

THE ROLONG OF THABA NCHU

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Thaba Nchu is a small enclave of the Republic of Bophuthatswana situated far to the south and east of other Tswana territories. It almost borders on Lesotho and is surrounded by the Orange Free State. Its people belong mainly to the Seleka branch of the Rolong division of the Tswana people. They speak a Tswana dialect (*Setswana*) that has been influenced greatly by South Sotho (*Sesotho*).

The reason that this small group of Tswana people exists in the centre of a predominantly South Sotho area lies in the troubled history of the Tswana people during and just after the wars "of scattering or dispersal" (*Difaqane*) in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Towards the end of this turbulent period the Rolong settled at Thaba Nchu (Black Mountain) in territory under the jurisdiction of Moshweshwe, chief of the newly formed South Sotho nation.

The Tswana

The Tswana-speaking people live mainly in Botswana, Bophuthatswana and the surrounding areas of the western Transvaal and northern Cape. A small number are also found in S.W.A./Namibia on the borders of Botswana. They are closely related to the South Sotho (*Basotho*) and North Sotho such as the Pedi, and are sometimes referred to as the Western Sotho.

These three groups share the same origins and have great cultural and linguistic similarities. They moved into their present territories centuries ago reaching the limits of their southward migration by the fifteenth century. Extensive stone ruins, on the southern African highveld, are connected with them. In the Orange Free State these ruins date from 1450 A.D.

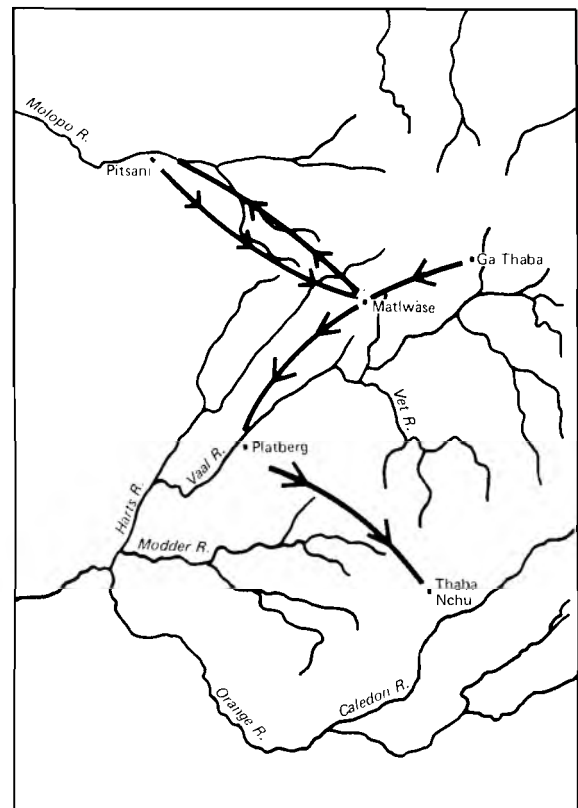
Each Sotho-Tswana tribe was independently ruled by its chief and councillors. Weaker tribes could place themselves under the protection of a strong chief, but they remained autonomous and could break away again. Any dissatisfied faction within a tribe could also break away and form a separate tribe. Most divisions were the result of succession disputes. These divided tribes were

unable to cope when the wars of *Difaqane* burst upon them.

The Rolong

The founder of the Rolong tribe (singular: *Marolong*, plural: *Barolong*) is said to have been Morolong, born, according to oral tradition, near Zeerust in the western Transvaal in the 13th or 14th century.

Sotho-Tswana lineages (descent groups) are connected to totems which seem to indicate that they were once hunters, cultivators and iron-workers, their cattle complex being added later. Rolong totems are iron (*tshipi*) and the hammer (*noto*), which implies that they were once perhaps the Smiths of the Tswana people.



This map illustrates the wanderings of the Seleka Rolong.

(After Lye & Murray: Transformations on the Highveld)



A painting of Rev. Archbell's congregation at Thaba Nchu in 1834.

(Africana-Museum)

Before 1760 the Rolong formed a political unit under Tau (the Lion) said to have been the greatest of the Rolong chiefs. The largest Rolong tribe is the Tshidi of Mafikeng and surrounding districts but the Ratlou, based mainly southwest of Mafikeng, are still considered the senior section. The Rapulana live mainly south-east of Mafikeng, while the Seleka are at Thaba Nchu. A number of smaller Rolong offshoots are also spread widely in Botswana.

The Seleka Rolong

The Seleka Rolong are first mentioned in written history by the Wesleyan Methodist missionary, Samuel Broadbent, in 1823. Under chief Sefunelo they lived at Thabeng (near the present Buisfontein) until dislodged by the Phuthing. In 1823 they moved to Makwassie near the present Klerksdorp, where the missionaries joined them. In 1824 they were driven from Makwassie by the Taung of Moletsane and fled to Phitshane to join the Tshidi and Ratlou Rolong. Later they returned to Makwassie, but, afraid of Mzilikazi, left again and settled at Platberg-on-Vaal (near the present Warrenton) in 1827. In 1830 Moroka succeeded his father, Sefunelo, as chief. In 1832 the Tshidi and Ratlou sections, fleeing from Mzilikazi's

Matabele, sought asylum with Moroka at Platberg-on-Vaal. The increased population at Platberg-on-Vaal resulted in a shortage of water and grazing and Moroka began to think about moving again.

In May 1833 an expedition consisting of the missionaries and representatives of the chiefs of the different Rolong sections, and of the Griqua, the Kora and the 'Newlanders' explored the area around the Modder, Caledon and Riet Rivers and obtained permission from Moshweshwe of the young Sotho nation and Sikonyela of the Tlokwa for the Rolong and the "Coloured" communities to settle there, the Rolong in the vicinity of Thaba Nchu and the "Coloured" communities further east.



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