

Vigilantism or Alternative Citizenship? The Rise of *Mapogo a Mathamaga*

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WHEREAS the areas of Nebo and Sekhukhune and surroundings are presently suffering under an unprecedented wave of crime and lawlessness, where criminals are openly flaunting their crimes in complete contempt of the law and for society (...)

WHEREAS the state and its political rulers do not have the political will and/or ability to stop this crime wave by tangible and material support and encouragement to the police and by voting adequate funds for law enforcement and see to it that these funds are spent properly and effectively (...)

NOW THEREFORE they have decided that they can no longer suffer in a society that lives in fear of criminals that think they are above the law. All good men and women must now bond together to show the criminals that there are men and women in these areas that are no longer prepared to take the situation lying down and are no longer prepared to suffer injuries, humiliation and loss of life and property to these swaggering criminals...

(from the *Mapogo a Mathamaga* Constitution, 1997)

At the end of 1996, just over two years after South Africa's first democratic elections, newspapers began to report on a new vigilante organisation in the neglected North of the country. *Mapogo a Mathamaga*, which roughly translates as "If you are a leopard, I'll be a tiger", propelled to national fame as the "*sjambok* vigilantes of the North".¹ Journalists described how angry mobs dragged suspected criminals from their houses, giving them "a hell of a hiding" before turning them over to the police. They interviewed cow thieves who vowed that "anyone who got flogged like me will never steal again" and wrote — with relish — about suspects being thrown into crocodile-infested rivers and dragged behind cars over Sekhukhune's dirt roads.² Television specials showed mobs, dressed in white t-shirts depicting two tigers, dancing in the streets and waving leather whips and small bottles of medicine, the metaphoric symbols of the *Mapogo* treatment. This rather sensationalist emphasis on the rough-and-ready justice it delivered continued as the organisation rose to prominence growing to boast an estimated 70,000 members and 72 branches around the country, with the two-tigered *Mapogo* logo visible on cars, schools and shops from KwaZulu-Natal to the Northern Cape (Sekhonyane and Louw 2002). For

lack of serious academic attention, one of South Africa's largest post-Apartheid vigilante organisations could well go down in history as a brutal and undisciplined mob of *sjambok*-wielding criminals.³

Yet in 1998 and 1999 when I lived next door to *Mapogo*'s head office in Jane Furse, attended numerous branch launches, meetings and court cases, interviewed over six hundred Bapedi and most of the important *Mapogo* executive, I got to know quite a different organisation.⁴ *Mapogo* seemed to be a highly organised and vocal elitist association that was not only involved in combating crime but also in sponsoring sports training and cultural dance clubs. Meeting after meeting showed how *Sepogo* — the *Mapogo* philosophy — was essentially offering a morality different from the neo-liberal constitutionalist discourse predominant in politics at the time and, as such, appealed to most of the more conservative elements in rural society: parents, chiefs and business and church leaders. Let me first evoke a typical *Mapogo* meeting, one chilly winter evening in the hamlet of Ngwaabe, by means of illustration.⁵

The forty-odd people who had gathered in the village school, next to colourful drawings and posters of the alphabet, seemed more like the local school governing body than a criminal organisation. They were immaculately dressed and clearly better off than most locals. There were more women than men, and many sported badges indicating membership of the Zionist Christian Church. The meeting began with a prayer and continued with a tight agenda, including such items as last week's minutes, correspondence, chairman's remarks and "the way forward". The main topic of discussion was a conflict between an old man in tweed and his two sons who had allegedly tried to poison their father and sell his house. The one son present was told to stay in the village until the *Mapogo* members had sorted out the case. The meeting went on to discuss what to do about a shebeen that made too much noise, patrolling hours, an upcoming visit of the Department of Public Works, membership fees and a planned visit to Cape Town. After the meeting, more than twenty men and women climbed into their cars "to start the evening patrols". "We'll only get home at sunrise," they said.

This article, then, joins the others in this volume in offering an alternative to the "mob-run-wild" perspective on vigilantism. It seeks to explain how *Mapogo* could become such a potent force in Sekhukhune, the area in which it originated. Such an explanation, I argue, has to be grounded firmly in local political dynamics, which — in the case of Sekhukhune — are not only shaped by high crime rates but also by a severely discredited police force, deep intergenerational rifts and a reappraisal of traditional authority. The article thus focuses on *Mapogo*'s rise to popularity in only one particular area: its heartland, the area that claims the most *Mapogo* members and that is home to its charismatic leader, John Magolego. Nevertheless, while the focus is not on the many different manifestations of *Mapogo* as it branched out around the country — from a purely commercial operation to one run by white farmers to a name appropriated

by local criminals — I do argue that *Mapogo*'s general rise to power cannot be understood without taking into account the way in which the organisation managed to hook onto local political dynamics and struggles.

In Sekhukhune, for instance, *Mapogo* could become so popular because it spoke for an alternative citizenship, one based on patriarchal power and privilege that resonated particularly well in an area with such a long history of intergenerational conflict. After providing a brief sociography of the organisation and its rise to power in Sekhukhune, I will demonstrate how *Mapogo* was essentially a hegemonic bloc, rallying conservative factions of rural society on the basis of a rights-based discourse on difference. On the one hand, this conservative stance posed a direct challenge to the egalitarian ideology of the post-Apartheid state, but it also owed its success, I argue in a later section, to the enormous intergenerational rift that has existed in Sekhukhune and similar areas since the youth revolts of the 1980s. In the concluding section, I will explore briefly the extent to which the demands made by *Mapogo*'s members were answered by the post-Apartheid state. The transformation that *Mapogo* underwent in many areas from a "moral community" with a political agenda of alternative citizenship into a privatised security company is, to a large extent, an indication of the failure of the state to address *Mapogo*'s demands.

The Rise of the Tiger

Mapogo was formed on 25 August 1996 in northern South Africa, after the violent killing of six businesspeople in the Nebo area of Sekhukhune. At the time, Sekhukhune was (as it is today) struggling to overcome the legacy of Apartheid when it was still part of the Lebowa homeland: a population density of 135 people per square kilometer, 81 per cent of whom earn less than the official minimum, with most of the area's income deriving from migrant work and old-age pensions (De Villiers 1997). The area — with its beautiful red soil and characteristic stone *koppies* — is largely unarable, and there is a severe struggle over ploughing and grazing land. Bopedi, as the area is known locally, once fell under the singular rule of King Sekhukhune but was split up into over fifty chiefdoms during the Apartheid era.

The vigilante organisation was a forceful response to rampant crime in the area and the incapacity of existing institutions to deal with it. The Northern Province was, at the time, amongst the most crime-ridden in the country, and the few local businesspeople — mostly owners of liquor stores, petrol stations and supermarkets — were particularly prone to being robbed and murdered. "Many businesspeople ran the risk of being shot or robbed every day, which is why we had to give meaning to the Sotho expression 'if you are a leopard I'll turn into a tiger'. Our people were dying and we'd just had enough," in the words of one of the founders.⁶ A co-founder recalled how he had often called the police but they had not arrived, or taken a case — the killing of his brother, threats to his wife,

numerous robberies — to the local police station, only to hear nothing from them. The few cases that did inspire police action and reach the courts often dragged on for years and were finally dismissed on technical grounds.

The widespread mistrust of the police and the court system was not only a result of their general inertia but was also fed by their history of implication in Apartheid's evils. Due to the "sunset" clauses guaranteeing civil servants job security after democratisation, many of the policemen were the Apartheid-era South African Police-trained officers whose primary role had been to maintain law and order in the former homelands by any means possible. The new station commander in Jane Furse, for instance, commented on the number of people he had to work with who had been accused of corruption and therefore held little legitimacy within the communities that they were supposed to serve. The courts suffered similar accusations of both incompetence and implication in implementing Apartheid, which added to the general feeling of lawlessness. While the chiefs' courts, the main alternative, underwent a reappraisal in the post-Apartheid era, they did not seem to have the capacity to curb the high incidence of crime either.

It was in this vacuum, before new institutions such as Community Policing Forums had taken off and while people felt that fighting crime was not given enough political priority, that *Mapogo* emerged. The organisation could build on a long history of violence that went under the name of "vigilantism" in the area. In the 1980s some government-sponsored right-wing vigilante organisations had operated in Sekhukhune (Haysom 1986). In addition, a host of "parents' associations" had been formed in the wake of the Sekhukhune youth revolt, discussed in greater detail below. These associations, such as the *Mbokotho* vigilante group in KwaNdebele (Ritchken 1990), were not only formed to "put the youth back in their place" but often had political aims too, such as opposing homeland independence.

In 1996, in an early activity of what was initially called the "*Mapogo a Mathamaga* Business Shield", over a hundred businessmen and -women marched to the provincial capital, Pietersburg, where they demanded of the provincial Member of the Executive Committee (MEC) for Safety and Security that "the killing and robbery of our members be attended to immediately" and that "the judicial ethics be followed and criminals be given heavy penalties, even ... the death sentence".⁷ In the weeks that followed, *Mapogo* members began touring villages, speaking to traditional leaders, organising mass meetings and using a megaphone to tell criminals that their days were numbered. By November, the name of *Mapogo* was well established, especially after the organisation had dished out its "medicine" for the first time: A mob of its supporters *sjambokked* and beat two — already convicted but escaped — criminals to death and assaulted six suspected criminals. Amongst the latter group were two policemen who were allegedly drunk on duty.⁸ Soon reports

began to surface all around the area of *Mapogo* members beating up suspected criminals and dragging the bleeding bodies to the police station. By August 1997 *Mapogo* had about 3,500 members, mostly business owners, and fourteen registered branches, and had made arrests themselves in over 46 criminal cases and solved many more.⁹ *Mapogo* had become a household name, with pensioners and businesspeople proudly sporting two-tiger t-shirts and with stickers indicating *Mapogo* membership (and thus protection) on cars, shops, schools, churches and farms owned by Afrikaner farmers. This support would only increase in the years to come, with the organisation boasting 70,000 members and 72 branches in at least five provinces by 2002 (Sekhonyane and Louw 2002).

Part of *Mapogo*'s success lies in the organisation's vocal and charismatic leadership. President for Life Monhle Magolego is a wealthy businessman who drives a BMW with tinted windows and dresses either in a business suit or in presidential attire with leopard-skin epaulettes. He has a knack for speaking directly to different audiences in fluent Afrikaans, Sepedi, English or Zulu with a zealous faith in the righteousness of *Mapogo*'s actions, for the "government treats criminals with kid gloves" and "if you have a kitchen, you keep it clean of cockroaches".¹⁰ A politician at heart (and some say an opportunist), Magolego was a candidate for the right-wing National Party in 1993 and for the UDM in 1999, until he found out "that I couldn't take my *sjambok* to parliament." In 2003 he finally joined the African National Congress (ANC) after nearly a decade of fiery battles with the party's executive.

Magolego is the main person responsible for the organisation's visibility, another key factor in explaining its success. The *Mapogo* brand was cleverly marketed in the numerous interviews with (and only with) its president and through promotional materials such as stickers, t-shirts, fliers and — as of 2002 — a website with pictures of smiling (white) children and ritzy business offices. The organisation was also highly visible at the local level, where each branch launch turned into a demonstration with (often) hundreds of *Mapogo* supporters dancing, ululating and singing songs such as "where have you seen such a thing as a criminal with rights?" At a branch launch in Rozenkranz, for instance, Magolego — in presidential regalia — told an exhilarated audience that "the bible doesn't allow us to steal. But God didn't do anything and that is why we have *Mapogo*," before driving away to the clinking of cowbells from stolen and retrieved cattle (Oomen 1999).

Mapogo's success, in terms of membership, was also due to its tight, franchise-like form of organisation. Branches could be set up only under the tutelage of the central executive and in accordance with the *Mapogo* constitution. Joining fees and monthly rates ranged from R15 to R120 respectively for pensioners to R25 to R250 for households, R45 to R800 for offices and churches, R85 to R1,000 for shops, schools and supermarkets, R225 to R7,500 for garages and

filling stations and R250 to R10,000 for big companies.¹¹ *Mapogo*'s tight organisation did not prevent it from undergoing many splits and leadership battles, and by the end of the century many localities had two or more organisations sporting the name "*Mapogo*" or similar-sounding alternatives.¹²

Good branding, of course, cannot stand without a product to support. The main factor in the organisation's success was the fact that *Mapogo* did manage to chase down suspected criminals and deal with them more swiftly and effectively than the slow and often corrupt criminal justice system, albeit in ways that encroached on the suspects' constitutional rights. Even if it is difficult to prove that *Mapogo* did indeed effect a lower crime rate, both the communities concerned and the Department of Safety and Security felt that this was the case.¹³ As one girl put it: "Before *Mapogo* came, girls would never dare to go out alone at night. Now we're free to do as we wish." *Mapogo*'s efficacy was generally attributed to its support in the community, where "everyone knows who is a criminal" and "if you just put your ear to the ground, you can hear the music". The general sentiment that *Mapogo* had indeed curbed crime had a great deal to do with the organisation's visibility: the stickers on the windows, the t-shirts that *Mapogo* members wore, the cars that patrolled each locality and — of course — the sessions in which suspected criminals were beaten to confession, often with an audience roaring in approval.

Finally, *Mapogo*'s rise to power can be explained by the organisation's ability to take many local forms and to link onto long-standing local political struggles and factions, divergent as these might be. Nevertheless, for all the variety in *Mapogo*'s local manifestations, the next section shows how the organisation's members in an area such as Sekhukhune shared some important common characteristics and virtually all belonged to the local elite, those people who had most to lose from the egalitarian ideology that characterised post-Apartheid political discourse.

All Good Men and Women ...

The celebration of *Mapogo*'s second anniversary, held on a hot Sekhukhune Sunday at the end of August 1999, showed how the organisation had managed to connect into local political dynamics and unite various factions around the common theme of crime. The festive meeting, with thumping music and pots full of meat and maize porridge, was attended by hundreds of supporters and sponsored by the local business community. Out of a long line of luxury cars with the two-tigered sticker on them came entrepreneurs from all over the area. One of the main attractions in the impressive line-up of speakers was a local chief who thundered about how "*Mapogo* has made our lands safe again". A cultural dance group sponsored by the organisation gave a swirling performance, followed by a talk by a church minister. Here and there, a white farmer stuck out in the audience, clearly ill at ease in this black heartland but determined to

show affiliation to the organisation that had made him feel safe again. Politicians, all seeking to share some of *Mapogo's* popularity, were well represented too. The jubilant get-together clearly consisted of some of the most important members of Sekhukhune society, all with their own reasons for supporting the organisation.

Businessmen and -women formed the initial and central faction within *Mapogo*, which had begun, after all, as a business shield. As entrepreneurs they held a particularly difficult position within Sekhukhune society, with their supermarkets, *spaza*-shops, filling stations, taxi-businesses and restaurants the frequent targets of extremely violent crime. In addition, doing business in the former homeland was difficult because of the uncertain land tenure arrangements there and the refusal by many large companies to insure assets (Adams *et al.* 1999). In addition, wealth was conspicuous in an area that was not only dirt poor but also saturated with the combined ideological and cultural emphases on communalism and the socialism that — at least before the 1990s — was part of the ANC agenda. As one businessman put it: “If you make some money, your whole family comes knocking on the door immediately”. Keeping wealth to oneself often evoked jealousy and potentially fatal accusations of witchcraft (Ralushai *et al.* 1996). To its business members, *Mapogo* offered not only much-needed protection but also a forum for unabashedly flaunting wealth, driving BMWs, toying with cell-phones and wearing expensive clothes. Making money in *Sepogo* was not a suspect but a virtuous activity, with “the promotion of wealth amongst its members” as one of *Mapogo's* core objectives.

The area's traditional leaders formed another part of *Mapogo's* core constituency. Even though many of Sekhukhune's chieftaincies have a long and heroic history, most office holders became bureaucratic “puppets of the regime” in the Apartheid era (Ntsebeza and Hendricks 2000; Oomen 2004). Legislation such as the 1951 Black Authorities Act made them responsible for local government functions (collecting taxes, registering births and deaths, culling cattle) and also for maintaining order in their areas. This generated so much hatred within their communities that the 1980s youth revolt was directed principally against the chiefs, and many leaders were killed or chased from their communities, their palaces burnt behind them. By the late 1990s, however, chiefs were reasserting their positions, often successfully, and the area seemed to be undergoing a veritable re-traditionalisation (Oomen 2000a; Oomen 2000b). *Mapogo* membership, for many chiefs, offered the physical back up to support their struggle to return to power. In Magolego's words “the *magoshi* used to be isolated and victimised, but now we protect them and all the chiefs are in favour of *Mapogo*.” The association with traditional leaders, from Magolego's vantage point, strengthened *Mapogo's* claim to being a traditional African organisation.

A similarly organic linkage existed between the churches and the vigilante organisation. In this staunchly religious area, many *Mapogo* members felt that

corporal punishment was endorsed and even encouraged by the bible, which represented a higher truth than the law of the land. "Of course you must hit a child if it's not obeying, this is what the bible tells us to do," was often reiterated. The link between the popular Afro-Christian Zionist Christian Church and *Mapogo* was probably the strongest evidence of this connection, with the *Mapogo* leadership attending important church meetings during which they were allowed to pass on their message. The patriarchal ideology of the conservative Dutch Reformed churches popular amongst the Afrikaner community, with its emphasis on cultural difference and corporal punishment, also jelled easily with the *Mapogo* approach. Churches of other denominations also sported the two-tigered sticker on their doors.

Mapogo gained rapid and widespread popularity amongst the Afrikaner *boers* on their extensive farms on the borders of the former homeland, as noted above. They suffered the same insecurity as the Sekhukhune businessmen, with hundreds of farm murders taking place all over the country in spite of the fact that most farms had become virtual fortresses behind fences and guarded by dogs and armed family members. Frustrated by police corruption and the impression that "it's one thing if you're black and beat up a suspect but it's a different cattle of fish [sic] if you're white. If I protect my property I'll be hauled before an irate magistrate who will put me in jail and throw away the key," farmers were happy to pay *Mapogo* to "do the dirty work" for them.¹⁴ Impressed by the fact that the *Mapogo* leadership was "well-dressed, articulate and drove smart cars", farmers entered into new alliances, going out on crime-fighting patrols but also drinking tea together.¹⁵

More generally, *Sepogo* appealed to all who considered themselves "parents", which specifically referred to those community members who had gone through *bodika*, initiation school. Ritchken notes a vigilante organisation in Bushbuckridge in the late 1980s, the Sofasonke Civic Union, which had as its specific aim the imposition of "generational and school-based authority" (1995: 368). In a similar vein, the Concerned Parents Group in a village called Mahwelereng forged an alliance with *Mapogo*.¹⁶ "Since *Mapogo* is there, our children are not beating us up any more," one parent said. Many teachers also approved of *Mapogo* and its methods, and the organisation set a special membership rate for schools.

The parents' main concern, as we will see in the next section, was that democracy would allow their children to rule them. This fear was particularly strong among two of the most vulnerable groups in society, women and pensioners. In spite of its patriarchal ideology and its leader's utterances — "I expect my wife to make my bed and cook my food" — many more women than men supported *Mapogo*: 68 per cent as against 49 per cent.¹⁷ As a mother of six said, "All women used to be afraid to go out in the evenings, with naughty boys rampaging and raving and raping, but since the *Mapogos* came, they are fine."

The elderly who received government pensions held similar sentiments. These pensions, however modest, are one of the main sources of income in the area and thus make pensioners vulnerable to attacks from their children, grandchildren and strangers alike. *Mapogo* offered special joining rates for pensioners, and 76 per cent of people over fifty years of age who were interviewed approved of the organisation, stating that “finally we sleep again at night”.

South Africa’s most notorious vigilante organisation, then, was much more a moral community that rallied the local elite around a common ideology than a vicious mob of hoodlums run wild (Connor 1998). With a women’s league and a youth league, it started to attract members of various backgrounds, even if they all belonged to the rural elite. At *Mapogo*’s first anniversary, when it changed its name from “Business Shield” to “Business and Community Shield”, President for Life Magolego donated a sports kit to a local soccer club, emphasising that “soccer breeds discipline, which is what we want for the youth in this area”.¹⁸ The questions that arise next concern the substance of this ideology that appealed so strongly to chiefs, teachers, white farmers and old ladies alike, and the government’s response to its challenges.

“How Can a Criminal have Rights?”

How could it be that the 1990s in South Africa provoked “grandmothers to incite murder, and middle-class family men to don balaclavas and whip their own workers”? That “people, decent and law-abiding by their own estimation”, imagined they had the “right to terrorise a newly legitimised South Africa in the name of justice?”.¹⁹ Part of the answer lies in South Africa’s rampant crime rates and the ANC’s refusal to make security a central concern.²⁰ Many *Mapogo* members joined the organisation out of sheer exasperation, from direct experience of violent crime and the police’s incapacity to deal with it. However, *Mapogo*’s appeal also lay in its offer of an alternative perspective on post-Apartheid citizenship, one with far greater appeal to larger segments of the rural population than the egalitarian constitutionalist discourse so popular with the country’s political leaders. What was the type of citizenship propagated by *Mapogo*, how was it invoked to challenge the state, and how did the state respond?

A central challenge posed by *Mapogo* to the state was that it too was framed in terms of rights. This was very much in line with post-Apartheid and, arguably, world politics of the time, replacing political discourse with rights talk, leading (for example) from negotiations on South Africa’s future to a fully fledged interim constitution rather than a Memorandum of Understanding (Glendon 1991). *Mapogo* was all about criticising the post-Apartheid constitutional ideology in its own terminology. At branch openings, for instance, *Mapogo* members would often charge, “Where have you ever seen a criminal with rights?” and “Rights are destroying the nation” (Montana 1999). Magolego infuriated the

authorities with statements such as “human rights for criminals is a *sjambok* on the buttocks” and “the Bill of Rights and Duties which has been distributed to schools without consulting us as parents is a piece of dirt and teaches our children lawlessness.”

One element of the critique was that the constitution was too European and not in line with African tradition. According to one businessman, “The law of the land is fancy and decorated. But whoever thought they could solve crime without corporal punishment is wrong. That is for First World countries; they must come down to the Third World.” The ANC, from this point of view, had imported a western-style constitution without regard for local sentiments. Over and over again Magolego emphasised that *Mapogo* dealt with criminals in the traditional African way.

The alternative values that *Mapogo* propagated were not only about corporal punishment but also about respect for the elderly, for hierarchy and for traditional culture in general. Meetings were often held in the chief’s kraal, followed “traditional” procedures, and invoked values that resonated forcefully with the most important factions in rural areas where initiation schools also instilled “seniority of birth, obedience of authority, respect of elders, loyalty to the chief, obedience to the father, and disobedience to the mother” (Ritchken 1995: 339). The constitution, even if it recognised culture and traditional leadership, was felt to be antithetical to these values.²¹ In the words of *Mapogo* leader Magolego once again:

There are many cultures in South Africa and they must all have their place. We have our African way of doing things. Everybody should be allowed to do their own thing. But what you see now is that one culture, the English, is put on top of others. And in comes pornography, these gay and lesbian rights which are against our culture, and people kissing and rolling over each other on television.²²

Of course, this particular conceptualisation of respect for cultural difference is oddly reminiscent of the rhetoric of Apartheid, with its legal enshrining of cultural difference, recognising “customary” law and “traditional” leadership (Chanock 1989). Generally, one can propose that the form that the vigilante organisation took, the values it invoked and its methods of punishment were inspired as much by Apartheid as by the pre-colonial era. The term “vigilante organisation”, used self-referentially by *Mapogo* members, was reserved for right-wing, government-sponsored fighting units in the 1980s (Haysom 1986). Values such as respect for traditional authority were central to the Apartheid government, which ruled in 1957 legislation that a chief was entitled to the “loyalty, respect and obedience of all the blacks resident in his area”.²³ While early studies on the Bapedi indicate that “corporal punishment seems to have been administered”, the leather-tongued *sjambok* was the instrument with which a series of governors and administrators sought to keep Africans in their place, its usage sanctioned by law (Harries 1929: 110).

Mapogo ideology, then, referred to values that were deemed traditional and yet had been official government policy for most of the twentieth century. Most *Mapogo* supporters genuinely felt that they held the moral high ground and that they were decent, hard-working citizens doing work that ought to be the government's. One *Mapogo* member explained it this way: "The thing that shocks me is that I'm degraded to the level where I actually have to go out and lynch these people. I don't want to have to degrade myself like that. It's the government's job".²⁴ *Mapogo* members were fervent in underlining that the organisation did not intend an outright denial of the state, but rather proposed imagining an alternative: "If our African style can be applied, you will find that there's humanity inside, there's warmth, a sense of building a nation. We don't destroy." (ibid.) In addition to going out on patrol to catch and harass suspected criminals, many *Mapogo* branches were involved in local-level dispute resolution. In Zebediela, for instance, I witnessed senior *Mapogo* members sitting down for hours to mediate — in "customary" fashion — between a husband and a wife experiencing marriage troubles.

How then did the state in all its manifestations react to this open challenge? The response has, primarily, been ambivalent, with competing stances reflecting sympathy for *Mapogo*'s cause, a desire to uphold the law and political expediency.²⁵ From the inception of the organisation there was frequent interaction between the provincial government and the *Mapogo* executive. One of *Mapogo*'s first demonstrations was a march to the provincial capital and in August 1997 the provincial MEC for Safety and Security signed an agreement with *Mapogo* stating that the organisation would work closely with the South African Police Service "as responsible members of the community" and not assault or harass people after having made a citizens' arrest. This marked the beginning of a dual strategy in which Magolego or other *Mapogo* leaders would reach agreement with the government, only to continue the *sjambokking* sessions and open critique of ANC politics afterwards.

The government's desire to work with *Mapogo* can be explained in part by the fact that many individual politicians and administrators agreed both with the organisation's depiction of the police service as corrupt, inefficient and tarnished by Apartheid, and with *Mapogo*'s insistence on an "African way of doing things". Provincial MEC for Safety and Security said: "Corporal punishment is indeed the African way. And people have difficulties stopping it, like in the Eastern Cape where magistrates continue applying it in defiance of a ministerial circular."²⁶ There are numerous examples of policemen and government officials joining *Mapogo* and of politicians speaking at *Mapogo* rallies. The province of Mpumalanga even recruited *Mapogo* to protect its legislature. General sympathy for the organisation, covert or overt, was also fuelled by the feeling that *Mapogo* was in many ways exactly the type of participatory body that the government sought to promote via its Community Policing Forums.

Yet, with hundreds of *Mapogo* members involved in serious assault and outright killings, often with much more serious weapons than *sjamboks*, the government could not remain inactive. Between 1996 and 2000 over three hundred *Mapogo* foot soldiers were arrested and faced charges such as murder, assault and attempted murder (Sekhonyane and Louw 2002). A high-profile case that dragged on from 1998 to 2000 concerned the involvement of John Magolego and eleven other executive members in killings in 1997. Aided by the best lawyers in the country and accompanied by scores of *Mapogo* supporters to each trial, they secured an acquittal in August 2000 on the basis of conflicting eye-witness reports, after exactly the type of drawn-out, technical court case so often criticised by the organisation. Another case, dealing with the 1999 murder of a *Mapogo* branch chairman, had not yet been closed in 2004.²⁷

It seemed that the government's stance towards *Mapogo*, and even more so that of the ANC, depended more on its charismatic leader's political allegiances than on its criminal activities. In 1999, when Magolego joined the United Democratic Movement (UDM) — after his 1994 flirtation with the National Party — the government arrested thirty-five *Mapogo* members, many of whom already faced charges (Lubisi 1999). Many local observers noted the connection between these two events, especially when the government ceased this clampdown once Magolego withdrew his UDM candidacy and joined the ANC in 2003.²⁸ Since Magolego's change of party-political affiliation and — as some argue — *Mapogo*'s movement “into the mainstream”, relations have become less tense, even though Magolego has not stopped advocating corporal punishment.

A large part of the organisation's appeal, in sum, lay in the alternative mode of citizenship that it envisaged and the way in which it articulated this vision in its dealings with the state. Nevertheless, in order to understand why this appeal was heeded so strongly we must not only look at the organisation's relations with the post-Apartheid state, but also at the political dynamics at play in the area where *Mapogo* originated, Sekhukhune.

Keeping the Youth in Place

Mapogo took off so successfully in Sekhukhune because the organisation fed on, and strengthened, local political dynamics, in particular the omnipresent rift between youth and elders (Von Schnitzler *et al.* 2001). Anti-Apartheid protest of the 1980s took many different forms in South Africa; in Sekhukhune the youth revolt was directed against the elderly in general and chiefs in particular (Van Kessel 2000). The infamous 1986 Sekhukhune youth revolt, which propelled this marginal area onto the front pages of national newspapers, saw many youngsters *toyitoyi-ing* (dancing in protest) to the chiefs' palaces, their fists in the air, chanting “*pansi magoši pans!*” (down with the chiefs). Youngsters stoned chiefs, murdered dozens of people suspected of witchcraft, especially elderly women, and burned down royal palaces. “Comrades wake up, remake the world. Our

parents' hour has passed away. This hour belongs to the youth," chanted members of the Brooklyn Youth Organisation (Ritchken 1995: 312).

Delius has described vividly how this revolution constituted a reversal of the old order, with youngsters appropriating central indicators of authority, such as dispensing justice, organising initiation schools and pointing out witches (Delius 1996). Even if not all youngsters agreed with the comrades' call to do away with the chiefs, challenging these demands was virtually impossible at the time. The youth revolt was thus not only about contesting Apartheid, but also about redefining the social hierarchy, and represented the youth's attempt to replace chieftainship as the legitimate "guardian of the nation" (Ritchken 1995: 324). "Youth", in this context, is above all a special social category, not unlike "*puer*" in Latin. It indicates those who should not be in power, often those community members who have not been to initiation school. In this sense, it is quite possible for a fifty-year-old with grey hair to be considered "a youngster" by the tribal elders.

The rift caused by this reversal of roles still stretched wide by the time *Mapogo* was founded over a decade later. Parents, elders and chiefs still had a strong fear of "the youth taking over", a fear that was not entirely unfounded. In Sekhukhune, as in the rest of South Africa, the majority of the population is under thirty years of age. They constitute an enormous reservoir of bored youngsters, marked by the lack of education during the anti-Apartheid struggle, faced with joblessness and empowered by the human rights rhetoric of the post-Apartheid era. Many of the leading figures in the youth revolt of 1986 had gone on to be elected to government, provoking elders to speak scornfully of "those young boys driving around in Mercedes Benzes all of a sudden, thinking that they are the boss here". The youth in schools drew on human rights discourse to challenge their over-worked teachers and many youngsters did indeed turn to criminal activities, ranging from highjacking cars in Johannesburg and reworking them in Sekhukhune "chop shops" to stealing their grandparents' pensions.

To many older members of society, *Mapogo* represented a vehicle for putting this protest-minded, frustrated and empowered generation back in their place. As Delius has put it, the vigilante organisation could only "operate in this context because there's a strong sense that things are getting out of control, and that something has to be done" (Von Schnitzler *et al.* 2001). Over and over again, the parents we spoke with emphasised their appreciation for this dimension of *Mapogo's* activities. "Maybe you don't know how we used to be terrorised by these youngsters; it is only since *Mapogo* came that there is peace and stability," one man explained. In the words of another, "Don't you see, we have many naughty young boys here who would steal, rape and kill? In the old days we could beat them at the chiefs' palace, but when that stopped our children just started to control us."

Unsurprisingly, then, Sekhukhune youngsters were much less appreciative of the organisation than their parents. Generally, a narrow majority of 56 per cent of the people interviewed states that they “like the organisation”, but, in the case of people under twenty years of age, this proportion goes down to 32 per cent. Many youngsters indicated that “we as the youth are victims of *Mapogo*, they discriminate against us” or “the whole *Mapogo* thing is really something for our parents”. Some youthful Sekhukhune criminals even formed counter-organisations (which proved less successful) with names like *Retla jang* (what will we eat?), *Maputla a Mapogo* (youth against Mapogo) and *Sekhukhuni se Bona ke Sebataladi* (mischief will always be found out).²⁹

Age	Likes Mapogo (%)	Does not like Mapogo
Under 20	32	68
20-30	48	52
30-40	46	54
40-50	59	41
50-60	77	23
60 +	75	25
General	56	44

1999 Survey by author of opinions on *Mapogo*, n = 547

The way in which simple crime fighting became entangled with long-standing grievances between youngsters and their parents is illustrated by the case of the Mphanama battles in August 1997. In this dusty outpost a mob of seventy *Mapogo* members killed a young criminal, Fanie Makola, by shooting him in the head. In revenge the local youth, many of who had benefited from Makola's activities, stoned and burned the shops and houses of *Mapogo* members and demanded R50,000 in compensation. *Mapogo*, in turn, retaliated by assaulting another youngster and burning more houses. About fifty youngsters fled to the nearby mountains, where they remained until a governmental task team was sent out to mediate between the youth and the vigilante organisation.

Notes taken at the meeting that was subsequently held at the chiefs' palace shed light on some of the grievances on each side.³⁰ The youngsters' representative complained that, “According to tribal rules the youth is not even allowed to speak. Youngsters are arrested just because they are talking and our parents disturb us all the time.” A *Mapogo* member, in contrast, protested that, “The youth are in control and parents are afraid to talk.” He went on, “The youth have fined us R50,000 but we are against this.” A teacher explained how all his colleagues, fearing for their lives, had been forced to seek refuge in *Mapogo*-owned stores, while education in the area came to a standstill. Interestingly, one of the many grievances put forward by the youth was that *Mapogo* never presented its constitution to them. While governmental intervention brought an

end to the fighting in Mphanama, similar clashes would take place throughout Sekhukhune in the years that followed.

Transformations

In the vocabulary of this volume's introduction, *Mapogo* operated on the frontier of the South African state and offered a particularly forceful challenge to its central ideologies and institutions. A discussion of the vigilante organisation and the reasons why it could become so popular in Sekhukhune inevitably contains a discussion of the post-Apartheid state, and of the way in which its citizens imagine it.

In its initial manifestations in the area described here, *Mapogo* could be read as above all an impassioned critique of the state's inability to deal with the one subject that concerned its citizens most, and most directly: the rampant crime threatening the fabric of social life. It was an open critique: the *sjambokking* sessions nearly always took place in broad daylight, with as many spectators as possible and frequent invitations to the media to attend. While *Mapogo* members took it upon themselves to catch and question criminals, they would subsequently dump the bleeding bodies on the doorsteps of the local police office, crying out for action and, ultimately, justice. The message to the state, repeated over and over again, was clearly: "We are doing the government's job."

At a deeper level, *Mapogo* initially embodied a challenge to the egalitarian and constitutionalist discourse that has been a central feature of South Africa's first democratic government. The new constitution was drawn up with an unprecedented degree of public participation and the government made it a central priority to inform people of the rights that they had finally obtained. This was achieved by sponsoring special television and radio programs, commissioning cartoons in newspapers and handing out ten million multilingual copies of the constitution to schoolchildren so that they could read it to their illiterate parents. In reaction to the message that "we are now equal", *Mapogo*'s members — those who had a great deal to lose in this new dispensation — reiterated the rhetoric of patriarchy, privilege and custom that had been the law during their lifetimes.

As it rose to power in Sekhukhune, *Mapogo* was thus, in essence, a political movement, even if it seldom explicitly manifested as such; it deliberately operated in the public sphere and sought to change the power relations of the times. The government's reactions to the organisation depended almost entirely on whether the message was explicitly politicised. As long as *Mapogo*'s executive tacitly or overtly supported the ANC, the organisation could count on a remarkable degree of tolerance. However, as soon as *Mapogo* threatened to join the UDM, as discussed above, government reaction was fast and furious.

While it is outside the scope of this article to reflect on the changes that *Mapogo* has undergone since its early years, one development is particularly relevant to

the theme of reading *Mapogo* as a quest for an alternative form of citizenship: the organisation's gradual transformation from a rural protest movement to a private security firm, and the related loss of its political agenda, over the past years. This, it seems, is not because of the reasons predicted by Premier Ramathodi when he told me in 1999 that "the organisation is an aberration, a passing show. It is only there because our democratic institutions are young and weak, and won't last as they grow stronger."³¹ Crime is still high on the popular agenda, and state institutions still have difficulties in dealing with it. Rather, it seems that the hope that the post-Apartheid state would come to include *Mapogo's* image of alternative citizenship has evaporated. While *Mapogo's* founders felt, in 1997, that the state ought to guarantee its citizens safety and security, they had come to realise by 2004 that they could not count on this.

Notes

1. The name is derived from the Sepedi expression "*Ge ole nkwe, nna ke lepogo ka moka re mathamaga*": If you are a leopard, I am a tiger. We are all equal in strength. Amuphadi 1997.
2. See *Sowetan*, 27 November 1996 "Businessmen 'assault' 20 burglars" by K. Mamaila, pp 4; *Sowetan* 26 August 1997 "Vigilante group changes its name — Mapogo a Mathamaga now calls itself a community shield" by K. Mamaila, pp4; *Northern Province Times* 29 November 1996 "Vigilantes — police warn that they 'cannot be a law unto themselves'" pp 1; *Herald* 29 August 1997 "Businessmen establish anti-crime organisation in the North" pp 3; Montana 1999.
3. Exceptions to this lack of attention are Minnaar 2001; *NRC Handelsblad* 18 September 1999 "De Wet van de Bullepees" by Oomen and De Bruyne, pp 6; Sekhonyane 2002; Von Schnitzler *et al.* 2001.
4. Having visited Sekhukhune numerous times before 1998, I lived in the area from October 1998 until November 1999 to conduct PhD research on the position of traditional leadership and customary law in the area. (Oomen 2004) '*Bapedi*' is the self-referential term for the people who live in Bopedi, which corresponds roughly with the former homeland of Lebowa in what is presently called Limpopo and was at the time the Northern Province.
5. 30 September 1999, Ngwaabe *Mapogo* Mass Meeting.
6. Interview J. Magolego, 8 December 1998.
7. *Mapogo* Memorandum to the MEC of Safety and Security, 26 September 1996, on file at the Provincial Department of Safety and Security, Pietersburg.
8. *Northern Province Times* November 1996 "Police warn against Pagad-style organisations" pp 15.
9. Internal Memorandum, Provincial Department of Safety and Security, August 1997.
10. *Business Day* 10 October 1998 "Provinces adopt conflicting stances on Mapogo vigilantes" *Sunday Times* 2 August 1998 "When fighting crime depends on a vigilante" by C. Barron; Montana 1999, p. 6.
11. Rates 2003. These are practically the same as they were in 1996, although they have been standardised since then.
12. *Electronic Mail & Guardian* 1 May 2000 "Vigilante group faces split" by E. Wa ka Ngobeni., <http://www.mg.co.za/mg/news/2000may/19may-vigilante.html>
13. Sekhonyane, Case Study, argues that it is difficult to make a causal link between the decrease in crime and vigilante activity. Respondents in the majority of the interviews held in 1998 and 1999 as well as (confidential) records at the Provincial Department of Safety and Security do note a relationship between the rise of *Mapogo* and the decrease of criminal activity in Sekhukhune.

14. *Saturday Star* 2 May 1998 "Lashing out at crime", pp 6.
15. *Sunday Times* 2 August 1998 "When fighting crime depends on a vigilante" by C. Barron, p. 6.
16. *Northern Province Times* November 1996 "Police warn against Pagad-style organisations" pp 15.
17. N = 547. of which 52 per cent female, 48 per cent; 5 per cent under 20, 28 per cent 20-30, 22 per cent 30-40, 19 per cent 40-50, 14 per cent 50-60 and 12 per cent 60 +; 20% no education, 21 per cent up to standard 6, 42 per cent standard 6-10, 7 per cent matric, 7 per cent technicon, 3 per cent university; only 27 per cent formally employed; This is more or less representative of the Sekhukhune *adult* population as a whole. The interviews were conducted by Tsepo Phasha, Patson Phala and myself or by two of us, usually in Sepedi, in personal, face-to-face interviews based on a Sepedi questionnaire with 45 closed and open questions, which would typically take 1 to 2 hours and have been translated to English by the interviewers. The data used derive from uni-, bi- and multivariate analysis in SPSS.
18. *Northern Province Times* 29 August 1997 "President of Mapogo denies rumours about murders" by R. Phala, pp 9.
19. *Electronic Mail & Guardian* 29 May 2000 "Rough justice", by D. Aitkenhead. <http://www.mg.co.za/mg/news/2000may2/29may-vigilante.html>
20. South African Press Association *Financial Times* 5 June 2003 "Mapogo owes its existence to govt: TAU". Information/Global Newswire.
21. The Constitution Act 108/1996 has a provision granting communities the right to enjoy their culture, and two sections recognising the "status, institution and role of traditional leadership".
22. Interview, 8 December 1998.
23. Proclamation 110 of 1957, *Regulations prescribing the duties, powers, privileges and conditions of service of chiefs and headmen* (as amended, for the Northern Province)
24. *Electronic Mail & Guardian* 29 May 2000 "Rough justice", by D. Aitkenhead, <http://www.mg.co.za/mg/news/2000may2/29may-vigilante.html>
25. *Business Day* 10 October 1998 "Provinces adopt conflicting stances on Mapogo vigilantes".
26. Interview S. Nthai, 14 January 1999.
27. *Financial Mail* 9 April 2004 "Embattled Mapogo moves into the mainstream" by P. Honey, pp 26.
28. *Financial Mail* 9 April 2004 "Embattled Mapogo moves into the mainstream" by P. Honey, pp 26.
29. *Electronic Mail & Guardian* 1 May 2000 "Vigilante group faces split" by E. Wa ka Ngobeni, <http://www.mg.co.za/mg/news/2000may1/9may-vigilante.html>
30. This account was reconstructed from reports at the Ministry of Safety and Security (from which the quotes are taken) and discussions with Mphanama residents a year after these events.
31. Interview N. Ramathlodi, Moria, 4 April 1999.

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