known Bafokeng tradition" that claims the name derives from the time when the people referred to "reached their present location", when they encountered thick dew (*phoka*) covering the valleys in the morning (p xiii). Yet, Fokeng identity by that name had to have preceded this arrival if we accept the authors' argument (based mainly on Huffmann³) that these people originated south of the Vaal River at Ntsuanatsatsi, because, as is well attested, various groups of Bafokeng (Basotho) remained south of the Vaal when the Bafokeng of this volume relocated to the Magaliesberg.

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1. I. Schapera, *A Handbook of Tswana Law and Custom* (1938) is partially cited in the footnote (without the article) but is not in the bibliography. This first (1938) edition is rare and difficult to find, whereas the second edition (1955), and subsequent impressions by Frank Cass, are in common circulation.
 2. J.C. Pistorius, *Molokwane, An Iron Age Bakwena Village: Early Tswana Settlement in the Western Transvaal* (Perskor, Johannesburg, 1992); F. Morton, "Perpetual Motion: Resettlement Patterns in the Western Transvaal and Southeastern Botswana since 1750", *Historia*, 48, 1, 2003, pp 265–282; S. Hall, M. Anderson, J. Boeyens and F. Coetzee, "Towards an Outline of the Oral Geography, Historical Identity and Political Economy of the Late Precolonial Tswana in the Rustenburg Region", in N. Swanepoel, A. Esterhuysen and P. Bonner (eds), *Five Hundred Years Rediscovered: Southern African Precedents and Prospects* (Wits University Press, Johannesburg, 2008), pp 55–85.
 3. T.N. Huffmann, *Handbook to the Iron Age: The Archaeology of Pre-Colonial Farming Societies in Southern Africa* (University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, Scottsville, 2007), pp 429ff.