

THE SEKHUKHUNELAND TERROR

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BEHIND the mass murder trial of Bapedi tribesmen from the "sealed off" Reserve of Sekhukhuneland, lies the story of their people's resistance to the Nationalist Government's Bantu Authorities—and of the intrigue, intimidation and armed force which the Native Affairs Department has employed to make them accept this final tightening of the screws of White control over African tribal life.

The Bantu Authorities Act, which was passed in 1951 without any consultation with the African people, changed the traditional forms of African tribal and rural local government without providing for any form of African political expression. The Act called for the setting up of tribal and regional Authorities under chiefs or headmen, with all appointments—there are no elections—subject to Native Affairs Department (N.A.D.) approval. These Bantu 'Authorities' replace the traditional tribal gathering, or *kgotla*, as the final tribal forum, and also replace the considerable number of existing, partly elective, local and general councils, which had enabled many educated Africans to play a part in rural affairs. The Bantu Authorities Act is, in short, an unashamed buttressing of tribalism under the strictest governmental control. In this, it completes the process begun by General Hertzog's Native Administration Act of 1927, which brought tribal chiefs under the control of the Governor-General as their 'Great Chief', and made them liable to dismissal at the slightest sign of opposition.

To understand recent events in this loosely defined area, which lies in the Lulu mountains of the Eastern Transvaal, one must remember that its native Bapedi 'group' were amongst the very last of the Bantu tribes to be conquered by the White man in South Africa.

The Bapedi—whose chief Sekwati gave that most obdurate of all trekkers, Hendrik Potgieter, the land for his Andries-Ohrigstad headquarters in 1844—were, like many Bantu tribes, an amalgamation of several smaller groups. Their last great chief, Sekhukhune I, emulated Moshesh's Basutoland example by successfully amalgamating the Bapedi with the surrounding Bakoni and Batau people, permanently binding them by

'diplomatic marriages' with his sisters and relatives.

As is common in such processes of Bantu tribal growth, each original group retained its own name, but so successful and accepted was the fusion that when Sekhukhune defied the authority of Burgers' Transvaal Republic in an armed conflict lasting from 1876-78, the Bakoni people fought as part of the Bapedi.

Disputes about the succession of Sekhukhune I, who was finally defeated and deposed by the British, were settled in 1883; the Bapedi were disarmed; and for the past 75 years the inter-linked Bapedi, Bakoni and Batau peoples have lived in as much peace as the impact of successive White laws, taxes and agricultural betterment schemes permitted them.

Their health and education have, more recently, been helped by the establishment of the Jane Furse Mission Hospital and primary-cum-secondary school by the Community of the Resurrection, and the 200 miles which separate Mōhaletse, the royal seat, from Johannesburg have not proved too long for Bapedi working in the city to maintain contact with their homes, through a voluntary Association. Some few of these men inevitably became active in the African National Congress and filtered some of its ideas back to the Reserve, but, on the whole, life in Sekhukhuneland changed little over the years.

No sooner had the Bantu Education Act been passed in 1954, however, than the N.A.D. took over the Jane Furse Mission school run by "Father Huddleston's friends", and abolished its three high school classes. The principal, a Pedi, resigned in protest against the Act, and considerable resentment was aroused, fanned by the dictatorial manner in which the local N.A.D. agricultural officer is said to have imposed stock restrictions, new local taxes and even residential bars to the Bapedi's traditional polygamy.

When, therefore, Dr. Verwoerd himself held an *indaba* a few months later with Eastern Transvaal chiefs and counsellors to explain the blessings of his Bantu Authorities and Bantu Education Acts, the Bapedi representatives were unimpressed.

Their Regent, Moroamoche, returned home and called a 'report-back' meeting, the assembled tribe rejected the Bantu Authorities system—and the four year war of attrition with the N.A.D., which has turned Sekhukhuneland into to-day's Government-occupied armed camp, began.

A network of spies and informers was established throughout

the Reserve, but even by May, 1956, only four headmen had been persuaded to back Bantu Authorities. When attempts were made to trick Moroamoche into signing Bantu Authorities papers, his counsellors pulled him away physically, and in June, 1956, a tribal gathering once more decisively rejected Bantu Authorities, though a few more headmen had been 'won round'. In November, the local officials having failed, no less a person than Mr. C. W. Prinsloo, Chief Information Officer of the N.A.D., came to promise the Bapedi a railway bus service, a new secondary school, a clinic, a post office and a telephone if they accepted Bantu Authorities. The Bapedi, however, resolutely refused the bribe. Rumour spread that Moroamoche was to be deposed, and the tribal council dismissed its secretary and head councillor, whom it suspected of intriguing with Prinsloo to foist Bantu Authorities on them. Phetedi Thulare, a senior member of the royal house who had been working in Johannesburg as a messenger, became secretary in March, 1957—and was deported without warning exactly one month later.

Mr. Prinsloo's repeated unofficial offers, in the pseudo-Bantu idiom beloved by his chief Verwoerd, to bring the two deportees "out of his stomach" if the tribe accepted Bantu Authorities, were rejected; but by July 5 of last year, he had apparently bullied Moroamoche into submission. The setting up of a Bapedi Bantu Authority was gazetted. Some 8,000 members of the tribe then donned ceremonial dress and gathered from as far as 20 miles away, at Mohaletse, where they presented a petition bearing 30,000 signatures to N.A.D. officials, demanding the return of their exiled "sons".

Their petition was completely ignored and, although two new secondary schools were set up, matters came to a head at the end of last November. On the 29th, the Bapedi Authority was disestablished "for lack of support," and on the 30th the regional Chief Native Commissioner, backed by an armed police convoy, informed Moroamoche at Mohaletse that he was suspended as Regent for a month. Simultaneously, seven men were arrested, and two of them, including the new tribal secretary, immediately deported. The five others were gaoled on charges of obstructing the authorities. It is perhaps significant that one of these five subsequently made application to the Supreme Court, on December 4, when his counsel alleged that the police at Schoonoord, the Sekhukhuneland administrative centre, had refused to give him access to his client. The

matter was settled out of Court after ready access to the accused was promised, and the State agreed to bear the costs of the application. In February of this year, three of the five men were acquitted and minor fines imposed on the other two.

Before this, however, the Government decided to reverse the history of over a century, and to facilitate the setting up of Bantu Authorities by separating the 'Bapedi' from the 'Bakoni'. The removal of the latter to the Nebo part of Sekhukhuneland under their "own" Native Commissioner was begun, but they have reportedly been trickling back to their old homes recently.

At the end of last year Moroamoche's suspension was extended for another three months, and after this the Government, which was simultaneously encountering stiff resistance from the Bafurutse around Zeerust, quickened the pace of its persuasion.

Acting under a law of 1927, Dr. Verwoerd took powers on February 28 of this year to "seal off" any Native area at will. Within such an area, "Any person who . . . makes any statement, verbally or in writing—

- (a) which is intended or is *likely* to have the effect of subverting, or *interfering* with, the authority of the State, the Native Commissioner or any other officer of the Department of Native Affairs, or of any chief or headman; or
- (b) which consists of or contains any threat that any person will be subject to any boycott, or will suffer any violence, loss, disadvantage or *inconvenience* on account of such person's obedience to the State or its officers, the legislature or his chief or headman"; (my italics)

becomes liable to a fine of £300 and three years imprisonment. Cases under this proclamation, on which comment would be superfluous, would in the ordinary course be heard by the local Native Commissioner doubling up as Magistrate.

On March 7 this proclamation was applied to the 'Bapedi' part of Sekhukhuneland (as well as to Zeerust and a third Reserve), and since then, reliable first hand reports have been understandably hard to come by. However, the Government's publicly taken measures speak for themselves.

On March 11 Moroamoche won a Supreme Court appeal against his continued suspension, on the grounds that the Government had not given him the chance to defend himself, demanded by the law it had invoked. With impressive

promptness, the Government re-suspended him on the very next day—this time under a different law which contained no such 'democratic' safeguards.

Five days later the African National Congress was declared an illegal organization in Sekhukhuneland—once more through a mere proclamation in a Government Gazette—and anyone even giving its 'thumbs up' sign or 'Afrika!' greeting became liable to a fine of £300 and three years imprisonment.

On March 21 Moroamoche was deported, without any warning, to Cala in the Transkei, together with his wife and one child; and shortly afterwards, on April 11, the Bantu Trust, which is in effect the N.A.D., took over all functions of the disestablished Bapedi Authority.

One would think that there was nothing except remaining alive which the Bapedi could now do, but apparently they were not yet crushed. At Easter the primary school at Mohaletse was permanently closed down as a result of a boycott, and its 300 children reportedly barred from all other schools.

Heavy police reinforcements were brought into the area and, after several 'nominees' had refused the position, an attempt was made to set up a retired Pedi police sergeant as acting Regent of the tribe, which promptly rejected him. As the boycott of schools became general, heavy police reinforcements took over the Reserve, headed by a special mobile column under Detective Sergeant Jan Hendrick van Rooyen, already notorious for his unbridled terrorism whilst commanding a similar force in Zeerust.

Tension rose as police raids increased, and the by now inevitable flow of blood began on May 16. An armed police detachment arrested Phasoane Nkadimeng, a minor chief who had been threatened with deposition because of his opposition to Bantu Authorities, as well as his brother and a senior counsellor. Phasoane's villagers apparently rushed up, surrounded the police van into which their chief had been thrust, and held it to prevent his being driven off. What followed is a sadly familiar story. The police claim that stones began to fly, and that they were reluctantly forced to open fire in self-defence. Four men were shot dead, and six men and a woman wounded. The police van roared off, and the enraged crowd took its revenge on the nearest Government 'collaborationists'. The wave of retributory violence spread, and for several days assaults and arson swept the Reserve. Seven more tribesmen

died, and many were seriously wounded.

Convoys of fresh police reinforcements were rushed to Sekhukhuneland under the personal command of top brass, including Col. C. de Wet van Wyk, Deputy Commissioner of the South African Police, and the arrests of the tribesmen now facing murder charges began—many of them reportedly ‘smelt out’ by ‘loyal’ headmen.

On May 26 yet another Government Gazette proclamation made the carrying of “dangerous weapons”, which include the heavy ‘kierrie’ sticks and indispensable knives habitually carried by tribesmen, punishable by a year’s imprisonment and/or a £100 fine or whipping.

I will not attempt to recount the many harsh sentences which have been imposed by local courts there under the various and incredibly restrictive decrees now in force. In some cases, the timely intervention of White lawyers has led to the noting of appeals, but the authorities alone know how many other convictions there have been. Meetings of more than ten Africans have, of course, been banned together with all other possibilities of even verbal protest, and those reporters who have been allowed into the area entered it under the strictest official supervision. Their ‘sight-seeing tour’, though otherwise barren, did provide one final touch to fill in the public’s picture of enlightened White guardianship.

Standing in front of a smoking, sealed-off Reserve occupied by sten-gun carrying police, Mr. C. W. Prinsloo and his fellow Native Affairs Department ‘information’ officers explained what the “real” cause of the trouble in Sekhukhuneland was. The 20,000 strong Bapedi, said Mr. Prinsloo, were (after 75 disarmed years of White rule) trying to maintain an “*asegai* empire” over their 280,000 strong Bakoni neighbours, and were therefore against the “progress” brought about by new chiefs appointed by the Government. But the terrorized Bakoni need not worry, Mr. Prinsloo assured the world, for the Government would protect them and deliver them from oppression.

I know of at least one Bakoni headman who will be glad of Mr. Prinsloo’s assurances—one Frank Maserumule, who, after being rewarded for his espousal of Bantu Authorities by being made chief of a brand new village which the N.A.D. had set up at Nebo for the Bakoni it had forced to move from northern Sekhukhuneland, was forced to flee for his life from the wrath of his enforced subjects.