Slipping through their fingers: women’s migration and Tswana patriarchy

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It is a fact that the chiefs have no power to stop them and get them to remain in the country and be useful there... for my part I have failed (Kgosi Bathoen II 1940).

Introduction

The interwar period in southern Africa was an era of widespread male dissatisfaction with women’s exercise of mobility. Female migrancy posed a significant threat to those who exercised patriarchal control over women. Men’s attitudes to female migrancy and strategies to immobilize women have been explored in regions throughout Africa south of the Sahara such as South West Africa, Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia, Tanganyika, Lesotho, Swaziland, the Ciskei, and the Western Transvaal. Common to these diverse regions were the unquestioned belief that men should control women’s mobility (especially women’s migration to town), and the creation of a range of strategies, policies, and punishments to achieve that end. Also, much of the male thinking behind women’s mobility was reinforced through temporary ‘alliances’ between colonial officials and elite indigenous men, alliances that depended upon a shared ideological stance towards migrant women.

Much of the existing literature tends to emphasise the colonial response, rather than the indigenous response, to women’s migrancy. However, to make sense of the complex and variable characteristics of these movements, it is necessary also to consider ways in which the internal controls and sanctions on women’s mobility interfaced with localized white colonial control measures. While female migrants exercised some choice over whether they would fall into the traditional role of women, or evade male mechanisms of control through migration, their autonomy was strictly circumscribed. Thus migration posed a significant threat to those who exercised those controls. As a result, various groups of indigenous men, including royal leaders, elders, headmen, husbands, and fathers, as well as colonial officials and even missionaries resolutely opposed women’s migration. They did so for different reasons and the discourses that crystallized around women’s migration were therefore diverse, interfacing and complex. However, this male opposition to women’s mobility and migration was not unanimous.

This article explores the nature of the patriarchal response within Tswana society to the growing emigration of Tswana women, from the late nineteenth century to the 1920s. Contrary to much of the past and popular thinking of Bechuanaland’s history, Tswana women did migrate to South Africa during the colonial period. As with other regions in southern Africa, most men resolutely opposed female migrancy. However individual responses did vary. Local patriarchs became extremely concerned about the issue of women’s migration much earlier than their colonial counterparts, but did not turn to the colonial government for help until the 1920s. This may have reflected power shifts over the colonial period in the Bechuanaland Protectorate between indigenous and colonial authorities, and the volume and character of women’s migrancy prior to the 1920s. This study reveals how Tswana men, not just British colonialists, played significant roles in the shaping and production of colonial history.
The patterns of Tswana female migration were diverse and complex, though two phases can be identified. The first phase stretched from 1850 to 1920, characterized by various social and economic causes, slowly accelerating volumes, return movements, and predominantly rural western Transvaal destinations. The volume of female migrancy slowly accelerated up to 1920, unlike in Basutoland, where women left earlier, and in greater numbers. Most migrants left from southeastern Bechuanaland. The three overlapping spatial patterns (short-distance movements, migration streams, and step migrations) corresponded to particular categories of female migrants with very specific reasons for migrating. Other early cross-border female movements included social trips between old tribal centres, journeys to attend elite schools, travel to work on farms in the western Transvaal as labourers and domestic servants, flights to mission stations, and coerced or involuntary movements.

As with migrants from other regions, most Bechuanaland women migrants to South Africa before 1920 were married women who rarely migrated alone unless their husbands were already there. Other migrants included widows or women escaping violent husbands. Most of the married women combined urban domestic and rural agricultural labour, with their mobility generally condoned by dikgosi and free from state interference. This compares with the category of women in Southern Rhodesia from the 1940s that Teresa Barnes describes as “migrant wives”, despite her claim that ‘these exact conditions do not seem to have obtained in other parts of Africa’. Barnes explains that before the 1930s, wives stayed in the rural areas, then by the 1940s some wives began migrating between rural fields and urban husbands. After the 1950s, increasing numbers of women came to live in towns permanently with their husbands. In Bechuanaland, married women began migrating to South Africa from the 1850s on, either with their husbands or to join their husbands, and most women engaged in cyclical movements.

The post-1920 period of female Tswana migrancy was characterised by rising volumes of migrants, new categories of independent migrant with predominantly economic motives and step patterns to urban destinations (particularly the Witwatersrand). Post-1920 migrants increasingly came from virtually every district and village in Bechuanaland, travelling by various modes of transport including foot, bicycle, bus, truck, and train. While the pattern was uneven, more women left from the areas bordering South Africa. As with the pre-1920 period, most women often returned to Bechuanaland to visit family and friends or to help with farm labour, before eventually permanently settling back in their natal village.

The vast majority, at least two-thirds, of Tswana women migrants to South Africa were single women who had never married: the rest were divorced, separated, married, or widowed. This pattern was certainly not confined to Bechuanaland, but was typical of female migrants from Basutoland, the western Transvaal, and the Ciskei. The emergence of these new categories of migrant women, particularly the single woman migrant in the 1920s and 1930s, must be seen against the backdrop of major structural change within colonial Tswana society. These changes contributed to transforming traditional family structures, making these new groups of women even more economically insecure and socially dislocated, and disproportionately shifting the labour burden to young, unmarried women. Indeed, the 1920s may have marked the emergence of new forms of gender relations in Bechuanaland. Certainly, the volume of Tswana female migrancy surged in the late 1920s and continued to increase through the 1930s and 1940s. This surge can be explained in part by the crumbling Bechuanaland economy, the paucity of local jobs, an unprecedented combination of ecological disasters, and a rise in men’s migration in the mid-1930s (which itself was linked to South Africa’s economic restructuring). Rebecca Molefe explained how World War Two brought an even heavier labour burden to Tswana women:

There was no time to plough and weed our own fields because of the war lands. We were not even paid for working on these lands. We were reduced to starvation as everything had come
to a standstill. Even hunting, where mephato used to go on a lesholo to hunt and share meat so that their children could find something to eat could no longer be carried out.

Various personal motives for departing intertwined with these broader structural changes in Bechuanaland. For instance, Mmamilo Sentsho explained, ‘I ran away. Then when I got there I was told go back, your mother is sick ... I had to look after her because I was older’. Other women went more out of curiosity. Elizabeth Pule explained:

I wanted to see what people were always talking about when they said they were going to work. I wanted to see what was meant by the Transvaal... To tell the truth we just ran away for fun, so that we can also tell people what we saw there... We heard that it is beautiful, that there are lights.

Indeed, as is discussed elsewhere, women’s agency was exemplified by their migration strategies. Migrant women contributed to the rearrangement of social organization in Bechuanaland, developed stronger female relationships, and created new matrifocal kin groupings.

**Controlling Women's Flight**

The first signs of Tswana patriarchal concern with women’s migration occurred in the late nineteenth century. Fathers, husbands, and dikgosi used a range of devices to restrict female mobility and tie them to agricultural and domestic production. Indeed, dikgosi used a mix of coercion and concession to achieve these ends. In the 1880s, for example, Kgosi Khama granted women several new rights, such as greater access to cattle and the kgotla perhaps in response to the exodus of women from his “reserve”. Other dikgosi soon followed suit by decreeing that men were to give cattle to their daughters on marriage, and also to bequeath cattle to their unmarried daughters. When it became apparent that these new “customary” laws were failing to bind women more securely to their guardian’s homestead, more drastic measures were taken. Around 1900 Kgosi Khama first proclaimed that his written permission was a prerequisite for any Bamangwato female going to South Africa by rail. Since those women running away by foot were most difficult to catch, dikgosi tried to control migrants’ access to available public transportation as a form of spatial confinement.

The impetus for intervention by headmen and dikgosi came initially from homestead-heads who turned to them for assistance to control the flight of “runaway” daughters. Indeed, throughout the twentieth century, fathers and husbands remained the strongest opponents of unauthorized female migration. Uncontrolled outmigration meant the loss of a valuable resource to Tswana households. Parents lost their daughters’ much needed domestic and agricultural labour. Unauthorized female migration also meant a loss of bridewealth (bogadi in Setswana). This system transferred rights over women’s labour and reproductive capacities between household heads. Villagers knew that runaways often married “foreign” men of their own choice. Thus parents could no longer arrange the marriage, the ideal arrangement in Tswana culture since it kept the cattle within the extended family. In contrast, fathers received less, sometimes even no bridewealth from foreign husbands and the daughter would be lost to the morafe since she tended to follow her husband to his place of work or residence, which was often in South Africa.

As in other regions of southern Africa, dikgosi, headmen, elders, and fathers had a strong material interest in maintaining the bridewealth system. Elders’ power over young men had been undermined by the monetization of the Tswana economy as the loss of male labour meant that these elders lost access both to younger men’s labour and their wages. Lobola thus became one of the few ways in which elderly men could gain access to the cash wages of younger ones. During the colonial period, cash payments began to replace cattle as units of exchange (though not entirely). This monetization had turned the lobola transaction from a means of social patronage...
and control into a means of access to skilled agricultural labourers (i.e. women) and capital goods (cattle). Although men had vested material interests in lobola, women became objects of transfer in this transaction, although it was true that various groups of women were enlisted in this process.

Thus, male elders had a vested interest in containing women in the rural areas. Women solidified kinship alliances through their marriages and daughters-in-law produced children for the patrilineage whilst fathers used bridewealth received for daughters to obtain wives for their sons. In addition, women’s arduous labour generated much-needed food and their roles in sustaining the rural areas became increasingly important as more men migrated. Women’s labour safeguarded their migrant husband’s land rights, as any deserted, unused land was returned to the common domain. Restraining rural women ensured elders’ access to the male migrants’ wages, as husbands usually remitted some money to their rural wives. If women migrated as well, it would deprive the chiefs of access to the only group of labourers over which they still wielded some control. Control over women was the only hold the elders could maintain over the young men. This fact, as well as dikgosi’s urgent petitions to the colonial state to stem the outflow of women from the early 1920s, indicates that control over daughters had become more significant than control over sons by the 1920s. This parallels the situation in Southern Rhodesia, where control over daughters had become more significant than control over sons by the mid-1920s.

Women’s flight would probably also lead to the permanent migration and settlement of the male labourers in South Africa as the rural economy continued to decline. Kgosi Rasebolai Kgamane complained, ‘naturally if a man goes with his wife he must take his children also. When the contract period is over most of them don’t come back. They seek work there and stay there forever’. The free movement of women was not the problem: the concern among Tswana men was that women might leave and not come back. Independent female migrancy meant that men lost control over women’s mobility, labour, children, cash, marriages, and other resources. In the early years, most female runaways were vigorously pursued, tracked down and caught. When parents realized their daughter had escaped, they sent the uncle (usually the mother’s elder brother) to find her. He would ask people if they had seen her, and people readily volunteered the information. By Tswana law, any person who heard of the flight of a married woman, but failed to report it to the woman’s husband, or the court, committed a wrong. Most Kgatleng migrants had to pass through Sikwane, and people usually saw the runaways there. Once found, often on the following day, the woman had no choice but to submit to her uncle and return home. In her family’s lolwapa, either the uncle or father then beat her with a cane. Occasionally she was whipped in the kgotla. This differed slightly from Ovamboland, where headmen beat women caught escaping. When a married Tswana woman ran away, the husband informed his parents who then informed the daughter’s parents. Again, her uncle was responsible for locating and returning her. As time passed, the parents’ control mechanisms over female mobility were less successful. Sometimes women successfully escaped a second time without permission. In other cases, women successfully evaded their parents after several abortive attempts.

Husbands increasingly used physical violence against their wives to control their mobility, sexuality, and general behaviour. The use of physical force was culturally permissible, if not fully sanctioned. One of Schapera’s informants told him in 1932 that a man was permitted to ‘beat his wife until blood flows like water, and even tear off all her clothes and burn them if he is very very angry’. Schapera felt that such extreme measures were curbed by the possibility of the wife’s flight to her natal family. This was ‘generally an effective check against abuse of this right, while if he carries it to an extreme he may be punished at the kgotla’. According to another informant, a man should ‘thrash (his) wife so that she must fear you’ but only periodically: ‘If you beat her now, though, let it be long time before you beat her gain, don’t beat her continuously, otherwise she begins to despise you’. Similarly, he was told, Tswana fathers had rights to physically abuse their daughters:

[She] may be beaten with pieces of wood, or stinted of food or clothes, or let her hair grow without cutting it, nor give it shoes (sandals) and keep her unhappy. Speak nastily to her, stop
her from playing. Beat her on body, always on back. May let her stay whole day or even go to sleep without food, drive her away.

Schapera also depicted rape of young women as a common occurrence in colonial Bechuanaland:

They [young men] will seize upon any girl whom they fancy, and ask her to sleep with them. She is by no means always unwilling, but, if she refuses, they whip her with the canes which they habitually carry and force her to comply with their wishes. Often two [men] will copulate in succession with the same girl; they catch her when she is out alone, and compel her to accept their advances. If the girl resists he thrashes her, and, unless she succeeds in running away, she will be forcibly violated. She may afterwards complain to her parents, but apparently this is not often done, as she feels too ashamed. But even if she does, little can be done, for the [men] are allowed unbridled licence.

One special form of organized violence against “rebellious” women took place during initiation ceremonies. From sunset to dawn, the bagokane (male initiates) ‘ran all over the village, thrashing and swearing at anyone they found in the open’, though their special victims were ‘women of whose “bad and rebellious” conduct husbands had complained in camp’. The bagokane entered these women’s compounds, tore down the huts’ thatchings, and smashed all the pots. They did not go inside the huts, but ‘if any women came out to protest they beat her severely and insulted her freely, even if she was one of the chief’s wives’. Domestic and sexual violence were ambiguous tools for controlling women’s mobility. The reality and threat of physical violence was certainly a deterrent to many potential migrants. On the other hand, an abusive relationship could provide a woman with the incentive to try and flee, whatever the consequences. Other, perhaps more invidious, levers included cultural sanctions such as the use of witchcraft and witchcraft accusations. Isaac Schapera has described in great detail the many forms of sorcery among the Batswana. Witchcraft was clearly a significant means of securing compliance and controlling behaviour. Whether its use increased in intensity during the colonial period is hard to say, but certainly it was put to new uses, including control over female migrants. Some migrants believed that if people visually detected them leaving or returning, or even learned about their migration plans, ‘they might be bewitched’. Quite apart from the dangers of capture and physical punishment, this partly explains the high level of secrecy that surrounded departure, why women often escaped during the evening, and why they only caught public transport at points outside the village.

The sjambok and the cane

How did dikgosi respond to men’s concerns regarding female flight? Here they seemed to make a distinction between authorized and unauthorized migration. The former was permissible under certain circumstances. The latter was not. They allowed many married and some single women to work on western Transvaal farms as long as they had their parents’ or husband’s permission and eventually returned. It was common for women to travel some distance to visit relatives and trade. But they vehemently opposed the unauthorized migration of single, young females, and runaway wives. For their part, women were no more disposed to seek the permission of the chief than they were their parents or husbands. As Flora Koloti explained:

They didn’t tell the chief [that they wanted to leave] ... didn’t want to report. They were absconding. The chief didn’t like women to go this side, but they had no choice, especially for families with many women.
When questioned in interviews, women gave different reasons why dikgosi opposed their migration. Some felt that the chief simply wondered why women left when there was plenty of food and rain: ‘What more did they need?’ the kgosi would say. Some migrants felt the dikgosi’s personal experience of poor treatment by white South Africans influenced their perspective. Other dikgosi ‘didn’t like women going to South Africa because they would be spoiled by those people staying in Jo’burg’.

From the perspective of dikgosi, female migration undermined the power of the male elders and added to the decline of chiefly authority. ‘If this [migration] is allowed to go on’, observed one, ‘the tribe will gradually die’. Female runaways reinforced the widespread perception of youth out of control. As one man later complained: ‘There is a wrong spirit with our children. There is a sort of wave of softness sweeping across the country, the old hardness of their forefathers is disappearing, the young men and women today want things too easy’.

Occasionally, a kgosi would soften his stance. The Mangkodi kgosi, for example, eventually made an announcement granting women permission to migrate. Similarly, Kgosi Isang Pilane announced at the Mochudi kgotla in the spring of 1936 that women could leave. My interviewees did not know why Isang had changed his mind, though one said it was his intention simply to allow women ‘to seek work to find something to eat to survive’. As Paramount Chief over the BaKgatla in both the Kgatleng District and the Rustenburg District, he maintained strong economic ties between the two regions, and probably also felt less threatened by the movement. Indeed, he had earlier actively encouraged women’s migration to white farms in the western Transvaal. Perhaps he also realized that his law was futile: women were leaving with or without his permission. Economic depression, severe drought, widespread destruction of crops and cattle, hunger, and poverty pushed a new wave of female migrants to South Africa in the early 1930s.

But Isang was the exception rather than the rule. Most dikgosi enforced their laws with instruments of surveillance and control. Those running away by foot were usually the most difficult to catch, but at some point in their flight they would try to use public transportation. Kgosi Tsehekedi Khama placed headmen at three railway stations. Their task was ‘to see that laws are kept and to stop women who run away from home from their husbands’. These measures were still in place by the mid-1940s, at least among Bamangwato and BaKgatla. At this time two Tati District sub-dikgosi prohibited women from returning home who had migrated to Rhodesia without permission. This restriction aimed to prevent the women from enticing others to follow them. Also, the South African Railways (SAR) wanted to extend a road motor service from the Transvaal into the Kgatla Reserve in 1930 but the chief would only agree if the SAR employed his own men as bus conductors. This ensured that women did not use the service for escaping from home.

Even among the BaTawana, where ‘tribal law forbids persons to leave the Reserve for employment without the Chief’s permission’, the District Commissioner noted, ‘this law is evaded by all except labourers recruited by the W.N.L.A’. This kind of evasion was common in both remote areas, like the Tawana Reserve, and among merafe straddling the border with South Africa.

The punishment for absconding or leaving without permission was often severe. As Mma Leah Moagi recalled: ‘Unmarried youth running away to South Africa used to be tracked on horseback by Isang and when caught they would be called to kgotla where they would be whipped because they did not have any permission or right to go to work in South Africa’. Every five or six years, the Kgatla kgosi would personally ‘round up and force’ émigrés who stayed in South Africa too long to return. He also sent people to bring others back. One of Schapera’s informants in 1931 described how two young lovers had tried to run away to Johannesburg. They were caught and brought back to the chief, Isang. He had their hands fastened on yokes, and laid them down with their bare backs upwards. He had then personally ‘badly thrashed’ them in public with a sjambok (a leather whip) and a cane. Public kgotla beatings of women were usually more severe than those in the lobwapa. Simon Ratshosa described the brutality and humiliation of a public flogging in vivid and dramatic terms this way:
Without shame, women and girls are ordered to strip and to remain with one single underdress round the waist. A stalwart man is then ordered to give them a severe flogging until the only garment they wore became ragged and loose and to be left rolling in agony on course ground in a nudy state (sic) while men attending Kgotla looking as if without showing even the slightest emotion.

But public flogging was no more effective than a private beating in controlling those women determined to get away, as the dikgosi began to realize.

The failure of many of these strategies of coercion within Bechuanaland encouraged dikgosi to reach out to the places of employment where Tswana women congregated, primarily the Rand. They travelled frequently to Johannesburg and arranged meetings with their subjects. Many of the meetings were coordinated by burial societies. Each morafe had its own society: the BaKgatla burial society, for example, met regularly in Sophiatown, Newclare, and Dobsonville. Every Tswana women on the Rand belonged to one of these societies, and contributed regularly to membership dues. These monies covered the costs of transportation to Bechuanaland and burial expenses. Burial societies formed the heart of Tswana culture on the Rand. Here, the dikgosi or his representatives often gave women advice, urging them ‘to behave properly’. Burial societies were a crucial element of urban culture in many parts of the Rand and often played a crucial link in rural-urban linkages.

**Immorality and tradition**

In Ovamboland in then South West Africa, women’s migration was seen as ‘highly threatening to the “traditional” order, which highlights the fact that African women were designated not only as the bearers of agriculture but also as the bearers of culture’. This was also the case in Bechuanaland. Here, 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. These legal measures coincided with the period when Tswana women were migrating to South African cities in rapidly growing numbers. One woman admitted, ‘it is difficult to question the chief if he put the law’. 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 Tswana view held that women were ‘not expected (indeed she is forbidden) to earn a living’. Mosadi was reinterpreted from ‘the one who is prohibited from leaving’ to ‘the one who stays and tends the home’. The unprecedented numbers of women who were leaving and the growing realization that many were staying away too long or even failing to return to the morafe heightened concern. The chiefs were particularly exercised by the growing trend towards unauthorized, unmarried women finding employment on the Rand. This new kind of migration worried dikgosi a great deal more than the earlier movement of married farm labourers to the western Transvaal.

Throughout southern Africa, local states and their allies among the black elite shared an ideological stance of immoral urban women. Male relatives lost control of migrant women’s sexual activity, defined it as immoral, and then socially condemned migrant (and particularly urban migrant) women. In Bechuanaland as well, migrant women were portrayed as immoral, untraditional, and irresponsible. 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. 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’. Tswana men and missionaries chastised the women left behind for their ‘slacker
moral standards as a result of men being away'.

Although both men and women were implicated in representations of the "immoral migrant", women bore the brunt of this discursive assault. One Mochudi man, an informant of Schapera's, articulated a common enough male view when he noted that 'women whose husbands [are] away in Johannesburg [are] not used [sexually], don't get children, will get sad, run away to Johannesburg too and get men for themselves there, get spoilt, and xo falatsa, the tribe breaks, is spoilt, or it gets weak. In Johannesburg [they] become prostitutes'.” One kgosi described unmarried, celibate women ‘as the cause of immorality, prostitution, and general moral deterioration amongst races’. Simon Ratshosa, an educated Ngwato “aristocrat”, went even further:

Nowadays a girl’s life has become one of endless sexual orgy. They are today swarming the whole of European cities and have adopted foreign ways which were unknown amongst their ancestors. They have become immoral soon after reaching the age of puberty and from that age they go to towns to live with one or more men as wife. Family life in those towns is almost unknown amongst these immoral people. A girl may have her room in a certain spot but her men or affections are here, there, and everywhere.

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. 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’.

Tswana men clearly abhorred the growing assertiveness of women. For the kgosi, women’s dress came to symbolize the erosion of their power and the ‘immoral, irresponsible and shockingly independent’ character of migrant women. By dressing in short European-style skirts, they supposedly ‘pollut[ed] the morals of the rising generation’. Kgosi Isang beat two girls in the kgotla who wore shamefully short “modern” dresses as an example to the rest. He gave them long dresses and the habit ended abruptly. Kgosi Sebele rode on his horses about the village chastising women who dressed “improperly”. In Molepolole he prohibited women from wearing black dresses when not in mourning or going to the stores without their husbands. Even rebellious young male migrants cultivated the image of migrant women as untraditional. And untraditional town women made undesirable wives. ‘[They] do not like to marry cultured girls’, commented one of Schaper’s informants, ‘those who speak English, [they] say such girls will think them too dirty and not want to wash their clothes’.

Modern education was widely perceived as contributing to the exodus of young women. Initially, parents, some dikgosi, and missionaries discouraged young girls from learning English in school. At first, missionaries were more concerned that girls should learn Setswana to read the Bible. As Maria Moagi explained:

Initially girls were not taught English but only Setswana so that they could read the Bible. Chief Isang later changed this and stipulated that girls should also be taught English. The Kgatla community did not want the girls to be taught English... English was not taught because it was feared that should girls be taught English, they might go to Johannesburg to work and never come back.

Although rare at the turn of the century, English classes in Protectorate schools grew in popularity after World War I. Parents often removed their daughters from school after a few years, complaining that school deprived them of the domestic help of their children. They may also have been concerned because English classes were added to Setswana classes in Standard One.
Kgosí Isang actually went against most of the morale in encouraging girls to learn English. He recognized its economic value to future labour migrants, both male and female, and spent considerable sums on education. However, he was generally more concerned that boys received an education than girls. He personally made certain that the eldest son of each Kgatla family had their eldest son educated. As the son approached school age, Isang would pay a visit to the parents’ home, stress the importance of education and insist that money be found to educate the boy. Despite the obstacles, many Tswana girls did obtain an education. Female students during colonial times usually represented at least two thirds of the student body at primary schools. Even by the 1930s, there were a fair number of schools throughout the Protectorate. Statistics from the Inspector of Education’s Annual Reports show between 62 and 64 per cent of Bechuanaland students were female in the late 1940s. This varied across districts for various reasons. For instance, the 1949 Kgalagadi District Annual Report showed that 76 per cent of pupils were girls: this number jumped to 87 per cent three years later. Girl’s knowledge of English eventually helped many young Tswana women attain work in South Africa.

The representation of women who stayed as virtuous mothers/domestic workers and those who migrated as immoral, untraditional, and irresponsible wage earners were designed to reinforce indigenous patriarchal controls over women’s behaviour. British administrators agreed with such representations of the immorality of migrant women, as did South African officials. European men, the product of Victorian society, had low opinions of women in general, though black women were held in particularly low esteem. 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’. Various official sources—as well as “neutral” academic observers such as the anthropologist Isaac Schapera—reinvoked this stereotype of women’s social immorality and economic marginality.

Women’s informal urban work, outside of a patriarchal figure (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’. Dikgosi similarly devalued women’s urban work. In 1943, Chief Batheon II wrote of the Ngwaketse that: ‘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’. Tswana and colonial authorities converged on the notion of women’s domestic destiny. At the same time, the role of missionaries certainly interfaced with the interest of colonial administrators as well as those of groups of Tswana men. Dumbrell, the Inspector of Education advocated “elementary home economy” courses for girls in order to ‘combat the shocking effects of malnutrition... due to the appalling inefficiency as homemakers of Native wives’. Both black and white men were threatened by black women’s sexuality. The ideology of women’s domesticity, enforced through Tswana social norms and missionary education, came from men’s need to ensure patriarchal control over women’s sexuality. Women’s sexual activity outside the control of male relatives in general became defined as “immoral”.

Conclusion

The images of migrant women and women in town as “immoral” and “irresponsible” shared by Tswana dikgosi and colonial officials provided a shared discourse by and through which indigenous patriarchs could articulate their appeals to the colonial state for assistance in their efforts to control migrant women. Prior to the 1920s, both the imagery and the response it evoked were muted. From the mid-nineteenth century through to the 1920s, the sustained efforts of fathers, husbands, headmen, elders, and dikgosi to reimpose control over women and their mobility reveals that women’s socio-economic status was of continuing importance over this period.

However, Tswana male opposition to women’s migration was not ubiquitous. As Teresa Barnes convincingly argues for the Southern Rhodesian context, African men had varied responses.
to female migrancy, and the complexity of their response should not be underestimated: 'it is impossible to quantify the numbers of men who supported the mobility of respectable women as opposed to those who condemned the mobility and migration of all women'. She sees this as evidence of the complexity of gender relations in mid-century colonial Zimbabwe. In Basutoland, Marc Epprecht explains that to understand the range of chiefs’ responses to women’s migration, ‘we must consider the bewildering and contradictory demands made upon them by the colonial state in the modernizing era of indirect rule’. He elaborates,

Chiefs often and loudly professed that they shared the government’s concerns about women’s increasingly non-traditional, and sometimes outright subversive behaviour. They urged the government to give them the legal powers to keep women in place. Yet when actually given those powers, the chiefs commonly failed to use them. Indeed, in practice chiefs often encouraged or defended women’s migration to the camps, women’s litigation against negligent or abusive husbands, and women’s right to brew and sell beer.”

In Bechuanaland, most men opposed women’s migrancy, however some condoned, actively supported, or were indifferent to, female migration. Mmapula Modisane’s parents initially encouraged her to work in South Africa for a short period; her regular and significant remittances helped support the family farm. Other patriarchs’ individual positions changed over time, or were dependent upon particular contexts. For instance, Kgosi Isang’s position on female migrancy shifted over time: he initially severely punished young women in his village who wore the short, modern skirts from urban South Africa, then he strongly encouraged female education (as useful for their future labour migration), then he announced in 1936 that women were allowed to leave. Men’s response to female migrancy sometimes also depended upon the particular form of women’s migration. The new kind of migration of unauthorized, unmarried women working on the Rand, from the 1920s on, generally worried dikgosi a great deal more than the earlier, authorized movement of married farm labourers to the western Transvaal. Some men’s response to female migrancy depended upon the duration of absence. For instance, dikgosi became increasingly concerned in the 1920s with the growing realization that many women were staying away too long or even failing to return to the morafe.

In the early 1920s, when the Native Advisory Council was constituted, dikgosi vigorously used this public platform to voice their concerns over women’s unauthorized exodus. This occurred much later than in Basutoland. Here Basotho chiefs began seeking the assistance of the colonial state in reasserting control over migrant women in the 1890s: this was undoubtedly related to the greater volume and earlier timing of women’s departures. From the early 1920s to the late 1950s, Tswana dikgosi turned to the British and South African authorities for assistance in controlling women’s migration. The use of internal Tswana structures by dikgosi, elders, household heads, husbands, brothers and fathers had failed to quell the exodus of women. As Tswana male control of women loosened, the volume of female migrancy rose in the 1920s and Tswana men recruited the state as an ideological ally in their efforts to assert control over women. In the 1920s and early 1930s, as the appeals for assistance intensified the colonial state began to act though hesitantly and ambiguously, for reasons explored elsewhere. By the 1950s, however, the dikgosi and colonial officials were united both in their representations of “immoral” migrant women and their perception of the need to exercise greater control over their movement.

References

1 Botswana Collection, University of Botswana, Gaborone (BC), Minutes of the 21st session of the Bechuanaland Protectorate African Advisory Council, 26 March – 1 April 1940, 60, comment by Chief Bathoen.

2 This includes: Teresa A Barnes, “We Women Worked so Hard”: Gender, Urbanization, and

3 Most of the regional literature argues for, or at least hints at, the formation of a patriarchal alliance between indigenous elites and colonial administrators. However, Teresa Barnes argues against such an “alliance” or coalition in Southern Rhodesia: instead, women’s mobility and migration brought African men into conflict with the state and with each other, and the state largely did not actively answer the requests of some men to restrict women. Teresa Barnes, “We Women Worked so Hard,” p86; Teresa Barnes, “The Fight for Control.”


6 Camilla M. Cockerton, “Less a Barrier”; Marc Epprecht, “This Matter of Women.” Women started migrating from both Basutoland and Bechuanaland as early as 1850.

7 Marc Epprecht, “This Matter of Women,” p83-84.

8 Marc Epprecht, “This Matter of Women.” See in particular, chapter five, “‘Loose women’ and the crisis of colonialism.”

9 Teresa Barnes, “We Women Worked so Hard,” p. 111; Wendy Izzard, “Migrants and Mothers: Case Studies from Botswana,” *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 11, no. 2 (1985). She only identifies Izzard’s study that suggests a similar pattern, however this category is discussed in Camilla Cockerton, “Less a Barrier”; and Camilla Cockerton, “‘Running Away’.”

10 Camilla M. Cockerton, “Documenting the Exodus”; Camilla M. Cockerton, “‘Running Away.’”

11 Camilla M. Cockerton, “Documenting the Exodus”; Camilla M. Cockerton, “‘Running Away.’”

12 Barnes, “‘We Women Worked so Hard’”, footnote 59 on p. 121-22, citing Belinda Bozzoli with Mnantho Nkotsoe, *Women of Phokeng* and Phillip Bonner, “Desirable or Undesirable Basotho Women.” As Barnes explains, Bonner does not envisage women’s migration to the Rand as cyclical, and Bozzoli’s Phokeng women did not undertake yearly rural-urban cycles under the direction of husbands.


16 Camilla Cockerton, “Documenting the Exodus.”

18 Camilla M Cockerton, "'Running Away,'" interview with Mmamilo Sentsho, Morwa, 12 May 1993, by Semakaleng Kgaswane and Camilla Cockerton.


20 Camilla M Cockerton, "Mothering as Motive and Mechanism."


23 Ibid, 116; Schapera, Migrant Labour, p90.


27 See, for instance, Marc Epprecht, "This Matter of Women"; Teresa Barnes, "We Women Worked so Hard."


29 Diana Jeater, Marriage, Perversion and Power.

30 Botswana National Archives, Gaborone (BNA), Minutes of the 37th session of the Bechuanaland Protectorate African Advisory Council, 14-20 May, 1957, comment by Mr Rasebolai Kgamane, 129.


32 Camilla M Cockerton, interview with Naomi Madube, Bokaa, by S. Kgomo and Camilla Cockerton, 6 June 1993.

34 Camilla M Cockerton, interview with Elizabeth Pule, Morwa, by S Kgoso and Camilla Cockerton, 13 May 1993.
35 Patricia Hayes, "'Cockey' Hahn and the 'Black Venus,'" p50.
39 LSE, Schapera’s Diaries, Book 1/9, interview with Sofonia, 20 July 1932.
40 Isaac Schapera, A Handbook of Tswana Law and Custom (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1970[1939]), p151; E S Schmidt, “Patriarchy, Capitalism,” p745. In Southern Rhodesia Schmidt contends that “women who ran away from their husbands frequently did so as a result of physical abuse.”
41 LSE, Schapera’s Diaries, Book 1/21, interview with Sofonia, 30 August 1934.
42 LSE, Schapera’s Diaries, Book 1/9, interview with Sofonia, 20 July 1932.
48 Isaac Schapera, Migrant Labour, p64.
54 BC, Minutes of the 26th session of the Bechuanaland Protectorate African Advisory Council, April-May 1945, 87, comment by Sefhako A Pilane.
55 Camilla Cockerton, “‘Running Away,’” interview with Flora Koloti, Dobsonville, by
57 LSE, Schapera’s Diaries, Book 1/24, interview with Marobele, 4 January 1935.
58 LSE, Schapera’s Diaries, Book 1/4, interview with Modise Rapoo, 27 December 1929; Isaac Schapera, Migrant Labour, p19 and 90.
59 Isaac Schapera, Migrant Labour, p90.
60 Ibid, 91.
61 Ibid, 91, quoting “Memo on Labour Migration”, 7 September 1943, L. 5/43. In other words, for work on the South African gold mines.
63 LSE, Schapera’s Diaries, Book 1/2, interview with Steensma, 21 October 1929.
64 LSE, Schapera’s Diaries, Book 1/7, interview with Sofonia, 20 June 1931.
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66 Patricia Hayes, “‘Cocky’ Hahn and the ‘Black Venus,’” p50.
67 BNA, S 318/7, letter No L. 2125, Resident Magistrate, Lobatsi, to the Assistant Resident Commissioner, 20 May 1933; BNA, S. 318/7, letter No S 917, Resident Magistrate, Serowe, to the Assistant Resident Commissioner, attached memorandum by Interpreter Mahloane.
69 BNA, S. 318/7, letter No S 917, Resident Magistrate, Serowe, to the Assistant Resident Commissioner, attached memorandum by Interpreter Mahloane.
70 BNA, S. 318/7, letter No L 2125, Resident Magistrate, Lobatsi, to the Assistant Resident Commissioner, 20 May 1933.
71 See, for instance, Anne Mager, Gender and the Making (particularly chapter six, “Independent Women and Youth in the City of East London”; Kathy Eales, “‘Good Girls’ vs ‘Bad Girls’”; Diana Jeater, Marriage, Perversion and Power.
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74 Phillip Steenkamp, “A Vision of Order,” Unpublished PhD dissertation (Kingston: History Department, Queen’s University, 1990), p188.
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79 BC, Minutes of the Bechuanaland Protectorate African Advisory Council, 14-20 May 1957, 131, comment by Mr G D Marobela.
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96 BNA, S. 436/12, letter # M. 153, A. A. Resident Magistrate, Molepolole, to the Government Secretary, Mafeking, 15 July 1935, 1; Central Archives Depot, Pretoria, AD 1715, 13/13, leaflet issued by The Helping Hand Club for Native Girls and the English Church Native Mission Hostel, entitled “Native Girls in Johannesburg,” November 1928; K. Eales, “‘Good Girls’ vs ‘Bad Girls.’” Eales examines the South African state’s construction of black women as immoral.
98 Transvaal Archives Depot, Pretoria, GNLB 153 224/14/216, letter No I. J. W. 17/23g, Bennett, Inspector of Native Labourers, Johannesburg Western Area, to the Director of Native Labour, 26 January 1923.
100 K T Hanson, “Negotiating Sex and Gender,” 225-26, quoting Epstein.
101 Isaac Schapera, Migrant Labour, p69.
102 Isaac Schapera, *Migrant Labour*, p70, quoting a memo written for him by Chief Bathoen II, September 1943.

103 Barbara Rogers, *The Domestication of Women: Discrimination in Developing Societies*. London: Kogan Page, 1986[1980]), p40. British administrators strongly advocated the idea of women's domestic destiny and reinforced this through Western-type domestic skills education and moralizing over women's place being in the home.


106 This concurs with Barnes' analysis of Southern Rhodesian women, but differs from Schmidt's interpretation of women's declining socioeconomic importance in the early twentieth century. Teresa Barnes, "We Women Worked so Hard"; Teresa Barnes, "The Fight for Control"; Elizabeth Schmidt, "Negotiated Spaces and Contested Terrain"; Elizabeth Schmidt, *Peasants, Traders and Wives*.

107 Teresa Barnes, "We Women Worked so Hard," p68, 71.


109 Interview with Mmapula Modisane, Boka, Botswana, 12 March 1993, by Semakaleng Kgomo and Camilla Cockerton.


111 Camilla Cockerton, "State Strategies and Policies".

112 Camilla M Cockerton, "State Strategies and Policies."