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The Institute of Current World Affairs
THE CRANE-ROGERS FOUNDATION
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

TCY-11 1998
SUBSAHARAN AFRICA

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Modjadji: Transformer of the Clouds

"Of all the characters and tales of that romantic mistland of the Northern Transvaal, there is none that stands out with greater contrast than the woman, Modjadji, and the legend of her past... Modjadji — 'Transformer of the Clouds' — 'She who must be obeyed.'"

PIETERSBERG, South Africa

MARCH 1998

By Teresa C. Yates

It's a rare rural community in the Northern Province — or in the rest of South Africa, for that matter — that recognizes women as their leaders.

I have met several women chiefs who have come to power because of the death of a brother or husband or father. In each of these cases it is understood that the woman is more or less a regent, and that the chieftainship will pass to the oldest sons of these women or to another selected male heir in due course.

One community in the Northern Province is different. For as long as they have been in South Africa, the Balobedu people have acknowledged a long succession of queens known as "Modjadji" as their leaders.

Like all of her predecessors, the current Queen Modjadji is also known as the "Rain Queen" because her followers believe that she has the power to make or withhold rain.

I wanted to meet the woman behind the legend. I wanted to hear about her experiences as reigning Queen of the Balobedu and what difficulties and rewards she faces and enjoys as a woman leader. I was also curious about the her power to bring rain. In this land of agriculture, that's quite a power.

The Balobedu lands are about 90 kilometers northeast of my home base in Pietersburg. They lie beneath the Letaba mountain range in a beautiful, lush-green valley. It is a mystical place where there always seems to be plentiful rain.

The first time I went to the area I stopped at a large Mediterranean-style house, so grand that I thought it must surely be the Queen's residence. I approached the gate slowly and asked the guard whether this was where the Queen lived and whether it would be possible to speak to her. I had come to the right place, it turned out, but it was not possible to see the Queen. I would have to return another day, not to the Queen's residence but to the Tribal Authority office to make an appointment.

The Balobedu Tribal Authority offices are perched just beneath the Queen's residence on top of a hill that overlooks several villages that are part of the Queen's domain. When I returned to make the appointment I spoke to an aide named Victor Mathekege. Victor told me that I should return the next week and he would take me to see the Queen.

I returned the next week but Victor was nowhere to be found. I told one of the two men

in the office that I had an appointment to see the Queen. He checked the appointment book — no appointment.

“When did you make this appointment?” he asked with a skeptical look.

“I spoke to Victor Mathekge last Monday. I was told to come back this morning, and that I would be allowed to speak to the Queen.” I was beginning to get concerned that I was going to be sent back to Pietersburg without seeing the Queen — when both men suddenly stood up and said they would take me to the royal kraal.

Finally, I thought, I’m going to meet a Rain Queen. We drove to the house, where one of the men went into an office and made a telephone call. When he came back he said, “Wait here.” Then he walked out again. Fifteen minutes later he was back, this time with two other men, named Basie and John. They would be my escorts, they said, but they first wanted to know why I wanted to see her.

I explained that I was from America and that I was living in the Northern Province studying land reform. I wanted to talk to the Queen because I was interested in the history of the Modjadji succession and the legend of the Rain Queen. I also wanted to ask the Queen questions about her experiences as a traditional leader and whether she thought that being a woman was a hindrance to her rule.

Basie and John agreed to take me to the Queen’s kraal. When we arrived there were a few women sitting outside a *rondavel* (a circular thatched house). Two chairs were brought out — one for Basie, one for John. I was told to sit on the ground. Five minutes later a tall woman wearing normal western clothing walked out. All those outside bowed down as she approached. The woman sat down on the ground facing me, Basie and John. Her face was stern.

“This is the Queen,” Basie told me.

I was not sure about the proper protocol in this situation. “*Tobela*,” I said, greeting the Queen in the Northern Sotho language. She did not respond.

Basie spoke to the Queen in Lobedu. Then he turned to me and asked me to introduce myself to the Queen and state what I wanted to talk to her about.

I told her in English that I was from America and that I was in South Africa studying implementation of land reform in the Northern Province. I repeated what I had said to Basie earlier about my interest in talking to her.

The Queen looked at Basie or at the ground but never

at me. She spoke to Basie in Lobedu again. She never smiled. When she was finished, Basie turned to me and said, “Did Victor tell you that you should bring something for the Queen?”

“No,” I said. “Victor did not mention that I should bring a gift for the Queen.”

“You see, traditionally when people come to see the Queen they bring a gift,” he said. I had a feeling that this interview was coming to an end. “Victor should have told you,” Basie continued. “Perhaps you have something in your bag that you can give to the Queen, some small token? Or you can give her some money.”

I looked in my bag and did a quick inventory — writing pad, two pens, map, credit card, tampons. Nothing really fit for a Queen. I’d spent all of my cash on gasoline before I left Pietersburg, so I couldn’t even offer money.

I looked as humble as I could and said to Basie, “Victor did not tell me that I should bring a gift. I don’t have anything in

my bag that I think that the Queen would like and even if I did, it would not be a gift for the Queen, it would just be something pulled out of my bag. Couldn’t we just finish the interview and I will come another day with a gift for the Queen?”

Basie did not bother translating this suggestion for the Queen. Instead, he said to me, “You’ve actually come at a bad time. The Queen’s brother has passed away and we are all busy preparing for the funeral. It would be most inappropriate for you to ask the Queen any more questions without presenting her with a gift.”

I offered my condolences over the death of the Queen’s brother and asked when it might be appropriate to return to talk to the Queen.

Basie said that I could come back the next week.

“Can you give me some idea as to what I should bring to the Queen when I come back?” I asked.

Basie smiled and said that he didn’t know, but I could ask the Queen what she would like. I did, and she answered in Lobedu. I didn’t understand anything she said except the letters “TV.” Basie smiled and asked me if I heard the Queen.

I realized that I had made a huge error in asking the Queen what gift would please her. My reply was somewhat indignant, “You can tell her,” I said to Basie, that she’s not getting a television. Is there anything else that she would like? Something less expensive?”

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Basie did not respond and he did not translate.

I tried a softer tone. "Tell the Queen that I don't have the means to buy a television. Perhaps there is something less extravagant that she would like to have."

Basie translated. The Queen did not respond. Basie told me that I could come back the following Tuesday, and if I brought any small gift the Queen would be happy to answer all of my questions.

I left Modjadji's realm wondering whether I should bother to go back. I decided I would try one more time, and if I wasn't allowed to interview the Queen on the next visit I would give up. Having decided that I would return to Modjadji, I was now faced with the problem of finding an appropriate gift.

Back in Pietersburg I told several friends about the Queen's request for a television set. Everyone who heard the story laughed and said that I never should have asked her what she wanted. All very well, but the question remained: What was I going to take?

"Everyone who heard the story laughed and said that I never should have asked her what she wanted. All very well, but the question remained: What was I going to take?"

I got several friendly recommendations:

"Buy her an umbrella, and tell her that she mustn't be afraid to make rain."

"Take her a goat or a sheep. If there's been a death in the family they probably slaughtered a lot of livestock."

"Give her a toy television."

In the end I took a large grass mat that Northern Province women sit and sleep on. The mat was made by an old woman living in one of the villages under the Queen's rule. I also took along a small blanket and a New York City souvenir mug that I had bought for someone else but had never given away.

I met Basie at the Tribal Authority offices. He looked at the gifts and nodded approval. We then went to see the Queen.

On this visit I was invited into the Queen's round, grass-thatched house. The coolness of the room was a welcome relief from the heat outside. The Queen sat on one side of the room, Basie on the other. Basie set the gifts on a rug on the floor in front of the Queen and spoke to her in Lobedu.

The Queen looked at the gifts with cold indifference.

Basie thanked me on behalf of the Queen and again spoke to her. The Queen did not respond. He then told me the Queen was pleased with the gifts and I could ask her any questions I wanted.

I started with something simple. "What is your name?"

"Mokope Modjadji, the Fifth."

"How long have you been the ruling Queen of Modjadji?"

"Since 1982."

"How many villages fall under your authority?"

"There are many villages in Modjadji. I cannot say for sure."

"Can you tell me what your responsibilities for your subjects are?"

"This is just a gift from God. I cannot say that I can do this or that." I waited for her to go on, but the hanging

silence made it clear that she had said all that she had to say on the matter.

"What do you do as Queen?"

Looking at the floor the Queen gave a short response. Basie's translation was that "the Queen says that her main duty is to work hand in hand with the community, seeing to it that there is cooperation between the people and trying by all means to unite them."

"Is there disunity among your people?" I knew that one unique aspect of Modjadji rule is that two ethnic groups pay allegiance to the Queen, the Balobedu and the Tsonga. I thought that the differing traditions of her subjects might be the cause of some conflict.¹

Still looking at the floor, the Queen responded that she had "never experienced that [conflict] since taking the throne."

According to the Queen the Modjadji people never had any problems with the old apartheid government of South Africa. She explained that under her rule they negotiated with the whites in order to keep peace. As a result, she claimed that the former white government never reduced the land that fell under Modjadji. The Queen insisted that "the Modjadji

¹ I was unable to find any explanation to why Balobedus and Tsongas pay allegiance to Queen Modjadji. When I asked the Queen she said that it had been the case when she took the throne but did not know the origins. The curator of the Tzaneen Museum explained that one theory is that when the Balobedu migrated to the Letaba area they seized land from the Tsonga but did not drive them from the area.

kingdom was not changed by the former government.”

This seemed strange to me, since I’d read that Queen Modjadji IV had vigorously challenged former South African governments and that as a result of her resistance the land under her rule was greatly reduced. I thought that if I moved the discussion away from politics and into the mystical powers of the Queen I might get more forthcoming responses.

“Why are you called the Rain Queen?” I expected a tale of myth and legend about the powers of the Modjadji Queens to call upon the heavens. Instead, the Queen’s response was another disappointment.

“I am called the Rain Queen because I am ruling the people in the correct way and so many people from far away visit my place to get advice. I have my own way of advising them. The people don’t believe that I can make rain.”

Perhaps the Queen thought that I didn’t know anything about the Rain Queen legend. Or maybe she didn’t care. She had clearly made a decision that she was not going to answer my questions honestly. I was not going to confront her with the things that I had read in books and heard from people in her queendom. I was not going to tell her that my friend Lily grew up in one of the Modjadji villages and told me that there is a big ceremony at the beginning of each rainy season where people from all of the Queen’s villages come to the Queen to pray for rain. At this ceremony the Queen pours traditional beer on a special tree that the people say has magical powers. At the end of the ceremony the Queen’s subjects return home, plant their crops and wait for rain.

It’s believed that if the rain does not come, it’s because the Queen is unhappy with her subjects. People from far and near bring gifts to the Queen if there is no rain and beg her to bring rain.

I thanked the Queen for her time and left the house. Basie followed and said he would take me to the Royal kraal² and show me the house where the Queen lives and the area where official ceremonies are held.

When we approached the kraal Basie took off his shoes and instructed me to do the same. He explained that no

one is allowed into the Royal kraal wearing shoes. I took my shoes off but the sun-baked red dirt burned my feet. I quickly ran to the nearest shade. Basie, laughing, came to join me and said that he was sorry that the Queen was not “completely forthcoming about the rain.”

He showed me the large ceremonial drums that are beaten during the Queen’s annual rain ceremony. People from all over the Queen’s realm come to listen to the drumming, drink traditional beer and pray to the Queen for rain. They’re convinced that it is within the powers of the Queen to make rain or cause drought.

Basie said that I was not allowed to take photos of the royal drums, so I ran back across the burning earth to my shoes. I drove back to Pietersburg deeply disappointed by my brief audience with the Rain Queen.

* * * * *

The Balobedu Rain Queen legend spans three centuries and is filled with mystery and romance. Historians have traced the Balobedu people back to the 15th century, when they lived in a region called Karanga somewhere north of the Limpopo River, which now separates South Africa from Zimbabwe. The Balobedu split into factions in the 18th century and a breakaway group migrated south. This group brought to South Africa rain-making knowledge and a set of sacred glass beads that were the insignia of their chieftainship.

These first Balobedu settled in what is now the Letaba District of the Northern Province. A short period of strife between the Lobedu and northern Sotho-speaking people ultimately led to Balobedu domination in the area and the accession to the throne around 1800 of the first woman chief, Modjadji I.

Modjadji gained widespread fame and power as a rain-maker. Balobedu legend is that Modjadji I was a white woman. Some people guess that she was from North Africa, and had been taken as a slave by marauding Balobedu. Others think that the first Modjadji was a fair-skinned black woman, or perhaps an albino who migrated south with her people.

And the succession down to today’s Modjadji V? Old habits die hard, it seems. □

² A kraal is a traditional compound for extended families, with houses and an open area for gatherings.

