Traditional Democracy and Local Emancipation: The Story of a Chieftainess

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In 1964, a young woman, Mohumagadi[1], following a decision by the traditional council of Amandebele a Moletlane, took over from her late husband, the Chief, in the role of Chieftainnesss. This was unusual, not only because female chieftaincy is rare in South Africa, but also because she had only two female children, thus she was not acting as regent for any male heirs.

In early 1976, Mohumagadi took the decision to close the schools in her community. This decision preceded the Soweto Riots, which were sparked by resistance to Afrikaans as medium of instruction. Mohumagadi's decision was an act of resistance to seTswana as a medium of instruction in schools where previously instruction took place in sePedi. The change to seTswana was precipitated by the imminent independence of Bophuthatswana, as a 'homeland' for baTswana people.

The ensuing battle over language in schools involved the President of Bophuthatswana, Lucas Mangope; legal challenges, deposition of chiefs, and questions of allegiance of the community. Using this as a case study, this paper will explore themes of traditional democracy in the context of local emancipation. Mohumagadi struggled against Mangope, so she could have been seen as an agent of the struggle against apartheid. She also struggled for what she saw as appropriate ethnic, language and tribal rights for her community, which could have made her an ally of apartheid. Her community saw her in neither of these roles – they saw her as a leader, as representative of their interests, but also as one of them, and so to be supported and protected. Once Mohumagadi was deposed, the community challenged the deposition legally, with funds collected by the community. This paper will explore the discourse of local emancipation in which Mohumagadi's story is told.

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[1] While the direct meaning of this is "Queen", this name will be used to protect the interviewee's identity.