KRONOS
southern african histories

MAY 2025 VOLUME 51 http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2309-9585/2025/v51a17

# REVIEW

Khumisho Moguerane, *Morafe: Person, Family and Nation in Colonial Bechuanaland, 1880s-1950s* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2024), 469 pp, ISBN 978-1-4314-3277-6

*Morafe: Person, Family and Nation in Colonial Bechuanaland, 1880s-1950s* is a story of people living along the Molopo River and what we now know as the Botswana-South Africa border, but at a time when racial, political and national identities were much less fixed than they would come to be in the latter 20th century. Moguerane offers a biography of a family – the Molemas – which includes not just those biologically related but also those who the Molemas incorporated into their household as kin, such as Sol Plaatje. In *Tribing and Untribing the Archive* (2016), Mbongiseni Buthelezi argues that given the problematic history of terms like tribe, 'we need new names too' for the political formations that people in southern Africa are ascribed to.[1] In *Morafe*, Moguerane painstakingly parses the Molemas' archive to give us new names for several concepts at the heart of South African political histories, presents and futures. She argues that the Molemas played a significant role in making and remaking categories and practices around personhood, family and nation in southern Africa between 1880 and 1950.

The concept *morafe* (pronounced 'morahe'), from which the book takes its name, is central to Moguerane's argument. She describes *morafe* as a Setswana word that is difficult to translate into English. While some translators have used 'tribe' or 'nation', Moguerane argues a more accurate definition of *morafe* would be 'a community of persons'.[2] To belong to the *morafe* among the Barolong – to be granted personhood (*botho*) – those born into the community as well as newcomers had to act in accordance with a set of norms denoting civic and moral virtue. The norms and practices that defined membership of the *morafe* could be and were tested, challenged and stretched over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. Moguerane argues that the Molema family believed they had divine intervention to define 'sacred personhood,

1 M. Buthelezi, 'We Need New Names Too' in C. Hamilton and N. Leibhammer (eds), *Tribing and Untribing the Archive* (Pietermaritzburg: UKZN Press, 2016), 587–599.
2 K. Moguerane, *Morafe: Person, Family and Nation in Colonial Bechuanaland, 1880s-1950s* (Johannesburg: Jacana Media, 2024), 2.

*morafe*'.[3] Sol T. Plaatje described the Molemas as 'fathers, assembling the morafe into a house of vigour, nourishment and pride'.[4]

Moguerane suggests that a biography of the Molemas in the north-west of southern Africa can offer a different vantage point on understanding empire and colonial administration, in the context of a historiography that tends to situate the fulcrum of change in the 19th century in the British colonial Cape, the gold fields of the Witwatersrand, or the *Mfecane* of Natal. Moguerane contends that another reason to focus on the Molemas is the incredible paper trail they left behind. In addition to the government archives of Botswana and South Africa, Moguerane relies on a substantial archival repository left to the University of the Witwatersrand by Silas Molema and Sol Plaatje, with materials in English, Setswana and Dutch; the personal papers of Sebopioa and Modiri Molema; and the newspaper *Koranta ea Becoana*, edited by Plaatje and owned by Silas Molema. These archives offer access not only to documents concerning governance, bureaucracy, economic and public affairs, but also to personal documents, such as letters between spouses, private journals and family photo albums. The breadth of sources allows Moguerane to connect the intimate personal lives of the Molemas to broader societal processes around personhood, land and nation.

The book *Morafe* is divided into three sections and ordered around three key concepts. First, there is 'moreness/fathers'. Here Moguerane refers to the ability of an individual to be 'more' than just themselves – to understand themselves through what she calls 'moral routines of practice'.[5] Examples of these routines of practice include Christianity, schooling, reading, writing and even an acceptance of the British empire as a 'political home for the *morafe*'.[6] This presenting, making and remaking of personhood required some discussion of the 'origins' of *morafe* amongst the Barolong.

On the matter of what 'lent moral force to the practices that made persons', there was much debate amongst the Barolong group, especially in relation to *sechuana* (traditions) and *sekhoa* (understood to be reified Westernisation). For example, in the aftermath of the *Mfecane*, two of the Molema brothers, Isaac and Montsioa, charted different paths. Isaac, who had converted to Christianity, set up a base at Mafikeng in 1857, where he argued for and succeeded to an extent, in incorporating Protestantism into the social and moral practice of the *morafe*. Meanwhile, Montsioa, who remained in Rietfontein, insisted that his brother's embrace of Christianity would tear apart the fabric of personhood and authority, particularly the symbolic meaning of 'fathers', whose role it was to bring households together through certain labour, marriage and circumcision practices.[7] These debates continued among the next generation of Barolong in the pages of *Koranta Ea Becoana*, a newspaper that

3 K. Moguerane, *Morafe*, 24.
4 Ibid., 391.
5 Ibid., 26.
6 Ibid., 26.
7 K. Moguerane, *Morafe*, 49.

Moguerane argues 'facilitated the gathering of men'.[8]

In her second chapter, Moguerane explores the themes of 'family/placement' after 1885, when the British established control over two regions: the Bechuanaland Protectorate north of the Molopo River (modern Botswana), and British Bechualanaland south of the river (modern South Africa). She focuses on six main characters and their relationships with each other: four men (Silas Molema (b. 1852), his sons, Sebopioa (b. 1881), Modiri (b. 1891), and Sol Plaatje, (b. 1876); one woman (Silas' daughter Harriet, b. 1896); and a sixth character, the land. She argues that in the 19th century the Molemas successfully negotiated with the British for the Barolong to maintain a level of autonomy over the 'reserve' areas on both sides of the river. They therefore avoided government ownership of land, imposition of hut tax and interference in local law that Africans in the 'native locations' experienced at the hands of the British. They also took on numerous white tenants and labour tenants. Through purchasing land around the reserve, petitioning the British Crown and advocating through their churches, the Barolong established an alliance with the imperial power which helped to protect their interests.

From the Union Government of 1910 onwards, the Molemas faced greater threats to their ownership of land and to their autonomy. The final chapter in *Morafe* deals with how the Barolong confronted these threats, through their engagement with government legislation, work in political movements and landlord-tenant relationships. Centered on the theme of sons and homecoming, Moguerane looks at the relationship between the Molema family and the politics of the nation state. Moguerane argues that 'sons had inherited the ambitions of their fathers but not the means to realise them [in the 20th century].'[9] She analyses the Molemas' involvement in the South African National Native Council (SANNC) and Native Advisory Council of Bechuanaland Protectorate. She pays particular attention to the crucial role that Modiri Molema played in bridging the older ('fathers') and younger ('sons') generations to define a moral vision for the *morafe* into the 1940s and 1950s. Some older Barolong men courted the Bantu Authorities system of the apartheid era, seeing it as an opportunity for reinforcing power. Meanwhile Modiri Molema ultimately swung the parameters of *morafe* towards the Congress tradition of 'collective black experience'.[10]

In *Morafe*, Moguerane offers several important theoretical interventions. She charts how Barolong people navigated, made and re-made understandings of labour value, land, personhood and nation in the context of major economic and political changes. These are issues that continue to animate conflicts and debates in southern Africa. Moguerane argues that nationhood is not 'out there'; it is also navigated and contested 'in here; in the very intimate spaces between us'.[11]

There is a constant shuttling back and forth between the intimate, family zone and the public zone of what it is to be part of the *morafe*: 'whether and if so, when and

8 Ibid., 80.
9 K. Moguerane, *Morafe*, 264.
10 Ibid., 359.
11 Ibid., 394.

why, the nation state became commensurate with the ideals of personhood that the *morafe* represented in colonial Bechuanaland'.[12] However, this connection between *morafe* and the nation is slightly under-theorised in the book and could have been strengthened by linking the broader claims of the introduction and conclusion to the empirical details she provides in the chapters.

Moguerane's biography of the Molemas offers insight into how members of the Barolong group shaped colonialism, particularly British policy and legislation. She argues that the Molemas played a significant role in constructing racial difference and nationalism. In this way, she challenges the top-down story of how colonialism shaped the affairs of African people so often told in histories of imperialism on the African continent.

While most of the main figures in her book are men, Moguerane does subtle and nuanced work around gender. She offers insights into what makes a man among the Barolong by focusing on the categories of fathers and sons – not in the biological way, but in terms of the moral norms that are expected if one is to be part of the *morafe*. For example, she argues that Silas Molema saw himself as a 'father of the house' – a figure who could forge solidarity by accumulating people into the homestead. Silas Molema's work was 'the work of *tiro*, of making persons'.[13]

In her conclusion, Moguerane suggests that the 'the significance of this book is in its analytical understanding of the work of personhood'.[14] She argues that personhood is an 'existential capacity, a quality not related primarily to material interest nor to status' but made through reciprocal transactions with other people. Those familiar with Marx may think of this as an articulation of 'species being', or those interested in the philosophy of *ubuntu*, as an expression of the maxim that a 'person is a person because of other people'. What makes *Morafe* an exceptional work of theory and history is that Moguerane is nuanced and particular as she builds a theoretical understanding of personhood from the Molemas' sources and world view. This book is not only about the Molemas, or the history of Botswana and South Africa; it is also about the ways in which we become human and the stories we tell ourselves about that humanity, to prevent it from unravelling.

Tara Weinberg
*Department of History, University of the Witwatersrand*
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3163-1169

12 Ibid., 23.
13 Ibid., 389.
14 Ibid., 388.