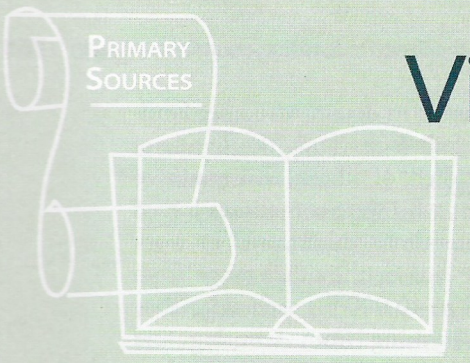

Viewpoints 25.2

African Views of the Scramble for Africa

In the mid-nineteenth century King Moshoeshoe (1786?–1870) gathered together his own Sotho people and Mfecane refugees in what is now Lesotho. He also allowed Christian missionaries to convert his people. In the 1850s encroachment by Afrikaners from the Orange Free State upon his lands precipitated a war. In 1868, after Moshoeshoe appealed to Queen Victoria and diamonds had been discovered, Great Britain made Basutoland a British protectorate, protecting the country from further Afrikaner attacks. Moshoeshoe is widely considered one of the great African rulers and diplomats because he played off the British against the Afrikaners to maintain Sotho independence. An example of his diplomatic maneuvers is illustrated in the following letter where he asks Sir George Grey, governor of the Cape Colony from 1854 to 1861, to mediate between the Sotho and the Afrikaners. Grey frequently acted as an arbitrator between Africans and European settlers.

When King Lobengula (see page 763) realized the Rudd Concession threatened Ndebele independence, he sent two envoys to Cape Town and London in January–February 1889 to meet with Queen Victoria and seek her advice. On April 26, 1889, he wrote to the queen, repudiating the Rudd Concession.

King Moshoeshoe, Letter to Sir George Grey

"Thaba Bosigo, June 1858

I know . . . you have heard with pain of the horrors occasioned by the war [between the Orange Free State and myself], at present suspended in the hopes that peace may be restored by Your Excellency's mediation.

Allow me, however, to bring to your remembrance the following circumstances: About twenty-five years ago my knowledge of the White men and their laws was very limited. I knew merely that mighty nations existed, and among them was the English. These, the blacks who were acquainted with them, praised for their justice. Unfortunately it was not with the English Government that my first intercourse with the whites commenced. People who had come from the Colony first presented themselves to us, they called themselves Boers. I thought all white men were honest. Some of these Boers asked permission to live upon our borders. I . . . believe[d] they would live with me as my own people lived, that is, looking to me as to a father and a friend. . . .

We were at peace for a time. In the commencement of the present year (1858) my people living near farmers received orders to remove from their places. . . . We tried to keep all quiet, but the Boers went further . . . in troubling the Basutos and threatening war. . . . Still I tried to avert war. . . . I had given orders that no farms should be burnt, and my orders were obeyed till my people saw village after village burnt off, and the corn destroyed, they then carried destruction among the enemy's homes. . . . My bands were getting ready to make a descent upon them, when the Boers . . . request[ed] . . . a cessation of hostilities. I knew what misery I should bring upon the country by leaving the Basutos to ravage the Boer places, and therefore I have agreed. . . . I cannot say that I do so with the consent of my people, for many of those who suffered by the enemy were anxious to recover their losses.

If they have remained quiet, it has been owing to my persuasions and my promises that they might have good hope of justice—Your Excellency having consented to act as arbitrator between the Boers and Basutos.

Moshesh, Chief of the Basutos"

King Lobengula, Letter to Queen Victoria

"*To Her Majesty Queen Victoria,*

Some time ago a party of men came into my country, the principal one appearing to be a man called Rudd. They asked me for a place to dig for gold, and said they would give me certain things for the right to do so. I told them to bring what they would give and I would show them what I would give. A document was written and presented to me for signature. I asked what it contained, and was told that in it were my words and the words of those men. I put my hand to it. About three months afterwards I heard from other sources that I had given by that document the right to all the minerals of my country. I called a meeting of my Indunas [chiefs] and also of the white men and demanded a copy of the document. It was proved to me that I had signed away the mineral rights of my whole country to Rudd and his friends.

I have since had a meeting of my Indunas and they will not recognize the paper, as it contains neither my words nor the words of those who got it from me.

From Lobengula"

Sources: George McCall Theal, ed., *Basutoland Records.* Vol. 2: *1853–1861* (Cape Town: W. A. Richards & Sons, Government Printers, 1883), pp. 384–388; Edmund D. Morel, *The Black Man's Burden* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1920), pp. 34–35.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What one word in Moshoeshoe's letter best describes his impression of the English?
2. Do either of these documents suggest Africans were treated fairly in their dealings with Europeans during the scramble for Africa? Why or why not?
3. European imperialists partly justified their invasion of Africa by saying they were ridding the continent of bloodthirsty tyrants. Based on these readings, do either Moshoeshoe or Lobengula appear to fit that description? Why or why not?