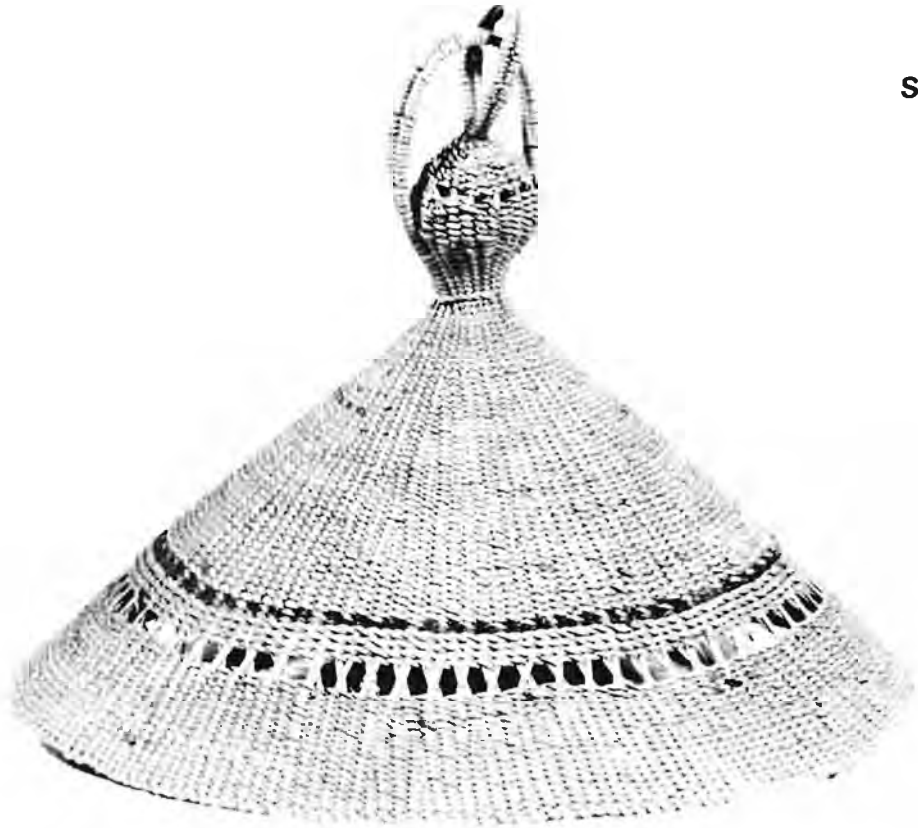


HATS OF THE SOUTHERN SOTHO

S.D. Bishop



Modianyewe.

The *modianyewe* (pi. *medianyewe*) is the conical straw hat typically connected with the South Sotho. Today its traditional symbolism is being lost and it is worn by anyone and even sold to tourists. But it was once the hat of royalty, symbolising the power of the Basotho nation, and to the traditionalist it is still a very special hat. *Modianyewe* means "he who executes judgement in court." It was the prerogative of the older men to give judgement in the chief's court, which they did with great eloquence. Therefore only older men, chiefs and kings wore *medianyewe*. They did not wear the hat while going about everyday matters, but only when going to court or attending important traditional feasts (national feasts). A man wearing a *modianyewe* revealed himself as a true Mosotho. It gave him full self-confidence as a Mosotho man and the belief that nobody could withstand his eloquence in the debates of the court. According to Tyrrell¹ the number of "handles" on the apex of a *modianyewe* are said to indicate a man's status, but Mr Edwin Mohatlane, guide-lecturer at the National Museum, has never heard anything about this.

A "true" Mosotho displays a *modianyewe* prominently in his home, indicating to all who see it that he is an upholder of tradition and that he acknowledge his political ties with his chief and his bonds with his ancestors. It also serves to protect his home against danger and evil influences. For these same reasons Mr Mohatlane's father keeps a *modianyewe* on the shelf below the back window of his car.

Today this hat has an honoured place on the national flag of Lesotho, which consists of a white *modianyewe* on a blue background with red and white stripes on the left hand side. Lesotho postage stamps are watermarked with a repeating pattern of *medianyewe*. A design of the hat is also used to indicate Lesotho on the number plates of cars registered in that country. The Basotho Hat curio shop in Maseru is in the form of a *modianyewe* and is the first obvious landmark one sees upon entering Maseru. According to Mr Mohatlane the shape of this building symbolises that here one is entering traditional Lesotho.

The origins of *modianyewe* are obscure. A similarly shaped hat was once found among the Cape Malays and Tyrrell states that it is said to have been adopted from them. According to Ambrose² the oldest known records of a *modianyewe*-shaped hat in the interior is Burchell's report of such a hat being made by the Bangwaketse of Botswana in 1812. Among the Basotho the *modianyewe* is as old as anyone can remember. According to Mr Mohatlane it came into use at the time of the founding of the Basotho nation, as the hat of royalty and a unifying symbol for the diverse peoples under Moshoeshe, but nobody knows anything about it before that time.

The other common type of hat found in Lesotho is the *mosetla*, (pl. *mesetla*), a straw hat with a brim. It has no special significance. It may be loosely woven with holes, to serve as a sun-hat, or tightly woven as a rain-hat. Mr Mohatlane was adamant that the conical hat (*modianyewe*) is not a rain-hat as some authors maintain. The *mosetla* is worn by all ages and both sexes, but Mr Mohatlane says that he has never seen it worn by a young woman. Older women may wear hats, but young women traditionally go bareheaded to show off their *fora-mangetse*, that is the beautiful designs into which their hair is plaited. Traditionally *sekema* (white clay) or *letsoku* (red ochre) was used on the hair when making these designs, giving the hair a characteristic white or red colour.



This hat is commonly known as MOSETLA, but it is more precisely the wider brimmed MOKOROTLO.

The *mokorotlo* (pl. *mekorotlo*) is similar to the *mosetla*, only flatter and with a wider brim. The term *tsetse* is used for the brim of a hat, while *katiba* (pl. *dikatiba*) simply means a hat. The *kuwana* (pl. *dikuwane*) is a bonnet-type hat made from the skin of a wild cat, and is normally only worn by the younger men. The *kgaebane* (pl. *dikgaebane*) is similar to the *kuwane*, but somewhat larger. It is worn by any man, but mostly by older men. To show respect to another man, a man doffs his *kgaebane*, and if the other man is of higher status, he keeps it off in his presence. According to Mr Mohatlane, straw hats can be made by anyone, male or female, who has the necessary skill. Various grasses, such as *teele* (which is also used for large granary baskets), *kgahla* and *lethepu* can be used, but the most common is *lodi* (*Cyperus marfinatus*). *Moseha* grass is used to stitch or bind the *lodi* which usually forms the framework.



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Author's note: The scanty references in the literature to Basotho hats are both confusing and contradictory, especially with regard to terminology. Therefore this article is based almost entirely on information provided by Mr Edwin Mohatlane who grew up among traditionalists and was very critical of the data in the available literature. ○

REFERENCES

- 1 TYRRELL, B. 1968 *Tribal Peoples of Southern Africa*, Cape Town (Books of Africa).
- 2 AMBROSE, D. *The Guide to Lesotho*, 2nd ed., Johannesburg and Maseru (Winchester Press).