

ECAS 2007

## **Trajectories of the transition: tracing former youth activists in Sekhukhuneland**

Paper prepared for the AEGIS Conference, Leiden, 11-14 July 2007

Panel 34: Post-Apartheid: ethnographies of the South African Transition

Ineke van Kessel, Afrika-Studiecentrum Leiden, Netherlands

[Kessel@ascleiden.nl](mailto:Kessel@ascleiden.nl)

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### **Abstract**

This paper traces the careers and changing world views of former activists of the Sekhukhuneland Youth Organisation (SEYO) over the period 1990-2006. SEYO, a rural youth organisation founded in the Lebowa Bantustan (in the then Northern Transvaal) during the 1980s, was one of several hundred youth congresses that banded together under the umbrella of the United Democratic Front. In 1990-91, I interviewed youth activists in Sekhukhuneland about their role in the liberation struggle and their interpretations of South African society.<sup>1</sup> At that time, youth leadership interpreted society in Marxist-Leninist terms, mixed with elements of local belief systems. My present research explores how their lives have changed over the past 15 years, which career patterns have evolved and how former activists have interpreted changes in South African society. It is part of a wider follow-up project on social movements after the demise of the United Democratic Front. As this project is still in an early phase, this paper should be read as 'work-in-progress'.

The main research questions of the overall project can be summed up as:

- What has happened with the places – the physical environment- where I stayed around 1990-1991? Did Sekhukhuneland benefit from its vanguard role in resistance against apartheid and Bantustan rule in the 1950s and again in the 1980s?
- What has changed in the lives of the people whom I interviewed some 16-17 years ago?
- How do former activists make sense of socio-political developments and of the changing nature and ideology of the ANC?
- What is the present state of social movements in these areas?

### **I. Making sense of the post-apartheid experience:**

#### **Class, Culture, African Nationalism and the neo-patrimonial welfare state**

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<sup>1</sup> Ineke van Kessel, *Beyond our Wildest Dreams: the United Democratic Front and the Transformation of South Africa*. Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000.

Before summarizing my findings in Sekhukhuneland, I will briefly discuss four possible analytical frameworks to interpret my findings and to locate them in the wider context of post-apartheid South Africa.

Two of these frameworks are generalised macro narratives, which present a distinct reading of the state of present-day South Africa based on a prior analysis of the South African condition under apartheid. I have summarised these interpretations as: Class or Culture? The other two interpretative models start from a localised case-study but also arrive at an analysis which has wider applicability. I have labelled these interpretations as: African nationalism and the neo-patrimonial welfare state. Obviously, these models are not necessarily mutually exclusive: there is some overlap.

When discussing this research project with some fellow academics in South Africa, I was struck by the vehemence of their reactions. Excellent idea, one academic said: ‘Everybody will be talking to you about Thabo’s betrayal’. Someone else opined: ‘You’ve got no chance with that project. One half of your interviewees will be stinking rich, and the other half has died of AIDS or left the country’. Yet another colleague wished me safe travels on ‘the boulevard of broken dreams’. My findings in Sekhukhuneland were rather different than I had anticipated on the basis of these and many other gloomy predictions. There was indeed some talk of betrayal, but if interviewees wished to blame someone else for their misfortune, they targeted a close acquaintance - usually a former comrade- rather than the state president.

The betrayal of the erstwhile ideals of the liberation struggles in Southern Africa is a prominent theme in the work of John Saul, Patrick Bond, Hein Marais, Ashwin Desai, Henning Melber and many others. In this paper, my primary concern is not whether or not the revolution has been betrayed. I have tried to understand the perspectives of activists who had been involved in community struggles in the 1980s.

### **Class**

Class-based interpretations of Apartheid South Africa have of course dominated much of the intellectual discourse for some three decades. From the campus and the trade union movement, class analysis filtered down to local student and community activists. When conducting my interviews in 1990-91, the vast majority of informants interpreted South African society in terms of the class struggle. Liberation would not only mean the end of apartheid; it would bring an egalitarian society with participatory modes of decision-making. The means of production would be owned by ‘the people’.

Dozens, or perhaps hundreds of names could be listed in the bibliography of this neo-Marxist school, but for convenience sake, I will use the macro-narrative as outlined by John Saul in a recent paper that evoked much instant discussion on H-Safricanet.<sup>2</sup> Few would disagree with Saul’s minimalist common ground: “The outcome of the liberation struggle has not been quite what we had expected or what many of us had hoped for”. However, from this common ground to “Defeat or Tragedy” – Saul uses both labels – is quite a leap. He describes the ‘tragedy’ as

“In the teeth of high expectations arising from the successful struggle against a malignant apartheid state, a very large percentage of the population - amongst

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<sup>2</sup> John S. Saul, “The Strange Death of Liberated Southern Africa”, paper presented to a seminar at the University of KwaZulu/Natal, April 3, 2007.

them many of the most desperately poor in the world – are being sacrificed on the altar of a neo-liberal logic of global capitalism”.<sup>3</sup>

In discussing the possible causes of “the death of liberated Southern Africa”, Saul favours a Fanonesque explanation: the tragedy is caused by the sell-out of the new elite, the ‘national bourgeoisie’ with its greedy eyes set on self-enrichment.

Perhaps, he suggests, ‘defeat’ is not challenged because the overriding sentiments of African nationalism hamper a fully-fledged class consciousness, that now is being undermined by “a dramatic recasting of the very terms of common-sense”, viz a radical individualisation and rampant consumerism. However, he points at the possibility that the people “at the bottom”, although “comprising the vast majority (...) and potentially radically conscious of the unacceptability of their subordination, haven’t quite figured out **how** (not “whether” as suggested by the previous point) to reverse the process of ‘false decolonization’”. Moreover, indigenous intellectuals, in the Gramscian sense, haven’t yet helped them adequately to do so. Saul adds that he sees “numerous positive signs” of new social movements from below.

In John Saul’s interpretation, the mass democratic movement has been strangled when the ANC from exile moved in and took over. The ANC has become a dispenser of patronage and a career machine for access to public sector employment and the administrative ‘gravy train’, rather than a mass movement committed to ‘a better life for all’, as Rusty Bernstein noted in a response to Saul. Bernstein states that the ANC in exile came to see the UDF as an undesirable factor in the struggle for power, and thus decided to fatally undermine it as a ‘rival focus for mass mobilization’. But this dichotomy of exile versus internal is oversimplified. After the imposition of the Second State of Emergency in June 1986, the UDF had virtually collapsed by 1987. The beginning of 1989 saw a revival of the spirit of resistance led by COSATU. The UDF combined forces with COSATU in the Mass Democratic Movement, which proved successful in reconstructing a popular protest movement. After the unbanning of the ANC in 1990, internal activists scrambled to be part of the new power bloc. By and large, the UDF emptied itself into the ANC: there was no need for the ANC to undermine the UDF as a potential rival.

I venture another possible explanation: perhaps we have all along misinterpreted the nature of the anti-colonial struggle? Perhaps liberation movements were inspired by the desire to inherit the colony, not to undo colonialism, in spite of all the revolutionary rhetoric? This is hardly a novel view. Saul and Gelb’s *The Crisis in South Africa* was highly influential among anti-apartheid intellectuals on the left, while the book by Adam and Moodley, published in the same year (1986) could not claim any cult status.<sup>4</sup> Adam and Moodley argued that mainstream African nationalism aimed at the limited goal of equality, of the realization of bourgeois freedoms, not at a revolutionary road to a socialist society.

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<sup>3</sup> John S. Saul, *The Next Liberation struggle: Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy in Southern Africa*. Durban [etc] University of KwaZulu/Natal Press, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> John S. Saul and Stephen Gelb, *The Crisis in South Africa*. London: Zed Books 1986; H. Adam and K. Moodley, *South Africa without Apartheid: Dismantling Racial Domination*. Berkely: University of California Press, 1986

“Like Afrikaner nationalism, which used the state to seize its share of wealth from English imperialism, so Black nationalism, on the whole, aims at capturing capitalism for its own benefit rather than overthrowing it.”<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps Adam and Moodley were right after all, even though their analysis was not fashionable in the mid-1980s?

## Culture

A number of recent publications seeks “to examine the limits of liberation from a different angle, one that investigates the limits of liberal democracy in relation to questions of ‘culture’, identity, citizenship and governance. Instead of reiterating political economy critiques of neo-liberalism (...) the contributors interrogate the prospects for liberal democracy in relation to questions of cultural diversity, post-apartheid ideas and practices of citizenship and governance”.<sup>6</sup> In some of these discussions, ‘culture’ seems to be used as a politically correct euphemism for race.

Again, for convenience sake, I will take one (in this case two) prominent protagonists of the cultural interpretation: Jean and John Comaroff.<sup>7</sup> The Comaroffs see a contradiction between the liberal democracy enshrined in the South African constitution and the Kingdom of Custom, “the age-old traditions, customs and cultures observed by millions of black South Africans”. They predict an ongoing process in which individual rights will be pitted against collective rights, liberal universalism against culture, citizens against subjects. Activism in the name of identity poses a challenge to democratic rule. Popular politics in future will not be shaped by the notions of race or class. Notions of ethnic identity and poli-culturalism will frame local struggles against the authority of the state. According to the Comaroffs, the nation-state in the context of the postcolony “in which ethnic assertion plays on the simultaneity of primordial connectedness, natural right and corporate interest, is less multi-cultural than it is poli-cultural.”<sup>8</sup> The prefix ‘poli’ marks two things at once: plurality *and* its politicisation.

Unlike Saul, the Comaroffs argue that ideological debates are a thing of the past. The Age of Ideology, of “genuinely competing ideas” is over, killed off by a mix of world-historical and local conditions. The result is a depoliticised arena, in which party platforms tend to converge, in which charismatics crystallise their popularity into ‘customised’ political brand, in which differences are confined largely to the implementation of policy and the distribution of material advantage.<sup>9</sup> Identity-based struggles haven taken over from the universalist ideological passions that once inspired the liberation struggle. The Comaroffs remind us that most of the ANC leadership - with some notable exceptions such as Nelson Mandela- during the liberation struggle dismissed ‘tribalism’, culture and custom as part and parcel of the divide-and-rule strategies of the apartheid state.

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<sup>5</sup> Adam and Moodley, p. 198.

<sup>6</sup> Steven L. Robins, ed., *Limits to Liberation after Apartheid: Citizenship, Governance and Culture*. Oxford: James Currey, 2005, p. 3

<sup>7</sup> John Comaroff & Jean Comaroff, “Reflections on Liberalism, Policulturalism & ID-ology: Citizenship & Difference in South Africa”, in Robins ed., pp. 33-56; Jean and John Comaroff, “The struggle between the Constitution and “Things African””, in *The Wiser Review*, July 2004, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Comaroff & Comaroff, (2005) p. 44

<sup>9</sup> Comaroff & Comaroff (2005) p. 35

### **Neo-Patrimonialism: votes for welfare**

In 2004, Isak Niehaus revisited Bushbuckridge, a rural district in Limpopo Province where he had previously conducted research in 1990-91. He repeated a social survey of 87 households in Impalahoek to find out what had changed in people's lives and livelihoods. Niehaus concluded that very few households had realized their expectations of prosperity. "Instead, we heard a cacophony of complaints about worsening conditions of life, crime, corruption and AIDS. (...) Male unemployment had increased from 16 to 43 percent."<sup>10</sup> On the basis of these findings, he predicted declining support for the ANC in the 2004 general election. Yet, the ANC gained 89 % of the vote in Limpopo Province, an increase of one percent from the 1999 general election.

Niehaus concludes that the framework of neo-patrimonial politics offers the most fruitful approach for an explanation of this paradox. Continuing loyalty to the ANC is tied to the relatively modest but expanding social benefits of the welfare state. In view of declining employment opportunities, the local electorate had become increasingly dependent upon the distribution of welfare by the neo-patrimonial state.

"Voters perceived the elections through the prism of a transactional logic in which they traded votes for government jobs, school feeding schemes, housing, increased old age pensions and child support grants. In this process strength and the blurring of party-state boundaries secures electoral support".

In this context, it made no sense to vote for an opposition party: only the ANC was in a position to deliver. Niehaus observes that "they simply cannot afford to bite the proverbial hand that feeds them". People expressed their dissatisfaction by staying away from the polls or spoiling their ballot paper. The ANC received 92.4 percent of the votes cast in Bushbuckridge, but the turnout was low. Only 39% of eligible voters actually cast their ballots for the ANC.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike Saul c.s., Niehaus does not believe that widespread dissatisfaction will lead to a new 'liberation struggle'. "Our observations provide some substance to repeated assertions about the absence of revolutionary potential among the most impoverished social classes".<sup>12</sup> Niehaus focuses on a sample of 87 households, not on local activists, as I do in my research in Sekhukhuneland.

### **The glue of African nationalism**

I came across one other longitudinal survey of the changing fortunes and worldviews of activists: Ari Sitas's survey which traces 400 working class leaders in KZN over the period 1988-1998. He found that 51% of respondents was much better off than before (the upwardly mobile); 25 % was stuck in the same occupational milieu as before (the stuck) , while 22% had experienced a rapid deterioration of life chances (the deteriorated).<sup>13</sup> The *upwardly mobile* were earning much more than before, but became frustrated when confronted with the limitations of mobility: with limited formal qualifications, they soon hit the 'glass ceiling', with some former activists blaming whites

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<sup>10</sup> Isak A. Niehaus, "Doing Politics in Bushbuckridge: work, welfare and the South African Elections of 2004", *Africa*, 76 (4), 2006, p. 526

<sup>11</sup> Niehaus, pp. 542-543

<sup>12</sup> Niehaus, p. 545

<sup>13</sup> Ari Sitas, "Thirty Years since the Durban strikes; Black Working-Class Leadership and the South African Transition", *Current Sociology*, 52 (5) Sept. 2004, pp. 830-849

and Indians for their blocked mobility. A crucial variant in these careers was education. The higher their education, the more mobility. However, for women mobility was independent of education. For *the stuck*, issues of race were not salient: their main concern was job security. They manifested a strong sense of class consciousness as well as increasing antagonism towards state policies. The *deteriorated* tended to blame their misfortune on corruption, illegal migrants, the compromise deal between ANC and NP, but most of all on their own prior disadvantage: their lack of education. Only a small minority of these 400 respondents remained actively engaged in politics. However, all agreed that their life now was much better than under apartheid: now there is peace and fairer treatment. In search of jobs or other livelihood, the *deteriorated* activated their political network with the *mobile* and the *stuck* comrades which they cherished as a valuable resource. Sitas concludes that “in spite of rapid stratification, the elastic band that held the horizontal comradeship of the labour movement together in the past has not snapped”. His findings point towards the resilience and longevity of African nationalism as a defining ideology.

“The articulation of nation, race and class so central in the self-definition of comradeship is being challenged by the everyday reality of divergent needs, yet it is proving to be resilient. (...) Each cohort ( the upwardly mobile, the stuck and the deteriorated) could be seen to be providing the necessary ‘social capital’ for the other. The articulation of race, nation and class continues, despite its ‘shifts’ in meaning, and has been reconfigured.”<sup>14</sup>

## II. Sekhukhuneland

How do my findings in Sekhukhuneland compare with the macro-narratives of class and culture, or with the micro-narratives of Bushbuckridge and trade union activists in KwaZulu-Natal? A straight-forward comparison is not possible: I did not conduct systematic surveys that produce quantifiable data. At different times in 1990-91, I spent several weeks in Sekhukhuneland, Mankweng and Pietersburg, conducting interviews with local activists, as well as with the leadership of the UDF Northern Transvaal. I also sat in on numerous meetings, informal discussions and social chats. In 2006-07, I returned to the same places trying to trace my previous informants, and again sitting in on meetings and informal discussions. In the years in between, I kept in touch with some key informants and paid several brief visits to Sekhukhune.

Notwithstanding the dire predictions, nobody talked about Thabo’s betrayal, although many former comrades were unhappy with developments in the ANC. Some former comrades were indeed quite well off although mostly not ‘stinking rich’, while others were unemployed. Some had died, although road accidents seemed a more prominent cause of death than AIDS, and nobody had left the country. In fact, it proved remarkably easy to trace the interviewees: these days, the Internet is a wonderful resource, while cell phones also help. The old comrades’ network was to some extent still operational: many informants helped me find other contacts.

Where did I find the ex-comrades? The vast majority of my interviewees – then and now- was living in Sekhukhuneland or Polokwane (Pietersburg). The centres of my research in Sekhukhuneland had been the villages of Apel and Jane Furse, which now

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<sup>14</sup> Sitas, p 845

have become the seats of Fetakgomo and Makhuduthamaga municipality, respectively. In 1990/91, I also interviewed the leadership of the UDF Northern Transvaal and students from Sekhukhuneland at the University of the North in Pietersburg, Seshego and Turfloop. In 2006/7 I stayed for some weeks in the same places, although now I had to add Groblersdal, the administrative seat of Sekhukhune District. This does not mean that there has been little mobility: a number of interviewees had lived for some years in Johannesburg or Pretoria. Some currently live in Pretoria, but I met them during visits to their home village. Some work in Sekhukhuneland, but live in Polokwane.

### **Longing for ‘home’, but not for the Kingdom of Custom**

Previously, educated young activists tended to see Johannesburg/Pretoria as the gateway to a better life with more opportunities. With few exceptions, this is no longer the case. Several people indeed were quite happy to return ‘home’, even if they had coped reasonably well in Gauteng. One however returned to his mothers’ house because he had failed to find work. While Watson Mosoane came home because he could no longer afford to live in Gauteng, others left a secure (if not particularly well-paid) job in Johannesburg. They felt happy and relaxed to be ‘home’, where they were known and respected, while they had been anonymous strangers in town. Modern amenities such as a wc in the house, a bath, a refrigerator, an electric cooking stove, a television etc are now available in Sekhukhune villages, while the provision of fresh foodstuffs has improved tremendously. One reason why Sekhukhune or Polokwane was the preferred place of residence was related to language. Even when they were fairly or very fluent in English, some informants felt more at ease speaking Sepedi.

Maurice Nchabeleng (40), one of SEYO’s founding members, quit a secure job at the Star Library in Johannesburg to take up employment as a municipal officer at the Makhuduthamaga municipality in Jane Furse. In terms of salary, the increase was marginal, but his new job offers more scope for initiative and growth. He is happy to be back home, and spends most of his weekends in his home village Apel, where he is also deputy chairman of the ANC branch. In the early 1990s, he had moved to Johannesburg in search of jobs or educational opportunities. Maurice is the son of Peter Nchabeleng, a longstanding ANC activist and chairman of the UDF Northern Transvaal, who in 1986 was murdered by police. Like his father, Maurice Nchabeleng is not only a prominent ANC activist, but also a committed member of the South African Communist Party. When interviewed in 1990 about his views on post-apartheid South Africa, he stated straightforward: “We want the dictatorship of the proletariat”. In 2007, I asked him to reflect on his expectations in 1990 and subsequent developments. He summed up his expectations in 1990 as: “We were expecting to go to the place of the whites”. Although this is obviously a rather different proposition than the dictatorship of the proletariat, it is altogether feasible that Maurice and many of his comrades harboured contradictory expectations about post-apartheid society. On the one hand, there was the Marxist-inspired ideal of an egalitarian society in which the state would provide. On the other hand, comrades aspired to inherit the seductive world of White South Africa, with its comfortable houses, manicured gardens, flashy cars and modern gadgets. They wanted to undo the apartheid state while simultaneously inheriting white privilege. This contradiction is far from exceptional. It is quite common to regard the United States as

the evil imperialist empire and to long for America as the promised land, a beacon of modern life styles eagerly copied by black South Africans aspiring to catch up with the latest fashions.

During his 15 years in Johannesburg, Maurice Nchabeleng tried to remain involved in ANC and SACP politics, but he found it difficult to function in branches in Hillbrow or Yeoville. He had been a leading activist in Sekhukhuneland, but he was somewhat intimidated by the glib style of urban politics. Because of the distance, he did not keep sufficiently in touch with Sekhukhune politics either. In a sense, he lost out in both worlds. He did not gain entry to urban networks that could have helped to advance his career, while he also did not manage to keep up with his rural base. When in 2005 he stood for the position of chairman of the ANC Apel branch, part of the ANC membership considered him as an unknown quantity: ‘Who is Maurice Nchabeleng?’ He now serves as deputy under a chairman who has mobilised his Zion Christian Church (ZCC) base to take over the ANC branch. The chairman buys their ANC membership cards ( 12 Rand per year) and summons them to meetings whenever their votes are required to fill positions in the local executive or to appoint delegates to ANC regional or district conferences. Thus, an ANC meeting in Apel now offers the unusual spectacle of dozens of middle-aged women with ZCC insignia who silently sit through the proceedings and only stir when they need to raise their hands to support the nominations.

In spite of these and many other sobering experiences, Maurice Nchabelengs overall judgment of change is not negative. In his view, life in Sekhukhune has improved considerably: “Now we have water, electricity and RDP houses. The chief no longer bothers us. Now we have freedom of movement and freedom of speech.” The main drawback is mass unemployment.

“In 1990 we believed that the majority of people would have a job in the government or the private sector, and that education opportunities would be more plentiful. If you are not well connected, you have no access to BEE; very few people get very rich. When thinking about democracy, we expected local communities to be empowered. But many instructions now come from the top. The People Shall Govern is an idea of the past. The fundamentals of democracy are in place, but the benefits should be more evenly spread.”

The desire for a more equal distribution of the fruits of liberation is widespread, but does this amount to the same ideal as the previous vision of an egalitarian society? For some former activists, this is indeed the case, but for others it means that they want to share in the privileges of the new black elite. One former youth leader, now a high school principal in Sekhukhuneland, expressed a bitter sense of disillusionment.

“The government follows a capitalist agenda. We know that we cannot have a socialist state, but we need a developmental state, a society not based on hand-outs but on employment. There has been way too much privatisation, casualization of labour, rising unemployment, while some people become super rich. They are trying to do away with government altogether. Some people were simply in the struggle to advance their own careers, not to struggle for the people”.

While this may sound like someone who cherishes the old ideals of an egalitarian, participatory society, the remainder of the conversation went in a rather different



direction. Silas Mabotha complained that his income does not allow him any middle-class luxuries, as he has to support an extended family. While he objects against Black Economic Empowerment as simply a scheme to build a black bourgeoisie, he simultaneously complains: “We do not even have the money to buy shares. (...) We are worried that they will have run out of Mercedeses before our turn has come.” This statement does not sound as a desire for a radical social transformation, but rather as the complaint from someone who is frustrated because he does not belong to the newly privileged. Former comrades who now hold administrative jobs in the provincial government regard the position of a high school principal as a failed career. Silas Mabotha is ‘stuck’, in the terminology of Ari Sitas.

Silas Mabotha blames his being ‘stuck’ on nepotism in the ANC as well as on ethnic and gender favouritism. He views the Zuma affair as a conspiracy by Mbeki and other Xhosa’s in power, who do not want to relinquish power to non-Xhosa. The ANC should not only strive for a gender balance, but also for a regional balance. However, he is not happy with the gender policies either. The prioritizing of women means that many incompetent women are being appointed, and these incompetent women block the way for the advancement of others. He is adamant that he will not accept plans for RDP houses close to his house in Polokwane, arguing that the RDP people are unemployed and therefore will bring crime to the neighbourhood. He reasons that RDP houses should be built next to the white suburbs, ignoring the fact that he and other former comrades now live in such a previously white neighbourhood. Silas Mabotha is well versed in Marxist jargon and he expresses his discontent largely in the familiar struggle discourse. Yet, he hardly fits Saul’s ideal type of the organic intellectual who may yet help launch an authentic socialist revolution from below.

The desire for a larger share in the fruits of liberation is common. Ex-comrades mention with a mixture of awe and astonishment the true revolutionary character of Lawrence Phokanoka, a veteran ANC and SACP activist who died in 2005. Phokanoka refused his veterans’ pension, saying that he had not been in the struggle to become rich. However admirable, this position has few followers.

Quite a few former comrades now are employed as teachers. While this is considered less glamorous and less paid than jobs in local or provincial administration, a number of interviewees were content with their achievements: a secure job, a house, a car, plus the means to provide for their family. Some seek some extra revenue from investments in business opportunities. All too often, ‘business’ means bottle stores or beer halls, sometimes euphemistically labelled ‘family restaurants’.

Life in Sekhukhune now is as comfortable as in town, as several interviewees explained. But even when that is not the case, some still prefer their rural base. Not because they, as the Comaroffs phrase it, are attracted by “the true-life experience of ethnic subjecthood”. They were well aware of their newly-won citizens’ rights and harboured no nostalgia to ethnic subjecthood. Even when engaging in ‘age-old’ customs, they infused their rights-based discourse in the Kingdom of Custom. The story of Queen and her participation in a ritual of ‘speaking with the ancestors’ illustrates the point. Queen herself is not from Sekhukhuneland, but she is married to a prominent former youth leader from Apel.

*Queen quit her job in Johannesburg as a waitress with McDonalds to run a beer hall in her native village near Potgietersrus (Mokopane), as well as a transport business with a bakkie. It was too early to know whether her business venture was successful, but she obviously enjoyed living in her tiny two room house, even though amenities were much more basic than in her apartment in Yeoville. Apart from her business, she had started a stokvel, a volleyball club for girls and a dancing group for village youth. In the village, she was a somebody, while at McDonalds she had felt exploited and dispensable. One early Saturday morning, Queen with some hundred family members gathered around a big stone to speak with her long deceased grandfather. The family had never engaged in this type of ritual before, but an aunt had been visited in her dreams by the deceased who made it clear that he felt neglected. After the introductory ceremony, all the men - from the aged to the young boys- one by one mounted the stone to praise the ancestor and invoke his help in their current problems with jobs, housing, studies, family life etc. Then the group proceeded to the cemetery for a brief visit to family graves. When I asked Queen why it was that only the men had addressed the ancestor, she almost exploded: "I am furious! This is unconstitutional! I would never have come if I had known that we would not have an opportunity to speak with grandfather. We have to democratize the ancestors".*

Queen is willing to partake in the rituals of the Kingdom of Custom, provided that her gender rights, as enshrined in the Constitution, are respected.

### **Jobs, education and networks**

Most of my current interviewees in Sekhukhune land now worked as teachers or employees of the new municipalities. One was a traffic officer who made most of his money by running a beer hall; one was a soldier in the SANDF based in Phalaborwa, who had seen service in peacekeeping missions in Burundi and the DRC. One was in charge of the constituency office of the local ANC member of parliament, as well as a member of the District Council in Groblersdal. Three were unemployed: one of them had dropped out of high school when on the run in the late 1980s but the two others had a high school certificate.

The vast majority of interviewees in Polokwane were employed by the provincial administration of Limpopo Province. Building on ANC networks had been very important in securing these jobs. Sometimes these networks built on the comrades' networks from the UDF's days, although I also heard bitter complaints from interviewees who felt that they had been dumped - even 'betrayed' - by their former comrades.

Nearly all former activists maintain strong links with their 'home' region, even when working and living in Polokwane. They frequently attend funerals and other family events in their home region, while also actively participating in a 'home boys' network in Polokwane. Every Friday evening, the ex-comrades gather in the house+garden of a Cape Dutch Mansion in an elegant Polokwane suburb, the home of one successful civil servant with a background in SEYO. The table is loaded with mountains of porridge, meat and salads, but the habit of drinking beer has given way to a preference for expensive whiskies.

Although many continued to be active ANC members, very few actually held an elected position in local, district or provincial councils, or in an ANC executive. One was an ANC member in the Sekhukhune District Council, and one a member of the Limpopo parliament. Two had previously served as municipal councillors. Remarkably, the membership of the municipal councils of Fetakgomo and Makhuduthamaga was not drawn from SEYO ranks. The councils included a few ANC veterans from the 1950s, but by and large consisted of teachers and businessmen, as Niehaus also noted in Bushbuckridge. In the perception of former SEYO activists, the councils are controlled by a clique that has deliberately sidelined activists because they were perceived as a threat.

Already in the early 1990s, when the UDF was disbanded and SEYO, along with many other youth organisations, merged with the ANC Youth League, the complaint among the comrades in Apel was that the newly established ANC branch was controlled by teachers and businessmen who had been adversaries rather than allies in the liberation struggle. For a while, Apel had two rival ANC branches, one controlled by comrades and one by newcomers, who came to be known as *February 2's* – those that joined the ANC after the release of Nelson Mandela on 2 February 1990, when no risk was involved. In turn, the *February 2's* had their own label for the activists who rose to prominence during the 1980s: *expiries* – those whose time has expired.

Nowadays, resentment against the teachers-councillors is still quite strong: why should they hold two jobs? They must chose which job they want and give the other job to someone else. Although the position of councillor in a rural municipality is obviously not a full time job, it does carry a remuneration (presently some R. 8.000 per month). Where jobs and income are extremely scarce, accumulation causes resentment. The same sentiments however do not apply to businessmen who are elected as councillors: they earn their own money with their business, while teachers are paid with taxpayers' money. "It is not fair, because others are unemployed. We want one man, one job".<sup>15</sup>

### **Navigating between liberal democracy and 'Things African'**

In the worldview of the former activists in Sekhukhuneland, there is not an either/or choice between the ideology of liberal democracy with its rights for individuals and 'Things African', or the Kingdom of Custom, as posited by the Comaroffs.<sup>16</sup> People navigate between the notions of individual rights and liberal universalism and the world of custom, culture and collective rights. This is not a schizophrenic journey: people shop around and take what suits them, without swallowing either liberal democracy or the world of culture and custom lock, stock and barrel. Rather, they unpack and take what they find suitable. Their choices are based on tactical considerations of expediency (keeping all options open) as well as on rational or emotional preferences. They do not withdraw in the world of custom and culture to contest liberal democracy; rather they draw from a broad register of options.

This eclectic strategy can be illustrated with the example of my host family in Apel, a female-headed household. After the death of the mother in 2000, three sisters

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Pinky Nchabeleng, Apel, November 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Jean and John Comaroff, "The Struggle between the Constitution and 'Things African'", *The Wiser Review*, no 1, 2004, p. 6

with children but no husbands make up the household, which includes also some more distant relatives. Well aware of her constitutional right as a woman to have her own stand even though she lives in a tribal area with communal tenure, Pinky, the eldest sister, applied to the chief for a plot to build her own house. She was duly allocated a plot in an area which will be serviced with water and electricity. Without complaining she paid a R 120 fee to the chief. But when the chief claimed a fee because the family had sunk a borehole on the plot where the family house presently stands, she refused. Why should they pay? They had paid all the expenses themselves and “the chief does not own the water”. More ambivalent was her reaction to a request from the chief that all subjects who earned an income, pay R 20 towards the purchase of a car for his second wife. Pinky complained, but considered that she would probably pay. Not because she believed this was a fair request, but because she wanted to remain in reasonably good standing with the chief. Why? The chief holds the key to the cemetery, as well as the spade and the pick to dig a grave. If one wants to bury a relative, the tribal office first checks whether all tribal levies have been paid. If not, you’ll not get the key. Since it is very important that in death you are reunited with your family, this is a powerful argument. Pinky laughed at my puzzled face and explained: “This is our culture, it is in my blood”.

However, Pinky was by no means prepared to swallow everything labelled ‘culture’ uncritically. She served as a district councillor and was much in favour of the ANC quota system to increase the participation of women in elected bodies. She applauded Mbeki’s remark that his successor should be a woman.

Women are tired of always being the deputy only. Men say that in our culture it is not acceptable for men to be led by women. But they only say that in private, not in public. Men will just have to accept this. In the old days, women were not allowed to head a tribe, but now women have more opportunities.

In spite of the culture running through her veins, Pinky makes calculated choices about the elements in BaPedi cultural heritage that she wants to retain and those that she has discarded. Likewise, she embraces elements of liberal democracy – notably the equality of men and women before the law- , but is scornful of some basic tenets, such as political pluralism. In Pinky’s worldview, opposition parties have no legitimate reason to exist: “We want everybody to be ANC”. This is a common position among the ANC members of Sekhukhune District Council. The council meeting is usually done and over with in 15 minutes. In the morning before the meeting, the ANC caucus meets to discuss the agenda, to decide its position and to assign the roles in a fixed and rigid ritual. In the caucus, it is decided which councillor will speak the sentence “I move that we accept this proposal” and who will then add the required “I second this”. The mayor and the speaker of the council are part of the ANC caucus. This procedure is deemed necessary to “make sure that unity prevails”. Sekhukhune District is a solid ANC bastion; the tiny minority of 4-5 PAC, AZAPO and Independent councillors pose no threat whatsoever to ANC hegemony. Yet, their very presence is resented. “They have no structures, they don’t even have an office. You cannot take them seriously. They should join the ANC. The ANC wants everybody in, in the interest of unity. We want to appear unified and uniform.” Pinky was very dismissive of my argument that even if the opposition parties have no offices, they do represent voters. I asked whether the voters, including the ANC’s own voters, should not be entitled to some transparency and a public discussion of the policy issues on the agenda? However, Pinky was adamant that public discussions ought to be

avoided, so as to not appear internally divided. The decisions of the council will later be communicated to the public; and that is deemed sufficient. Mayor Dickson Masemola had his own explanation for the secretive nature of proceedings: “It is because we are still revolutionaries”. As a true revolutionary, he has an apparent obsession with secrecy and security as vital ingredients of status. Mayor Masemola, known to be a *February 2*, travels around with two body guards in bullet proof vests, and with a driver, a prerogative that otherwise is enjoyed only by members of the provincial cabinet of Limpopo. A most unusual sight is the parliamentary village in Polokwane: here all members of the provincial parliament live together in a heavily guarded gated community, effectively cut off from their voters and the concerns of daily life.

### **Representation or Redistribution**

Politics in Sekhukhune is about redistribution rather than representation.

After the 1995 local elections, the newly elected councillors were congratulated by their friends: “Congratulations! You’ve got a job now. The ANC has given you a job”. Rumours abounded about the generous remuneration, but when the first pay checks arrived, some councillors were bitterly disappointed about their ‘job’: they only received an attendance fee. Remuneration for municipal councillors is quite modest: presently about R 4.500 net per month, but there are some perks, such as cell phones and a transport allowance. By way of comparison: experienced high school teachers earn about R 8.000.

The obligations of the ‘job’ of councillor involve acting as conduit for the ANC. It is important to be in touch, to know the correct line, to avoid falling out with the powers that be or will be— today or tomorrow. Hence the importance of the Zuma/Mbeki dispute: if you happen to land in the wrong camp, you risk that you’ll no longer be connected with party patrons who dispense favours, jobs and contracts. Most powerful is the ANC deployment committee (5 members), a provincial party organ that has no constitutional or legal basis, but that is considered all powerful because it assigns strategic jobs to party members.

Political discussions amongst ex-comrades centred around personalities rather than policies. Among the most strongly contested issues are personnel matters, notably the appointments of mayors and municipal managers. These functionaries control other appointments and are influential in granting tenders. The ANC and the state are not understood as separate entities, each with their own sphere of operation. Without being properly connected to relevant power centres in the ANC, there is no prospect for a government job or a lucrative contract. Hence even the positions on an ANC executive at village level are hotly contested: members of the executive are better placed to have access to the relevant information and to exercise some leverage.

In late 2006, Sekhukhune District adopted a new regulation to expand the redistributive effect of politics. Ward committee members ( local community representatives who act as sounding board for their councillor) will henceforth receive R 250 per month. With 116 ward committees in Sekhukhune district, each comprising some five members, this regulation will dispense a small regular income to some 600 persons every month, tying them to the system of patronage.

Pinky Nchabeleng is not only a district councillor, she also works in the constituency office of John Phala, an ANC veteran from the 1950s who serves as MP in the South African parliament. Like Pinky, Phahla finds it intolerable that not everybody in Sekhukhune votes for the ANC. When told that voters in the village of Ga-Radingwana insist on electing an AZAPO candidate as their councillor in the Fetakgomo council, his reply was terse: “We must crush it”. Opposition, in his view, cannot and should not be tolerated. “Government is not going well, and that is because of the opposition. Opposition will confuse the people”. Phahla has no problem with the Democratic Alliance (DA) members in the parliament in Cape Town. However, in his home base Sekhukhuneland everybody ought to belong to the ANC.

### **Shopping around for satisfaction**

Not only the elected representatives of the people of Sekhukhuneland navigate between liberal democracy and the kingdom of culture and custom, the traditional authorities do likewise. For some decades now, the BaPedi paramountcy has been contested between the incumbent, K.K. Sekhukhune and his half-brother Rhyne Thulare. The death of Rhyne in January 2007 did not end the contest: the claim to the Bapedi throne has been inherited by his son. Without going into the intricacies of the dispute: the general story is that Rhyne would have been the legitimate successor but when he declined, KK was persuaded to quit his job as telephone operator and assumed the position of Acting Paramount Chief, on behalf of his youthful son. When Rhyne later challenged KK, the argument of KK’s supporters was that he had forfeited his rights when he initially declined the throne. Anno 2007, this dispute continues to rage in full force, and the stakes have become higher as it now involves disputes over tribal land with rumours of highly profitable platinum deposits.

The South African constitution makes a provision for a House of Traditional Leaders in provinces that include the former bantustans. KK Sekhukhune has thus far declined to take up his seat in Limpopo’s House of Traditional Leaders. Premier Sello Moloto of Limpopo Province has stated that the traditional leaders must solve the problems of chieftaincy in the House of Traditional Leaders, and no longer take their problems to the courts. KK Sekhukhune is adamant that the House of Traditional Leaders is no substitute for the courts. “The courts are much better! In the old days, when there was a dispute about succession, the contenders killed each other. We want to take our dispute to court rather than resort to killing each other.” In the days of the apartheid state, the High Court in Pretoria ruled in favour of KK.

However, the ANC came to power with a promise to weed out illegitimate chiefs who had been created under apartheid and to certify who are the genuine chiefs. This can of worms has been opened, but not yet closed. The report of the Ralushai Commission, installed by the previous premier Ramothlodi, has been shelved, but it is widely known that among its findings was a recommendation to install Rhyne as paramount chief. The national government came up with a new commission, the Nhlapo Commission.<sup>17</sup> KK is adamant that “as a law-abiding person”, he does not want to fight the government, but he insists that the dispute about the BaPedi throne should be settled in a courtroom of the Republic, not in specially-created institutions such as the House of Traditional Leaders,

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<sup>17</sup> Prof. R.T. Nhlapo is the chair of the Commission on Traditional Leadership

or Commissions appointed to investigate the proper ways of ‘the Kingdom of Custom’. Far from being *forced* to engage the state in juridical terms - ‘in the idiom of rights, constitutionalism, and due process’<sup>18</sup> - KK insists that litigation is the *only* way. By circumventing the courts and installing special commissions, “the government is acting as if we live in a banana republic”.

The 1986 generation of activists takes little interest in the chieftaincy dispute, but passions run high among older generations – including the ANC activists from the 1950s as well as former Lebowa officials and politicians. One reason why the dispute flared up in the 1990s was the return to South Africa by John Nkadimeng, who had spent some 30 years in exile with SACTU, the ANC’s trade union wing. Nkadimeng, who is Rhyne’s uncle, campaigned ardently for his nephew, a campaign only temporarily interrupted when Nkadimeng served as South African ambassador to Cuba.<sup>19</sup> Here again, the world of liberal democracy and the Kingdom of Custom do not represent two opposites: KK Sekhukhune wants to shop where he is most likely to get satisfaction. Like many others, he simply wants the best of both worlds.

### **The upwardly mobile, the stuck and the deteriorated: possible explanations**

SEYO’s former activists are nearly all employed in the public sector: municipal or provincial government or teaching. Two had worked for NGO’s. Two made a brief venture into the private sector, which they deemed challenging and interesting, but after one or two years they preferred to take up a position in the provincial administration. Freddy Maputha (42) is a senior civil servant at the Department of Housing in Polokwane: he is definitely upwardly mobile. He is extending his house in one of Polokwane’s residential suburbs and drives an impressive car. “I have benefited from change, I am content. But many people have not benefited.” To explain the fading of previous egalitarian ideals, he points towards the changed global context. “It was obvious that communist or socialist policies had not delivered freedom and opportunities. ANC activists lost their faith in socialism.” He believes that the government has made the right macro-economic choices. South Africa has a well functioning economy, but economic growth has not created much employment. “Now we are moving towards a skill-based economy, but we lack appropriate skills.”

His explanation for the different trajectories in the life stories of comrades who all started from a poor, rural background:

- you have to be at the right place at the right time
- some luck and much determination
- involvement in student politics at Turfloop has helped in building a network
- I graduated at the right time (1994) , when plenty of opportunities were opening up.

Educational qualifications are indeed a crucial variable in the careers of former activists. Without at least a BCom or a BA in administration, there is no access to the much desired

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<sup>18</sup> Comaroff & Comaroff (2004) ; In their ‘Reflections’ article, Comaroff & Comaroff assert that traditional leaders feel disadvantaged by the terms of the courts and would prefer to settle their disputes in traditional institutions (p. 52, note 54) The Acting Paramount Chief of Sekhukhune however is adamant that he places his confidence in the courts of the Republic.

<sup>19</sup> Ineke van Kessel and Barbara Oomen, “‘One Chief, One vote’: the revival of traditional authorities in post-apartheid South Africa’, *African Affairs* 96 (1997), pp. 561-585

senior positions in the municipal or provincial administration. Successful former activists invested in their education; now in their forties, a number of ex-comrades are still furthering their studies through UNISA or other part-time courses.

Three interviewees are unemployed. Watson Mosoane dropped out of high school when he was on the run in the late 1980s. He never managed to get his high school certificate. He tried to make a living in Gauteng with welding jobs, but after an injury sustained in a traffic accident he is no longer able to do this type of work. He is now aiming for a drivers' licence, but does not have the money to complete the procedure. With his wife and child, he has returned to Sekhukhune to live with his pensioner-mother. He blames himself for his misfortune: whenever he had earned money, he went out drinking with friends. Damaris Maditsi graduated in 1995 with a diploma as primary school teacher, but has never been able to find a permanent job, only temporary positions. Summing up her view of 'change', she said: "People are free now, but the main problem is jobs and crime. Education is free now, and the children receive a school lunch. Then there are social grants and RDP houses." Thus, in her view the welfare arrangements are among the main achievements of ANC rule. She is still an ANC member, but the ZCC has become much more important in her life, as it provides solace from an abusive marriage. Looking back on her involvement in the struggle, she is quite positive: it has made her more confident, now she is no longer afraid to stand up and speak her mind.

Women and girls were only a tiny minority in my original sample of activists, as in 1990-91 the phenomenon of female activists was almost unknown in Sekhukhuneland. Nowadays, women seem much more confident and more visible in the public sphere.

### **The place: what has changed in Sekhukhune?**

Greater Sekhukhune District has a population of 1.1 million, over 90 % rural. About half of the population is under 18. In terms of the demographic gender balance, little has changed: women outnumber men. However, in terms of women's empowerment, changes are striking. In 1990, it was rather difficult to interview women and girls : they hardly took part in public life, youth organisations or political formations. Women now take active part in the municipal and district councils, are employed by the municipalities and speak their mind to a foreign visitor without hesitation.

Sekhukhuneland has become much more connected with the outside world. A well-maintained tar road leads to Apel, the seat of Fetakgomo municipality, one of the five new municipalities that make up Sekhukhune District. The arrival of an unfamiliar car no longer arouses any fear in my host family, who used to be terrorized by police visits.

Newspapers are readily available in the new shopping complex, or at the new beer lounge, built by one of the former comrades of SEYO, who already in the early 1990s was making good money with a shebeen in his mothers' house. Cell phones are ubiquitous. In 1990, making a phone call was a major operation that involved queuing up at the Post Office, or asking permission from one or two shopkeepers who had a manually operated landline. Now, the grandmothers of Sekhukhuneland walk the roads with a pre-paid cell phone in their hand, courtesy of their children who work in town. At night, the cell phone doubles as a lantern. In 1990, there was no way that I could inform my family back in the Netherlands not to worry because I was extending my stay in



Sekhukhune for some weeks and would not be in touch for a while. Now I simply send an SMS.

In Apel, the most common response to my question ‘What has changed’ is: “Water, electricity and The Spar”. Interestingly, people who reply in Sepedi still use the English word ‘change’ to indicate improvements in their living conditions. In 1990, most families drew water from springs in the bottom of a largely dry river. In the early morning, girls carried buckets of water from the river to fill the containers in the kitchens. This chore has become much lighter: people bring their jerry cans in a wheelbarrow to the roadside pumps, which are rarely more than a few hundred meters from their house. Moreover, this is purified water, healthier and with a better taste than the salty water from the river bottom. Water from the pumps is free. Some have installed their own borehole, that serve their kitchen and bathroom. My host family now has a wc and a bathtub in the house. With newly acquired middle class tastes, the yard is no longer just an open space for sitting and hanging laundry. Many properties now are fenced, while sprinklers water the lawn - a worrying sight in a region with scorching temperatures and an acute water crisis.

Electricity has not yet been extended to the entire village, but by 2007 most houses were connected, either through subscription or pre-paid meters. The advantages are obvious. The day has more productive hours. Before, children could not do any homework after 18.00 hours, when darkness fell. In the more affluent households, electric cookers, refrigerators, freezers, electric irons, televisions and ventilators have made their appearance, while electricity is of course also needed for the recharging of cell phones. Although these household appliances are by no means ubiquitous, their presence is not limited to a tiny village elite. Many a pensioner does possess one or more of these appliances either from own savings or brought by a son or daughter who works in town. For months, the new shopping complex that opened in 2006 was the talk of the village. The spacious Spar Supermarket with a great variety of vegetables, fruits, milk and yoghurts, cold drinks, cookies, meat, cheese as well as tinned foodstuffs was truly miraculous for a village where fresh milk, fruits and vegetables had been unavailable, apart from some onions, tomatoes and morogo (wild spinach). Now consumers can trust that there will be fresh bread everyday, while before one never knew if and when the truck from Lebowa bakeries would arrive. Moreover, the supermarket is cheaper than local grocery shops. Before, villagers had to travel to Lebowakgomo for well-stocked supermarkets, a distance of more than one hour. Apart from the supermarket, there are also clothing stores and a bottle store; a bank is expected to open soon. ‘The complex’, as the shopping centre is known, has also become a social venue. Young people loiter here, boys watch football on the TV screen in The Spar, a few girls try to trade sex for one of the many seductive articles for sale. On Saturdays, youngsters dance to tunes from a sound system with a real life disk jockey. Obviously, local shopkeepers are not happy with the competition, but for ordinary residents The Spar symbolizes a better life, as well as some most welcome employment opportunities.

Next to ‘The Complex’ are the new buildings of the Fetakgomo municipality: brand new offices, equipped with computers. The municipality is host to Umsobumvo Youth Advisory Centre, a small office with two staff members and three computers to offer career guidance, support for job seeking, or a starters’ package for launching your own enterprise. Adjacent, also new, is the office of the provincial department of

education. A little beyond is the police station, the only structure that was already there in 1990.

The tribal hall, built in the early 1990s, doubles as community hall. ANC members, previously regarded as the chief's mortal enemies, now assemble here for their meetings. Chief Richard Nchabeleng has also joined the ANC, although he rarely attends a meeting.

At the junction known as Apel Cross is a largely deserted settlement of RDP houses. Many people signed up for a RDP house, but decided to not take up the house when it became available. Apel Cross is quite distant from the village and too isolated. Transport is not available, and if it were, it would be too costly. It are mostly the elderly and the young who signed up for the RDP housing, but only a few houses are inhabited. Housing policy has changed now: applicants can have a house on their own stand, if their old house is built of mud. This meets local requirements much better, and RDP houses are now being built scattered throughout the village.

Apel now has a clinic, where consultations and medicines are provided free. If necessary, an ambulance can ferry patients to Jane Furse hospital, a distance of about one hour and previously the only health service for Sekhukhuland. Health workers conduct door-to-door talks to encourage healthy living, raise HIV/AIDS awareness and monitor the growth of children. Since 2005, a slowly expanding system of home-based care is in place, to provide chronically ill patients with assistance in their household and if necessary with routine medical help. Twice a week patients receive free vegetables. However, people living with AIDS do not apply for this type of assistance, because the helpers are local people. They do not want to disclose their HIV positive status to the local population, worrying that the helpers will chatter about their clients in 'the complex'. Summing up the most important developments in the field of health, the nurse who has worked in the clinic since 1993, mentioned a marked decline in infant mortality, less malnutrition (largely because of the child support grant) and, in general, less diseases because people now have access to safe drinking water.

There are four common sources of household income in Sekhukhune:

- government-provided old age pensions ( received by 33% of households)
  - child support grants ( 33%)
  - remitted income from migrant labourers ( 31%)
  - income from regular wage employment ( 27%)
- + remaining social assistance and other income sources (limited coverage)<sup>20</sup>

Sekhukhune remains one of the poorest regions of South Africa, with 84% of people defined as poor (having less than R 1500 per household per month) and 66 % as very poor ( having less than R 550 per month)<sup>21</sup>. Employment levels are very low. Unemployment in Sekhukhune currently (2006) stands at 69%, much higher than the provincial average of 49%.<sup>22</sup> Of the working population, 34% are employed in 'Community Services': this includes teaching, the municipality, the clinics etc. Mining comes second with 28%. Only 2,4% are employed in farming. The rapid expansion of the

<sup>20</sup> Scott Drimie, Monitoring Food Security in South Africa: the FIVIMS-ZA Experience

<sup>21</sup> Department of Water and Forestry, .....2005

<sup>22</sup> Greater Sekhukhune District Municipality, 2005.

platinum mines around Burgersfort holds most promise for increased employment, while it is hoped that the miners will also provide a ready consumer market for locally produced foodstuffs. This would require a transformation from subsistence to commercial farming.<sup>23</sup>

### **Does resistance pay?**

Did Sekhukhuneland profit from its track record as a hotbed of resistance against Bantustan rule and apartheid? The commonly held view holds that, on the contrary, Sekhukhune still suffers the consequences of the rebellions of the 1950s and the 1980s. Under Bantustan rule, the Lebowa government invested in the infrastructure of more pliable parts of this scattered Bantustan. Bursaries for the University of the North and other tertiary institutions were allocated to students from less troublesome backgrounds. In the context of the Northern Transvaal, the rulers of the Gazankulu Bantustan gave high priority to education, much more than the administrations of Lebowa or Venda. In the perception of the ex-comrades from Sekhukhuneland, the Shangaan now dominate the administration of Limpopo province because of their educational advantages. Among former BaPedi activists, there is a sense of continuing marginalisation. In recognition of Sekhukhune's backward state, the South African government has declared the district a 'nodal point', a status that should bring more resources and manpower to help overcome the backlog.

### **New social movements?**

Some former activists were quite scathing about the ANC. Some stated that the ANC had been taken over by the former Bantustan elite, while a number of former comrades also 'sold out'. "Self-proclaimed communists have become capitalists. The ANC has become a bourgeois national democratic movement. Only people with money own the ANC. The SACP has become a forum for people who missed out on opportunities and positions. Some of them know nothing about communism".<sup>24</sup> The presumed 'battle for the soul of the ANC' revolves around control over tenders and jobs, not around ideological differences. Yet, there is very little evidence in Sekhukhuneland of emerging new social movements. One initiative, the Rural Women's Association (a project with gardening, sewing, computer literacy and carpentry) collapsed when the nuns who set up the project in the early 1990s, handed over to a local trust. Long existing church-based networks, stokvels and some youth and women's clubs continue to exist, but do not engage in the socio-political sphere. A Methodist priest, also a former SEYO activist, who returned to Sekhukhune in 2006, aspires to set up a youth group to function as pressure group "holding local government to account and raising awareness in local communities."<sup>25</sup> Thus far four youths had volunteered. In his view, the churches must reassume their prophetic role: the churches left a vacuum when, after 1994, they withdrew from the public sphere into the domain of religion.

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Jackson Lesufi, LED for economic development in Fetakgomo municipality, Apel, March 2007

<sup>24</sup> Moss Mabothe, Polokwane, 15 March 2007

<sup>25</sup> Philemon Talane, Apel, 24 March 2007

Sporadically, ‘concerned groups’ emerge, often including former comrades who feel excluded from the fruits of liberation. They attempt to draw attention to their plight by disturbing meetings or ceremonies. Thus, one ‘concerned group’ attempted to blow up the newly erected statue of King Sekhukhune at Tjate, using spent dynamite from the stocks of a nearby platinum mine. The damage was minimal, but the message was clear: celebrations of BaPedi heritage were seen as a luxury indulged in by the new elite, while the local village still did not have proper roads or access to electricity. However, the ‘concerned groups’ are short-lived. Without access to resources or influential ANC networks, their impact amounts to no more than an occasional grumble of discontent.

However, the provincial administration is well aware of the widening gap between rulers and ruled. Recently, Community Development Workers, employed by the province, have been introduced to maintain contact with ordinary residents and register their problems and complaints. As ‘the eyes and the ears of the premier’, CDW’s have easy access to the Premiers’ Office and other provincial services.

### **Conclusions**

The case of Sekhukhuneland and the former SEYO activists does not fit neatly in any of the four paradigms discussed in the first part of the paper. John Saul’s analysis is least applicable, while only some elements from the Comaroffs’ perspective on culture are relevant for the case of former activists in Sekhukhuneland. The case most resembles Niehaus’ interpretation of politics in Bushbuckridge, although not all activists share the extremely negative views expressed in Niehaus’ survey.

If there was a sense of betrayal, the target of the wrath of the former comrades was not Thabo Mbeki, but some of their old close comrades who had made successful careers. These comrades were expected to pull whatever strings at their disposal to help less fortunate friends. Their perceived lack of solidarity was bitterly resented. In Sekhukhune, horizontal solidarity networks between comrades survived to some extent. Interviewees expressed some sense of obligation towards comrades who ended up unemployed and stuck, as well as strong jealousies towards those who did well. The ‘upwardly mobile’ are expected to provide for others as well; often expectations seem to be way beyond what reasonably can be expected of the person concerned.

For all the talk of ‘betrayal’, the world of former SEYO activists is quite remote from John Saul’s interpretation of ‘defeat or tragedy’. While they may share his analysis of ‘a sell-out by the new elite, the national bourgeoisie’, their basic sentiment is that they want to be part of it, not overthrow it.

.Political debates centre on matters of personnel, not on ideological differences. As far as national politics is concerned, the competition between the ‘Mbeki camp and the Zuma camp’ is hotly debated. In Limpopo, factions within the ANC centre around premier Sello Moloto and MEC Aaron Motsoaledi. These factions are labelled the *Mokhukhu*, after a ZCC dance, and the *Mapogo* (leopards) to refer to people from Sekhukhune. Premier Sello Moloto is a ZCC member: he sometimes takes cabinet ministers to Moria (ZCC headquarters) for meetings. Mapogo is the name of a notorious private security firm based in Sekhukhune.

On the local scene, speculations abound about who will become chair of the ANC branch, delegate to the ANC conference, but most of all: who will be (re)appointed municipal manager. In theory, the municipal council decides on this appointment, but the

advice of the provincial ANC deployment committee is awaited as if descending straight from heaven. If you choose to ignore party instructions, you do so at your own peril, as many comrades told me. This picture fits well with the Comaroffs' notion of a depoliticised arena, in which differences are largely confined to the implementation of policy and the distribution of material advantage.

As Niehaus observed in Bushbuckridge, welfare and services are crucial in securing loyalty to the ANC among the not-so-well off. Many informants listed 'freedom, water, electricity, the child support grant and free clinics' as the most important gains of liberation.

For some, the glue of African nationalism secures a continuing loyalty to the ANC, but in many cases this loyalty is inspired by the conviction that there are no opportunities outside the ANC. The strong bonds of loyalty to Sekhukhune and BaPedi networks at first sight support the Comaroffs' argument that many South Africans are seeking comfort and security in the Kingdom of Custom. I have not done research among people with little or no education in Sekhukhune; activists in 1980s were recruited in high schools and at the University of the North. Former activists however harbour no nostalgia whatsoever for the rule of the chief, who in many cases used to be their mortal enemy. They are well aware of their rights as citizens of the Republic, while simultaneously cherishing certain elements from their cultural heritage.

What are the implications of this pattern of shopping in the Kingdom of Custom and the Republic of liberal democracy? Potentially this can be a creative process that could produce Africanized versions of liberal democracy and/or social democracy. There is however also an inherent danger of opportunistic practices, if one shops around only for rights and not for responsibilities. If liberal democracy as well as the traditional world are regarded as supermarkets where one takes whatever suits today's needs, the resulting mixed bags of provisions will not amount to a coherent pattern of norms, values and codes of behaviour.

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