

- M. Nkomonde

The maxim that war is politics employing other means has become generally accepted as true since it was formulated. The obverse, that politics is war using other means, is less readily accepted. Among the great Southern African statesmen of the 19th century, perhaps no other man besides Moshoeshoe, the founder of the Sotho nation, grasped this truth more clearly. The independence of Lesotho today, though its territory is much reduced from what he had ruled, can be directly attributed to his skillful employment and ability to combine diplomacy with military force. In our day we have seen how wisely this tactic was deployed by our Vietnamese comrades during their wars of liberation against both the French and United States imperialists.

Moshoeshoe was the son of Mokhashane and Kholu of the Bakwena tribe, one of many Sotho speaking tribes then distributed along the length of the Drakensburg and westward as far as the desert of the Kalahari. He was born around 1786, near Butha-Butha. At birth he was given the name Lepoqo, and at his initiation into manhood was renamed Tlabutle. The name by which he became famous, Moshoeshoe, was originally a title bestowed upon him by the praise poets after he had demonstrated his military prowess during a short war with one of the neighbours. By 'shaving the beard' of his opponent (as the poets then described defeating another chief in battle) he was given the title Moshoeshoe, which is an imitation of the sound of the razor as it shears away the hairs of the defeated chief's beard.

Together with his brothers, Moshoeshoe grew up under his father's guidance at Menokhaneng. At his initiation he shared the initiates lodge with Makonyane, who in manhood was to be one of his chief counsellors and a commander of the Sotho armies.

During the years of Moshoeshoe's adolescence and young manhood, there was a well known ngaka (healer) and rainmaker, Mohlomi, living among his people. Mohlomi had travelled widely during his

time and had come to know intimately the other African communities to the east, the west, the north and the south. Moshoeshoe very early became a disciple of the ngaka. The sage's knowledge made a great impression on him and this was reinforced when after his initiation Mokhashane, Moshoeshoe's father, handed his son over to Mohlomi for further instruction.

As the repository of traditional knowledge, customs, lore and mores Mohlomi taught Moshoeshoe his first lessons in statecraft impressing on him that greatness lay not in holding power for its own sake but in using power to defend and protect the weak; that the great ruler was he who could attract people to him by persuasion and moral example rather than by force or bullying.

During Moshoeshoe's boyhood and youth, the Sotho speaking people were divided amongst a number of autonomous principalities including the Bakwena, Bataung, Bafokeng, Batlokwa, Bakhatla and the Baphuthi. Around the 1820s a series of political upheavals now known as the Mfecane (in the Nguni languages) or Difaqane (in the Sotho, Tswana and Pedi languages) erupted in South Africa. From his capital at Butha-Buthe, Moshoeshoe began moulding the separate Sotho groups into a centralised state under the leadership of the Bakwena. His plans were both interrupted and abetted by the Mfecane wars. In 1824, Matiwane and his Ngwane people, fleeing from war-torn Natal, attacked Moshoeshoe and his people at Butha-Buthe. Fighting under Moshoeshoe's command, the Sotho beat off the Ngwane advance, forcing Matiwane to turn his migrating people southwards where they fell on the Hlubi and the Mpondo forcing a route as far south as Mthatha. During the winter months of that same year, a similar migrating group, the Batlokwa, led by their queen Mmanthatisi, laid seige to Butha-Buthe and forced the Sotho to seek refuge in the mountains of their country. It was during this retreat that Moshoeshoe established himself on Thaba-Bosiu, a flat-topped mountain whose summit could only be reached through a few easily defended passes. Thaba-Bosiu has a rich topsoil, many water-holes and green sweet grass which made it possible

to sow corn and graze cattle. This natural endowment enabled the Sotho to hold out almost indefinitely against any invader. In the end, Mmanthatisi and her armies were forced to move on to more vulnerable targets.

This great victory won by Moshoeshoe, with very little loss of life on either side, immediately raised his prestige in the region. Fugitives from other tribes, including former enemies whose own communities had disintegrated during the wars now flocked to him. He also began to display what was later to be one of his main weapons, the combination of diplomacy and warfare, as two different means working towards the same end, during this time. The two most formidable threats to the rising Sotho nation at the time were the Zulu under Shaka and the Ngwane under Matiwane. Of the two, Matiwane was the principle threat. At no cost to himself or his people Moshoeshoe skillfully played off Shaka against Matiwane. Matiwane was defeated and thus the immediate threat was removed. He employed similar tactics when handling an invasion by Mzilikazi's Ndebele, in 1831. After soundly beating Mzilikazi's armies in the mountain passes of Thaba-Bosiu, Moshoeshoe sent the retreating enemy a gift of fat oxen to restrain the Ndebele from devastating the surrounding country-side in search of food.

From his secure base on the mountain, Moshoeshoe could afford to be generous and flexible whereas his rivals, Mzilikazi, Mmanthatisi and Matiwane were forced by circumstances to be more ruthless. He never attacked, he fought only to defend his people, their lands and his allies. To spread his influence more widely, he began to invite fugitives caught up in the maelstrom of the Mfecane to join him and offered protection to smaller tribes who would otherwise have been engulfed by the wars. Thus the Baphuthi became a tributary tribe to the Sotho but retained their autonomy in internal affairs and some aspects of military policy.

After beating off the invaders to his east, a new threat from the south-west appeared. These were the Koranna, an independent Coloured community

made up of Khoi, escaped slaves and Coloureds migrating from the Cape. Through longstanding contact with the European invaders the Koranna had become Christians, using horses, firearms and wearing European style clothing. They had lost their original languages and now spoke Dutch.

After they entered the areas north of the Orange river, then called Transorangia, the Koranna periodically raided Sotho cattle and other livestock in order to build up their herds. Despite Sotho pleas they were reluctant to enter into negotiations to resolve their differences. In order to build up Sotho defences against this new threat, Moshoeshoe resolved to do three things: To acquire horses so that his people would have the same mobility as the Koranna; to acquire guns to place them on an equal footing with regard to weapons; and to acquire the European skills which the Koranna were putting to such effective use. Thus in 1833, three missionaries from the Paris Evangelical society arrived at Thaba-Bosiu. That same year, Moorosi, chief of the Phuthi, gave Moshoeshoe his first horse from amongst the spoils the former had won in a raid against the White colonialists in the eastern Cape.

In 1837, a threat far greater than all his African opponents now faced Moshoeshoe. The Boer trekkers crossed into Transorangia with their wagons and horses. Moshoeshoe realised immediately that these were a section of the foreign invaders who were encroaching on the Xhosa, the Thembu and the Khoi of the Cape. They were a threat not only to his people but to the independence and freedom of all the African people of our country. The power the Boers wielded was burned even deeper into his mind when they used the Barolong as allies to smash the once powerful Ndebele army at Vegkop later that year. Fighting from the cover of their defensive laager, Boer firearms mowed down the Ndebele before they could close to make their spears effective.

The most important thing as Moshoeshoe saw was to bury the feuds and quarrels of the past and build a defensive alliance far wider than the one he had constructed among the Sotho and would have to embra-

ce those of the Cape, Natal and those inland. Common interest in resisting Boer aggression now made the Koranna more amenable to Sotho diplomacy. Starting with his immediate neighbours, Moshoeshoe built up an alliance with the Griqua, the Koranna and the Bataung under Moletsane. From his new allies, the Griqua and Koranna, he traded corn and other grain in return for horses and guns. The Sotho soon became excellent marksmen and within a few years had bred the tough 'Basotholand Pony' adapted to the rugged conditions of their mountainous country.

The French missionaries now also became valuable informants through whom Moshoeshoe familiarised himself with European politics and about the conflicts and rivalries dividing the Boers from the British. Using this intelligence, he began devising an elaborate diplomatic strategy aimed at isolating the Boers. As in the case of Matiwane and Shaka, Moshoeshoe realised that though the British were the greater threat, the Boers were the immediate danger which had to be dealt with. By isolating them from the British and exploiting the differences between them he would achieve two things: (1) He would buy time for the African people so that when the greater British danger presented itself they would have had time to prepare themselves to face it. (2) By dealing with the White invaders one at a time, the Africans would more easily defeat both rather than a united front of Boer and Briton.

Parallel with the diplomatic effort, Moshoeshoe began making military preparations. From 1838 onwards, all surplus Sotho grain went towards the purchase of firearms to narrow the disparity in arms between the Africans and the Whites. By 1843, the Sotho were known to have one of the largest arsenals amongst the independent African kingdoms.

In fact Sotho diplomacy resulted in war with the British before any real fight with the Boers. In their effort to isolate the Boers, the Sotho had opened negotiations with the British colonialists in the Cape. The outcome was a Treaty signed in December, 1843, by whose terms the British agreed to recognise and respect the Sotho borders. Five

years later, in 1848, the treacherous Sir Harry Smith, repudiated the treaty and annexed Transorangia as the 'Orange River Sovereignty'. In October of that year, Smith tried to impose an unequal treaty on the Sotho seizing large tracts of their land for the newly created British colony.

Moshoeshoe had seen this coming and prepared his allies for a confrontation. By this time the Batlokwa had been subdued. Mmanthatisi had been succeeded by her son Sekonyela and they had become allies of the Sotho. Satisfied that he was ready, Moshoeshoe rejected Smith's treaty. In a vain attempt to enforce it, Smith marched a column of troops into Lesotho in 1851. He was soundly beaten by the Sotho and their allies. The next year, still smarting from the defeat, three columns from the Cape under Cathcart, marched into Lesotho. At the battle of Berea, on 20th December, 1852, the Sotho fielded 6,000 horsemen besides foot soldiers. All the mounted troops were equipped with firearms.

Though the Sotho had off-set the usual disparity in arms between Black and White, their most effective weapons at Berea were still the traditional spear and battle axe. A squad of mounted British colonialist lancers was trapped in a pass at Berea. Descending upon them with these weapons, the Sotho warriors wiped it out almost to a man. Cathcart ran away with his tail between his legs, then advised the British government to abandon both the war and Smith's scheme to annex Transorangia.

Moshoeshoe had rightly foreseen that the effectiveness of his alliance system would persuade other African rulers to follow his example. Sekwati, king of the Bapedi, sought and made an alliance with Moshoeshoe. The political understanding was sealed with royal marriage in traditional fashion. Standing astride the cross-roads between the Cape and the people to the north, the west and the east, the Sotho could serve as a conduit for arms. After 1850, Pedi labourers regularly passed through Sotho territory en route to the Cape and later the diamond fields. With their wages they bought arms and ammunition. In this way, King Sekwati and his son Sekhukhuni were able to build

up an arsenal to defend themselves against the Boers in the Transvaal. To strengthen the general defences of the other African kingdoms, the Sotho dispatched their gunsmiths and marksmen to train troops in these areas. This was true in Zululand where Sotho marksmen helped Cetshwayo in developing two regiments equipped with guns.

In 1854, the British imperialists withdrew from north of the Orange river. Before their departure, they tried to arrange things in such a fashion that the Boers and Sotho would wear each other down in mutually ruinous wars, in fact trying to turn Moshoeshe's diplomacy against him. However, of the two the British favoured the Boers and wanted to make sure that the Sotho got the worst of any military confrontation. To make the Sotho more vulnerable, they made a pact with the Boers prohibiting the sale of arms and ammunition to the Sotho or any other independent African kingdom.

Unlike the present day 'embargo' against Smith and his Pretoria allies, the British imperialists strictly applied sanctions against Moshoeshe. To breach this embargo the Sotho encouraged smugglers and White deserters from the British colonists' armies to come into their territory. With the aid of these they could acquire guns and also learnt how to make ammunition and cast cannon.

The British-devised embargo bore fruit when war broke out between the Sotho and the Boer 'Free State' in 1858. While the Sotho had to make do with a trickle of guns bought from money-hungry smugglers, the Boers had been able to buy the most up to date weapons available on the world market. This included the new Schneider breech-loader and Enfield rifle. Apart from these they also had new British artillery pieces.

Despite these advantages, Sotho military skill and ingenuity won the day. From smugglers the Sotho had acquired a battery of six cannons from the Cape and had cast a brass three-pounder devised by White deserters and made by their own smiths. When the Boers advanced into Sotho territory, the foot-soldiers drew them deeper and deeper into

the mountains. Meanwhile, the Sotho mounted troops commanded by Moshoeshoe's son, Masopha, outflanked the advancing Boers and raided Boer farms in the enemy's rear. The Boers advance was stopped at Thaba Bosiu and while they made preparations to lay seige to the fortress, reports came in of Masopha's raids on their homes. Confused and terrified, the Boer army disintergrated into a hundred and one disputing factions and withdrew. From the west the Koranna under Taaibosch had also opened up a new front and harrassed the Boers. Faced with this prospect, the Boers asked for peace.

During the war of 1858, Moshoeshoe had fought with skill and from a position of immense moral superiority against his enemies. All onlookers,* he had also out-generaled the Boers, forcing them to choose between two equally untenable alternatives: a long seige of Thaba Bosiu with little prospect of success while their farms were reduced to ashes in their rear; or a hasty retreat to retrieve what was left of these but leaving the undefeated Sotho free to attack their retreating armies. In the face of this, Boer morale broke and their army fell to pieces. The Sotho had emerged victorious in spite of British treachery and Boer aggression.

The balance of local and international forces in the 19th century did not however favour African resistance, no matter how skillful. In the following two wars against the Boers, this factor was to come into greater prominence. The arms the Sotho acquired through smugglers were of poor quality. During this time almost all the armies of Europe were re-equipping and their old weapons had begun to flood the world market. The Boers, who could buy direct from the new arms dealers or through the Cape, readily acquired the up to date weapons they wanted. The smugglers sold the Sotho the outdated muzzle loaders. The disparity in arms now denied the Sotho victory. The price the Boers paid for aggression was however still high.

Unable to match Boer firepower, the Sotho had to retreat into the mountains and try to fight using the terrain. When the next war began in 1865, the Boers were drawn deep into Lesotho and laid

seige to Thaba Bosiu. From August of that year till April, 1866, the Boers made repeated attempts to storm the fortress. Moshoeshoe's armies beat off each attempt. In their last desperate try, the Boer commander, Louis Wepenaar, was killed and the Boer army smashed in the rout that followed. At this point the Sotho monarch decided to turn to diplomacy and suggested that the British be invited to mediate between them. At first the Boers refused, confident that the drawn out war had exhausted the Sotho and put forward a number of punitive conditions for peace. Unable to accept these terms, Moshoeshoe began making overtures to the British to take his country under their protection.

The Boers now turned to harrassing tactics hoping to give the Sotho no breathing space in which to recoup their losses from the war. At the same time the ambitious Shepstone decided to help the Boers by putting military pressure on Moshoeshoe's eastern flank. Under these stresses, the unity of the Sotho kingdom began to crack. First Molapo, one of Moshoeshoe's sons, residing closest to Natal, the Boers sued for a seperate peace in March, 1866. Soon after the other chiefs followed suit and finally Moshoeshoe himself on the 5th April, 1866.

Moshoeshoe had decided to seek peace in order "to sow corn" as the Sotho expressed it. Buying time was a costly exercise at this time. The Boers demanded the rich farmlands on the banks of the Caledon river and the annexation of Molapo's chiefdom as 'Free State' tributary. However, the Boers were unable to occupy their newly acquired farmlands and thus enabled the Sotho gradually to re-occupy the land.

In 1867, the Boers determined to put an end to this and marched their armies into Lesotho once again. To secure their rear, the Boers waged a war of pillage and destruction, killing and burning as they advanced. Fighting with skill, the Sotho armies slowed down the Boer advance until March, 1868, when Wodehouse, the new British commissioner at the Cape, decided to respond to Moshoeshoe's

overtures and declared Lesotho a British "Protect-
orate".

Moshoeshoe was determined that his country would not fall into the hands of the Boers and hoped to retain a great deal of control even under British protection. He had put a number of riders and conditions to his request for protection and though Lesotho lost its independence, some degree of local initiative remained. Two years after this, the great statesman died.

During his lifetime, Moshoeshoe had forged from the divided tribes and clans of the Sotho a unified kingdom which won prestige amongst all the peoples of southern Africa. With his system of alliances, he devised a strategy to defend African independence which proved itself at Viervoet, in 1851, and at Berea in 1852, and again in 1858. Had it been more widely applied, there is no knowing what other successes it might have won. By the skillful application of diplomacy and warfare, he preserved the integrity of what he had built. It is largely thanks to him that Lesotho is today an independent African state.

*Corr: Page 29, Second Para, third line.

... All onlookers, including the British imperialists, were forced to admit that he acted in self-defence. Militarily, he had also...

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THE STORMY POLITICAL LIFE OF A 97-YEAR-OLD SOWETO MAN HAS LEFT HIM TIRED BUT UNALTERED IN HIS IDEALS. NOT ONLY IS MR WILLIAM SEBINA LETLALO ONE OF THE OLDEST POLITICAL THINKERS IN SOWETO, BUT WHEN HE WAS PLACED UNDER HOUSE ARREST FOR FIVE YEARS AT HIS DUBE HOME, HE BECAME AN HISTORICAL FIGURE. MR LETLALO WAS A MEMBER OF THE BANNED AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS (SOUTH AFRICA) SINCE 1916. ...

"I AM NOW JUST ABOUT TO DIE AND WILL NOT BE IN A POSITION TO SEE MY PEOPLE LIBERATED. ALL I CAN SAY IS THAT THE TIME IS DRAWING NEARER WHEN ALL PEOPLE, IRRESPECTIVE OF THE COLOUR OF THEIR SKIN, SHALL LIVE TOGETHER IN PEACE AND HARMONY".