

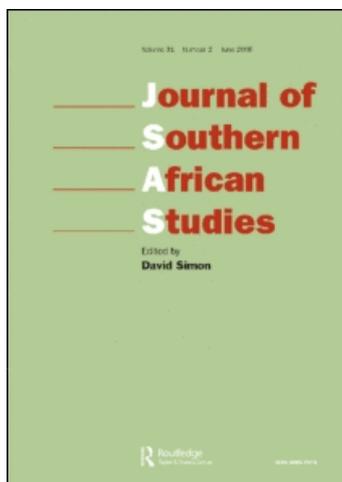
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'Beasts of Burden': The Subordination of Southern Tswana Women, ca. 1800–1840

MARGARET KINSMAN

Tswana women were caught in a state of legal minority in the early nineteenth century: they depended on men for representing them in court cases and in all legal transactions; they were physically excluded from participation in public political debates; they were expected to act in strict obedience to their husbands and elders; and they were subject to violent reprimands and social chastisement if acting otherwise. Although the legal position of Tswana women has been mitigated since then, they remain as a group subordinated. Hoyt Alverson, in his recent study on the Tswana, noted, 'Generally men dominate women psychologically . . . The relations between the sexes are seen as based on a *proper* inequality.'¹

The existence of patriarchy amongst the Tswana has been recognized, although tacitly ignored, since its first recorded instances in the early nineteenth century. Although missionaries who resided with the Tswana in the nineteenth century were irked by some features of the subordination of Tswana women, they tended to view the stringent patriarchy as a feature inherent in the 'heathen' community, which would be relieved by large scale conversion. Reacting to missionary criticisms, S. M. Molema, the first social analyst of southern Tswana society, became in many respects an apologist for their culture. Although he noted the existence of men's domination of women, Molema rationalized the patriarchal order by focusing on the benefits – the openness of material giving and the continued supports of the extended family – which were offered to women in the place of equality.² Subsequent anthropologists have noted that Tswana women were dominated, but after identifying women's subordination as a matter of Tswana law or an aspect of the Tswana mind set, have passed up the issue.³ Moreover, although the entrenchment of women's subordination played a major role in the transformation of Tswana society in the nineteenth century, historians have overlooked the problem. In analyzing the social upheavals experienced by the Tswana particularly in the

¹ Hoyt Alverson, *Mind in the Heart of Darkness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p.12.

² S. M. Molema, *The Bantu Past and Present* (Edinburgh: W. Green and Sons, 1920).

³ Hoyt Alverson, *Mind in the Heart of Darkness*; of the copious works of Isaac Schapera, see, for example, *A Handbook of Tswana Law and Custom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938) or his *Native Land Tenure in the Bechuanaland Protectorate* (Alice: Lovedale Press, 1938); Gabriel M. Setiloane, *The Image of God Among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam: A. A. Balkema, 1976).

nineteenth century, the tendency of historians has been to study the overarching relations between the Tswana and colonial or overseas whites. The gradual transmutation of common people's lives, of which the shifting position of women was part and parcel, remains largely unexplored.⁴

This essay attempts to illustrate the structures which worked to restrain southern Tswana women in a subordinated position between 1800 and 1840.⁵ Its intended contribution is twofold: first, to provoke some discussion amongst historians as to the nature of patriarchy amongst pre-colonial black communities in southern Africa, for it is against this framework that the position of black women in colonial southern Africa can be better understood. Second, it seeks to provide an historical backdrop which better illuminates the transformation of southern Tswana society later in the century. As I intend to illustrate in a future study, because women were enmeshed in a matrix of communal ownership, they could at best participate only incidentally in the growing market for local grain. Although at the beginning of the nineteenth century women exclusively produced and controlled harvests, the commoditization of grain production supported the growth of a male-dominated peasantry, on one hand, and an increasingly wealthy, agriculturally-based aristocracy, on the other. Although some women sustained their independent production of grain for subsistence purposes, many others became dependent on the fields of their brothers or husbands, which they were expected to tend and reap. Because in the latter case the harvest was claimed by men, many southern Tswana women were caught in a position of increased dependence, subordination and exploitation.

Social analysts like E. P. Thompson and Pierre Bourdieu⁶ have argued that it is the investigation of the constraints harnessing the poor, of the prohibitions immobilizing the vulnerable which particularly illuminate the nature of relationships in any social formation. Accepting their proposition, this essay discusses briefly the material position of southern Tswana women and then explores the ways in which this made them vulnerable to physical deprivation and violence. For although southern Tswana women were independent producers between 1800 and 1840, their inability to produce and control surpluses yoked them to a lifelong regimentation of

⁴ The tendency of historians writing before 1970 was to focus on the political relations between the Tswana and whites. See, for example, S. M. Molema, *Monishiwa* (Cape Town: C. Struik, 1966) and A. Sillery, *Sechele* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1954). Since 1970 historians have concentrated on the growth of European mercantilist penetration of Tswana society. See, for example, Peter Kallaway, 'Tribesman, Trader, Peasant and Proletarian', Paper presented to the African Studies Seminar, University of Witwatersrand, October 1978; Martin Legassick, 'The Northern Frontier to 1820', in *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1820*, Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee (eds.), (London: Longman, 1979), pp.243-90; and Neil Parsons, 'The Economic History of Khama's Country in Botswana, 1844-1930', in *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa*, Robin Palmer and Neil Parsons (eds.), (London: Heinemann, 1977), pp.113-43. Although these as well as other studies make stabs at the social history of the Tswana, only Gary Okihiro and Thomas Tlou have placed social history squarely in the centre of their studies. See, for example, Thomas Tlou, 'Servility and Political Control', in *Slavery in Africa*, Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (eds.), (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1977).

⁵ Southern Tswana refers to those Tswana people who lived between the Orange and Molopo rivers at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

⁶ E. P. Thompson, 'The grid of Inheritance: a Comment', in *Family and Inheritance*, Jack Goody, Joan Thirsk and E. P. Thompson (eds.), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp.328-360 and Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

labour and restraint and to continued dependence on the wealth controlled by their fathers, husbands or sons. These circumstances were reflected in the socialization of girls, who were inculcated from early childhood with the acceptance of heavy manual labour and obedience; moreover, they restrained southern Tswana women throughout their adult lives, for women's extreme vulnerability to social ostracism, physical violence, and material deprivation exposed them to and forced them to rationalize their domination by southern Tswana men. It is argued, here, then, that it was the entanglement of material and ideological factors which in combination harnessed southern Tswana women in a position of subordination and inhibited them from transforming their world.

*A. The Material Framework of Subordination: Women's Labour and Women's Gains*⁷

Prior to 1840, the southern Tswana tended to settle in relatively large communities, which housed roughly five to ten thousand residents. Distinct from European towns, which were marketing and craft centres, southern Tswana towns had a markedly rural, agricultural character, for they consisted of largely self-sufficient families which occupied themselves primarily with subsistence production, particularly cultivation and cattle keeping. Separate settlements were commonly autonomous polities, which recognized the suzerainty of resident chiefs. The towns were organized primarily according to wards, which were collections of extended families which recognized the immediate authority of a headman, who in turn counted himself as subservient to the chief. The extended families were patrilocal and composed of possibly several generations of male relatives with their families, who tended to settle together in family compounds within the ward. The compounds, in turn, were divided into separate households, which were the residences of individual wives with their unmarried offspring.

Families organized their productive activities primarily within the ward. The ward, in this sense, approached an autonomous village, for when expanded labour teams were required, it was from it that they were culled. Livestock kept at cattleposts, for example, was collectively tended by youths drawn from different families resident in the ward. Similarly, women looked to their extended families and neighbours when organizing the large labour teams necessary for hoeing fields.

Nevertheless, the bulk of subsistence activities was carried out by individual families, and, so far as it was possible, each household was expected to rely on its own resources to supply its subsistence needs. Production itself was organized according to sex: men herded livestock, hunted game, worked skins for clothing their families or for trade, and carved wooden tools; women cultivated, gathered

⁷ For purposes of brevity, I have had to condense into a few pages my description of the southern Tswana social formation. For the more fully argued and documented description, see Margaret Kinsman, 'Notes on the Southern Tswana Social Formation', *Africa Seminar, Collected Papers, Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town*, Vol.3, 1980. The need for brevity leaves this section with a somewhat static quality of description, but the level of abstraction is unavoidable in such a summary. Let me stress, however, that the analysis presented here is drawn principally from sources produced between 1800 and 1840, and makes no claim to a timeless or invaried representation of Tswana social relations.

edible wild foods (*veldkos*), built and repaired houses and granaries, and wove or moulded household utensils. Although expanded labour teams could be organized within the ward when needed, the labour unit most commonly exploited in daily activities was the household. A married woman, for example, was assigned her own arable field, on which she was expected to produce grain which would be consumed by her family. Although assisted by her neighbours in hoeing, she was responsible, with the help of her unmarried daughters, for weeding, harvesting, and garnering the crop.

The material basis for women's subordination rested not in any marginality of their productive activities. As shall be more fully explored in Section B, the sexual division of labour coupled with the relatively simple technology available to the southern Tswana wove a web of mutual dependence between husband and wife. Women's provisioning of grain and edible wild food was just as vital as the husband's supply of milk and meat to the family's survival. Despite this, patterns of land ownership and property rights granted men quite different positions in community life from women. Men maintained relatively exclusive control over their products which allowed for their accumulating property and acquiring social standing over time. Women, however, were cast into largely communal forms of ownership, which locked them into a situation of dependence and lifelong subordination.

Although the chief bore the title, 'owner of the town and the country adjoining',⁸ the charge of allocating specific sites to producers rested largely with ward heads and extended family elders. In terms of sites intended for immediate use, the chief's ownership referred to his role in orchestrating the distribution of blocks of land to ward heads, which would eventually be assigned to their followers, or confirming individual families in their rights to isolated spots of which they hoped to make use. Ward heads and family elders performed the task of distributing specific pasture grounds or arable plots to producers. Cattle posts were most commonly set aside for communal use by families resident in the ward, which right entitled them to exclusive access to specific fountains or pans. Grasslands were not specifically demarcated for use by one ward as opposed to another. Blocks of arable land, on the other hand, were subdivided by the headman who subsequently assigned these smaller units to family elders. Elders, in their turn, allocated specific fields to themselves or their sons for the use of their wives.

Most significant, here, was the patriarchal hold over arable plots. Men gained access to lands they required seemingly by birthright: hunting grounds were normally open for public use; similarly, men acquired access to a ward's cattle post through membership in an extended family resident in the ward. Although women maintained rights to usufruct of arable plots, their access to specific fields was mediated by their fathers' or husbands' control over the disposition of the grounds. The initial parcelling of fields to women, it should be remembered, was controlled by men. Similarly, the privileges maintained by families over their lands – particularly the inheritance of fields and the right to transfer lands to other families

⁸ South African Library, Methodist Missionary Archives, Box 14, Thomas Hodgson, Journal XX, 1.22.1827.

— were conferred on men. When land was inherited, it passed to the husband's sons. Similarly, it was men who conducted and concluded any negotiations involving land transfers, although they perhaps usually acted with their wives' consent. Unlike men's relatively straightforward access to required lands, women were suspended beneath the authority of their fathers or husbands in being allocated the field sites they needed for cultivation.

The subordinating effects of land tenure were exacerbated by the different ownership patterns which pertained to men's and women's products. Hides gained from the hunt, and livestock, were the most important products of men's labour. Both were highly valued, not only for their role in subsistence production, but also for their demand in local trade networks. Livestock was the most significant form of storable wealth found in southern Tswana society. Hides could be bartered for the second most prized form: copper ornaments. As both were considered the private property of their owner, a man could accumulate significant wealth over the years, which he exclusively controlled.

Women, also, could formally own cattle. According to S. M. Molema, when a southern Tswana woman left her father's home after marriage, he gave her two or three head of cattle, probably to ensure provisioning.⁹ Yet, because of the division of labour, control over the cattle probably passed to her husband and sons. Moreover, the number of cattle which a woman could acquire in her lifetime was most likely to be limited. Women fell outside the patrilineal forms of inheritance which pertained to livestock; similarly, because grain and veldkos were rarely entered into trade circuits, southern Tswana women could not easily acquire cattle through barter.

The products which women controlled did not lend themselves to accumulation. Though women owned the veldkos they collected, tubers and wild fruits were highly perishable and were used exclusively for consumption. Grain was potentially the most valuable product of women's labour; yet, although the grain harvested by a woman from her field was theoretically her property, it was in fact stored and distributed by her mother. Isaac Schapera noted, 'Each daughter has her own basket or bin, as has the mother, but they all use the corn jointly, exhausting the contents of each in succession.' According to the Tswana, such a practice is imperative to subsistence: 'young wives are apt to be careless or extravagant in using corn; the mother who is more experienced, will therefore be a better custodian'.¹⁰ Despite the perceived necessity of communal control of grain for subsistence, it inhibited women's ability to resist their subordination by immobilizing them economically.

B. 'Beasts of Burden': The Constraints Imposed by Women's Role in Production

The semi-arid character of the region of southern Tswana settlement, alongside the relatively simple technology available to those communities, challenged southern Tswana women with continued heavy labour and restrained consumption. The

⁹ S. M. Molema, *Bantu Past*, p.126.

¹⁰ Isaac Schapera, *Native Land Tenure*, p.57.

region receives an average of fifteen inches of rainfall a year. However, the impressionistic descriptions of rainfall recorded by missionaries in the nineteenth century suggest that local precipitation was subject to significant annual variation. From such records one can reconstruct cycles of abundant rainfall and drought which recurred roughly every fifteen years: two or three years of abundant rains were often followed by three or four of good or marginal rains; thereafter, two or three years of drought might set in, to be succeeded again by marginal rains. And so the pattern would repeat itself.

The southern Tswana had long accommodated to the possibility of shortfalls in rainfall in the region. By the early nineteenth century, women focused their cultivation activities on drought resistant crops like sorghum, cowpeas and various kinds of pumpkins.¹¹ Similarly, they shifted their field sites according to predictions of rainfall: hillslopes and valleys were most productive in years of abundant or good rains; silty ground near river beds was most likely to nurture crops during periods of marginal precipitation or drought.¹²

The relatively simple technology available to the southern Tswana, however, conspired with the low annual rainfall to limit the possible surplus which could be obtained in any given year. Prior to the 1820s and 1830s, the tools available to the southern Tswana were simple. Women, for example, depended on hoes and hatchets for breaking ground and weeding crops,¹³ which restricted the acreage which could be sown, even in the best of years.

The southern Tswana, then, depended upon combining a variety of subsistence techniques for supplying food. Except in years of severe drought, food stores were most abundant at the end of the rainy season, following the harvest in May or June. Storage bins were filled with grain and dried fruits and pumpkins laid up for the winter. Similarly, local pastures continued to provide sustenance for milk cows tended by men. The first signs of shortage frequently did not appear until August, in the midst of the dry season. Then, the calving season, combined with the dryness of pasture, cut short milk supplies,¹⁴ forcing men to begin augmenting food supplies with products of the hunt. Stores of grain and dried foods tended to give way soon after, sometimes at the end of the dry season, but more commonly just after the sowing season, which followed the first rains between late September and December. Women were then forced to seek out veldkos – tubers, or when fortune brought them, locusts – to supplement the often scanty supplies of game meat. One missionary noted, ‘There is mostly at this season a pinching want’ among the southern Tswana.¹⁵ The relative food shortage, however, tended to ease up by roughly mid-January, when young grasses again supported milk production, wild

¹¹ H. D. Leppan and G. J. Bosman, *Field Crops in South Africa* (Johannesburg: South African Central News Agency, Ltd., 1923), p.11.

¹² South African Library (hereafter SAL), Methodist Missionary Archives, Correspondence, South Africa, I/21, Kay, Leetakoon, 6.20.1821; SAL, John Campbell Papers, Journal, vol.3, 6.28.1820 and 7.1.1820; Mary Moffat and Robert Moffat, *Apprenticeship at Kuruman*, Isaac Schapera (ed.), (London: Chatto and Windus, 1951), p.67.

¹³ John Barrow, *Voyage to CochinChina* (London, 1806), p.394.

¹⁴ SAL, John Campbell Papers, John Campbell, Journal, vol.3, 7.15.1820.

¹⁵ University of London, Council of World Mission Archives (hereafter LMS), Correspondence, South Africa, XVII/3/d, Edwards, Kuruman, 9.12.1840.

edible fruits were ready for picking, and early-maturing crops like pumpkins were ripe for harvest. From then on, the wait for the grain harvest was likely to be less strained.

Dependence on one food source as opposed to another, it should be noted, was greatly affected by rainfall. Successive years of good rainfall, for example, allowed for the building up of grain stores. Those of sustained drought could force a majority of families to abandon settlements, to scatter in search of wild foods.

Because a southern Tswana woman had little control over storable wealth, outside of gifts like copper bracelets which her husband might confer on her, she relied for security to a large extent on her capacity to labour. The general lack of surplus grain tended to limit the extent to which she could fall back on relatives or neighbours for foodstuffs. Thus her responsibility for provisioning her family with grain and veldkos required that she repeat the annual work cycle of cultivation and collection of wild foods for the whole of her able life. When age debilitated her capacity for labour, a southern Tswana woman became dependent on the generosity of her children for sustenance. Litsape, an aged widow at Kuruman, was viewed as a 'dry old hide' because of her inability to assist herself or others; she was able, however, to find shelter with her son, and, when he moved away, with her granddaughter's husband.¹⁶ Others, it should be noted, were not so fortunate.¹⁷ This contrasted with the situation of men, who could continue to depend on the proceeds of their herds for sustenance up until their deaths.

Though southern Tswana women were not saddled to the regularized, long working hours common in capitalist society, there can be little doubt that their productive activities were strenuous. The actual labour time expended in cultivation may have waxed and waned with the task at hand, yet as the missionary Robert Moffat wrote, 'The labour time and trouble attendant on growing grain here is inconceivable to farmers either in England or in the Colony.'¹⁸ Moffat's colleague, Robert Hamilton, noted that the process of cultivation took roughly eight months to complete, during which time women were kept 'almost daily at work'.¹⁹ During the ground breaking and sowing season, the working day began at sunrise, and women did not return from the fields until 3.00 or 4.00p.m., only perhaps to haul water and firewood and begin preparations for the evening meal.²⁰ Weeding, which may have required a similar schedule, occurred at least two or three times before grain matured. During the last few months of the crop's maturation, the task of keeping birds from consuming the harvest required that women actually move to the fields to keep vigil over the crop, 'constantly screaming, beating with twigs and raising smoke in the fields.'²¹ And finally, the harvest, 'which takes much time to bring home, thresh and lay safely up for winter.'²²

¹⁶ LMS, Correspondence, South Africa, XXI/1/b, Moffat, Kuruman, 8.14.1845.

¹⁷ See the story of the widow, Mamoelangoe, who was abandoned by her son. LMS, Correspondence, South Africa, XXII/1/a, Ross, Taung, 6.2.1846.

¹⁸ LMS, Journals, III/77, Moffat, New Lattakoo, 1821.

¹⁹ CO 120, Hamilton, New Latakoo, 3.1.1820.

²⁰ Petrus Borchers, *An Autobiographical Memoir* (Cape Town: A. A. Robertson, 1861), p.128.

²¹ LMS, Correspondence, South Africa, XIII/2/d, J. Bailie, Letakoo, 8.16.1832.

²² LMS, Correspondence, South Africa, XXI/1/b, Ross, Taung, 10.10.1845.

While harvest time may have been particularly festive, it also signalled the onset of a new cycle of labour: household repairs, including pot making, replastering, weaving, mending fences, and indeed collecting and hauling materials, often from a distance, for these tasks. This was above and beyond excursions for collecting wild foods and the normal daily prerequisites of food preparation and cooking. Moffat's description of southern Tswana women's labour, then, is not surprising:

During the greater part of the year they are constantly employed in laborious work of many kinds, living a coarse and scanty fare, and having a baby frequently tied to their backs while they tilled the soil or performed other heavy manual labour . . .²³

These, to be sure, are impressionistic accounts, refracted by European preconceptions about the appropriate division of labour. In the absence of statistics, however, they are an adequate indication that while prolonged periods of arduous labour were not necessarily daily, they certainly were common. This seemed to be reflected in local attitudes, for according to E. Solomon, women were 'regarded as beasts of burden – a name which I have heard applied to them by men.'²⁴

Despite the ability of the southern Tswana to accommodate their production to the possibility of drought, the vicissitudes of rainfall did pose challenges to them. While years of ample rainfall witnessed abundant harvests, those of drought brought near or complete crop failure. Following sustained crop failures, the 'want of food' was 'the lot of many'.²⁵ John Campbell described the drought of 1820 as quite difficult: by July, crops had failed; crocuses and other roots were increasingly exhausted and were only to be found at a distance; the combination of its being calving season and winter when grasses provided little nourishment meant cattle produced little milk. Adequate food sources were unlikely to appear before December. It was 'a hard time for the poor, and even for the rich.'²⁶ Moffat, describing a similar drought in 1834, noted that 'their manner of living in general is far beyond what may be termed abstemious. They live a starving life and scarcely ever can say that they have had a full meal of wholesome food.'²⁷

During such times, tight ideological controls on consumption functioned to stave off starvation while protecting sowing seeds from being exploited as food. This is clear from descriptions of the 1834 drought. The Griqua, living just south of the Tswana, had long been heralded by missionaries as the bearers of agricultural advance in the region, because of their use of ploughs and irrigation. Successive crop failures, however, forced them to desert their settlements to seek out food supplies through hunting. Much to the embarrassment of missionaries, local southern Tswana families stayed on their lands, eking out harvests as best they could. The missionary resident at Griqua Town attributed the Tswana success in part to their

²³ Robert Moffat, 'Since 1800. Second paper – in Bechuana Land', *Sunday Magazine*, [1878], p.109.

²⁴ Edward Solomon, *Two Lectures on the Native Tribes of the Interior* (Cape Town: Saul Solomon and Co., 1855), p.44.

²⁵ William Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa*, Vol.2 (Cape Town: C. Struik, 1967), p.588. The emphasis is Burchell's.

²⁶ SAL, John Campbell Papers, John Campbell, Journal, vol.3, 7.15.1820 and 7.18.1820.

²⁷ LMS, Correspondence, South Africa, XIV/2/f, Moffat, Kuruman, 2.3.1834.

technology and in part to their greater 'industry and carefulness', or their 'industry and frugality'.²⁸ Robert Moffat elaborated that, unlike the Griqua, the southern Tswana 'have been accustomed to the habits of industry and economy from their early years and . . . I believe would rather die of hunger than eat the seeds of grain intended for next year's sowing.'²⁹

Of relevance, here, are the references to the 'carefulness', the 'frugality' and the 'habits . . . of economy' of the southern Tswana – indeed, their persistent restraint in the face of deprivation, despite the extremely harsh conditions. The missionary at Griqua Town attributed this to 'their civil and domestic arrangements';³⁰ Moffat assigned it to their socialization. Surely such factors are intricately interwoven. What is of greatest significance, here, is that the economic constraints functioned purely through ideological controls – controls which, as we shall see, restrained consumption in much the same way that the work ethic subordinated a woman's sense of self-interest so that it was directed towards seeking communal benefit.

C. Socialization and the Inculcation of Obedience

Socialization appears to have played a major role in moulding girls into the roles they would take on as adult producers. On one hand, it seems to have been through the gradual training of children that knowledge of techniques necessary for subsistence production was transmitted. On the other, girls were inculcated from an early age with the social mores – acceptance of potential deprivation and adherence to the need for obedience – which would strap them to a legally dependent and subservient position. Contemporary sources illuminating southern Tswana socialization practices are particularly scanty. They consist primarily of missionary explanations for the failure of day schools. Still, given the centrality of the process in imposing social controls, it is vital that one attempts even the most cursory of reconstructions.

Much to the displeasure of missionaries, the southern Tswana lacked formal educational institutions. Rather, children seem to have undergone a casual, though pervasive education when daily accompanying their parents in their chores. As an infant, a child was carried in skins on its mother's back as she attended to her work,³¹ and in early childhood was drawn into less demanding chores, such as scaring birds from maturing grain³² or perhaps carrying small bundles of firewood back to the compound. Differential training of girls and boys, however, began from an early age, possibly five or six. Roughly at that age, a boy was initiated into pastoralism, being given charge of the family's goats and calves,³³ and through play

²⁸ LMS, Correspondence, South Africa, XIV/1/a, Wright, Griqua Town, 2.25.1834; and XIV/1/c, Wright, Griqua Town, 6.19.1834.

²⁹ LMS, Correspondence, South Africa, XIV/1/f, Moffat, Kuruman, 2.3.1834.

³⁰ LMS, Correspondence, XIV/1/c, Wright, Griqua Town, 6.19.1834.

³¹ Edward Solomon, *Two Lectures*, p.41.

³² Andrew Smith, *Andrew Smith's Journal*, William Lye (ed.), (Cape Town: A. A. Balkema, 1975), p.229.

³³ Erasmus Smit, *The Journal of Erasmus Smit*, H. F. Schoon (ed.), (Cape Town: C. Struik, 1972), p.7; LMS, Correspondence, Matebeleland, I/2/e, Moffat, Kuruman, 6.7.1865.

learned to manipulate weapons like the knobkerry and assegai.³⁴ From the age of nine or ten until their circumcision, boys were stationed permanently at the cattle posts, distant from town.³⁵

Girls, on the other hand, remained resident in the household and appear to have been increasingly drawn into women's labour. At home, this might include cooking and the grinding of grain.³⁶ Afield, they seem to have assisted their mothers in collecting wild plants³⁷ and were increasingly drawn into agricultural production. Reconstructing the staging of agricultural training is most difficult. Still, it is possible to suggest that girls were increasingly burdened with assisting in their mothers' fields as they matured physically. Such assistance might entail initially carrying seeds to the fields in spring and helping with harvests.³⁸ By the age of roughly ten, however, they participated even in the heaviest of chores – hoeing. Indeed, between the age of ten or twelve, girls were apparently expected to be more or less independent in their productive capacity³⁹ – so effective was the mode of *in situ* training and so far had the girls advanced in acquiring technical skills by observation and participation.

More obscure is the transmission of social mores. Still, the very fragmented references to the education of girls suggest that from an early age, they imbibed the variety of restraints that would guide them in their adult lives. Recalling Moffat's statement that southern Tswana women were 'accustomed to the habits of industry and economy from their early years', it would seem that from childhood girls were inculcated with the acceptance of prolonged and arduous labour and the employment of self-restraint in consuming supplies. These could have been instilled through the careful supervision of the mother. With approaching puberty, girls may have increasingly felt the constraints on their sexuality. Maturing girls may have stood shamed knowing that pre-marital sex could entail ostracism and 'disgrace ever after';⁴⁰ indeed, one of the purposes of initiation was to inspect a girl's hymen to make sure she was 'fitted to marry';⁴¹ and, ultimately, a girl knew that her spouse would be determined by her parents, a choice which she could be 'forced by the sjambok' to accept.⁴² The repression of a girl's sexuality may have coincided with her increasing acceptance of the need to subordinate herself to male domination. For as one author noted, 'by Bechuana education' women were taught to keep away

³⁴ John Campbell, *Travels in South Africa* (London: Black, Perry and Co., 1815), p.222; Petrus Borcherds, *Autobiographical Memoir*, p.125.

³⁵ University of Witwatersrand, William Burchell Papers, A 342/1/2, William Burchell, Journal, 8.3.1812–8.4.1812.

³⁶ John Campbell, *Travels*, p.162.

³⁷ University of London, Methodist Missionary Archives, 301/5/46, Archbell, Platberg, 12.31.1829.

³⁸ University of London, Methodist Missionary Archives, 303/1/27, Archbell, Platberg, 6.30.1830.

³⁹ University of London, Methodist Missionary Archives, 303/3/28, Archbell, Platberg, 8.10.1832; LMS, Correspondence, South Africa, XI/2/b, Moffat, Lattakoo, 9.12.1828 and XVII/3/d, Edwards, Kuruman, 9.12.1840; CO 120, Hamilton, New Latakoo, 3.1.1820.

⁴⁰ Mary Moffat and Robert Moffat, *Apprenticeship*, p.32.

⁴¹ Andrew Smith, *The Diary of Andrew Smith*, vol.1, Percival Kirby (ed.), (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1939), p.342.

⁴² Mary Moffat and Robert Moffat, *Apprenticeship*, p.118.

from the public discussions of men: they were to mind their work, 'and leave the *mahuku* ("words") to men alone.'⁴³

Although popular wisdom and familial chastisement may have vaguely prepared a girl for her future station, at the age of ten to thirteen she underwent a two month period of initiation (*boyale*) which (complex as it was) was ultimately conscious, intensive sex role training. According to the missionary, Helmore, initiation was designed to 'prepare girls for the station and duties of women'.⁴⁴

The tuition was apparently twofold: first, preparing girls for the process of childbirth, and second, inculcating in them the appropriate social stance of 'passive obedience'.⁴⁵ In terms of the former, a girl was internally inspected, after which her hymen was pierced with a tuber.⁴⁶ Thereafter, the initiates were explicitly taught about sex by their tutor – by custom a widow⁴⁷ – and severely flogged, 'in order to inure them to suffering and to give them an idea of what pain they will undergo in giving birth to children'.⁴⁸ This, in particular, worried missionaries for girls learned 'licentious' songs, which they believed were corrupting of the soul.⁴⁹

The process whereby obedience was instilled is greatly obscured – a result of the incomplete and superficial descriptions of the ceremony left by contemporary observers. Still, one can see in the setting that a certain passivity, an acceptance of self-denial, and an idealization of subordination occurred. In the first month of the ceremony, the initiates took over the quarters of a poor family,⁵⁰ and were considered 'servants of the lowest caste',⁵¹ daily hewing wood and drawing water, and being beaten on their return.⁵² Though the period was humbling, it ended with the public expression of hostility towards men – for their laziness and their failure to labour for their families. The glorification of servitude was, to a certain extent, amplified in the second month of initiation. Initiates donned vests of damp stalks, which when dried became so hard as to chafe and even cut the skin. These they wore until the period of training ended. Similarly, according to Moffat, at the end of initiation a girl was given a piece of hot iron which she had to hold fast to show that her 'hands are hard and strong for labour'.⁵³

According to Moffat, the primary lesson of initiation was 'passive obedience', which was associated with a woman's perceived climax of life – marriage. For, Moffat wrote, 'to be a mother they consider the chief end of a woman's

⁴³ 'Anniversary of the Grahams Town Auxiliary to the London Missionary Society', *Grahamstown Journal*, III, 122, 4.24.1834.

⁴⁴ LMS, Correspondence, South Africa, XX/1/b, Helmore, Likatlong, 12.12.1843.

⁴⁵ Robert Moffat, *Missionary Labours and Scenes in Southern Africa* (London: John Snow, 1843), p.250.

⁴⁶ A. E. Jennings, *Bogadi* (Tigerkloof: London Missionary Society, 1933), p.18.

⁴⁷ Andrew Smith, *Diary*, p.400.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.271.

⁴⁹ See, for example, LMS, Correspondence, South Africa, XIV/3/c, Bailie, Tsatsabane, 3.7.1835 and University of London, Methodist Missionary Archives, 315/9/1, Cameron, Thaba Nchu, 6.12.1846.

⁵⁰ Andrew Smith, *Diary*, p.400.

⁵¹ SAL, Methodist Missionary Archives, Correspondence, South Africa, I/21, Kay, Leetakon, 6.20.1821.

⁵² Andrew Smith, *Diary*, pp.342–3.

⁵³ Robert Moffat, *Missionary Labours*, p.250. Later missionaries, it should be noted, believed this might have been a slight exaggeration.

existence'.⁵⁴ Though this may only be suggested, the mixing of religious ceremony with humbling and trying circumstances in initiation may have worked to instil in women a sense of the righteousness of communal interests, as opposed to grating and dangerous singularity. What this means to imply is that through initiation, acceptance of subservience, at least at the conscious level, may have been enmeshed as an integral part of a young woman's cosmology.

D. 'She Must Mind Her Work and Leave the Mahuku ("Words") to Men Alone': Subordination and Resistance in the Tswana Political Arena

While a married man was granted relative independence in action and opinion, being 'allowed to act on his own responsibilities',⁵⁵ a married woman remained in all formal transactions a legal minor. Disallowed from acting on her own accord, she was dependent on a responsible male relative – her father or her husband – for representing her interests publicly and was thus vulnerable to their direct domination or chastisement. The subordination of southern Tswana women, their confinement in 'circumstances of dependence',⁵⁶ may have stemmed in large part from the communal forms of ownership into which their products were cast. Access to fertile land remained dependent on the goodwill of their husbands' family, while disposal of harvests fell subject to their mothers' approval. Thus, they remained, even in married life, a ward of their parents, of their husbands, and of their parents-in-law. Enmeshed within this framework, individual women rarely broke free of their subordinated position. Indeed, the social mores they internalized reinforced their subservience, urging them to mind their work and to leave the 'words' – legal debates and political disputes – to men.

Perhaps the most powerful manifestation of women's subordination was that they were prohibited from even entering the ward or chiefly court. The courts themselves were spaces enclosed by hedges, akin to cattle kraals, in the centre of each ward. They were seen to be the place of 'public resort' for men,⁵⁷ 'where adult males assemble and spend the whole day in preparing their skins or sowing them into karosses, enlivening the work with . . . animated debates . . . criticisms and retorts'.⁵⁸ They were the places where 'all public business is transacted',⁵⁹ where in normal times a chief with his councillors, or a ward head with family elders conducted court cases or made minor decisions, and where in crises general public debates were held to decide upon major problems like involvement in war or movement of the town site.⁶⁰ The barring of women from the courts, apparently by

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ LMS, Correspondence, South Africa, XXII/1/b, Hughes, Griqua Town and Vaal River Stations, 11.26.1840.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ John Campbell, *Travels*, p.187.

⁵⁸ Edward Solomon, *Two Lectures*, p.43.

⁵⁹ William Burchell, *Travels*, p.371.

⁶⁰ See, for example, George Thompson, *Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa*, Vernon Forbes (ed.), (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1967), p.95 and Samuel Broadbent, *The Narrative of the First Introduction of Christianity Amongst the Barolong* (London: Wesleyan Mission House, 1865), pp.93–4.

customary law, rendered them politically powerless. Though they could and did shout from the sidelines into large public meetings, their clamour received little if any attention. Similarly, they were dependent on the sympathy and goodwill of their male relatives for representation of their interests in litigation. This paralleled their situation in formal transactions outside of the court, as discussed earlier, in matters even as intimate as the disposal of their lands. Women were restricted in their daily lives, then, to articulating opinions and fulfilling ambitions in the domestic sphere.

The exception to the rule was religious activities, and it was here that much of women's sense of civic involvement and public concern may have been channelled. Religious ceremonies provided the major public forum for women's collective action: preparations for the rain-maker, sowing the chief's garden, dancing and singing in ceremonies intended to bring rain, all brought women together to express their involvement and concern in the community's well-being. Considering this, it is not surprising to note that when women rose from their own ranks to become public figures, it was as oracles, who, having 'seen God', had been forewarned in quite inexplicable ways of 'famine, war or plenty'.⁶¹ Although in their day such women wielded considerable power, they were few and far between, and their influence seems to have been short-lived. The orthodox religious practitioners – whether they be rain-makers or priests – continued to be men.

While religious activities may have been expressive, many beliefs may have further inhibited women from attempting to break out of their subservient position. The connection between women's acts and the supernatural were graphically illustrated during initiation ceremonies. In the dead of the night, for example, a deep doleful drumbeat rang through the town, which was said to be the voice of God who had entered the settlement. 'As he is an evil and not a propitious being, he must be driven out by the shouts and screams of women.' If not, death would enter the habitations and harvests would fail.⁶² The belief in a direct connection between women's acts and possible supernatural chastisement may have permeated women's social perceptions, for, in deeply unnerving ways, it urged adherence to the weighty restraints imposed on women seemingly by tradition. Premarital sex, even with an intended spouse, for example, required public purification ceremonies which, if not taken, would inhibit rain.⁶³ Similarly, a woman who had dared to wear European clothing met with severe reproaches and threats from the community. It was believed that her neglecting or despising the customs of her forefathers could only bring upon the death of her husband or his herds.⁶⁴

Where politico-jural relations or belief failed to keep a woman in her place, physical violence or deprivation could force her to return. Women, in particular, manipulated various strategies to keep their own kind in check. Social sanctions may

⁶¹ LMS, Correspondence, South Africa, XVIII/2/a, Edwards, Kuruman, 9.24.1819; SAL, Methodist Missionary Archives, Correspondence, South Africa, I/21, Kay, Leetakoon, 6.20.1821; LMS, Correspondence, South Africa, XVI/4/c, Hooper, 11.12.1816 and Mary Moffat and Robert Moffat, *Apprenticeship*, p.218. The quote comes from the first reference listed above.

⁶² LMS, Correspondence, South Africa, XX/1/b, Helmore, Likatlong, 12.12.1843.

⁶³ Mary Moffat and Robert Moffat, *Apprenticeship*, p.13.

⁶⁴ LMS, Correspondence, South Africa, XIV/3/c, Bailie, Tsatsabane, 3.7.1835.

have begun when colleagues threatened to refuse to render assistance during peak labour periods, like hoeing. Moreover, physical violence and even poisoning could be resorted to in conflicts between women. Scrapping between women was apparently quite frequent, and could easily move from sharp verbal abuse to uncontrolled violence.⁶⁵ It was apparently most common amongst co-wives in polygamous households, however, and in such cases may have worked to express the extreme anxieties inherent in their mutually vulnerable positions as much as to maintain social controls.

Sorcery, in contrast, was a quite conscious act. And, although it was normally used to secure prosperity for the user's family, it could be quite vindictive. The missionary, Helmore, quite disbelieved the claim of a convert that he was being slowly poisoned by a sorceress, who injected small amounts of poison into him at night. Helmore stayed up repeatedly at night to investigate the claim and found it to be true. In the uproar which followed the publicity of the incident, he learned that particularly harsh treatment could be meted out to pregnant women or mothers. Women in his acquaintance had had children, for example, abducted from them.⁶⁶ This, most probably, would have been for revenge.

Despite the probable efficacy of such measures carried out by women, it is arguable that men controlled even more effective means of repressing women. Severe beating of a recalcitrant daughter or wife escaped any social sanction.⁶⁷ Moreover, although the husband's payment of a brideprice to his wife's parents may have stabilized marriages — bringing the influence of the wife's parents to bear on the couple in times of crisis — a woman deserted by her husband had little access to civil law and at times faced stark destitution. Moffat, commenting on one man's apparently arbitrary abandonment of a 'good and amiable wife', noted, 'the civil law in regards to cases of this kind are inert or rather it makes no pretension to interfere.'⁶⁸ Although most women in such circumstances could have been cushioned from impoverishment by returning to their own families, this did not always occur. Both William Burchell and John Campbell encountered southern Tswana women who had been abandoned by their husbands and, thus deprived of access to the means of production, forced into beggary.⁶⁹

Southern Tswana women were not completely uncritical of their situation. Mahutu, the principal wife of the Tlhaping chief, told Campbell that there was nothing she would prefer more than to live the life of a Boer women, taking Sunday off to lull away the day in a church service.⁷⁰ And, once the tight controls which inhibited women from approaching Christianity were loosened, it was the promise of relative equality within Christian society, 'that there is neither male nor female rejected', which made the religion most attractive.⁷¹ Yet within the 'traditional'

⁶⁵ Edward Solomon, *Two Lectures*, p.43.

⁶⁶ LMS, Correspondence, South Africa, Helmore, Likatlong, 10.8.1844.

⁶⁷ SAL, Methodist Missionary Archives, Box XXI, Thomas Hodgson, Journal, Vol.21, 3.15.1826.

⁶⁸ LMS, Correspondence, South Africa, XXXIII/3/b, Moffat, Kuruman, 12.28.1864.

⁶⁹ John Campbell, *Travels*, pp.194–5 and 223; William Burchell, *Travels*, p.316.

⁷⁰ John Campbell, *Ibid.*

⁷¹ 'Anniversary', *Grahamstown Journal*.

framework, the tensions of vulnerability, when not unleashed in scrapping or witchcraft, were strained into a powerful work ethic.

For the purpose of illumination, this paper has dealt separately with a number of ideological constraints which tempered women's lives: acceptance of prolonged and arduous labour, of real physical deprivation in times of want, of subordination and passive obedience in marital life and ultimately the placing of familial or community interests before private concerns. These constraints were perhaps not so distinguished in daily life, but rather made up a matrix of social perceptions through which women interpreted their world. The self-denial, the concern for the microcosm of the family, and the acceptance of arduous labour for its security constitute a 'work ethic'. As only an ideology of the subordinated can do, it meshed acceptance of subservience with rejection of the dominant world of men. The work ethic made women's acceptance of their circumstances a point of pride. This becomes clear from the words of abuse which the matron flung at men during initiation: men 'are lazy, they will do nothing but sleep with women, they think of nothing but getting children and that's for nothing as they provide no food for them to eat.'⁷² Disdaining the world of men, made up of self-aggrandizement and the search for material comfort, perhaps women saw themselves as beasts of burden — those who, humbly and without strain, carry the load.

Conclusions

This paper has sought to illustrate how the vulnerability of southern Tswana women inhibited their breaking free from a position of subordination. It has been argued that it was not one factor, but the intertwining of a variety which operated in daily life and which worked to bind women to subservience: patterns of land tenure and ownership, the work schedule imposed by subsistence production, vulnerability to deprivation and violence, and, finally, the work ethic itself. An historical reconstruction of this nature must be schematic. Historical evidence relating to southern Tswana women between 1800 and 1840 is scanty and tainted by the preconceptions of Europeans leaving records, allowing us at best to piece together a rough outline of women's daily lives. Although variation between women's individual circumstances undoubtedly occurred, the only significant difference revealed by available records was that between very wealthy women and average or poor commoners. The wives of chiefs or ward heads enjoyed some material ease. Their wealth of ornaments cushioned them, for example, against extreme drought, for copperware could in such times be traded with distant communities for grain. Similarly, they frequently had domestic and agricultural servants, who assisted them in their tasks. Such servants did not preclude aristocratic women from labouring themselves, for even the wealthiest of women participated fully in cultivation and domestic chores. This stood in contrast to poorer commoners who depended on their own labour for subsistence, and the poorest were particularly vulnerable to drought, at times being forced to abandon cultivation altogether to seek out an existence

⁷² Andrew Smith, *Diary*, vol.1, pp.342–3.

through beggary, collection of veldkos, or clientship. These material differences, however, did not completely override the basic structural subordination of wealthy southern Tswana women. For they were subject to the same laws of land tenure, they were politically obscured by the same customary prohibitions, which affected other southern Tswana women.

Finally, by concentrating on women, this study has left unexplored the relative social circumstances of men, for they, too, laboured under subordinating constraints, particularly in relation to their fathers and other senior males. As I have shown elsewhere, young men remained obedient to their elders, just as poorer men did with benefactors who lent them cattle. Yet men's position within property relations gave them some means of escape from subordination. Their right to private ownership of livestock, alongside their gradual accumulation of herds through trade, gift, and inheritance could ultimately free them from a position of dependence and give them the wherewithal to subordinate their juniors. This was reflected not only in the ability of men to participate in legal transactions and political discussions, but also in the very different criterion according to which men, as opposed to women, were judged. A man's industry in craft production and his success in increasing his herds — in essence, his ability to accumulate property — were the primary means through which he gained social standing.

Such factors placed men in an entirely different historical position from women. Following the devastation of the Difaqane in the 1820s and 1830s, the reconstruction of southern Tswana community life was dependent on commoditization of production. Once communities were successfully re-established by the mid-1840s, men with the wherewithal and who recognized the growing market for grain began to trade surplus livestock for ploughs, extending acreage under cultivation. Moreover, they were able to extend their rights to private ownership over the grain harvested from the fields they ploughed. Thus, men could not only participate in but also benefit from commercial grain production in ways which women could not. It was on such seemingly simple foundations that the complex re-ordering of southern Tswana society occurred.