

The Traditional Diet of the Bantu in the Pietersburg District*

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SUMMARY

The food habits of the Tswana-Sotho ethnic group in earlier years are described by a medical practitioner of 40 years' experience in the Pietersburg district, who has made a close study of such diets.

We know that following World War II maize was adopted by the Bantu as the cereal staple and that pellagra and kwashiorkor have become very prevalent in these parts.

The writer shows that the traditional diet gave protection against deficiency diseases and urges that the Bantu be induced, as far as possible, to return to the food habits of earlier times, in particular to the use of kaffir-corn, beans and milk, in order to alleviate present conditions.

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We are informed by G. W. Stow that the Bakwena or Bakoni, the most numerous branch of the Tswana people, once occupied the country from the Maluti mountains in the south to Lake Ngami in the north; and from the Drakensberg range in the east to the fringe of the Kalahari desert in the west, while the present Transvaal territory formed the principal focus around which they concentrated.

Commencing in 1820, the southern portion of this region was overwhelmed by Zulu clans chased out of Natal by Shaka. These in turn expelled the Batlokwa from their homeland. Led by their chieftainess Mantatisi, the Batlokwa swarmed far into (ba)Kwenaland, plundering and murdering the indigenes. In 1823 Mzilikazi and his Matabele impis swept like a hurricane through the Transvaal killing and pillaging until there was hardly a Mokwena left alive in the country. This turmoil lasted until 1837 when the Voortrekkers drove the Matabele into Rhodesia.

According to S. M. Molema the renowned Mokwena chief Moshweshwe, having weathered this fearful storm, collected all displaced persons whether of Tswana or Zulu stock, welded them into one nation which he called the Basotho or 'black people' and settled them in the terrain adjoining the Maluti mountains. This land became known as Lesotho. Here he fortified himself on such mountain strongholds as Thaba Bosego (mountain of night) where he enjoyed immunity from the attacks of the most daring impis of Shaka and Mzilikazi. As the Tswana element predominated it absorbed the lesser Zulu and other strains and the language spoken by the new nation became a modified Setswana called Sesotho. The same appears to have happened in the Northern Transvaal where the

assimilation of darker intruders changed the original Tswana language of the light-skinned Bakoni (Bakwena) to Sepedi or Northern Sesotho and lent their skin a deeper hue. These people called their country Bosotho.

In discussing the food habits of this Sotho-Tswana ethnic group, the subject will be referred to in the past tense as the traditional diet has largely been discarded.

In their tribal state the Sotho-Tswana practised a strict division of labour whereby the men tended the cattle while the women tilled the soil and prepared the food. They took 2 meals a day: the sefihlōlō or breakfast at about 11 o'clock in the morning just after the cattle had gone out to graze, and the selalēlō or supper at sunset when the cattle had returned to the kraal.

They had 3 kinds of food, the bogōbē or porridge, the sesebō or relish, and morōgō or vegetable.

AGRICULTURE

When soaking rains had fallen, and the chief's field had been tilled, the women were allowed to hoe their own lands (each married woman being entitled to a piece of land).

No manure was used but the following crops were planted together in the same land or tshemo, the seed having meanwhile been stored in a powder obtained from the calcined dry leaf of the aloe marlothi to preserve it from insect pests.

Crops

The principal crops were:

Cereals: Mabêlê or sorgho or kaffir-corn (*Sorghum caffrorum*); leotsa or mabêlêbêlê or millet (*Pennisetum typhoides*); and nyōba or sweet reed (a kind of sorghum).

Beans: diNawa or mixed kaffir bean (*Vigna unguiculata*); diTloo or juga (*Voandzeia subterranea*) and diThlodi or mung bean or green gram (*Phaseolus aureus*) introduced from India and very much favoured by these people.

Gourds: Makataan or lerotsê and watermelon or legapu (*Citrullus lanatus*) and lagenaria or calabash, both edible and inedible kinds. The leraka (*Lagenaria siceraria*) was eaten as a vegetable and is now being cultivated and sold by the Portuguese market gardeners. The fruit of the segō, phafana (kgapa) and morutlō were dried and made into utensils.

During February (Hlakola), the lands were carefully weeded and at this time the eating of the first fruits was

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initiated by the Chief and observed by the whole tribe. Towards the end of May when the Naka star had appeared, the harvesting of cereals began.

When poor crops indicated that the soil was depleted, the land was left to recuperate and an adjoining piece was cultivated.

PREPARATION OF FOOD

Bogôbê (Porridge)

To make bogôbê or porridge, the housewife had to grind the mabêlê herself as follows: Kneeling before a flat rock about 60 × 40 cm called a lwala, she placed some corn on this and grasping an oval stone or tshilô with both hands, crushed and ground the grain. When lwala and tshilô became too smooth to grind the grain, the surfaces were pecked and roughened by means of a hard stone known as a kgekgeto. With continuous use this kgekgeto gradually assumed a rounded shape and was then discarded. The millet was ground in the same way as the mabêlê. All foods were cooked in earthenware pots and served in calabash utensils or wooden bowls.

Their chief food, the bogôbê or boswa was made with mabêlê or millet meal. Although this was referred to as a porridge, the quality was more that of a bread. It was fashioned into loaves (makako) which were neatly arranged in a wooden bowl (mogopo). At meal time when the bogôbê had cooled, a loaf was taken in the left hand and with the right hand pieces were broken off, kneaded and eaten with sesebô or morôgô or both.

Unground mabêlê grain was also cooked in its natural state, the resulting dish called lewa being eaten alone instead of bogôbê. Soft porridge (motêpa or mphokolô) was made with mabêlê or millet meal to supplement the diet of infants who had to be breast-fed for 2 or 3 years.

A very popular dish was sour porridge (ting) made in one of two ways. Either they cooked mabêlê with whey instead of water, stirring (loisa) until it was firm, or they mixed mabêlê meal with warm water in an earthenware pot and let the mixture stand for 2 days, until it had risen (kokomoga) and turned sour (bodila). When it was 'right' (lokile), water was boiled in another pot and the mixture gradually added and allowed to simmer (kgakgatha) and stirred until it thickened. The sesebô used with this type of bogôbê was a gravy called bogoko. A bogôbê known as legala used to be made with fresh milk.

There were of course other modifications of the bogôbê such as the kgodu whose main ingredient was the makataan or lerotsê. When the lerotsê was stored in a cool and dry place such as the matuding (verandah) of a hut, it lasted until the next crop. Such a lerotsê was peeled, sliced and hung out to dry for a while. It was then cooked until reduced to a puree, then mabêlê meal was added and the mixture stirred until firm.

A dish named dikgôbê was made by cooking two kinds of beans, dinawa and dithlodi. The beans were mixed and cooked together with a little water and were generally eaten whole without the addition of other foods. Some-

times they were mashed. Bogôbê or a substitute was eaten morning and evening.

Beer

For ages these people have brewed two kinds of mabêlê beer—a mild one known as mageu and a more intoxicating one called bjalwa. The latter is a very popular and nourishing drink. It is made by moistening mabêlê and storing it in a basket or sack until all the grains have sprouted. It is then spread over the lapa or courtyard of the homestead and left there to dry. It is next ground to a meal named mohlaba (malt). This mohlaba is mixed with water in earthenware beer pots and allowed to ferment for a day or more depending on the weather. The mixture is now boiled and allowed to cool down. Mohlaba is then again added and the mixture allowed to ferment for a day or so, whereupon it is strained and again left to cool. It is now ready to be served at some party or gathering. However much they drink of this beer they remain cheerful and never become aggressive.

Unfortunately the same cannot be said of morula beer. During February and March the morula tree, which grows all over the Bushveld, sheds its fruit in a green state. The fruit ripens on the ground turning yellow in the process. Attached to the pip of the fruit is the pulp and between this and the peel a little fluid. When the pulp of the fruit and the fluid are mixed with a little water, fermentation takes place with the production of a very potent alcoholic beverage. It very often happens that under the influence of this drink, Bantu run amock and 'inflict grievous bodily harm' on their fellow-beings.

Sesebô (Side-dishes)

A sesebô is a food which adds flavour to the bogôbê or staple.

Meat. Obviously the most popular one was meat. The Tswana-Sotho have kept cattle, sheep, goats and fowls since time immemorial. But, as they only slaughtered livestock for ritual purposes or on festive occasions and had unreliable hunting methods, meat was not always available. When prepared by the women it was usually stewed and had a pleasant flavour, but men preferred to roast or grill it with less tasty results.

Eggs and fish were taboo (go ila) and were never eaten.

Locusts and caterpillars: Long ago when locusts periodically swarmed into this country destroying crops and plant life, they were eagerly gathered, boiled, dried and stored and used as sesebô for months. Now that the locust has been brought under control, the people have taken over the Venda habit of gathering a caterpillar called masotsa or mopani worm. These masotsa are also treated and stored in such a way that they can be enjoyed for a long time.

Beans: A sesebô called segailele was made from the nawa bean (*Vigna unguiculata*). The beans were crushed and winnowed, then made into soup. The tloo or juga bean, on the other hand, was boiled with the husks which were removed just before eating.

Milk: By far the most important *sesebô* was sour milk because it was available daily. Not many years ago milk was plentiful in the *platteland*. Only children and herdboys drank fresh milk. The latter had to leave with their herds or flocks for the grazing grounds just before breakfast (*sefihlolô*) and had to make a meal of *malatsa* (left-over *bogôbê* of the evening before) with milk.

For adults, milk had to be curdled and for this procedure 5 earthenware pots called *ditshikwana* were required:

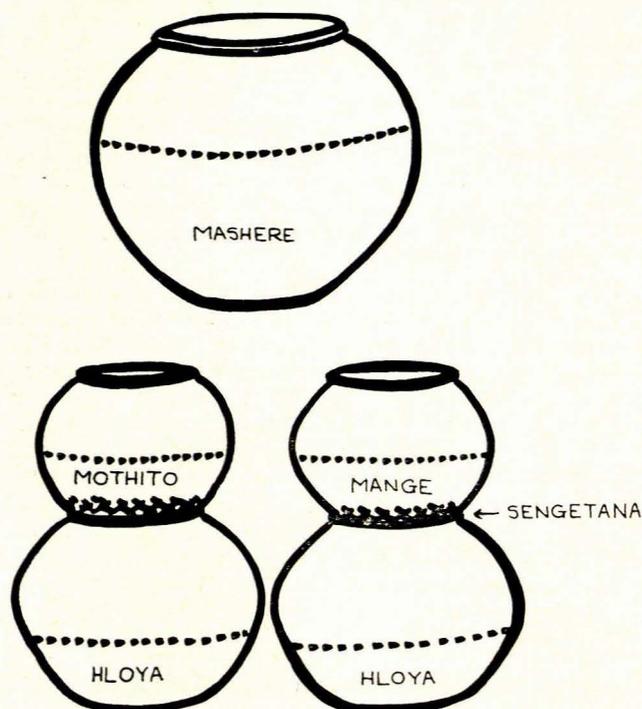


Fig. 1. Earthenware pots for separating curds from whey.

A large pot or *morifsi* held (*swara*) the milk until it was sour (*kgahla*). Two pots were medium in size and the other 2 somewhat smaller. The latter had an opening at the bottom and were placed on top of the medium-sized ones. The opening was covered with a sisal-plaited sieve called a *sengêtane* designed to separate (*phophisa*) the curds from the whey. There were thus 2 double pots or separators. When the milk in the *morifsi* was curdled (*kgahla*), the butter fat was skimmed (*okola*) with the aid of a *sefago* (calabash vessel) and put into the top of double-pot No. 1. When the fat had been removed from the *morifsi*, a milk remained behind known as *lesêrê*. This too was skimmed (*okola*) but added to the top of double-pot No. 2. When the curds and whey were completely separated in double-pot No. 2, the top pot contained firm, fatless curds which made a delicious *sesebô* called *mangê*. The lower pot held the whey (*hlôya*). The mixture of curds and cream in double pot No. 1 was removed to a clean earthenware vessel where it was churned (*go thita*). The butter was removed to a special small pot called a *sedibêlô*. It was mixed with ochre and used as a cosmetic. The buttermilk

on the other hand was boiled down to a gravy known as *bogoko*. This *bogoko* was used to enrich the flavour of *ting*. Needless to say the *sesebô* was served in its own receptacle. The *ditshikwana* had to be thoroughly cleaned after use.

Morôgô (vegetables)

Like all other people the Tswana-Sotho realized the importance of eating vegetables which they named *morôgô* (pl. *merôgô*), but they did not deem it necessary to ingest such large quantities as the people of the West. Apart from the *leraka* (*marakka*), *legapu* (watermelon) *lerotsê* (*makataan*), and *nyôba* (sugar reed), vegetables were not specially grown, but leaves were picked from such crops as the *nawa* (kaffir bean), the *lerotsê* (*makataan*) and *legapu*. The leaves of the *nawa* were termed *monawa* and those of the melons were called *motshatsha*. In order to have vegetables in winter, *monawa* was cooked with *lerotsê* and mashed. Pellets were made from this mash, allowed to dry and stored for future use. This product was known as *mokhusa* and when *morôgô* was needed it was boiled (*go khusa*). *Leraka* was cooked and eaten exactly like *gem* squash. Most *merôgô* were collected from the veld. The most popular one was the *lerotho* (*Cleome gynandra*) a plant found growing in the outer enclosure of the homestead.

Other vegetables were, *theepe* or pigweed (*Amaranthus hybridus*); *lehlanye* (*Vernonia fastigiata*); *selotane* (*Momordica balsamina*); *monawa* (*Vigna unguiculata*), and *motshatsha* (*Citrullus lanatus*).

The leaves of the various *merôgô* were stewed and served as a dish in its own receptacle.

Sweets were only eaten when the sweet reed, watermelon, and various wild fruit were ripe, or when somebody had robbed a beehive.

DISCUSSION

The food described above protected these people from deficiency diseases such as pellagra and kwashiorkor with all their concomitant ailments.

Writing in 1861 the Rev. E. Casalis remarks that 'the sorgho is to the Natives of South Africa what wheat is to us. They consume an immense quantity of it in various forms; sometimes cooked in its natural state like rice—sometimes ground and made into a kind of coarse pudding'. Subsequently he adds: 'according to the Natives, maize is a plant of recent introduction. Probably, they received it from the coasts of Mozambique and from the Cape Colony at the same time. Certain tribes of the interior do not yet cultivate it'. G. W. Stow corroborates this by informing us that 'the only vegetable productions cultivated by the Bachoana and their forefathers were varieties of the native grain, (*Holcus sorghum*) sweet reed, (*Sorghum saccharatum*) pumpkins, a small kind of kidney bean, and watermelons, which appeared to be a cultivated variety of the *Cucumis caffer*. Maize or Indian corn was perfectly unknown to them, and was introduced from the east coast (the Portuguese settlements) through the Matibili invasion'. Discussing the Batlapin branch of the Tswana he states

that 'the plants which they principally cultivated were the millet, a particular kind of bean, and an insipid sort of watermelon which was probably the wild melon of the country, cultivated'.

Paul C. Mangelsdorf, writing in the 1958 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, declares that 'maize is undoubtedly a plant of American origin, since there is no evidence of any kind—archeological, linguistic, pictorial or historical—of the existence of maize in any part of the old world before 1492 . . . Introduced into Europe by Columbus and into Africa by the Portuguese, maize spread rapidly through the old world . . . In the United States almost 90% of the maize produced is fed to livestock . . . as a human food, maize is inferior to other cereals . . . It is deficient in niacin and diets containing excessive amounts of maize usually result in pellagra'.

Neser and Pretorius point out that 'the peculiar shortcoming of maize, apart from its defective protein, is that a deficiency of tryptophan is combined with a deficiency of free nicotinic acid'. Quoting Aucamp *et al.*, they inform us that 'a surplus of kaffir-corn amounting in recent years to about 20% of the total production is exported annually to Europe, where it is largely used for animal feeding'.

For various reasons the Bantu of the Pietersburg district have had to discard their traditional food habits, adopting maize as their staple cereal instead of kaffir-corn. We know that pallagra and kwashiorkor have become very prevalent in those parts.

Under these circumstances, would it not be wise to encourage the Bantu to return to their erstwhile foodstuffs such as sorghum, millet and beans, etc., and to export maize instead?

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