Colonialism, Culture, Christianity and the Struggle for Selfhood: Manche Masemola[1] of Sekhukhuneland, c.1913 - 1928

Mandy Goedhals

Manche Masemola was not the sort of person who, for most of the twentieth century, would have been likely to attract the attention of historians in South Africa. She was a young Pedi woman who spent her entire life within her parents' household, near the village of Marishane in Sekhukhuneland, in what is now the Northern Province. Few written historical sources describe the lives of rural women in southern Africa, and even fewer the lives of individuals. The fact or date of Manche Masemola's birth was not officially recorded[2]. That we know her name or anything about her is largely due to the manner of her death in 1928: she came quickly to be regarded by local Anglicans as a martyr, and it was this which drew attention to her life. Most of what we know about Manche is found in missionary records and is shaped by Christian hagiography. Some redress for this imbalance is provided by Peter Delius' work on the Pedi published in *The Land Belongs to Us* (1983) and *A Lion amongst the Cattle* (1996). The missionary story is essentially about the making of a Christian martyr, a witness for Christ amongst people whom the church viewed as hostile pagans. Delius, on the other hand, points to missionary collaboration with forces of imperialism and colonialism, and although he does not mention Manche, it can be inferred from his work that the compromised position of the church within Pedi society contributed to her death. Missionary hagiography and Delius' exposure of the oppressive impact of

[1] Her name is pronounced 'maa-n-chee muh-sair-moo-luh'.

[2] Births and deaths in Sekhukhuneland at this time were not reportable (*Native Economic Commission* 721). Some sources give Manche's age as eighteen, while Whitnall records that she was born in 1914. Canon John Tsebe, who worked as Archdeacon in Sekhukhuneland and whose wife Nora belonged to the Masemola clan, argues that if Manche had been eighteen, she would have been too old for the initiation school which she attended. He argues that Manche was about fifteen years old at the time of her death (Interview, Jane Furse, 7 August 1997).

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imperialism and colonialism on Pedi society treat Manche as an object or as a victim. Tinyiko Maluleke, emphasises the need to search for African agency, while acknowledging the pitfalls of his proposed approach. Attempting to reflect on Manche's life from this perspective can help us to recover a life and experience hitherto hidden from history.

The missionary story

The history of the Anglican mission to the Pedi shaped the way Anglican missionaries approached their work and interpreted the circumstances of Manche's life and death. From the start, white Anglicans found Sekhukhuneland 'rather a hopeless mission' (Wilkinson 1992:231). The first Anglicans in Sekhukhuneland in the 1860s were probably returned migrant workers who had been converted during a term of labour away from their homes. The first Bishop of Pretoria, Henry Bousfield (1878-1902), was so attached to the institutions of the established Church of England, and so depressed by British retrocession of the Transvaal to the South African Republic (ZAR) in 1881, that he had no enthusiasm for mission. As a result, Anglicans in Sekhukhuneland received only sporadic visits from Anglican clergy (Hinchliff 1963:153-157): Edwin Farmer's visit in 1897 was followed by Latimer Fuller's tour as an itinerant preacher in a cape cart drawn by four mules in 1908 (Wilkinson 1992:230). The next priest, who remains nameless, passed through Sekhukhuneland on a bicycle in 1913 (Lewis & Edwards 1934:639). White clergy were reluctant to settle permanently in an area where the climate was harsh and the people unwelcoming. In 1919, the young African priest Augustine Moeka, trained by the Community of the Resurrection and newly ordained, settled in the village of Marishane, and opened a school and St. Peter's church there (Wilkinson 1992:230). Marishane, where the chief was willing to accept missionaries although never himself baptised (Whitnall 1983), was not the only Anglican centre in Sekhukhuneland. In 1918, Jane Furse, daughter of Michael Furse, bishop of Pretoria, and of Frances his wife, died two weeks short of her fourteenth birthday. She was a beloved only child, and money raised in her memory was used to build a hospital in Sekhukhuneland. This mission centre and hospital, named Jane Furse, was just sixteen kilometres away from Marishane, and was opened in 1921. In the view of one visitor, Marishane and Jane Furse were two tiny Christian 'oases in a great desert' (Lewis & Edwards 1934:640). This phrase 'oases in a great desert', is a key to understanding the early accounts we have of the life of Manche Masemola. These accounts have more in common with hagiography than history, and it is not surprising to find that they bear some of the crude and uncritical characteristics often associated with missionary writings.

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Two related assumptions run through the early mission accounts of Manche's life and death. Firstly, they ignore Pedi history, regard Pedi political and social structures as inimical to the growth of Christianity, and reject Pedi culture, while the benevolence of European rule is taken for granted, and conversion to Christianity is often equated with adoption of western norms and customs. Secondly, missionaries in Sekhukhuneland had a strong sense of identification with the life of the early church, when Christians had faced prolonged and often fierce persecution. Missionaries encountered great resistance to the message they preached. Christian converts faced rejection by Pedi society, and it seems that much missionary teaching was designed to prepare Pedi Christians to face persecution. No doubt many missionary sermons stressed the fortitude of early Christians and dwelt on the theme that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. The result of these two tendencies is that Manche, stripped of the cultural context and world view in which she was brought up, is presented as a stereotype of the faithful Christian who is courageous in the face of persecution and obedient unto death. In missionary writings, she has been used by the missionaries, rather than respected as a whole person, in the context of her own culture. Missionary records, although prejudiced against Pedi society and customs, and shaped by piety, give her a name and preserve details of the life of a young woman who would not normally have received much recognition in either Pedi society or the Christian church.

The first accounts of Manche's story were collected by Fr. Augustine Moeka. The priest was away when reports of Manche's death were brought to the church at Marishane. On his return, he set down his own recollections of conversations with her, and he sought to establish the circumstances of her death. It is clear that from the first, he was concerned to establish Manche's cause as a Christian martyr. Although we have no record of a detailed written account from Moeka, he left rough notes and these were incorporated in Dominic Whitnall's 1983 narrative. Moeka's notes make a considerable contribution to our knowledge of sayings of Manche, although it appears that only the English translation of her words has been preserved. In any society where there was resistance to Christianity, the period of preparation for Christian baptism was usually prolonged, and Moeka came to know Manche when she started attending the meetings for hearers which were held twice weekly at Marishane. By mid-1927, Manche was a catechumen, which meant that she was being formally prepared for baptism. It was quite common for young women in this group to encounter parental anger and in October, Moeka told several young catechumens, who were being subjected to varying degrees of corporal punishment, that they should not defy their parents. To this, Manche replied 'I am sorry, but from now on, I am going to stand by myself'. She reportedly went on 'If they out off my head, I will not leave my faith' and when warned that it would be some time before she could be baptised, Manche responded, 'I may be baptised with a better baptism'

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(Whitnall 1983). It was apparently intended that Manche would be baptised just before Easter 1928, and Moeka suggested to the young women that they should retain their traditional Pedi dress after their baptism, but Manche, with the rest of her group, rejected this proposal. Manche subsequently returned and told Moeka she was sorry she had joined the others in this veto. There seems to be no reason why Moeka preserved this anecdote: it does not seem to forward the cause of Manche's martyrdom in any way, and so perhaps provides a glimpse of Manche herself. Does it perhaps indicate that Manche wanted to please the priest, or does it suggest that she liked to be different from others, or that she thought retaining Pedi dress might placate her parents? Moeka also reported that in January 1928, shortly before her death, she predicted 'I shall be baptised with my own blood', and when asked whether she was afraid to die for her faith, she responded, 'Never' (Whitnall). This seems almost too trite to be true, but Moeka, who may have heard similar defiance from young women before, recalled afterwards that he didn't take much notice at the time at which Manche actually said this, an admission which may add a touch of authenticity to his memory.

The earliest written account about Manche was produced by Mrs. Moffat, wife of the Anglican priest at Jane Furse, for publication in England. One aim of the article was clearly to illustrate the excellence of the work being done by the local missionaries, and also to call forth further financial support. The article was published in *The Cowley Evangelist* in November 1928 and was significantly entitled 'The Seed of the Church'. Mrs Moffat reports on a meeting of the Wayfarers Club, an organisation for Africans along the lines of the Girl Guides, which Manche had attended, although she could not join until she had been baptised. There were 43 Wayfarers in the Marishane group, 'a group of girls of which any Leader might be proud'. The clergyman's wife writes approvingly of the khaki dresses and white headscarves of the Wayfarers, which she contrasts with the traditional Pedi dress, bracelets of lead and grass, and hair dressed 'like a pancake, the way the heathen do it here', worn by Manche, a tall girl among the group. Mrs. Moffat's account differs from other accounts in two ways. First, she tells that Manche was taken ill, as many were, in the rainy season, a fact somewhat conveniently ignored by other reporters, who perhaps wished to play down her illness, as detracting from her death for her faith. Second, Mrs Moffat suggests that Manche's time of trial was of short duration, whereas others describe a prolonged persecution: there seems to be no reason to question Fr. Moeka's account here. There is a kind of heartlessness about Mrs Moffat's account, as she claims that Manche laughed as she was beaten to death and asks, 'Why chronicle the death of a young Native catechumen?' The answer for Mrs Moffat is not the infinite value of all human life, but the fact that Manche died as a martyr. It is clear that by November 1928, Manche's cause as a martyr was well established. Mrs Moffat records that at Easter 1929, there would be a pilgrimage to

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Manche's grave, on which would be inscribed the words 'the noble army of Martyrs praise thee'[3]. The article, not surprisingly, ended with an appeal for donations to build a permanent church at Marishane[4].

Thus, from a very early date, Manche's death as a martyr was being commemorated at Marishane and Jane Furse. The Anglican church hierarchy was cautious about local initiatives which did not have episcopal approval, and was particularly wary of developments which indicated any attempt at independence in African congregations. Augustine Moeka was aware of this and took care to keep the local bishop informed of his attempts to encourage the development of a pilgrimage to Manche's grave. As part of the process of investigation, the Bishop of Pretoria, Wilfred Parker, visited Jane Furse in 1937, and there interviewed Manche's cousin, Lucia Masemola. The mothers of the two girls were sisters, and the orphaned Lucia was taken into her aunt's home and brought up with Manche and her two older brothers and younger sister Mabule. Lucia and Manche had joined the hearers' class at the church together and Lucia had witnessed the beatings to which Manche was subjected before her death. Lucia was subsequently baptised, and in telling her story, she would probably have been eager to have her cousin's status as a martyr recognised by the bishop. Moreover, Lucia was not with Manche at the time of her death and reports by others are included in her account. Nevertheless, however stilted by pious memory, and influenced by the telling and retelling of the story which had taken place over the decade which had elapsed since Manche's death, her account of life in the Masemola family contains personal details of Manche not elsewhere recorded. The method used in this interview fell far short of the modern scientific approach to collecting oral evidence: for example Augustine Moeka himself acted as interpreter, and this may very well have influenced the outcome. The experience of being interviewed by a bishop was almost certainly an inhibiting factor, bishops of the 1930s being far more awe-inspiring figures than their modern counterparts. We also only have the bishop's report of Lucia's story in a version typed in 1944, not a verbatim account, although the 1944 typescript may be a copy of an earlier text (Parker 1944).

According to Lucia, when Manche was about 13, she and her cousin heard Fr. Moeka preach at St. Peter's, and Manche was so drawn by what she heard that she asked her mother for permission to attend the hearers' classes at the church. This was allowed, but her parents also insisted that she participate first in the traditional Pedi initiation school. When Manche's interest in Christian teaching persisted, she and her

[3] A tablet with these words was actually erected on the grave only in 1949 (Blake 1950).

[4] Thanks to a generous response, the church was freed of debt by April 1930 (Whitnall 1983).

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cousin were sent away from Marishane, to cook for youths herding cattle in distant pastures. Her parents' next resort was to beat and humiliate her in order to force her to leave the church, and this punishment reportedly intensified from October 1927. By this time, the family was living at Mabuke, an outlying part of Marishane, as this was where their fields were situated. Lucia was sent back to Marishane, as she was regarded as a bad influence on Manche[5], and parental violence towards Manche at this stage is reported to have increased. Probably the real causes of tension in the family, the underlying fears which lead to violence were never clearly expressed. A bone of contention seems to have been the fact that Manche spent time going to church instead of working in the fields, and this seemed to enrage her mother particularly, because it was on her that the burden of agricultural work fell. Lucia records that on one occasion she pursued Manche with a whip and a spear, and on another occasion Manche went into Marishane covered in bruises. The situation was clearly a dangerous and explosive one. Lucia remembers Manche saying 'I am going to obey my parents and work for them as hard as I can with my hands. What I will not do is turn away from the Church'. Was this really Manche's view? Perhaps partly, but it also smacks of what a priest might have advised. A witchdoctor was consulted, and Manche was forced to swallow the medicine he prescribed, but this did not turn her away from Christianity. Her clothes were confiscated, so that she could not attend church meetings, but it is recorded that she continued to pray outdoors, morning and evening. Eventually, in about February 1928, her parents took her to a lonely place and beat her to death, because she refused to give up her allegiance to Christ and her desire for baptism.

The interviews at Marishane satisfied Bishop Parker that Manche's death was a genuine case of Christian martyrdom. As a result, the South African bishops recommended that Manche be included on the list of holy persons commemorated on special days each year by the Anglican church (Parker 1944), although this was not implemented for forty years. Within the Anglican church in Sekhukhuneland, in South Africa and in the worldwide Anglican church, the hagiography surrounding Manche Masemola has continued to evolve. A pilgrimage to her grave initially took place every few years and was attended by a small group of people, but by the 1960s, the pilgrimage drew many hundreds from all over the northern Transvaal, and continues to do so (Blake 1950, Whitnall 1983). After her daughter's death, Manche's mother persisted with her vehement expressions of hatred towards the church, shouting obscenities at Christians, spitting at those who came within range and warning vociferously that Christians killed people. She lived with her niece, Lucia, who reported that she was nevertheless drawn to the church in some way.

[5] Another cousin, Elesina Masemola, witnessed Manche's last days, and reported what she had seen to Lucia (Whitnall 1983).

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Eventually, Manche's mother was baptised and confirmed in 1969, taking the biblical name Magdalene (Tsebe 1969:16). She died in the hospital at Jane Furse in 1973. These events may have given fresh impetus to the commemoration of Manche, who was eventually given an official feast day on the Anglican calendar of saints in 1975. In 1998, statues of ten Christian martyrs of the twentieth century were placed above the west door of Westminster Abbey (*The Times* 10 July 1998). Those depicted included Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Archbishop Oscar Romero and Manche Masemola: as there was never a photograph or detailed description of Manche, the statue was an artist's impression (Chandler 1998). At the pilgrimage at Marishane in 1999, a large photograph of this statue was placed on the grave during the service, so that a depiction of Manche by a European artist defined the visual perception of Manche in her home village. Hagiography surrounding the Sekhukhuneland martyr has taken on a life of its own within the church, without necessarily leading to greater understanding of Manche herself. An examination of the political, social and economic context in which she lived out her life provides insights not yielded by the missionary records.

The political, social and economic context of the Pedi

In the early nineteenth century, Pedi hegemony extended over much of the land to the north and east of modern Johannesburg. In the 1820s, depredations from other African chiefdoms and from advance boer commandoes led the Pedi to withdraw from their capital in the fertile Steelpoort river valley, and to move northwards to the mountain fortresses between the Steelpoort and Olifants rivers. Here they regrouped under Sekwati, but the new location cast a shadow over the future of the Pedi kingdom. The land was not fertile, and the mountains acted as a barrier to rain, and poverty forced the Pedi into migrant labour, while the devastating storms which struck the land helped to shape the mindset of its people (Delius 1996:10). From the 1840s, white trekkers began to settle on the perimeter of the Pedi kingdom, competing with the Pedi for land, and creating a demand for farm labour. Although Sekhukhune succeeded Sekwati without a dispute in 1862, Pedi ability to rival the ZAR as a focus of power in the northern Transvaal had declined by the 1880s (Maylam 1986:127-131).

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, profits of the diamond fields and potential wealth of gold deposits in the Transvaal led to reformulation of British imperial policy for South Africa. Political control of the subcontinent, long avoided as too expensive, was now clearly in Britain's interests. The mineral revolution required a cheap and steady labour supply, which could be unlocked by the imposition of taxes on African people, taxes which would conveniently cover the cost of colonial administration. This policy was clearly incompatible with the continued

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autonomy of African chiefdoms, including the Zulu and the Pedi, and in 1879, Garnet Wolsley, in alliance with the Swazi, defeated the Pedi and captured Sekhukhune. In the wake of this defeat, small parcels of Pedi heartland were set aside for African occupation, and the rest thrown open to white settlement. The notion of private property as opposed to communal ownership was entrenched, and taxes which the Pedi had always resisted, were systematically collected, legacies which remained when the Transvaal reverted to the ZAR in 1881. British rhetoric implied that the South African War (1899-1902) was fought in the interests of indigenous peoples, but post-war policy ensured that Pedi did not regain their land or independence, although the ZAR government was replaced by 'native administration' run by the British and then Union government. Within the Pedi polity, subordinate chiefs had always enjoyed regional autonomy, and under British and subsequent Union administration, this assertion of independence continued. Beyond the ken of native commissioners, chiefs held court, allocating land and settling disputes, receiving cash or cattle fines and tribute paid in labour, agricultural produce or beer, as well as a proportion of bridewealth payments. The chiefs presided over seasonal ceremonies of rainmaking, sowing and reaping, and their maintenance of community life through mediation with the ancestors, and through initiation rites for young men and women kept traditional customs and values alive in the popular consciousness (Delius 1996:12-21).

The Pedi way of life, with its values deeply rooted in a rural existence, was financially maintained by labour migrancy. From the 1840s, young men had travelled south, first to the eastern Cape, and then, from the 1870s, to the diamond fields: their object was cash to buy guns for defence, but as Pedi territory shrank and became impoverished, labour migrancy became a matter of economic survival. Soil in their locations was poor, the rainfall erratic, and by the late 1920s, overcrowding due to population growth and expulsion of Pedi from white farms placed further pressure on the land. The Pedi herds had been decimated by rinderpest and then East Coast fever, and in the drought of 1924-1929, over ten thousand cattle died of starvation. There was seldom a crop surplus, even when drought-resistant crops like millet and sorghum were planted, and by 1930, the Pedi had born the cost of imported mealies for their staple diet through six years of drought. In 1930, nine thousand migrants, mostly young men, left for the mines and domestic service in towns while the conservatism of Pedi society ensured that very few women left their homes as labour migrants. Migrancy remained only the means to an end: a way to pay taxes, to build a home, to provide for a wife and family and to save for old age. The outside world and urban life was regarded as immoral and corrupt and time spent there was a necessary evil to preserve the rurally based social and moral order of the Pedi (Delius 1996:21-24). Pedi society was not egalitarian. Members of the royal house enjoyed wealth and status not available to commoners, and although all men were still able to obtain

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access to land and stock, there was a gulf between the prosperous Pedi and those whose economic resources were slight.

The deepest breach in Pedi society was not primarily economic, but occurred between the *bakreste* (the name given to the minority Christian community) and those who adhered to Pedi religious practices, whom Christian converts called *baheitenye*. Other names given to the two groups further illustrate the division. Christians were called *majakane*, a word which implied that they had chosen to live in a foreign country, while those who preferred the traditional ways of their people were called *baditshaba* or those of the community (Delius 1996:25). This separation from and suspicion of Christians, which was deeply rooted in Pedi society and which was to shape the course of Manche Masemola's life, had its origins in the role which Christian missionaries played in Pedi history in the nineteenth century.

Nineteenth and early twentieth century missionary apologetic presented the Pedi as heathen savages and the Pedi chiefs, Sekhukhune in particular, as persecutors of Christianity (Delius 1983:108). There is another perspective on the past. First Pedi contact with Christianity came through the Transvaal boers, and through Pedi who travelled to work in the Cape and Natal, and encountered missions there. Some Pedi were baptised, and a few proved diligent evangelists when they returned home. Their initial impression of Christianity was favourable, and Sekwati was interested in acquiring missionaries as counsellors such as Moshoeshoe had found in members of the Paris Evangelical Missionary Society (Thompson 1975:84). In 1861 Alexander Merensky and Albert Nachtigal of the Berlin Missionary Society (BMS) established the first mission on Pedi land (Delius 1983:108-125, 158-180). Interested in their political usefulness and medical knowledge, Sekwati smoothed the way for them, and Sekhukhune allowed them to remain until it became clear that their presence threatened his own position and undermined the independence of the Pedi. Sekhukhune was eventually forced to act by popular belief that Christian rejection of traditional values and practices rendered the Pedi kingdom vulnerable to enemy attack, and exposed land and people to drought and disease. The first steps were taken against Pedi Christians, but in 1866 the BMS missionaries were expelled from the chiefdom: Sekhukhune described the mission as wounds through which his people bled away. Nor was this a figment of his imagination. The missionaries had realised that while the Pedi chiefdom remained intact, their efforts would gain no foothold, and they therefore had an interest in undermining the political independence of the Pedi. In 1863, Merensky had accepted appointment as ZAR agent with the Pedi, thus allying himself with the land and labour interests of white farmers, which were diametrically opposed to those of the Pedi. Anglican missionaries had seen no reason to dissociate themselves from the Berlin missionaries – T.E. Wilkinson, first Anglican bishop to work in the Transvaal wrote of them: 'most glad I am to see them here' (Lewis & Edwards 1934:576).

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Missionaries were strongly identified with foreign administration, and in the 1940s, an Anglican priest lamented that his arrival in Pedi villages was equated with that of government inspector or tax collector.

How did this impact on Manche's world?

In the Sekhukhuneland reserve, where shortage of land created real danger of a landless class, Manche's family was still able to obtain access to arable land. Her father was not a migrant worker, and the household was therefore dependent on the annual harvest for their subsistence. The fields allocated to Manche's father were far from Marishane, in the village of Mabuke, and the family moved there during the planting season to tend their crops (Interview with Canon John Tsebe, 7 August, 1997). Her father or older brothers probably did the ploughing, while Manche helped her mother with hoeing, weeding and reaping. Like other girls of her age, she worked at home, helping to fetch water and firewood, and learning to gather wild plants and to cook. She would have been trained to grind corn, to gather needs for fencing and baskets. and to maintain the mud walls and dung floors of the homestead (Delius 1996:28). The repetitious songs, games and dances of children everywhere relieved this domestic routine. Manche appeared mature for her age, and took on her fair share of caring for babies and toddlers in the village. We know that Manche attended the traditional initiation school, the foundation of Pedi social organisation, which was supervised by the senior wife of the chief, older women and those who had already passed through the rites. Instruction emphasised loyalty to chiefs and parents, especially the respect women owed to men and their elders, while the work and duties of women as well as sexual matters were explained. The process included ceremonies shrouded in secrecy. According to one account, the school started with a symbolic circumcision which must have taught an impressive lesson in stoicism and patient endurance to those on the receiving end:

> The girls are told that an operation is to be performed on them. A knife is sharpened in their presence and they are then taken, one by one, made to lie down, and covered with a blanket. The knife is then pressed between their legs. Although they are not injured at all, the girls cry out with fright when feeling the cold metal. As each girl is led away, ... the women who perform the operation emerge from the blanket with their hands reddened with plant-juices. The girls still waiting their turn, thinking that the hands of the women are covered with blood, must obviously be terrorized[6].

[6] This extract from Mönnig, H. *The Pedi* Pretoria:np, is quoted in Delius 1996:30. D.R. Hunt, the native commissioner for Sekhukhuneland 1908-1931, has a different

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Missionaries, recognising that initiation practices were intended to bolster Pedi values and traditions, forbad Christians to undergo initiation (Delius 1996:31), and Manche's mother may have hoped that the church would look with disfavour on her daughter if she had recently emerged from the initiation school. It is perhaps to the experience initiation of school that one can at least partly attribute the forbearance with which Manche endured her parents' beating because of her stubborn resolve to become a Christian.

Christianity was closely associated with conquest of the Pedi, with their loss of land and with colonial demands for tax and labour, while urban areas were regarded as centres of immorality. Most of the women who left Sekhukhuneland to work in towns were Christians, so that Christianity was regarded as an example of 'truly delinquent behaviour' (Delius 1996:31). These factors explain Manche's parents' alarm. As a young girl, Manche did not enjoy high status in Pedi society: the expectation was that she would respect and obey older women and all men. Communal solidarity was highly regarded, and in wanting to be Christian, Manche was placing her individual sense of vocation above the wishes and wisdom of her elders. Among the Pedi of Sekhukhuneland, there were instances of violence and brutality towards those who threatened stability and continuity within the society (Delius 1996:172-211). Other factors also need to be considered. The late 1920s were a time of sustained drought, and the Masemola parents may have been anxious about their ability to feed their family. Moreover, Augustine Moeka was trying to establish a religious community for women in Marishane, and Manche's mother may

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account of the initiation ceremonies. The school was spread out over eight months. At one stage of the training, young women were required to stand in cold water for long periods, they were beaten across the shoulders and the hymen was broken to ensure that the girl was still a virgin: if there was no flow of blood, she was punished. Hunt remarked: 'this is done to harden them' (Hunt A1655, file Ca2). The Union Government officials lacked resources to prevent these practices, but as intervention would have disturbed the equilibrium of the arrangement with the chiefs on whose co-operation Hunt depended, there was no will to intervene on behalf of young girls and women. Exactly what happened to Manche is not clear. Missionary descriptions of the initiation school refer to initiates being required to stay awake and stand up all night, but the hospital at Jane Furse has no record of treating young women for the effects of female genital mutilation (Davies 16). Clearly, in the case of Sekhukhuneland, the initiation rites were associated with Pedi determination to retain their customs as an assertion of their independence, particularly when this independence was so circumscribed. In this way, colonialism and resistance to colonialism simultaneously reinforced the oppressive structures which indigenous culture inflicted on young women.

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have feared that Manche would ultimately join a celibate sisterhood: in Pedi society, failure to marry and bear children was a curse, to be avoided at all costs. From a material point of view, it also meant loss of the bride price to parents of daughters, and determination to acquire cattle on Manche's marriage, and with them a more secure future, seems also to have been on the mother's mind (Interview with Canon John Tsebe, 7 August 1997).

The severe beating of a young woman by her parents is an appalling dimension of this story. The dynamics and tensions of the relationship between a seemingly rebellious and obstinate young girl and her mother, a woman herself marginalised by the low status of women in Pedi society and by the precarious foothold of the family on economic independence can be imagined. Added to this was the parents' fear of the forces of disease and destruction which their child's seemingly irresponsible Christian devotion could bring on them, which in turn could lead to their ostracism from the rest of the village community. This was a result of the impact of colonialism on the Pedi. The local native commissioner was aware of the physical violence inflicted on young women and issued an order that those who wished to be Christians should not be molested (Davies 1984:18), but had no means of enforcing this except through the chiefs. What of the church? Why were the clergy silent? The fifth commandment 'Honour thy father and thy mother' had first of all to be obeyed. The church also clearly had less influence with the native commissioner than the alliance so often emphasised between Christianity and colonialism would lead one to expect. Christianity was the faith of only a tiny minority in Sekhukhuneland and permission to proselytise was dependent on the good will of the local chief, as was the safety of Christian converts: the missionaries would wish to alienate the chiefs as little as possible. But why did the church not act when Manche was beaten to death? One explanation is that the church was looking for a martyr, not a murder victim. Although a death was involved, the factors which determined the response to the beating of children continued to apply. This is how Bishop Parker summed up the situation in 1944:

> Canon Moeka told me afterwards that the local chief and some of the people were much annoyed, no doubt they feared an enquiry by the authorities.

It is inadvisable to say much about Manche's death, at any rate in South Africa, as her parents are still alive. Here, therefore, we have to be rather guarded (Parker 1944).

> In this way, colonialism and Christianity not only distorted aspects of Pedi culture, but also exacerbated its impact on the most marginalized within Pedi society.

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What then, in these circumstances, can be made of Tinyiko Maluleke's project for the recovery of African agency, in the case of Manche Masemola? Maluleke argues that Christianity is not 'intrinsically and irredeemably Western' (Maluleke 2000:29) and that Africans who are Christian are not thereby betraying their Africanness. Christianity is translatable into a variety of cultures and is rooted in Africa because of African agents and not because of the European missionary endeavour (Maluleke 2000:31). At the same time, he warns particularly against romanticization of African agency by those whose forbears did not experience the impact of colonialism and missionary attempts to impose western civilisation as part of the Christian gospel (Maluleke 2000:35) a warning which is germane in the case of the present writer. He cautions that emphasis on African agency may appear to minimise the extent of oppression which was experienced, whereas emphasis on agency is only acceptable where a careful examination of the victimisation provides the context: 'we are being called to a humble but careful observance of the struggle of Africans to be agents against great odds, not by discounting the odds, but by confronting them' (Maluleke 2000:27f). Maluleke (2000:33) also points out that it would be unreasonable to expect the marginalized to be fully conscious of the nature and extent of their domination and of their potential for agency.

Is Manche Masemola an agent of her own history, although in circumstances not of her own making? It is difficult to imagine a more marginalized person: member of an oppressed race, living out her life in a poverty-stricken reserve, she knew only a domestic economy dependent on subsistence agriculture. Her labour was controlled by her parents, and she could not read or write. But we can take her life history seriously, even in the circumscribed form in which we have it. Though illiterate, she was capable of making decisions, she had resources for survival and resistance, an inviolable sense of self. Her resistance was not based on any clear theoretical or analytical understanding of her circumstances, but she was not passive nor could she be easily silenced (Stratton 1994:172). Defiant and persistent, she was ultimately feared and terribly punished. Although she was excluded from power, her choices had political, economic and social consequences in her community (Norris 1999:209-220). In many ways, her mother, resolute and outspoken, may tell us something about Manche herself.

Sekhukhuneland lies in one of the most underdeveloped provinces in South Africa, with low levels of literacy, productive capacity and life expectancy. Three quarters of the children live in poverty (Delius 1996:6). Manche Masemola is a reminder that behind the statistics lie individuals, and that those who live in poverty and obscurity exist in their own right and have a sense of self which is not easily crushed.

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