

# Bakgomong: The Babirwa's transboundary pastoralist identity and social change in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Botswana

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## ***Abstract***

To follow is a critical narrative on the intersection between identity production and transformations in the indigenous herding systems of the Babirwa of pre-colonial Botswana. The production of the Babirwa's pastoralist identity rested on the adaptability of their cultural practices, language and social systems to socio-ecological influences. This emerging pastoralist identity was embedded in organic or loan words and concepts, which were continually reconstituted to negotiate social and environmental change. From the 1850s, the Babirwa of the eastern Botswana gradually transformed into cattle herders. The assimilation of cattle led to a symbolic shift in the Babirwa's social identity from the *Banareng* (people of the buffalo) to the *Bakgomong* (people of the cow). This shift was crucial in the production of a cattle-based identity in an area where crop production, hunting and the herding of caprines (goats and sheep) had been the primary ways of life since the first settlement of the Babirwa in the eastern Botswana a century earlier.

**Keywords:** Bakgomong; Botswana; Babirwa; Cattle; Identity; Environment; Power; Cultural Encounters; Social change.

## **Introduction**

*Ee kgomo (yes cow)!* goes the Babirwa's acknowledgement of one another. The Babirwa praise each other as *kgomo*, referring to their totem, the *nare* (buffalo), which to them is *kgomo ya naga*, "a wild cow".<sup>1</sup> Since the Babirwa had knowledge that buffaloes were wild cattle, this praise phrase may have roots in their adoption of the buffalo totemic identity long before the mid-century while they lived in Nareng (place of buffalo) in the Transvaal.<sup>2</sup> From the 1850s, the Babirwa, on the confluence of the Limpopo and Shashe rivers

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1 The language of the Babirwa is called Sebirwa. It is a branch of the Sotho-Tswana, a group of mutually intelligible Southern Bantu languages spoken in much of Southern Africa. Unlike with most other Sotho-Tswana languages, however, there is no study that documents and analyses the speech sounds of Sebirwa and there is no academic in Botswana who is an expert of this language. Against this background, the definitions of the Sebirwa words used in this article were provided by the local peoples.

2 NJ van Warmelo, *Die Tlokwa en Birwa van Noord Transvaal, Ethnological Publications*, 29 (Pretoria, Government Printer, 1953), p. 43; EJ Krige, *The realm of the Rain-Queen* (London, Oxford University Press, 1943), p. 302.

(see Image 1), gradually adopted cattle from the Bangwato, pre-colonial Botswana's cattle wealthy state.<sup>3</sup> By 1896/7 when rinderpest decimated the majority of cattle in the eastern Botswana, the Babirwa had established themselves as one of the cattle keeping communities in the country.<sup>4</sup> The assimilation of cattle led to a symbolic shift in the Babirwa's social identity from the *Banareng* (buffalo people) to the *Bakgomong* (cow people). This shift was crucial in the production of a cattle-based identity in an area where crop production, hunting and the herding of caprines had been the primary ways of life for generations.

Because African traditions can be enlarged to negotiate emerging changes,<sup>5</sup> the Babirwa reconstituted their traditional praise phrase, *kgomo*, upon the adoption of a pastoralist identity to reflect the new role that cattle played as a marker of social identity. This re-appropriation of a praise phrase ensured that the Babirwa kept their sense of buffalo identity amid the loss of this revered animal to commercialized hunting in the second half of the nineteenth century. As Vansina teaches us, the relevance and survival of African traditions rests on their adaptability to change.<sup>6</sup> The Babirwa's re-appropriation of a praise phrase into their pastoralist traditions falls within the broader context of enlarged and adaptable traditions.

This article explores the intersection between ethnic identity production and indigenous cattle herding systems of the Babirwa of pre-colonial Botswana. It challenges classic works that visualized African concepts of pastoralism almost exclusively in religious and cultural terms. This body of knowledge reified stereotypes of the irrational African pastoralist who purportedly personified and mystified cattle, and would not dispose of surplus even when faced with threats of loss to ecological shocks.<sup>7</sup> On the contrary, cattle keeping among the Babirwa was an historical process driven by peoples' ability to tap into their indigenous knowledges in order to innovate new sources of power and

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3 EC Tabler, *The far interior* (Cape Town, AA Balkema, 1955), pp. 26-31; I Schapera, *Praise poems of the Tswana chiefs* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1965), p. 26.

4 PP Molosiwa, "White man's disease, black man's peril: Rinderpest and famine in the Eastern Bechuanaland Protectorate at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century", *New Contree*, 71, December 2014, pp. 1-24.

5 S Feierman, *Peasant intellectuals: Anthropology and history in Tanzania* (Madison, WI, University Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 3-266.

6 J Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforest: Towards a history of political tradition in equatorial Africa* (Madison, WI, University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), p. 258.

7 I Schapera, "Economic change in South African native life", *Africa*, 1(2), 1928, pp. 170-188; I Schapera, *Married life in an African tribe* (London, Faber and Faber, 1940), pp. 116-126; H Alverson, *Mind in the heart of darkness* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1978), p. 124; A Kuper, *Wives for cattle* (London, Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1982), pp. 1-202.

as such adapt to changing social and environmental processes. This article is also an important addition to existing socio-environmental histories of ethnic identity formation and reformulation in pre-colonial Southern Africa. Many of these narratives have demonstrated not only the fluidity of ethnicity, but also the multiple ways in which communities interacted with socio-ecological landscapes to reshape their ethnic identities.<sup>8</sup> Southern African Herding communities such as the Nguni in South Africa and the mainstream Tswana groups in Botswana have always used cattle to interact with their physical environments and each other in multiple and nuanced ways that shaped their identities.

Surprisingly, Botswana has seen very little in the way of historical research on ethnic identity formation despite being an ethnically diverse nation, particularly because the post-colonial state subverted race and ethnicity research. The modern Botswana state has stifled ethnicity research by hiding behind the cloak of national unity, arguing that such research would cause tribal conflicts as happened in other parts of the continent. Against this background, the available historiography has largely reified official rhetoric of the organic dominance of the Tswana speaker in the country. Existing are narratives that focus primarily on the all-powerful mainstream Tswana-speaking states.<sup>9</sup> These works provide only a narrow political economy of the Tswana's use of their cattle wealth as an instrument of conquest and subjugation of the less centralized ethnicities. Such politicized perspectives obscure the differentiated ways in which communities' readings and constructions of nature shaped their sense of ethnic identity. Thus, ethnic identity formation is (mis)represented as an imposed phenomenon whereby it is used to construct a homogenous Tswana society.

Broadly the political ideology of the modern Botswana state has circumscribed ethnic difference and systematically promoted a homogenized

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8 E Kreike, *Recreating Eden: Land use, environment, and society in southern Angola and northern Namibia* (Portsmouth, Heinemann, 2004), pp. 9-11; AF Isaacman and BS Isaacman, *Slavery and beyond: The making of men and Chikunda ethnic identities in the unstable world of South-Central Africa, 1750-1920* (Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann, 2004), pp. 1-355.

9 F Morton, *When rustling became an art: Pilane's Kgatla and the Transvaal frontier, 1820-1902* (Claremont, David Philip, 2009), pp. 1-314; T Tlou, *A history of Ngamiland, 1750-1906: The formation of an African state* (Gaborone, Macmillan, 1985), pp. 1-174; P Motzafi-Haller, "Historical narratives as political discourses of identity", *Journal of Southern Africa Studies*, 20(3), 1994, pp. 417-431; N Parsons, "The economic history of Khama's country in Botswana, 1844-1930", R Palmer and N Parsons, *The roots of rural poverty in central and southern Africa* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977), pp. 114-117.

citizenship based on Tswana national identity.<sup>10</sup> This process of subtle subversion of identity research and advocacy is in and by itself a process of “social engineering”, wherein the self-recognition of minorities is suppressed and society reconstructed into an ethnic monolith through the reordering of hitherto existing ethnicities.<sup>11</sup> Given the historical salience of cattle in the indigenous knowledges of the varied Botswana communities about their environments, there is no better prism to examine questions of ethnic identity formation than through cattle keeping. This article challenges the official grand narrative of the natural evolution of an ethnically monolithic Botswana. It explores the myriad ways through which the Babirwa used cattle as a marker of their ethnic identity amid the homogenizing policies of the modern state. Generally, the article emphasizes the resilience and adaptability of Botswana’s varied ethnicities to ecological and social change rather than extinction of the so-called subordinate cultures.

The article begins from the premise that local knowledge is not timeless and unchanging. This knowledge is constantly in a state of transition, enabling communities to reshape their identities and therefore become adaptable to change over time and space. Identity is a problematic and contested process, involving individual and collective negotiation, and mediated by changes in social and environmental circumstances across time and space.<sup>12</sup> In this particular historical circumstance of the transformation in the Babirwa’s identity, their incorporation of cattle redefined pre-existing realms of knowledge and reshaped the dynamics of power relations between them and their physical environments. Most importantly, gender and generation determined the dynamics of people’s access to resources and power. Men and young men gained power over nature as cattle herders, while women benefitted from the same environment through crop production and other creative strategies, such as spirit possession. By embodying the spirits of the wilderness, for instance, these women were innovating alternative forms of community power, which they used to tame unmediated nature.

All these changes were reflected in linguistic innovations. As cattle invaded every aspect of society, the Babirwa’s pastoralist identity became embedded in

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10 L Nyathi-Ramahobo, “Minority tribes in Botswana: The politics of recognition”, *Briefing, Minority Rights Group International* (available at <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/496dc0c82.pdf>, accessed, 3 August 2016), pp. 1-16.

11 J Scott, *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve human condition have failed* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 4-5.

12 J Nagel, “Constructing ethnicity: Creating and recreating ethnic identity and culture”, *Social Problems*, 41(1), 1994, p. 154.

organic and loan words and concepts, producing a social matrix that was to reshape their ethnic identity. This ideology of cattle being the symbolic and material glue that reproduces social relationships constituted the epicenter of life and power struggles in other African livestock herding communities long before the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> It is within this cattle-shaped social universe that the Babirwa transformed, symbolically, from being the *Banareng*, “buffalo people” before 1850 to being the *Bakgomong*, “cow people” during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Image 1: The Shashe-Limpopo Confluence, Eastern Botswana



Source: Google Maps, accessed, 15 December 2015.

13 See amongst others, N Parsons, “The economic history of Khama’s country in Botswana...”, R Palmer and N Parsons, *The roots of rural poverty in central and southern Africa...*, pp. 114-117; DL Schoenbrun, *A green place, a good place: Agrarian change, gender and social identity in the Great Lakes region to the 15<sup>th</sup> century* (Portsmouth NH, Heinemann, 1998), pp. 1-301; JL Comaroff and J Comaroff, “Goodly beasts, beastly goods: Cattle and commodities in a South African context”, *American Ethnologist* 17(2), 1990, pp. 195-216.

## Banareng: The Babirwa before 1850

### *Trypanosomiasis [sleeping sickness] and cattlelessness*

The ethnic label, “Babirwa”, historically connoted disparate Sotho-Tswana groups of people who were scattered all over the Limpopo and Shashe watersheds during the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> They were a transboundary community that, up to the present, have continued to straddle the Botswana-Zimbabwe-South African borders (see Image 2). The history of the Babirwa of the Shashe-Limpopo basin in eastern Botswana prior to the second half of the nineteenth century is, however, murky. It is obfuscated by fragmented and inadequate sources. The convenience of piecing together oral sources and the little written information available thus justifies the subjection of the Babirwa identity to historical inquiry from somewhere in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. There are certain aspects of the Babirwa’s early nineteenth century histories, which are worthy of rumination. Two are germane to this article. The first aspect relates to the Babirwa’s cattlelessness due to their residence in a tsetse fly-infested abode. The Babirwa, originally known as the Bapirwa, a name derived from the word, “pirwa” (a colour designation for black sheep), did not raise cattle, but kept caprines.<sup>15</sup>

Prior to the second half of the nineteenth century, the Shashe-Limpopo watershed, with its large populations of buffalo, provided a suitable habitat for the breeding of tsetse fly leading to endemicity of African *Trypanosomiasis*, commonly known as sleeping sickness in humans and *nagana* (an African word with no English equivalent) in animals.<sup>16</sup> This made the area unsuitable for raising cattle because these animals are organically grazers and generally keep to open grassland areas. *Trypanosomiasis* acted as a severe restraint on cattle husbandry before the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Africans also observed, “the tsetse kills the ox, but it cannot kill the buffalo”.<sup>18</sup> The inability of cattle to enter thickets of tsetse fly infested environs meant lack of contact with the pathogens and thus failure to attain immunity to *Trypanosomiasis*.

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14 EOJ Westpal, “Notes on the Babirwa”, *Botswana Notes and Records*, 7, 1975, pp. 191-192.

15 Oral sources claim that the lexical transition from “Bapirwa” to “Babirwa” occurred as Europeans who interacted with the Bapirwa in the Transvaal pronounced the word “pirwa” as “Birwa”. Europeans’ corruption of spellings of place names in Botswana dates to as far back as the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, and most of such places have retained their corrupted names to date. PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, M Motsumi (elder, Bobonong)/M Maunatala (elder, Bobonong) 15 January 2016.

16 J Ford, *The role of Trypanosomiasis in the African ecology: A study of the Tsetse fly problem* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 283-301; J Mackenzie, *Ten years north of the Orange river: A story of everyday life among the South African tribes, from 1859 to 1869* (Edinburgh, Edmonston and Douglas, 1871), p. 367.

17 J Ford, *The role of Trypanosomiasis in the African ecology...*, p. 369.

18 J Mackenzie, *Ten years north of the Orange River...*, p. 205.

*Trypanosomiasis*, a disease the Sotho-Tswana called *kotselo*, or “dozing off”, because of its anaesthetic effect on victims, “is an infectious disease of humans and animals of similar aetiology and epidemiology ... transmitted by the bite of tsetse fly”.<sup>19</sup> Located on the proximity of human settlements, tsetse fly habitats were an integral part of the human ecology because they constituted people’s hunting, foraging and agro-pastoral grounds. These productive activities established a measure of equilibrium between humans and this disease prone environment as the Babirwa and their caprines were in regular but controlled contact with tsetse flies. Generally, African herders have always possessed knowledge that humans and livestock could acquire some immunity to *Trypanosomiasis* if they maintained regular but limited contact with tsetse flies.<sup>20</sup> As the Babirwa’s caprines penetrated and retreated from the nearby thickets of tsetse-infested bushes, their herd boys followed them, minimally exposing themselves to the vectors. As Mackenzie notes, “long exposure to the bite of the fly would prove fatal”.<sup>21</sup>

The keeping of caprines suited the Babirwa’s indigenous strategies of circumventing tsetse fly as these animals would only penetrate the nearby tsetse-infested forests for only a little while before returning to browse on shrubs that predominated the proximity of human settlements on account of bush clearing. As a result there was limited risk of young herd boys wandering far away and getting lost in the process. Women acquired immunity to *kotselo* by cultivating lands connected to tsetse fly environs while men’s bodies became conditioned to the pathogens as they navigated the infested terrain as hunters. Thus, managed exposure to the bites of tsetse flies rather than complete eradication enabled gendered categories of people and their animals to survive in this harsh environment of disease.

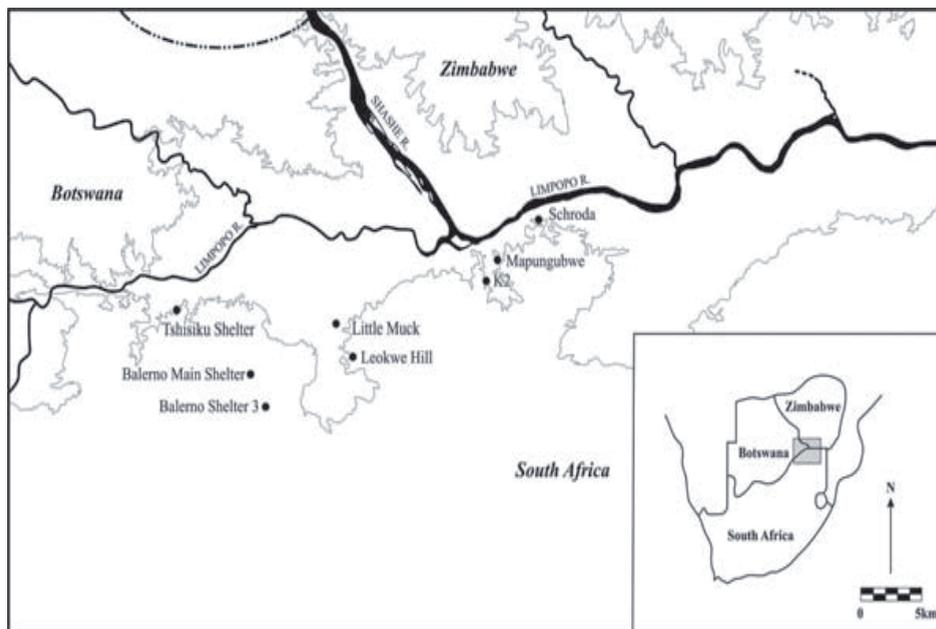
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19 D Steverding, “The history of African Trypanosomiasis”, *Parasites and Vectors*, 1(3), 2008 (available at <http://www.parasitesandvectors.com/content/1/1/3>, accessed, 5 May 2014), p. 1.

20 DL Schoenbrun, *A green place, a good place...*, p. 75; MMM Bolaane, “Tsetse and Trypanosomiasis control in the Okavango Delta, c. 1930-1970”, *South African Historical Journal* 58, 2007, pp. 91-116; JB Shetler, *Imagining Serengeti: A history of landscape and memory in Tanzania from earliest times to the present* (Athens, Ohio University Press, 2007), pp. 37-38.

21 J Mackenzie, *Ten years north of the Orange River...*, p. 206.

Image 2: Transboundary location of the Babirwa (see insert)



Source: Adopted and modified from T Forssman, “Casting Foragers into a new mould? The case of the Mafunyane shelter, eastern Botswana”, *Antiquity: A Review of World Archaeology*, 345, January 2015 (available at <http://journal.antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/517>, accessed, 7 August 2016), p. 1.

### ***Totemism and the Buffalo Clan identity***

Related to this eco-history of disease and society was totemic identity wherein the Babirwa identified themselves as the Banareng (buffalo people). Like the negotiation of the tsetse habitats discussed above, the Babirwa’s buffalo identity connected them to their environments. The Babirwa lived at a place called Nareng in the Transvaal, South Africa, between 1510 and 1590.<sup>22</sup> From Nareng, the Babirwa migrated into present-day Zimbabwe where they were subjected to the rule of Mambo chiefs.<sup>23</sup> Dissatisfied with being subordinated to the Mambo, they retraced their footsteps to the Transvaal around 1710.<sup>24</sup> On the way back, however, some groups settled in the southwestern Zimbabwe while others crossed into eastern Botswana, on the confluence of the Shashe

22 EJ Krige, *The realm of the Rain-Queen...*, p. 302.

23 QN Parsons, “On the origins of the baMangwato”, *Botswana Notes and Records*, 5, 1973, p. 90.

24 EOJ Westpal, “Notes on the Babirwa”, *Botswana Notes and Records*, 7, 1975, p. 191.

and Limpopo rivers.<sup>25</sup> This borderline settlement brought them into a “flexible, scattered and multiethnic frontier” of Ngwato, Kalanga and Ndebele who influenced each other socially, politically, religiously and culturally.<sup>26</sup>

There is ample evidence that most of the Babirwa of present-day Botswana are part of the Nyathi (Buffalo) clan who to date still live in *ne ha ka Makure* (Makure’s country) in southwestern Zimbabwe.<sup>27</sup> As literature shows, these groups formed an important part of the “flexible, scattered and multiethnic frontier” that occupied the Shashe-Limpopo confluence for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until they were separated by the artificial colonial boundaries at the end of the Century.<sup>28</sup> Oral sources claim that all Babirwa adopted the totem, *nare*, while living in Nareng.<sup>29</sup> Their exhortation of Bolopela Hill, one of the major settlements in Nareng, as “the small one of mother-buffalo-are-plentiful” is suggestive of large populations of this bovine species and their symbolic value to social identity.<sup>30</sup> Late nineteenth century European hunters’ diaries also indicate that buffaloes were overhunted in the Limpopo area.<sup>31</sup>

The adoption of buffalo totemic identity was part of the fundamental relationship between the Babirwa and their environments in Nareng. This relationship was at the level of production, which influenced the varied ways in which Southern Africans farming communities reshaped their socio-cultural identities.<sup>32</sup> The multiple ways in which people interacted with their environments to accomplish productive activities shaped not just the Babirwa’s social identities but their food systems too. In addition to foraging and crop production, buffalo hunting became a fundamental component of household subsistence. Two Transvaal Babirwa men interviewed by former South African ethnologist indicated that despite revering the buffalo as

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25 These groups are categorized as follows: Sekoba at Majweng Hills; Bolamba in present day Tuli Block at a place called Zembefonyi near the present day Lentswe-le- Moriti; Maunatlala in Lepokole Hills in the northern part of Bobonong; Serumola at Lephale Hills in the Tuli Block; Makala east of Mapungubwe; Kgwadlalala and Mbalane settled on the hill called Lekhubu-la- Mbalane in the vicinity of the present day Semolale. GB Molelu, “The history of the Babirwa from pre-colonial times to early Ngwato rule, 1820-1926”, BA thesis, University of Botswana, 1985, pp. 5-6.

26 P Zachrisson, *Hunting for development: People, land and wildlife in southern Zimbabwe* (Goteborg University, Department of Social Anthropology, 2004), p. 29.

27 P Zachrisson, *Hunting for development...*, p. 33.

28 P Zachrisson, *Hunting for development...*, pp. 29-33.

29 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, M Maunatlala/M Motsumi/M Malema, 15 January 2016.

30 NJ van Warmelo, *Die Tlokwa en Birwa van Noord Transvaal...*, p. 43.

31 G Cumming, *Five year’s of a hunter’s life in the far interior of South Africa, 2* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1874); F Selous, *African nature notes and reminiscences* (London, Macmillan & co., Limited, 1908), p. 46, pp. 151-152.

32 N Jacobs, *Environment, power, and injustice: A South African History* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 52.

their totem, the Babirwa ate its meat because it was a bovine like cattle (van Warmelo 1953, pp. 44-46). To date the Babirwa still consider buffaloes to be *dikgomo tsa naga* (wild cattle). Africans' representations of buffalo as cattle resonated across the region at the time. A native of Lake Ngami once asked missionary John Mackenzie to explain therefore this difficulty, which baffles all black people. The buffalo and the common ox are so much alike that even Bushmen sometimes mistake the track of the one when it crosses or mixes with the other.<sup>33</sup>

While hunting in the Zambezi-Limpopo Valley between 1872 and 1886, the self-professed "Great White Hunter", Selous, noted that the Ndebele used frequently to speak of [buffaloes] as "Izinkomo ka M'limo (God's cattle)".<sup>34</sup> These testimonies provide insights into the material and symbolic value of buffalo to Africans prior to the second half of the nineteenth century.

The Babirwa's consumption of meat of an animal so held with reverence was highly epistemic. It reflected their understanding of the intersection between nature and cultural knowledge. Their conceptualization of taboo as *moila*, or "that, which must be avoided," and totem as *sereto*, or "that, which is revered," reflects deep cultural knowledge of socio-ecological synergy.<sup>35</sup> In other Southern African communities where totemic consciousness is imbedded in discourses of self-identity, the boundary between totem and taboo is so nebulous that people avoid any form of contact with their totems.<sup>36</sup> As Mungazi teaches us, "Africans used animals as symbols of historical and hereditary relationships to distinguish one ethnic group from another".<sup>37</sup> Among the Bangwato, Ndebele and Shona, for instance, it is a violation of taboos to hunt, kill or hurt their respective animal totems: duiker, zebra and baboon, because they have symbolic affinity with the community.<sup>38</sup> With the buffalo doubling as a totem and a source of sustenance, the Babirwa constructed a taboo different from their totem. They adopted the *leebakgomo*, Namaqua Dove, as their

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33 J Mackenzie, *Ten years north of the Orange River...*, p. 205.

34 F Selous, *African nature notes and reminiscences...*, p. 46.

35 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, B Phuthego (elder, Mogapi)/S Makabe (elder, Mogapi), 25 December 2015.

36 JL Comaroff, "Of totemism and ethnicity: Consciousness, practice and the signs of inequality", RR Grinker and CL Steiner, *Perspectives on Africa: A reader in culture, history, and representation* (Malden, MA & Oxford, Blackwell, 1997), pp. 69-85.

37 DA Mungazi, *The struggle for social change in Southern Africa: Visions of liberty* (New York, Taylor & Francis, 1989), p. 35.

38 WC Willoughby, "Notes on the totemism of the Becwana", *Adresses and papers of the British and South African Associations for the Advancement of Science*, 3, 1905, pp. 295-314; DA Mungazi, *The struggle for social change in Southern Africa...*, p. 35.

*moila*. Adding the suffix, *kgomo*, to the prefix, *leeba*, pigeon, was a nuanced way of giving their taboo symbolic value and therefore distinguishing this forbidden bird from ordinary pigeons.

Flouting social custom and eating the *leebakgomo* was believed to cause skin diseases and also afflict the perpetrators with seizures.<sup>39</sup> Throughout Bobirwa today children grow up being warned that eating this pigeon is abominable because it would not only afflict them with the dreaded seizures, but would also turn them into *madhela* (sing. *ledhela*), imbeciles. It is believed that whoever becomes a *ledhela* has high propensity to beget *madhela* offspring. The curse of imbecility is also believed to have great potentiality to run through the affected families for generations, thus spoiling lineage and transforming the Babirwa into a community of *madhela*. Such cautionary tellings have imbedded a strong consciousness of the Babirwa's *leebakgomo* taboo, the severe consequences of breaking the food taboo, and a direct link between the meaning of family practices and the rituals of the greater community. As the instructive telling of the *leebakgomo* taboo demonstrates, traditions have always connected local familial contexts to the Babirwa's sense of belonging to a greater community. Nonetheless, this greater community is by no means totemically homogenous. Whereas they identify themselves as Bakgomong, some Babirwa do not have the buffalo as their primary totem. These lost a sense of their totemic identity due to a process of cultural interaction during the 19<sup>th</sup> century that necessitated their adoption of buffalo as a secondary totem. For others, particularly the Bangwato who engaged with Babirwa groups since the 1850s, changing totems had never been an option because they "were a superior ethnic group and could therefore not adopt the totem of an inferior group".<sup>40</sup>

### **Dilo Makwati...: Cattle gifts and Birwa-Ngwato encounters** *The rise of a cattle identity*

During the second half of the nineteenth century, commercialized hunting in the Shashe-Limpopo confluence depleted populations of buffalo and elephant upon which tsetse flies depended. As the vestiges of these host animals retreated into marginal and inhabitable spaces of the Limpopo, tsetse

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39 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, K Motsamai, (elder, Mathathane)/O Moseki (elder, Molaladau), 21 January 2016.

40 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, M Malema (chief of the Babirwa, Bobonong), 15 January 2016.

fly followed them, thus reducing the risk of *Trypanosomiasis*. When Selous visited the area between the Shashe and Limpopo watersheds in 1872, buffalo had retreated further west.<sup>41</sup> As populations of large game dwindled, the Babirwa had to seek alternative means of sustenance, as they had depended on buffalo meat for subsistence, trade, and other products, such as skins for clothing before.<sup>42</sup> This opportunity presented itself after 1863 when the Babirwa adopted cattle from the Bangwato.<sup>43</sup>

In early 1863 the Bangwato defeated the Ndebele in a war over the coveted Shashe-Limpopo watershed.<sup>44</sup> The Bangwato's triumph probably induced the Babirwa to enter into patron-client relationships with them. Having endured the ruinous smash-and-grab tactics of the Ndebele for decades, the Babirwa probably thought of the Bangwato as potential allies against foreign invasions. As a result, they felt that an alliance with the Bangwato would secure their territory, especially that the Kalanga whom they had interacted with for decades had already sought the Bangwato's protection against Ndebele raids. The herding contracts became the avenue to such a political alliance. These relationships involved pastoral contracts whereby the Babirwa were loaned Ngwato cattle to take care of as herders. In return, the Babirwa were entitled to usufruct in the form of milk and draught power, and were occasionally rewarded with a calf to build their own herds.<sup>45</sup>

As the pastoral economy spread, the Babirwa's symbol of identity moved from the wilderness to the domestic. Their *kgomo* symbolically acted in lieu of the *nare* as the most revered animal. From this invention and from their knowledge that both cattle and buffaloes were bovines, the Babirwa began to identify themselves as the *Bakgomong*.<sup>46</sup> Along with this symbolic shift in totemic identity came the pre-existing praise, *kgomo*, for every Mmirwa. Hence the expression, *ee kgomo!*, became the primary signifier of the symbolic representation of cattle in the Babirwa's identity as it did previously with the buffalo. To cultivate and nurture their emerging pastoralist identity the Babirwa employed a famous Sotho-Tswana proverb: *dilo makwati di kwatobololwa mo go ba bangwe* (lit. things are barks, which are peeled from

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41 F Selous, *African nature notes and reminiscences...*, p. 146.

42 FL Elton, "Journal of an exploration of the Limpopo river", *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, 42, 1873, pp. 6-7.

43 I Schapera, *Praise poems of the Tswana chiefs...*, p. 26.

44 J Mackenzie, *Ten years north of the Orange River...*, p. 358.

45 QN Parsons, "On the origins of the baMangwato", *Botswana Notes and Records*, 5, 1973, p. 90.

46 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, M Malema (Chief of the Babirwa, Bobonong), 15 January 2016.

trees), or “we learn by imitating others”.<sup>47</sup> Imitation, particularly mimetic encounters, is an important theme in social theory.<sup>48</sup> Since the proverb: *dilo makwati di kwatobololwa mo go ba bangwe*, falls within the realm of mimetic encounter, mimesis is worth at least a brief exploration. Mimesis is a field of cultural theory that explores the dynamics of power relations between the superordinate and subordinate groups of people. It teaches us that the ability to mime is a process of creative copying and not simple parroting.<sup>49</sup> That is, far from being an inferior cognition mode, mimicry involves a lot of processing of the derivative information by people in a position of subjectivity. These subjective others innovate to produce new systems of knowledge about the originators of the information, subsequently creating alternative sources of power to negotiate the institutionalized power of their subjugators.

Scholarship has demonstrated that when people with different traditions encounter each other, an in-between space where difference is negotiated, is created, leading to myriad and complex array of cultural negotiations.<sup>50</sup> This scholarship, however, focuses on the colonial encounter wherein mimesis is seen with the lens of resistance. Such a perspective obscures mimetic dimensions of African encounters. It is oblivious to the differentiated ways in which one pre-colonial African people adopted and adapted another’s nature and culture. Pre-colonial African mimetic encounter involved the practical aspects of cross-cultural interactive processes and images projected by one community about the other. By applying mimesis to pre-colonial African encounters, this article brings a new theoretical perspective of exploring this theme to understand better the diverse relationships between Africans. It takes the theme beyond clichés of oppression, resistance and collaboration so reified by colonial encounter narratives to address the complex and intricate question of African-to-African interaction as an unstable and heterogeneous cross-cultural event marked by fluidity.

This innovative process resonates across comparative historical linguistics, which shows that social change is reflected in the dynamics of a community’s

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47 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, M Maunatlala/M Motsumi/M Malema, 15 January 2016.

48 M Taussig, *Mimesis and alterity: A particular history of senses* (New York, Routledge, 1993), pp. 21, 269; P Stoller, *Embodying colonial memories: Spirit possession, power, and the Hauka of West Africa* (New York and London, Routledge, 1995), pp. 37-48.

49 P Stoller, *Embodying colonial memories...*, pp. 14, 123.

50 H Bhabha, *Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse, The location of culture* (New York, Routledge, 1994), pp. 121-131; M Taussig, *Mimesis and alterity...*, p. 21; P Stoller, *Embodying colonial memories...*, p. 123.

language.<sup>51</sup> Such innovations produce intellectual capital and lead to the development of alternative forms of knowledge and power. Linguistic innovations also reflect the myriad ways in which “power is constituted, deployed and contested”.<sup>52</sup> While gift giving can deprive the recipient of their autonomy, power is mercurial and does not rest with one person or institution forever. It is a problematic field that is always contested.<sup>53</sup> The veracity of power differentials therefore depends on the ability of people to use language to negotiate interventions by the opposing group. This idea of power as a contested terrain reveals the creative ways in which the Babirwa, who faced threats of exploitation and domination, were able to reshape a pastoralist identity amid cultural attempts at assimilation and oppression by the Bangwato.

### ***Go di tshwara ka megatla: The Babirwa’s cattle herding systems***

By 1875, the Babirwa’s *meraka* (singular for *moraka*), cattle posts, pervaded much of the Shashe-Limpopo watershed.<sup>54</sup> The word *moraka*, a Sotho-Tswana lexical term for cattle post, expressed a masculine socio-geographic world located considerable distances away from the village, and the agricultural fields, in order to access dispersed grazing lands and water sources.<sup>55</sup> Like with the Bangwato herding systems, the distant location of the *moraka* deterred direct contact between women and cattle. This socio-physiographic demarcation was a systematic way of subverting women’s reproductive power, which it was believed, was a potential threat to male prosperity.<sup>56</sup> In addition, *moraka* connoted the cattle themselves and the term was only applied when one owned a considerable herd. As a result, men who owned no cattle could not have a *moraka* and therefore constituted the *bakhumanegi* (the poor).

The location of *meraka* far away from human settlements redefined concepts of gender and labour in the Babirwa’s social organization. The *moraka* became an idiom of wealth, work, ritual and social differentiation. For this reason, it

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51 D Nurse, “The contributions of linguistics to the study of History in Africa”, *Journal of African History*, 38(3), 1997, pp. 359-391; DL Schoenbrun, *A green place, a good place...*, p. 12.

52 F Cooper, “Conflict and connection: Rethinking colonial African history”, *American Historical Review* 99(5), 1994, p. 1545.

53 DL Schoenbrun, *A green place, a good place...*, pp. 223, 225, 232.

54 EC Tabler, *The far interior...*, p. 41.

55 N Parsons, “The economic history of Khama’s country in Botswana, 1844-1930”, R Palmer and N Parsons, *The roots of rural poverty in central and southern Africa...*, p. 115.

56 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, B Sephetso (Traditional doctor), Tsetsebjwe, 7 January 2016.

was a space, where gendered social identities were produced. It was a space of the *bakbumi* (wealthy men). Young men and the *bakhumanegi* also stayed at the *moraka* as herders.<sup>57</sup> Its location in remote and formerly “unoccupied” territory also brought fundamental changes in the ways in which the domestic and the untamed wilderness, the *dinaga*, interacted. The word *dinaga* connotes boundless unknown spaces located beyond human settlements. In the pre-cattle herding Babirwa discourses of the unknown, boys and girls were not allowed to enter the *dinaga* because it was feared that the *dipoko* (sin. *sepoko*), unhappy spirits of the departed, which were believed to reside in these forests, would cause them to lose their way, or *go timela*. This denial of children to enter the *dinaga* represented a ritualized way of protecting them from *kotselo*, a disease, oral sources indicate, which could be more fatal to “young bodies than to the much stronger bodies of adults”.<sup>58</sup> Because of the dense *Colophospermum mopane* bush and numerous hill outcrops in eastern Botswana, *go timela* was an everyday preoccupation of the Babirwa and some informants expressed how disorienting the experience may be. As a result, it was necessary to tell cautionary tales about the *dipoko* leading people astray so that children could not wander away from home and get lost.

As commercialized hunting decimated the tsetse-hosting buffalo from the late 1870s, the *meraka* were built in this unmediated territory.<sup>59</sup> The location of the *meraka* made the *dinaga* accessible to cattle herders who were predominantly young men. This process enabled the Babirwa to tame their formerly wild and hostile terrain. They, like other Africans, were not “always adapting to the environment” but they shaped it in multiple and nuanced ways.<sup>60</sup> Like in other Southern African herding communities, cattle became very important tools of “re-creating” the natural environment.<sup>61</sup> In their daily movements to and from grazing and water points, cattle more than often move in a line, following the leaders. Such regular movements eventually produced *mebila* (singular for *mmila*), pathways, through which the Babirwa herders accessed the previously perceived-to-be dangerous *dinaga*. By traversing these untamed and potentially dangerous physical spaces, the Babirwa herders acquired more knowledge of the landscape and its resources and therefore accessed new

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57 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, G Mompoti (Former cattle herder and elder, Bobonong)/D Molamu (Wealthy cattle owner and elder, Bobonong), 15 January 2016.

58 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, B Sephetso, 07 January 2016.

59 J Ford, *The role of Trypanosomiasis in the African ecology...*, pp. 283-301.

60 H Kjekshus, *Ecology control and economic development in East African history: The case of Tanganyika, 1850-1950* (London, Heinemann, 1977), p. 27.

61 E Kreike, *Recreating Eden...*, pp. 9-11.

realms of power and truths beyond what was culturally constructed as “evil spaces”.<sup>62</sup> That is, herding allowed the Babirwa men’s power to confront its limits. It empowered particularly the herders to overcome their fear of the wilderness.

The Babirwa herders were also very important to the sustainability of the herds in this unstable environment of rain variability and drought. During the rainy season, the herd was watched more closely because good grass was found over a wider area, and individual animals tended to wander and become separated from the main herd. In the dry season, despite the herd staying together because good pasturage occurred in relatively isolated and well-delineated areas, some animals could still be lost due to contact with herds from distant areas. Keeping herds together and finding pastures and water for them was the preoccupation of the herders and necessitated their residence at the *moraka*. There they practiced a herd management system called *go di tshwara ka megatla* or (literally holding onto cattle’s tails) or following the cattle closely. The *go di tshwara ka megatla* practice symbolized a broader world of herding expressed in words. Consequently, the *moraka* became a space where men were made.

From an early age, boys would gradually be initiated into the world of cattle herding and masculinities. There were two practices, which were not only crucial in initiating young boys into the *go di tshwara ka megatla* world of herding but also contributed to the gendering of the broader social identity of the Babirwa. The first one was the combination of work and leisure. This infusion of leisure pursuits into herding was done in the best interest of the development of a child. In the African context, games mirror a community’s lived experiences within a socio-cultural and historical context.<sup>63</sup> The Babirwa’s pastimes were therefore crucial to the production of social identities across time and space. At the *moraka*, herd boys were taught a stick throwing game called *nnai*, or “flying stick.” This game has similarities with the stick throwing games of the Kalanga of western Zimbabwe, who called it *mnqgwai*, a word denoting “stick”.<sup>64</sup>

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62 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, G Mompoti/D Molamu, 15 January 2016.

63 C Burnett and WJ Hollander, “The South African Indigenous Games Research Project 2001/2002”, *South African Journal of Research in Sport* 26(1), 2004, pp. 9-23.

64 MPD Gundani, et al., “Mnqgwai: A stick throwing game of the Kalanga of people of Zimbabwe”, *African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance*, 14(4), 2008, pp. 495-513.

It is highly possible that the Babirwa adopted the *mnggwai* from the Kalanga and indigenized its name into *n nai* to suit their socio-cultural and linguistic contexts. Perhaps the Babirwa's use of *n nai* as an instrument of herding reflected the existence of cattle in the Shashe-Limpopo confluence antedating their arrival.<sup>65</sup> It is also highly possible that this game may have formed an important part of the hunting traditions of the Babirwa since the early eighteenth century when they first settled in Botswana. The first Babirwa to settle in the Shashe-Limpopo confluence found the Basarwa who used the flying stick to maim wild animals. The common Babirwa expression, *Refhithetse Masarwa [sic] lefhatsheng lavhohvirwa* (we found the Basarwa in the land where the Babirwa live today) is suggestive of the interaction between the two groups.<sup>66</sup> Having used the flying stick for over a century, the probability is that they re-appropriated it during the second half of the nineteenth century to build their herd management systems. As one of the several ways of initiating boys into male adulthood, the Babirwa's *n nai* was more than a pastime. It was a herd management pursuit that built physical skill, thus necessitating long periods of residence at *moraka* and close herding on a daily basis. Like a game of football in colonial Africa, it provided 'the opportunity for individuals to display their virtuoso skills before a crowd of spectators' and was more than "simply a passing diversion for youth, but a passionate part of becoming an adult male in society".<sup>67</sup>

*N nai* involved competition among a group of herd boys, throwing aerodynamically designed sticks to determine the winner. The ability to throw the stick for the longest distance coupled with the accuracy with which the stick moved were the most important components of the game. In the context of the Babirwa herding practices, accuracy was particularly instrumental in driving back any straying cattle into the main herd. The best Babirwa herders distinguished themselves by carrying sticks with which to manage the herd closely in the veld. Since herding produced men, the stick throwing game was therefore a gendered aspect of the Babirwa's herd management system.<sup>68</sup>

Other than playing games, boys graduated into manhood through rituals that intricately linked them to cattle. When the Babirwa started engaging in

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65 GC Mazarire, "Reflections on pre-colonial Zimbabwe, c. 850-1880s", B Raftopoulos & A Mlambo, *Becoming Zimbabwe: A History from the pre-colonial period to 2008* (Harare, Weaver Press, 2009), pp. 35-38.

66 EOJ Westpal, "Notes on the Babirwa", *Botswana Notes and Records*, 7, 1975, p. 93.

67 L Fair, *Pastimes and politics: Culture, community, and identity in post-abolition Urban Zanzibar, 1890-1945* (Athens and Oxford, James Currey, 2001), p. 24.

68 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, G Mompoti/D Molamu, 15 January 2016.

extensive herding, they realized that communication fostered a close relationship between herds and herders. As a result, they identified *molodi*, whistling, as an efficient mode of communication.<sup>69</sup> Whistling commands became the quintessential communication tool used by several southern African herding communities to manage their animals long before the nineteenth century. In 1652, the Dutch found Khoe herders in the Western Cape already using whistling codes to transmit simple messages and instructions to their cattle.<sup>70</sup> In most African herding communities, the animals were trained to respond according to the commands issued by their herders.<sup>71</sup> Like in other herding communities, the Babirwa used *molodi*, a paralinguistic audio signal, to issue instructions to their cattle since “*bogologolo tlala* (time immemorial)”.<sup>72</sup>

Since communicative whistling was an art and therefore had to be learned and mastered, young Babirwa boys were expected to swallow the urine of a bull to sharpen their skills. The urine of a bull was believed to help them to learn whistling skills that would make the cattle understand what the herder expected of them. Failure to master the art of whistling weakened the closeness between herders and their herds, leading to straying of some cattle from the main herd. Herders whose cattle went astray were called the *mashodwe*, a verb that connotes uselessness or impotence.<sup>73</sup> But to be a man, one had to be able to build a herd, get married and have children. Lack of all these three attributes denoted impotence. As a result, drinking the bull’s urine also had reproductive value as it transferred not only the masculinity of the bull to the boys, but also the bull’s fertility. It was believed that such boys would grow into fertile men who would have many sons and thus reproduce the *go di tshwara ka megata* herd management system.

### **Boswa: Inheritance, divinities and masculinity**

As much as children were important to the building of herds, cattle also played a role in biological and social reproduction of the community. While,

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69 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, G Mompati/D Molamu, 15 January 2016.

70 E Boonzaier, C Malherbe, et al, *The Cape herders: A History of the Khoikhoi of southern Africa* (Claremont, SA, David Philip, 1996), p. 60; P Mitchell, “The Canine Connection II: Dogs and southern African herders”, *Southern African Humanities*, 26, 2014, p. 11.

71 KM de Luna, *Collecting food, cultivating persons: Wild resource use in central African political culture, c. 1000 B.C.E. to c. 1900 C.E.* (available at <http://gradworks.umi.com/33/36/3336527.html>, accessed, 15 January 2016), p. 65.

72 E Boonzaier, C Malherbe, et al, *The Cape herders...*, p. 60; PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, M Malema, 15 January 2016.

73 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, B Sephetso, 7 January 2016.

the biological fertility of the community depended on the fertility of the bulls, social networks rested on the building of large herds. Since children and cattle were intimately linked, being childless deprived men of parenthood, the premium form of social capital. The labour of sons, and of course the marrying off of daughters, would produce wealth. Conversely, lack of sons would cause one to be heirless and therefore threaten the Babirwa's patrilineal inheritance system, or *boswa*. The Sotho-Tswana word, *boswa*, is derived from the verb, *swa*, which translates into "die". *Boswa* was therefore the pastoral estate of a dead man. Such an estate could only be distributed amongst his sons, the *baja boswa* (literally eaters of the pastoral estate) or heirs, following the death of their father.<sup>74</sup> Fatherhood, however, was not only biological. It could be social as childless men often adopted sons from their relatives to ensure the sustenance of the institution of *boswa*. In addition, wealthy cattle owners could loan some of their herds to the poor, occasionally rewarding them with a calf until they too built their own herds. But there were still exceptional cases where men would die with neither sons nor cattle. Such men, as one observer said of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Tswana during his sojourn in Southern Africa, had no use for cattle beyond herding the cattle of a wealthy man.<sup>75</sup> Cattlelessness and childlessness thus excluded these men from participating in the institution of *boswa*.

This masculine gendered system of inheritance found expression in the naming of first sons. Throughout Bobirwa, there were many first-born sons with the name, *Mojaboswa* (heir to a father's pastoral estate). As a result, *boswa* effectively disqualified daughters from getting a share of their father's estate. Despite its androcentricity, the institution of *boswa* also had the objective of protecting the widow of the departed man as it kept the cattle within the family kraal. By inheriting from their father, the sons were therefore expected to use the *boswa* to support not only their individual families but also take care of the wellbeing of their mother and other siblings.

The spirit of a man who died leaving behind *boswa* for his sons never went into oblivion. His was not death but a transformation from an embodied form of life to a disembodied one. Such men's corpses were shrouded in a black ox skin and buried in the kraal while their spirits moved into a parallel world to that of the living where they would continue to protect their cattle.<sup>76</sup>

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74 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, M Malema, 15 January 2016.

75 WJ Burchell, *Travels in the interior of Southern Africa*, 2 (London, Longman, 1822), p. 348.

76 I Schapera, *The Tswana* (London, International African Institute, 1953), p. 59.

To keep the spirits of these men active, their bodies were buried in a sitting position because it was believed that lying down was akin to laziness. The significance of burying of cattlemen in a sitting position was symbolically expressed in the Sotho-Tswana idiomatic expression, *ga gona kgomo ya boroko* (sleep does not build herds of cattle). This proverb was a warning to men that to build herds and have their spirits live on after death, they needed to work hard day and night.

Death for men with cattle was therefore an honour because they underwent *de facto* canonization into the *badimo* (the divinity). The etymology of the word, *badimo*, derives from the concept of *godimo*, which directly translates into “above”. This concept implies that there is a space above the realm of the living where the spirits of departed people of a privileged social standing reside. These spirits were believed to take a “keen interest in the world of the living and could influence and determine events in the living world”.<sup>77</sup> Thus, to the Babirwa, the death of a cattleman was not the end of life, but a journey into the upper realms of the universe where male divinities resided.<sup>78</sup>

Conversely, the death of childless and/or poor men (who did not own cattle) symbolized oblivion because they would have left no wealth in the realm of the living. Their death would be removed from the social memory and they were never reborn into the world of the living. Anxiety about fertility and heirlessness therefore gave the *badimo* centrality in social organization as men tried to avoid falling into the perilous social location of being *mashodwe*. For men, accumulating wealth while alive and becoming the *badimo* posthumously depended on the amount of social capital they built, making children very important to the social reproduction of the Babirwa’s pastoralist identity.

### **Magwasha: The lionesses of Bobirwa**

Like cattle, women shaped the social world by building ties between households through marriage. Marriage played a crucial part in the reproduction of children and the accumulation of household social capital. This argument challenges assumptions of African pastoralism being an

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77 J Gewald, “El Nigro, Al Nino, witchcraft and the absence of rain in Botswana”, *African Affairs*, 100(1), 2001, p. 560; PS Landau, *The realm of the Word: Language, gender and Christianity in a southern African Kingdom* (London, James Currey, 1995), pp. 24-29; J Comaroff and JL Comaroff, *Of revelation and revolution: Christianity, colonialism, and consciousness in South Africa, I* (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1991), pp. 216-213.

78 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, M Malema, 15 January 2016/B Sephetso, 7 January 2016.

exclusively male domain where men used cattle to “reaffirm the masculine hierarchies of access to power” and wealth.<sup>79</sup> Rather than being exclusionary, the mechanisms intended for male dominance drew women into the broader pastoral identity and therefore empowered them to take an active part in this purportedly male-dominated sphere of social life.

Apart from the geographic separation of cattle from the domestic space, in the Babirwa’s pastoralist ethnicity cattle and women were never diametrically opposed. While patriarchs monopolized intercession with the *badimo*, women innovated alternative power as they engaged in spirit possession to contribute to the taming of the wilderness and thus help shape a pastoralist social identity. It must be noted, however, that the Babirwa women, like other Southern African women, never consciously challenged male domination of the pastoralist sphere. After all, Southern African women had control of household subsistence and the entire domestic space, and with it control over men.<sup>80</sup> The Babirwa women believed in the prevailing power relations and were thus not interested in liberation as they did not subscribe to the disruption of the traditional or “natural” order of male domination. They were never really dominated and exploited by their male counterparts. Their appropriation of the powers of nature was meant to shape the spirituality of the community, tame the wilderness, and therefore contribute to the building of a pastoralist identity.

Some Babirwa women mimed the ritual of the lion spirits (*magwasha*), a rendition of the *mazenge* cult of the Kalanga,<sup>81</sup> which was geared towards creating a synergy between people and nature. With men continuing to dominate the pastoral worlds of the departed and the living, these women appropriated this lionized spirit in order to assert their power in the spirituality of the community and contribute to the taming of the wilderness.<sup>82</sup> Whenever they were possessed, the Babirwa women would start speaking in *Ikalanga* and roared like lions. This behaviour was akin to the *mazenge* cult, where every time “there is an appropriation of the exotic; the possessed... speak in

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79 M Kinsman, “‘Beasts of burden’: The subordination of southern Tswana women, ca. 1800–1840”, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 10(1), 1983, pp. 39–54.

80 C Walker (ed.), *Women and gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (Cape Town, David Philip & London, James Currey, 1990), pp. 113, 158, 175, 347.

81 RP Werbner, “Symbolic dialogue and personal transactions among the Kalanga and Ndembu”, *Ethnology* 10(3), 1971, p. 213.

82 The word, *magwasha* (sing. *Legwasha*), also referred to the possessed women.

the language of a neighbouring people.”<sup>83</sup> Being the embodiments of the lion spirit, the *magwasha* women would speak to men through a female interpreter, demanding certain black cows, which cattle would be killed and they would be served raw blood and meat.

Communities in the Limpopo watershed revered the lion for its power and feared it for its predatory habits. As the population of buffalo dwindled during the latter half of the nineteenth century, lions developed habits of preying on cattle.<sup>84</sup> The possession of women by the lion spirit was therefore an embodiment of the lion as well as an act of domesticating nature. Hence, like among the Kalanga where the *mazenge* were extolled as *pondanyama* (meat crusher), the *magwasha* were eulogized as *sebata* (predator). These expressions of practical power challenge performance theories, which have suggested that spirit possession is a discursive practice whose sole purpose is to politicize the ‘disempowered’ African woman.<sup>85</sup>

The *magwasha* practice was not a site of feminist mobilization against masculine power. Possession was symbolic of women’s expression of feminine anxieties about male dominance of the pastoral regime. It also reflected the masculinization of women because these spirits were male. “They spoke with a deep, guttural voice” that symbolized masculinity.<sup>86</sup> Hence the *magwasha* practice was an embodied practice whereby mind and body were synchronized to harness the power of nature. This idea of the mind and body working in tandem contests binaristic perspectives of consciousness whereby the body is subjected to intellectual superiority in symbolic communication.<sup>87</sup> It resonates with Paul Stoller’s recent dialogical perspective of possession that “at one level [possession is] negotiation with spirit” and “at another level it is the acquisition of [inner energy] by allowing one’s body to be completely possessed by the spirit, and in so doing, possessed becomes possessor”.<sup>88</sup> The *magwasha*, were not just a discursive form of power. They also constituted women’s appropriation of masculinity and the power of nature through bodily possession.

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83 RP Werbner, *Tears of the dead: The social biography of an African family* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1991), p. 192.

84 BH Raseroka, “Past and present distribution of Buffalo in Botswana”, *Botswana Notes and Records*, 7, 1975, p. 133.

85 J Comaroff, *Body of power, spirit of resistance: The culture and history of a South African people* (Chicago, University Press of Chicago, 1985), pp. 41-247; J Boddy, *Wombs and alien spirits: Women, men and the Zar cult in northern Sudan* (Madison, WI, University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 35-369.

86 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, O Patana (Former *legwasha*, Mathathane)/M Moeti (Former *legwasha*, Mathathane), 15 January 2016, D Moalosi (Former *legwasha*, Mogapi), 25 December 2015.

87 J Comaroff and JL Comaroff, *Ethnography and the historical imagination* (Boulder, Westview Press, 1992), p. 189.

88 P Stoller, *Embodying colonial memories...*, p. 25.

These spirits were both sympathetic and hostile. They sought to strengthen and empower women while they posed a threat of destruction of cattle and therefore divestiture of men. As a result, these temporally domesticated spirits of lions had to be supplicated by feeding them with the blood and meat of cattle. This, it was believed, would keep the lions satiated for some time and therefore spare the cattle. It was also believed that refusal to accede to the demands of the *magwasha* would anger such spirits so much that by the time they left the women to return to the jungle, lions would attack and kill cattle at a rate never experienced before.<sup>89</sup> By personifying the lion spirit or *legwasha*, these women were therefore innovating alternative forms of community power over nature. The Babirwa women thus transformed the potentially dangerous power of nature into benign mystical energy for community benefit. In the *magwasha* ritual, access to power therefore cannot be narrowly placed at the textual level. Possession was both a process of knowledge acquisition and the transformation of that knowledge into practical power of women to tame the wilderness.

### **Mosha o thata ka mosadi: Women's secular power and agro-pastoral identity**

The Babirwa women's power and nurturance of a pastoralist ethnicity extended beyond spirituality. Through their social location as cultivators and subsistence producers, they bridged the boundary between cattle herding and arable farming and therefore shaped an agro-pastoralist identity. Armed with only the *mogoma*, long-handled hoe, these women worked stoically, cultivating drought resistant varieties of grains such as sorghum and millet in an environment characterized by rainfall inconsistency.<sup>90</sup> The slowness of the *mogoma* and the uncertainties of rainfall put a lot of strain on them as work had to start immediately with the onset of the first rains and continued at a fast pace to cultivate enough land within the short rainy season.

The foregoing is not meant to portray the Babirwa women as an exploited class. By cultivating the fields and producing subsistence for their households, the Babirwa women were displaying secular power over nature. Among the

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89 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, B Sephetso, 7 January 2016, O Patana/M Moeti, 15 January 2016, M Malema/D Moalosi, 25 December 2015.

90 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, T Makabe (Village elder, Bobonong)/M Montsosi (Village elder, Bobonong)/K Ngwako (Village elder, Bobonong), 15 January 2016.

Babirwa, a woman is seen as the embodiment of the home and hence she, like in other Sotho-Tswana groups, is referred to as *mosadi*. The word, *mosadi*, can be literally translated into “one who remains at home”. This direct translation has lent itself to misinterpretation before, with Southern Tswana women represented as a sex category confined to the home.<sup>91</sup> In the Babirwa parlance, *mosadi* is the custodian of the home who wields a measure of power over domestic affairs. The word *mosadi* thus connotes the role that a woman plays in the home and not her location as the subordinate of man.

The Babirwa adage, *mosha o thata ka mosadi* (the strength of the home lies in that of a woman), captures the fundamental role of a pre-colonial woman in both the private and public spaces. It was the woman’s primary responsibility to create the home as a safe place by providing nurturance to males in her care. This constructed the home into a space where males were reaffirmed and restored in the midst of outside hardships and deprivations. Indeed cattle herding in the unstable environment of Bobirwa was always emotionally and physically taxing for men. As Fred Morton says of late nineteenth century Botswana:<sup>92</sup>

... [cattle] were difficult to accumulate quickly; cultivating a herd was an undertaking of years – requiring husbandry skills, much personal inconvenience and considerable good luck in overcoming drought and disease.

To the Babirwa women, a woman is the quintessence of the home. The following testimony resonated across my interviews:<sup>93</sup>

It was the duty of a woman to love, feed, shelter and take care of her husband. Men were like children, when they were tired after doing heavy work, they needed to be cuddled.

Thus as a woman’s domain, the domestic space, acted as a site of healing and recovery for men from all kinds of bodily and mental distress. Zeleza has also confirmed these ideas of the pre-colonial African woman as an indispensable cogwheel in the movement of the pastoralist machine. In pre-colonial African herding communities, he argues, “livestock property, which was owned by men, was channeled through the institution of the house, controlled by women”.<sup>94</sup>

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91 J Comaroff and JL Comaroff, “Goodly beasts, beastly goods...”, *American Ethnologist* 17(2), 1990, pp. 199-202.

92 F Morton, *When rustling became an art...*, p. 35.

93 PP Molosiwa (Personal Collection), interview, T Makabe/M Montsosi/K Ngwako, 15 January 2016.

94 TP Zeleza, *A modern economic history: Volume 1, The nineteenth century* (CODESRIA, 1993), p. 151.

Beyond being an autonomous space of female production, Southern African women's agricultural work nurtured the pastoral economy.<sup>95</sup> The Babirwa moved their cattle seasonally depending on the availability of palatable grasses. Responding to casual questions about where cattle were grazed, how locations varied with the seasons and about the relation of grazing to the agricultural activities of the community, the Babirwa presented an idealized grazing schedule. This pattern of grazing involved the seasonal rotation of cattle between the *meraka* and the agricultural fields, in order to extend the grazing range. It was a form of land use, which demonstrated the Babirwa's innovation of technical knowledge of their environments.

The ideal management system of the *moraka* area and its relationship with the Babirwa social system was thus based on the temporality of land use. However, entering the grazing area was governed by rules of access designed to ensure a steady flow of rangeland resources. Rules of access to the *moraka* can be understood by digressing a little to note the roles played by women in this agro-pastoralist social organization. Women did most of the agricultural work. However, they were also responsible for thatching roofs and therefore had to have access to the grass at the *moraka*. But this access to thatching grass was regulated so that the thatching grass first matured and dried for seed dispersal before it was cut up in order to ensure another crop of thatching grass in the following season, and to avoid direct contact between women and cattle. As a result, during winter, women and cattle moved in opposite directions. While women entered the *moraka* to collect thatching grass, the cattle fed on crop residue in the fields. The need to regulate grazing thus induced the Babirwa to develop range management systems that would ensure sustainable use of resources in a drought-prone environment.<sup>96</sup>

In the end, the type and amount of work done by men and women depended on unstable social divisions of gender, status and generation. The Babirwa's pastoralist identity developed because of the work of men and women. It flourished because of supplementation between the pastoral economy and the domestic space. But this prosperity lasted only until the beginning of colonial rule. By 1895, the struggle for and renegotiation of land, a main theme in Southern African environmental history, had become a prominent future of the colonial encounter in Botswana as the Babirwa were systematically expropriated of their grazing land. This dispossession followed Khama's

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<sup>95</sup> N Jacobs, *Environment, power, and injustice...*, p. 29.

<sup>96</sup> PP Molosiwa (Personal Communication), interview, G Mompoti/D Molamu, 15 January 2016.

(Bangwato chief) cession of Babirwa lands along the Limpopo River to the British Crown to stop the transfer of the Bechuanaland Protectorate to the British South Africa Company rule.<sup>97</sup> Despite losing their coveted lands, the Babirwa did not lose a sense of their *Bakgomong* identity. To date they still praise each other as *kgomo*, and the acknowledgement phrase, *ee kgomo*, continues to define Babirwaness.

## **Conclusion**

When the Bechuanaland Protectorate became a British colony in 1885, the colonial government entered into an alliance with the chiefs of the Tswana-speaking ethnic groups because these chiefs controlled cattle wealth, the country's coveted resource. The various, but mutually intelligible, Tswana dialects together with the similarities in the cultures and histories of these groups, provided a ready platform upon which the British built a colonial state founded on "Tswanadom".<sup>98</sup> This philosophical, albeit highly territorial, idea of the organic dominance of the Tswana speaker in a country made up of diverse ethnicities became used as a blueprint for the conception of the post-colonial state wherein non-Tswana speakers were designated inferior status. The Tswana-led post-colonial government, like many other modern states imposed Tswana cultures and language on the so-called minor or inferior ethnicities, thus undermining their histories, traditions, languages and local knowledges.

By studying the Babirwa's adoption of cattle herding, the article foregrounds the oft-told discourse of local knowledge as a changing recursive process and therefore not timeless and unchanging. Local African knowledge has always changed and adapted to social and natural diversity, leading to the reshaping of identity by various ethnicities. This article thus runs in sharp contrast to misleading official rhetoric of Botswana as an ethnic monolith. The idea of Tswana culture and language being used by the state to systematically undermine non-Tswana speaking ethnicities, however, still needs serious academic rumination and historical inquiry.

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97 Bechuanaland Protectorate Order in Council, 1904.

98 N Parsons, "The evolution of modern Botswana: Historical revisions", LA Picard, *The evolution of modern Botswana: Politics and rural development in Southern Africa* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1985), p. 27.

This article has examined the Babirwa's transition from herders of caprines, to herders of cattle, and symbolically from buffalo people to cow people. It contests particularly the cultural, mystical and resistance clichés that summarily represented African pastoralist pursuits as irrational. The article has demonstrated that the Babirwa's adoption of cattle herding during the second half of the nineteenth century was a historical process that depended on the reconfiguration of indigenous knowledge systems as communities navigated an unfriendly physical terrain to shape a pastoralist ethnic identity.