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# LESOTHO



VILLAGES  
OF THE  
PARAMOUNT CHIEFS  
OF  
BASUTOLAND

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BASUTOLAND  
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## VILLAGES OF THE PARAMOUNT CHIEFS OF BASUTOLAND

### I. BUTHA BUTHE

by

JAMES WALTON

UNTIL the time of Moshesh, the first Paramount Chief of the baSotho, Basutoland was occupied by a number of individual tribes, each owing allegiance to its own chief. Moshesh himself belonged to the baMokoteli, a minor clan of the baMonaheng branch of the baKoena, but his great-grandfather, Mualle, who married the widow of Motloang, came from the Nguni amaHlubi. Mualle's son, Motsuane, better known as Peete, was brought up by his uncle Mokoteli and on the death of Mokoteli should have inherited the chieftainship but he was a man of weak character and the authority passed to his younger sons, Libe and Mokhachane. Mokhachane settled at Menkhoaneng, near Leribe and it was there that the child, Lepoqo, later to be known as Moshesh, was born.

Menkhoaneng was the place of the *monkhoana* trees, trees which have invariably been associated with the chieftainship of Basutoland. Mokoteli himself held his *khotla*, court, under the shade of *monkhoana* trees and his village was also called Menkhoaneng, a term used in derision by his son Thamae. Nevertheless, in view of the fact that Mokoteli, the founder of the baMokoteli tribe, had *monkhoana* trees at his *khotla* and Moshesh, the first Paramount Chief of the baSotho, was born at Menkhoaneng, the name became symbolical of Sotho chieftainship, and most chiefs subsequently planted a *monkhoana* tree in their *khotla*, as a token of respect to Moshesh and as a visible symbol of their authority and lineage.

Ultimately Moshesh became more powerful than his father and about 1820, after having defeated the baSekake, he established his own village at Butha Buthe. Continual pressure from his rivals, the baTlokoa, ultimately forced him to select a new site, the mountain fortress of Thaba Bosiu, which remained the headquarters of Moshesh throughout the most eventful period of Basutoland's history.

Usually when a baSotho chief's son had been circumcised he moved with his initiation regiment and founded his own village. This was largely the result of a desire on the part of the young chief to be removed from the influence of his father's advisers and widows, although Sheddick contends that the real reason lay in 'the field of magic' (1). The young chief believed that his father's spirit continued to occupy his home after his death and that any intrusion would be strongly resented. Furthermore, the various medicines used to protect a village are considered to be effective only for the chief for whom they were originally intended.

On the death of his father the new chief assumes the chieftainship and settles at his grandfather's village, where he builds his own huts as an adjunct to the older village, which is eventually allowed to fall into disuse. He is responsible for the welfare of his mother, who retains the title of *mofumahali*, chieftainess, and for the widows of his father but he has no obligations towards any of his grandfather's widows who may still be living in the village to which he moves. They are left in the care of his uncles.

This settlement pattern has rarely been followed fully by the Paramount Chiefs of Basutoland for a variety of reasons. Moshesh's eldest son, Letsie I, was settled at Mokhoarane to watch over the first missionaries of the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society who were granted the site of Morija in 1833. In 1858 his village was sacked by the Boers as an act of reprisal for the defeat they had suffered at 'The Hell', and he then built a new village, Matsieng (the place of Letsie). When he succeeded his father in 1870 he remained at Matsieng and he placed his eldest son, Lerotholi, at Likhoele, near Mafeteng. Lerotholi changed the name of his village to Makeneng (the place of Lekena, Lerotholi's other name) (Fig. 1).

In 1891, when Lerotholi became Paramount Chief, he would normally have returned to the village of his grandfather, Moshesh, but at the time Thaba Bosiu was occupied by Masupha, the 'Wildebeest', who steadfastly opposed all attempts to dislodge him from the mountain. Lerotholi therefore built his village at Makeneng, a few miles from Matsieng, and Likhoele reverted to its original name.

Lerotholi's son, Letsie II, occupied his father's village at Likhoele but, on succeeding to the chieftainship in 1905, he moved to a new village, Phahameng, on a rocky shelf overlooking Morija, thereby returning to the vicinity of his grandfather's first settlement at Mokhoarane. Letsie II died in 1913 and he was succeeded by his younger brother, Griffith, who was then living at Phamong in the Orange Valley. Griffith established his village in a hollow below his grandfather's village at Matsieng, the new capital being called Matsieng New Town to distinguish it from Letsie's Matsieng Old Town.



could hardly have claimed the title of Paramount Chief of the baSotho then. Butha Buthe mountain, situated about two miles south-east of Butha Buthe camp, is a fairly flat-topped sandstone hill surrounded by steep scarps (Plate I). As is common with such mountains in Basutoland access to the summit is gained by a number of passes excavated out of the crumbling dolerite dykes by which it is traversed (Fig. 2). The most important and the most easily accessible is that on the north-east face, immediately above Mopeli's village. A boulder wall was built across the top of the pass, reminiscent of similar walls to be built later by Moshesh across the Khubelu Pass at Thaba Bosiu, which also follows a dolerite dyke. On a sheltered and protected ledge behind this wall are the foundations of the tiny stone huts of the look-outs who guarded the two gaps which converge at this point.

Moshesh's village occupied the gentle grassy slope above the pass. The ruined walls still remaining show that Moshesh's own homestead comprised a group of small circular stone-walled huts, probably with conical thatched roofs, arranged in a semi-circle around a large stone-walled cattle kraal (Plate II). The huts of Moshesh's followers were probably beehive huts of wattle and thatch which have long since disappeared but the stone cattle kraals, with which they were associated, are still scattered over the slope above Moshesh's homestead. On the western side are the ruins of another small settlement, similar to that protecting the pass above Mopeli's village, which housed the men who watched over the western approaches.

A number of caves, excavated out of the Cave Sandstone on the western scarp, were fronted with boulder walls and were certainly occupied when Moshesh was compelled to defend the mountain. The largest of these caves, Moshesh's Cave, is a vast deep shelter commanding extensive views over the western approaches and nearby a second dolerite dyke affords access to the summit.

Soon after Moshesh had established himself with his followers at Butha Buthe he was attacked by the amaNgwane, under Matuoane, and, according to Nehemiah Moshesh, the Nguni warriors captured some 2,000 head of cattle. After they had departed, Moshesh, contrary to the wishes of his people, sent six oxen to Ma u ane as a tribute, a gesture which ensured Moshesh's security from attack during the troubled years of the *Lifaqane* which followed.

In 1822 Butha Buthe was subjected to an attack by the baTlokoa who were repulsed with heavy losses and pursued by Moshesh and his young warriors back to their own mountain stronghold near Ficksburg. There the baTlokoa rallied under the leadership of an old woman, Maseile, and at the celebrated 'Battle of the Pots' Moshesh was routed and forced to flee to the mountains. Eventually he returned to his father's village at Menkhoaneng but in the following year he re-established his own village at Butha Buthe. No sooner had he done so, however, than he was again attacked by the baTlokoa.



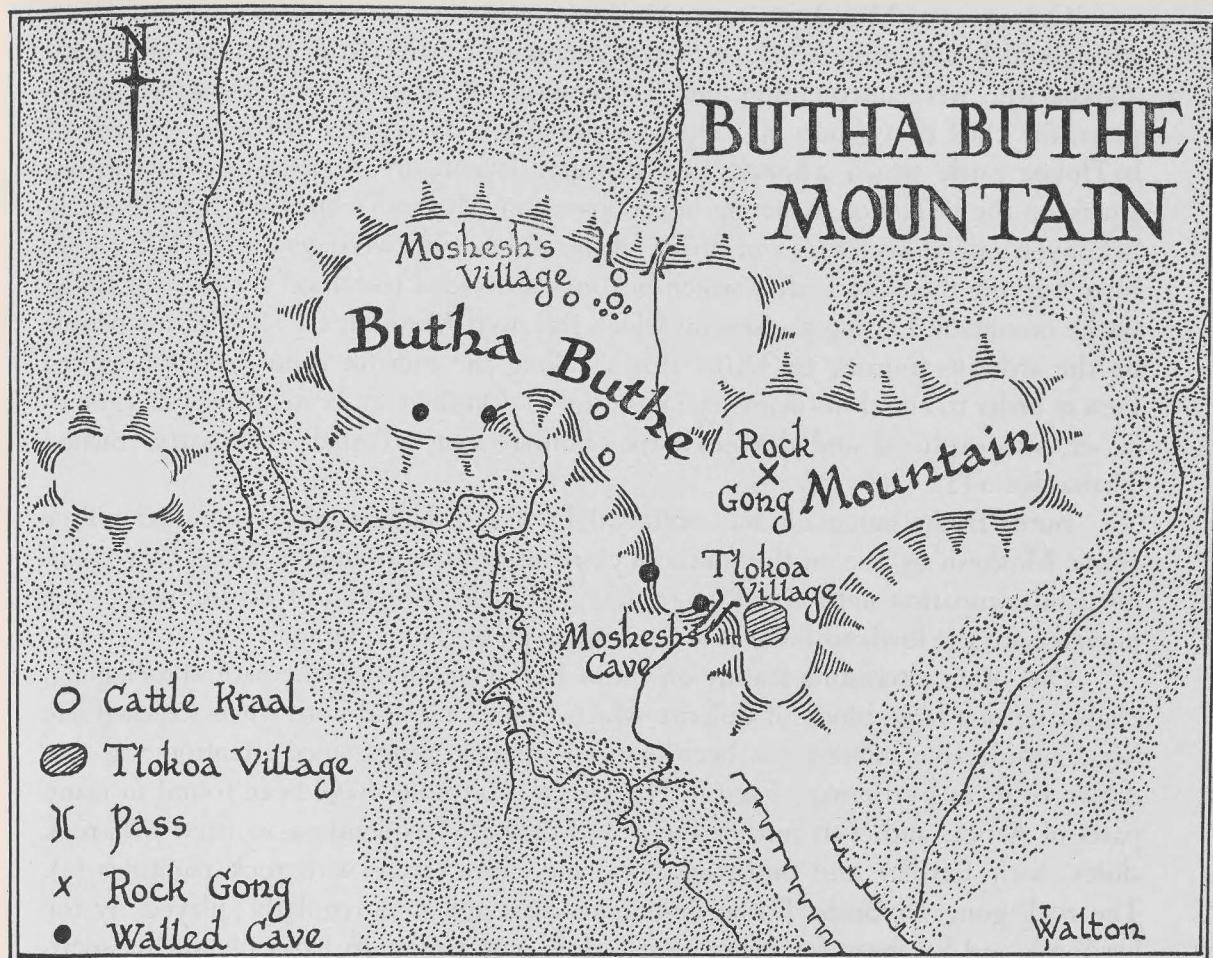
Ruins of Moshesh's Village on Butha Buthe Mountain. Remains of hut walls in foreground; main cattle kraal in right middle distance; and other kraal ruins on slope behind. (Photo by James Walton)



Rock Gong on Butha Buthe Mountain (Photo by James Walton)







Moshesh fortified the passes leading to Butha Buthe mountain and the walls which still remain were most probably erected at that time. As a further protection he acceded to the wishes of an old woman of his tribe who claimed that she could call up a serpent, *kokoi*, from the river which flowed between the camp of the baTlokoa and Moshesh's mountain. Accordingly, with a male companion, Rapoho, she moved down to the river with the necessary medicines but the baTlokoa evinced no sign of fear and promptly captured and killed the old woman.

Several abortive attacks were made by the baTlokoa and eventually they destroyed the crops in the fields surrounding the mountain and subjected it to a siege. Gradually, day by day, Moshesh's reserves of grain were being depleted and his people were faced with either starvation or surrender and ultimate slaughter. It was at this period that news was brought to Moshesh of a more impregnable mountain fortress, Thaba Bosiu, and he immediately sent out Mohale to explore the possibilities.

On receiving Mohale's report, Moshesh decided to move his people to the new stronghold but in order to do so it was necessary to divert the attention of the baTlokoa who were surrounding him. To achieve this he invited the assistance of Sepetja, the chief of a group of Zulus, tempting him by reports of the large herds of baTlokoa cattle which awaited easy capture. Eventually Sepetja made a surprise attack on the baTlokoa, inflicting heavy losses on Moshesh's enemies, but ultimately Sekonyela rallied his forces and drove off the Zulus. For two days the baTlokoa were busy burying their dead, after which Sekonyela decided to call off the siege of Butha Buthe mountain. During the respite which followed Moshesh set off with his people on the arduous journey to Thaba Bosiu, taking the difficult route over the Lipetu Pass in order to avoid his many enemies (Fig. 1). On the way Peete, Moshesh's grandfather, was captured and devoured by cannibals but eventually the party reached Thaba Bosiu (2).

Butha Buthe mountain was occupied by the baTlokoa who built their village above Moshesh's Cave on the southern extremity of the mountain. There they continued in occupation until about 1942 when Moholo Moraki and his followers were moved onto the lowland below the western slope of the mountain.

One other interesting feature on Butha Buthe mountain is the natural rock gong, consisting of a large block of dolerite which emits a musical note when struck (Plate III). Considerable interest has been evinced in rock gongs since attention was first drawn to them by Bernard Fagg in Nigeria (3). Examples have been found in many parts of Africa, and even further afield, and they are frequently associated with rock slides, with fertility and initiation cults, and more rarely with rock paintings (4). The rock gong on Butha Buthe mountain, although it is regularly played by the herdboys and has been for many years, does not appear to have any such associations so far as I could ascertain. Chief Kuini Mopeli, who drew my attention to the gong, stated that it had never been associated with initiation ceremonies or with rock slides and, although an ideal sloping rock surface outcrops immediately below the gong, it shows no signs of having been used as a slide.

In conclusion I would like to thank Chief Kuini Mopeli for conducting me to the various features of interest on Butha Buthe mountain and Mr. Edward Waddington, the District Commissioner at Butha Buthe, for providing transport.

References

1. Sheddick, Vernon : *Land Tenure in Basutoland*, London, 1954, p. 66.
2. The historical details here given are based largely on Ellenberger, D. F. and MacGregor, J. C. : *History of the Basuto*, London, 1912.
3. Fagg, Bernard : The Discovery of Multiple Rock Gongs in Nigeria, *Man*, Vol. LVI, 1956, pp. 17 - 18.
4. For an interesting summary of the literature see Goodwin, A. J. H. : Rock Gongs, Chutes, Paintings and Fertility, *S. A. Archaeol. Bull.*, Vol. XII, 1957, pp. 37 - 40.



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