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Mothering as Motive and Mechanism

Women's Contributions to a Tswana Diaspora in Colonial South Africa

Mothering in the African diaspora is a particularly important topic as the international diaspora literature tends to neglect gender and privileges the male gaze (Anthias, 1998). Although the African diaspora is often understood as cross-Atlantic communities (See Gilroy, 1993), many transnational, diasporic communities arose within this spatially large and ethnically diverse continent as well. For instance, the Tswana diaspora in colonial South Africa originated from the Bechuanaland Protectorate. This article on mothering in a Tswana diaspora not only contributes a gender analysis to the diaspora literature, but reveals the significance of mothering to the dynamics of the diaspora. It also contributes to the motherhood literature, as this extensive body of literature tends to ignore both African experiences and mothering experiences within diasporas (Chodorow, 1978; Cosslett, 1994; Daley, 1982; Yural Davis, 1996; Bassin, Honey, and Kaplan, 1994). Within the colonial Tswana diaspora, Tswana mothering was both the dominant motive for women seeking transnational work and the mechanism that made circulation possible.

Tswana diaspora in South Africa

Historically, South Africa's borders were relatively porous. Despite severe and heavily enforced immigration restrictions, both "legal" and "illegal" migrants from all over the continent found their way into the "land of milk and honey." Although many BaTswana (Tswana people) resided in the Western Transvaal, the BaTswana from the Bechuanaland Protectorate formed a distinct diaspora within South Africa, rarely entitled to citizenship. After crossing the transnational divide, this diaspora mainly settled just over the border in farms and small towns in the Western Transvaal. Many women and men eventually migrated to the Witwatersrand (Rand), particularly Johannes-

burg, the location of the highest paying jobs on the continent. This period of migration stretched from roughly the mid-nineteenth century until present times (Cockerton, 1996). The Tswana diaspora in South Africa remained closely connected to their homeland. While reasons behind this connection differed within the community, it could be argued that women's ties were particularly strong as mothering played a pivotal role in this diaspora (Cockerton, 1995).

The force of congregation was very powerful. Tswana women congregated in certain towns and areas, socialized with one another, depended upon each other for assistance, and kept alive talk of home. Most women actively participated in church groups and burial societies on the Rand. In fact, women often sought a South African church of the same denomination as their village church. As in Bechuanaland, these were the main forums for women to actively participate in their society. With people often moving backwards and forwards, there would also have always been a fresh flow of news from the home village. These were not "marooned" immigrant communities but groups of people or a dynamic diaspora in constant touch with home through a vibrant oral network.

Tswana *dikgosi* (chiefs) tried to reach out to the Rand by making visits, collecting taxes, and organizing cultural activities (Miles, 1991).¹ Here, they "inform[ed] BaKgatla of the activities and developments at home" and "attend[ed] social activities such as dances, films, etc...." (Morton, 1982). Ntonono Jack Ramotswetla recalled, "[*Kgosi*] Isang used to visit Johannesburg and he had a house in Newclare. Because he could not use the chief hotel in Johannesburg, he had to buy his own house" (Morton, 1982). It was very common for the mines to sponsor visits by chiefs from the Transkei and Basutoland to visit their followers and to collect tribute. Schapera (1947) discussed how *dikgosi* visited mines in the Western Transvaal to collect tax money. BaKgatla also stationed a "chief's representative" on the Rand. Originally, BaKgatla in Johannesburg unofficially chose the most senior royal "for leadership and guidance," then a "chief's representative" was officially elected (Morton, 1982).

The Tswana diaspora in colonial South Africa was heterogeneous, with spatial and temporal variations, and divided by social axes such as class, age, and gender. Recently, several theorists on diasporas depict the diaspora experience as marked by heterogeneity and diversity rather than essentialism and reductionism (see Hall, 1990; Cohen, 1997; Brah, 1996; Clifford, 1994). Diaspora identities are constantly producing and reproducing themselves. In particular, women's experiences in the Tswana diaspora differed sharply from that of men's experiences.

Gender is crucial to analyse within diasporas, as Anthias (1998) convincingly argues, since the diaspora literature has consistently failed to analyse gender. She argues that the first level of analysis of "gendering the diaspora" requires a consideration of how men and women of the diaspora are inserted

into the social relations of the country of settlement, within their own self-defined diaspora communities, and within the diaspora's transnational networks. Anthias (1998) provides a fascinating agenda for gendering the diaspora. Other sets of loci which could be added to her agenda include a mapping of the spatial dynamics of the diaspora, and an analysis of the shifting gender composition of a diaspora, along with some implications of this transformation. For instance, most Tswana women initially engaged in a women-only diasporic network then eventually participated in a mixed diaspora some time after settlement in South Africa.

Tswana women's diaspora in South Africa

One of the dominant characteristics of the Tswana diaspora in colonial South Africa is its highly gendered nature. For many women, migration was largely unauthorised and initially took the form of escape from patriarchal controls. Groups of young women literally "ran away" by foot in the middle of the night. In the 1920s and 1930s, the chiefs issued a series of unwritten, though widely known (if not observed), decrees prohibiting females from leaving their homes without the consent of their guardians (Botswana National Archives, 1933a). These legal measures coincided with the period when Tswana women were migrating to South African cities in rapidly growing numbers. These restrictions were part of a broader resurgence of neotraditionalism, designed to shore up the erosion of chiefly powers. Especially with respect to migrant women, *dikgosi* began to enforce a stricter interpretation of Tswana tradition. The most extreme view held that women were "not expected (indeed she is forbidden) to earn a living" (Botswana National Archives, n.d.). *Mosadi* (adult females) was reinterpreted from "the one who is prohibited from leaving" to "the one who stays and tends the home" guardians (Botswana National Archives, 1933a). The chiefs were particularly exercised by the growing trend towards unauthorized, unmarried women finding employment on the Rand.

From the available evidence it is impossible to accurately reconstruct how often Tswana women migrants went to South Africa during the course of their lifetime nor how long they stayed there when they did go. What is certain is that the periodicity of women's migrancy was not as regular or predictable as that of most men who left (and returned) on fixed contracts. Since women's migration was far less regulated than men's and their ability to return was determined more by their own resources than those of a recruiting agency, they tended to stay away for longer periods than men. From his own biased perspective, *Kgosi* Bathoen criticized the fluidity and variability of women's movements, and erroneously attributed their longer stays in South Africa to greater job satisfaction rather than often severe economic desperation:

Women seem to remain away much longer than men, because they mostly work as housemaids and cooks, and these particular employments are easy for them. The men at the mines, on the other

hand, find conditions unsatisfactory, and return home on the completion of their contracts, unless they stay longer to acquire more money for some special purpose. Women seem to move to and fro more leisurely than men, since they are not bound by obligations. (*Ksogi Bathoen II* qtd. in Schapera, 1947)

Individual migrant histories also seem to have varied quite considerably from woman to woman. Although it seems likely that as time passed women tended to go to South Africa more often and for longer periods. Schapera thought that women generally remained away much longer than men (*Ksogi Bathoen II* qtd. in Schapera, 1947). In fact, the pattern was highly variable. Some women while away in South Africa returned to Bechuanaland every weekend or every month; others, like the men, returned only once or twice a year (Cockerton, 1992a, 1992b, 1993a; Morton, 1982). At the other extreme was one woman who returned to Bechuanaland in 1927 having been away for 30 years, though this was clearly the exception (Morton, 1982). In sum, most women engaged in an irregular and extended form of circular migration between their rural Bechuanaland village and their final destination point.

The 1946 Census estimated that over two-thirds (70 percent) of women had been absent from Bechuanaland for less than four years (Bechuanaland Protectorate Government). Almost certainly, this was not the first time absence from Bechuanaland for many of these women. Rather what the figures seem to represent is the fact that when they did migrate, the vast majority of women did not stay away for more than four years. This conclusion would have to be tempered by the fact that the 70 per cent would also include young women who had migrated within the previous four years for the first time and who might well eventually have stayed away much longer.

Schapera suggested that the type of destination influenced the length of absence:

The general impression I received from conversation with people both here and in other tribes is that women going to urban areas, and particularly the Rand, [to work as domestic servants] tend to stay away for several years consecutively, if they come back at all. On the other hand, those seeking work on farms, etc., in the Western Transvaal normally return after a couple of months, usually at the end of harvesting season. (1947: 72)

Schapera's commonsense argument seems to miss the fact that by the 1930s and 1940s, many women working on the farms were simply using this as a stepping stone to more distant urban destinations (Cockerton, 1997). Most Tswana women eventually returned home after some time abroad: very few, in fact, remained permanently at their South African destination. Some, probably a very small minority, never returned, taking up permanent residence in South

Africa.² In 1943, Schapera recorded the names of 29 Tlokwa women who people called *makgelwa* (deserters) (1947: 69). Except for one divorcee, and another who had deserted her husband, they were all single when they left (Schapera, 1947: 69). Of these, eight had been away for over ten years, and the remainder for less than that time. The evidence, limited as it is, seems to indicate that only a small minority of women were *makgelwa* but that it may have been more common in the 1930s than it had been before. Even the fact that they were defined in Bechuanaland as *makgelwa* did not necessarily mean that they did not return at some later point or keep contact with other people from Bechuanaland while at work. Indeed, the striking thing about Tswana women's migration is how, even if they stayed away for long periods of time, they did not cut their links with home and eventually returned. As one informant commented, "most of them build themselves homes in Botswana. The main purpose to come here is to work. They like to go back to their farms"(Cockerton, 1993b).

Those Bechuanaland women who remained permanently on the Rand had arrived initially as single women, often met Tswana men from the Transvaal, married, stayed at their husbands' place, and raised their children on the Rand. Others had been very poor in Bechuanaland, and came from large families of seven to twelve siblings. Still others, such as widows or childless women, had been ostracized in their rural villages and saw little reason to go back. But even those who made a conscious decision to stay in South Africa did not always cut their links with the Protectorate, though the pressures to redefine South Africa as "home" were considerable. As Emily Moralo explained, "According to our custom, the wife follows the husband. Her husband is from South Africa, so she will be buried here. This is her home. Those who return to Botswana have husbands who were born in Botswana" (Cockerton, 1993c)

Tswana women's migration was rarely a permanent move. This raises an apparent contradiction: female migration was an escape from patriarchy yet, at the same time, women maintained strong links with home. And these bonds were preserved not simply because the patriarchs wanted it that way (see Cockerton, 1995). Several factors combine to explain this paradox, but the primary reason was women's responsibility to their children. And the new household structure and mothering arrangement was the vehicle by which this responsibility was achieved.

New mothering in new households

As the twentieth century progressed and patriarchal controls began to erode, men's migration to the South African mines disrupted traditional marriage patterns in colonial Botswana. Men were often absent for long periods of time, and increasingly found lovers, partners, and sometimes wives from various ethnic backgrounds in South Africa. Married women "left behind" in Bechuanaland increasingly complained to their chiefs that their husbands refused to return home or send money to support them and their children.

Single women found fewer single men left in their rural villages. The sizeable exodus of Tswana men facilitated the formation of new household arrangements and categories of women in colonial Botswana. In particular, the numbers of single, divorced, widowed, and separated women began to mount as women increasingly rejected male controls and struck out on their own (Kossoudji and Mueller, 1979). Some returned to their natal family; others formed their own households. A sizeable body of associated literature on female heads of households in colonial Botswana indicates that male labour migration increased the vulnerability and poverty of these households that lacked access to land and cattle (Brown, 1989, 1983; Murray, 1981; Izzard, 1985; Hansen and Ashbaugh, 1991; Glickman, 1988; Koussoudji and Mueller, 1983). Most women nourished close links with their natal family. For many of them, the previous norm of marriage and gradual incorporation into the husband's lineage was less important than their dependable natal ties. Women cultivated strong links with their own parents, siblings, and children.

Increasingly, divorcees returned to their natal home or unmarried mothers formed their own households within their parents' or male guardians' compound (Cooper, 1979; Brown, 1980). Schapera and Roberts (1975) discovered that between one quarter and one half of households contained unmarried women with children before the second world war. This trend accelerated during the following decades.³ Although male relatives cared for most unwed mothers, older daughters maintained increasingly close economic ties with their mothers (Schapera and Roberts, 1975). As traditional marriage began to disintegrate, more unwed mothers lived with their mothers rather than in the traditional patrilocal home. This created new genealogical connections through women, as children born with no bridewealth took their mother's name (Glickman, 1988). A pattern of matrilineality increasingly developed where the female line decided descent.

In response to the erosion of traditional marriage arrangements, women increasingly began to form their own female-headed households. Some of these households were the poorest in Bechuanaland (O'Connor, 1991; Peters, 1983).⁴ As kinship ties loosened, "husbandless" women could rely little upon their male kin to help them with difficult chores. They also had less cash than male-headed households to pay workers to do certain tasks (Schapera, 1947: 178). These women devised alternate strategies such as female work parties to compensate for the lack of male assistance. But ultimately, the pressure to earn cash was much greater in female-headed households, and many female heads (and especially their daughters) were forced to migrate (VanderWees, 1981).

Women often returned to their parents' home in Bechuanaland to give birth to their children. They might stay with the infant for up to six months and then leave it with the grandmother in her village and return to South Africa (Cockerton, 1993d). Flora Rambotha, for example, first ran away to South Africa in 1940 and did not return permanently to Botswana until 1992. Over the years, she had eight children, all of which she delivered in Odi, in

Bechuanaland (Cockerton, 1993e). One informant commented that most Bokaa women in South Africa would “come back being pregnant... They came to their parents so that they can take care of the babies” (Cockerton, 1993f).

Many women did not, or could not, raise their children in the urban areas. White employers of domestics did not usually allow women to keep their children with them (see Cock, 1980). Towns and farms almost always lacked adequate daycare, health facilities, and schools for black children. The South African urban environment was often violent, unsafe, and unhygienic. One Phokeng woman, Ernestina Mekgwe, summarized her distaste of urban life:

Life was not pleasant in the townships, you'd find a man and his wife drunkenly fighting and swearing at each other in the street. The next day another man is beating his wife because she had slept next door with another man. Being in the midst of such decadence is just not for me. I come from Phokeng, it's a small community where people are friendly and respect each other. I also don't like to see my children growing up in such an environment. (Mashabela, 1983).

Children were therefore often sent back to be raised in their home village in Bechuanaland (Cockerton, 1993g). The Protectorate schools, meagre though they were, far exceeded anything available on white farms or in towns.

Thus, one new household form in the colonial period consisted of a three-generational matrilineal relation linking daughters, mothers, and grandmothers (Cooper, 1979).⁵ All three generations eventually worked in South Africa. Pauline Peters defines these female-headed households as matrifocal households based on consanguineal links rather than conjugal bonds (Peters, 1983). The high status given to the position of mother, both in the family and in the wider society, fashioned the basis of matrifocality (Larsson, 1989). Wendy Izzard argues that increased matrifocality corresponded with the declining social and economic importance of the father figure within Tswana society (Izzard, 1982). It was also especially pervasive within female migrant households (Cockerton, 1995). Even on an interpersonal basis, village relations shifted more towards matrifocality.⁶ Within this context, women's casual, daily, friendship networks greatly infused the village's social life with female social bonds (Maher, 1974).

These new female-centred families supported female migration by providing a stable rural home where female relatives raised a migrants' children. They, in turn, came to depend economically and materially upon female migrants. These older women were especially dependent upon female migrants' remittances. Young women initially depended upon their female relatives in the natal home to raise their own children and later, when they were older, depended on their own children's labour. Women actively nourished these new household arrangements and female-centred ties of dependence. Most of a migrant woman's earnings went to the support and education of her children. Indeed,

women's remittances from South Africa often exceeded men's despite their lower earning power (Sefiwa, 1992; Syson, 1973). Tswana women were far more diligent remitters than men, often bringing furniture, clothing, and cash from South Africa (Cockerton, 1995).

Despite migrant women's continuing strong links with their natal homes, and the fact that their remittances were proportionally much larger than those of male migrants, the Tswana chiefs actively invoked images of migrant women as irresponsible. *Kgosi* Marobela painted a vivid picture of the irresponsibility of young women, noting that "these days these children run about all over, doing things they should not do, being young womenfolk who should be responsible women in the future, responsible in the way of bringing up a responsible generation" (Bechuanaland Protectorate African Advisory Council, 1957).

Ironically, both colonial and indigenous patriarchal authorities portrayed migrant women as immoral, untraditional, and irresponsible, in an attempt to reinforce crumbling patriarchal controls over women's behaviour (Kobokobo, 1982; Eales, 1989). British administrators agreed with such representations of the immorality of migrant women, as did South African officials (Botswana National Archives, 1935; Helping Hand Club for Native Girls, 1928; Eales, 1989). Native authorities shared the Union government's view that urban life was corrupting for women and children. A rural upbringing was perceived as inherently superior and more "suitable" for African women. A common belief was that returning migrants brought "bad" changes—such as "untraditional" marriages—into the village (London School of Economics, 1935). This came from contact with foreign people, who were typified as "rough" characters. These "strange" urban ways, according to *Kgosi* Seboko Mokgosi of the Bamalete, "pollute[d] the morality of the rising generation" (Steenkamp: 188). Tswana men and missionaries chastised the women "left behind" for their "slacker moral standards as a result of men being away" (Read, 1942: 20). One *kgosi* even described unmarried, celibate women "as the cause of immorality, prostitution, and general moral deterioration amongst races" Botswana National Archives, 1933b).

Women's informal urban work, (of either colour), alarmed colonial officials and produced acute tension between black women and black men. Even Schapera wrote that some urban women "do not even seek work, but live either by illicit beer-brewing or as prostitutes, sometimes combining the two" (Schapera, 1947: 69). *Dikgosi* similarly devalued women's urban work. One Inspector of Native Labourers claimed that most black urban women were "moral on arrival, but they invariably fall to the wiles of the men, and soon learn how to earn money to spend on themselves" (TAD, 1923). Few patriarchs recognised Tswana women's remarkable efforts to economically support the poorest sections of Bechuanaland villages, female-headed households.

Ironically, the colonial hierarchy in Botswana was oblivious to Tswana mothers' increasing status, and the new mothering patterns in the Tswana

diaspora. In 1930 there was, for the first time, a sustained discussion within the Bechuanaland administration over women's status. The impetus for this discussion was global rather than local, as a League of Nations' conference requested responses from all administrations on the issue. Britain's Dominions' Office blamed Bechuanaland's "low state of health" (including a troublesome decreasing population growth rate) on women's low status (Botswana National Archives, 1937, 1930, 1932). The High Commissioner responded:

It has further been represented to me that the status of native women is in some places scarcely distinguishable from that of slavery... I shall be glad also to be furnished with your recommendations as to how such conditions might be improved, with the object of raising their standards of health and intelligence, so as to make them better mothers and better qualified to rear their children afterwards, thus ensuring not only an increased birthrate; but also, what is no less important, the creation of a healthier and better-developed stock.

The High Commissioner clearly felt that all women should be mothers and breeders, "stocking" the Protectorate with good-quality babies for the Empire. A declining population, in colonial eyes, "spell[ed] stagnation of the natives—which mean[t] stagnation of trade" (University of Botswana, 1928). The High Commissioner was concerned only that the oppressive conditions and low status of women compromised these functions.

Returning home permanently

When a migrant woman returned permanently to Bechuanaland, it was often to care for her daughter's children so that the daughter, in turn, could seek wage employment. Mothering remained the dominant motive, if not the initial impulse, for seeking work and was the mechanism that made such circulation possible (Gay, 1980). But these patterns also showed that the decision to migrate could shift from being an individual to a household one throughout the woman's life course. In addition, inter-generational dynamics among women increasingly structured patterns of migration.

Tswana women migrants also had the means to return home to the Bechuanaland Protectorate. To the question "Why did so many women return to Botswana?" Molefani Baruti in Dobsonville, Soweto explained that "It's an individual choice. Most of them build themselves homes in Botswana. The main purpose to come here was to work. They like to go back to their farms" (Cockerton, 1993b). Thus, many women returned to Bechuanaland after they had accumulated sufficient earnings.

Tswana women, not unlike black women from other regions, had a very strong belief in the need to be buried among relatives. For most female migrants (single, divorced, and separated women and those married to local men), this meant the place of their birth. This differed for the few women who married

“foreign” men. When I asked Mrs. Motshegare, if she would eventually leave Mmabotho (Mafeking) and return to her natal village in the BaRolong Farms, she explained, “I will be buried here because the grave will be next to my husband” (Cockerton, 1993h). This aspect of Tswana cosmology underlines the respect accorded ancestors. Schapera even called the worship of the dead “the outstanding feature” of Kgatla religion. Thus, diasporic women upheld some aspects of Tswana traditions, while challenging and transforming others.

Some conclusions

In colonial Botswana, mothering was not only done by mothers, but by grandmothers. Mothers increasingly became producers and breadwinners in South Africa, while grandmothers became the primary care-givers in rural Botswana. In this context, both mother and grandmother shared the increasingly high status given to the position of mother. In other contexts, the high status of mothers leads to the exclusion of mothers from other forms of social activity. For instance, in the United States and Europe, this was based on the deliberate idealisation of motherhood after the second world war (Cosslett, 1994; Daley, 1982; Chodorow, 1978). In the Botswana context, mother’s high status might be more inclusive and not bring about social isolation.

Instead, women formed these stronger female relationships in response to their eroding traditional social status. Female relationships strengthened in the face of declining traditional kinship ties, the breakdown of the ward’s political and judicial functions, and the absence of men (Kooijman, 1978; Molenaar, 1980; Schapera, 1970).⁷ New female dependence relations marked a dramatic shift in gender relations. Rather than strengthening old ties of male dependence, migration made women less dependent upon men. They depended more upon other women and their children instead. The Tswana diaspora in South Africa was highly dependent upon these new women-and-children-only households and grand-mothering care-giving to migrants’ children. Mothering was the impetus and main mechanism behind the Tswana diaspora in colonial South Africa.

Yet it is important not to romanticise these new arrangements. “Menless” women had little of the economic security of “women with men,” and even less of men’s economic independence. This varied, of course, with class. Most women were unable to build up the assets of fields, housing, and the stock which women normally only accessed through men. Although the old patriarchal ties loosened, the shift away from male control was never complete, as women entered similar patriarchal structures in South Africa. Working and living conditions on the farms and in the towns of South Africa also presented a new set of challenges and hardships for women to cope with. But at least in South Africa, women had relatively more freedom to make independent choices.

¹Again this was very clear in the Swazi case though it was directed at both men

and women.

²This pattern became evident during my fieldwork (Botswana National Archives, BNB 230, Pim, Financial and Economic Position, 32).

³Forty-six years later, Barbara Brown (1980) discovered that many of these unmarried mothers in Mochudi moved from their natal home to their own *lolwapa*.

⁴Peters (1983) has argued that the category of “female-headed households” fails to take into account the life-cycle of the typical household. Further, female-headed households—not a uniform group by any means—were poorer than their male counterparts overall, though only a subset were disadvantaged.

⁵Some late colonial Boka households consisted of unmarried mothers (and their children) of unmarried mothers (see Cooper, 1979; BNA 1964 Census).

⁶Izzard (1982) has discussed matrifocality extensively in her studies of women’s migration within post-colonial Botswana.

⁷Tswana villages were composed of several wards. These clusters of small, clearly defined, circular hamlets contained homesteads belonging to a particular family-group. They formed a distinct social and political unit under the leadership and authority of a hereditary headman or wardhead.

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