

## Reviews

Gill, Stephen J. **A Short history of Lesotho.** Publisher: Museum and Archives, Morija 1993. Six chapters 266 pp.

### **Innocent Modó\***

A short history of Lesotho is a bold attempt at giving idiographic account of Lesotho from its formative stages to its formative stages to its becoming an autonomous nation within the committee of nations. The book is a comprehensive review of Lesotho history and is anything but short. It is made up of six chapters each of which can stand on its own and even constitute a separate book. The undercurrent running through the six chapters is really that of a people in search of identity - identity as a nation from the time of the great Moshoeshoe, to political identity as of 1993.

Chapter one describes the settling people of the Southern African region. It started with a general account of the stone age people dating back to 10,000 years ago when people of the world were hunters and gatherers. The writer suggested environmental crisis as the dynamic 'gem' which propelled the world out of the stone age period. As stone age culture started giving way to communitiues based upon herding, farming, metal work and trading, communications improved and towns started to develop. This civilisation came late to Southern Africa. The earliest known group of migrants, the San - a hunter gatherr group was joined by other groups most prominent of whom was the Khoi from Northern Botswana whose migration could be credited to the herding skill learnt from the Nilotic people of Sudan. The author's handling of San's transition to herding culture on the Riet River in the Southern Free State during 17th Century was too conjectural. But it is noteworthy that the Khoi who remained along the lower Vaal River (i.e. The Korral played a significant role also in the history of Southern Sotho of Orange Free State and Lesotho during the early nineteenth century especially

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\* Dr. Innocent Modó is a Senior Lecturer, Social Anthropology/Sociology Department, National University of Lesotho.

as they were joined by other Khoi and other people of mixed blood from South Western Cape who possessed horses and guns.

It is revealing to know of the now eclipsed San who were then, the dominant group in Southern Africa and who had interacted for centuries with the immigrant Southern Sotho especially of Fokeng, Taung and Rubung even before the formation of Sotho kingdom under Moshoeshe in the 19th Century. The sotho through their mixed economy of farming, herding and hunting coupled with different intrigues, curtailed and controlled much of the land previously under the San. This account of sotho political dominance however, appears to have come too early in the chapter. It would have blended more appropriately from page 21 at the sub-section **Southern Sotho settlement**. It is good that the author gave due credit to archaeology for giving concrete evidence of the stone age people of Southern Africa. Archaeological evidence from iron age sites located within the past 25 years showed that the first iron age people settled about 2000AD along coastal areas or low lying regions of the Eastern half of Southern Africa - It is also revealing that the iron age settlement was selectively based on the geology of the community. Because of this a large part of the interior was not settled in, until 900 and 1400 AD. The authors descriptive ingenuity had enabled him to bring into sequence otherwise scattered events of the time. For example, the iron age people continues to migrate in small groups into the region and from this amalgam of peoples, the Sotho and Nguni speaking people emerged between 900 and 1200 AD.

The Author however left a yawning gap in his description of the myth of the migration of Bantu speaking people to Southern Africa. What is obvious is that Bantu languages are spoken from Cameroon through East Africa along the Great Lakes to Southern Africa including Lesotho (Moko, 1998:65). The archaeological evidence of the Bantu settlement in South Africa around 900 AD as exemplified by the changes in material culture - the strong house techniques, location of villages on hill top and pottery styles is overwhelming. The Author also succeeded in spite of the conflicting myths of Sotho origin, to paint a mixed picture of the emergent Sotho of Lesotho beginning from 1500AD when the Koena clan established a settlement at Ntsoana-Tsatsi near modern day Vrede. Other clans that joined present day Lesotho include Fokeng, Nguni, San, Tlokoa

and Khatla. The ingenuity of Moshoeshoe a pupil of Mohlomi especially his boldness and carefulness made such amalgam feasible.

Chapter two is an ethnography of Lesotho including their world view. It clearly showed that Sotho people were heterogeneous, coming from a large number of Sotho and Ngumi clans thus dispelling the old idea that they were homogenous. Their settlement pattern discussed was based on archaeological records and evidence from early written records. The nature of their houses and the siting for example corbelled houses on ridges, overlooking river valley; were environmental and based on availability of clean water, adequate grazing areas for cattle and good soil for grain production. The elongated houses found at a site in the Vrede district of Northern Free State identified with the Tlokoa, and favoured above the earlier Ntsoana-Tsatsi type were indicative of the growing disparity between Chiefs and the ordinary folk. Pottery styles and their motifs appeared to be varying from community to community thus showing sophistication and change.

On the material culture of Sotho-craft work, artefacts, from 1600-1850 (documented by Casalis 1861:132) the author neither described their nature nor their use. He did not also indicate the type of music, poetry and games that he said, showed aspects of Sotho aesthetics. The integrative nature of life of the Southern Sotho was however vividly highlighted especially in the areas of Economy, Politics and Religion. The society knew what it wanted, and so iron works were priced highly so, so much trading took place between Sotho and societies that had iron and copper. The economy which revolved round the chieftaincy and the homestead blossomed as a result of this trade and led to further expansion and development of Southern Sotho. The contributions of women in this development and stability of the homestead were immense. They cultivated the grains that sustained the men in politics and trade, and milked the cows that provided part of the proteinous diet. In addition they made pottery; plastered houses, collected wild vegetables and brewed beer. Indeed the women kept the society stable and orderly through providing the daily needs of the citizenry. In addition to the authors highlighting of the division of labour in the Sotho patriarchy as gender based, he showed the importance of the extended family as the building block of the society and the centre of religious ancestral

worship. It was also important to note that women were regarded as minors and could therefore not take part in the important affairs of governance of possession of wealth. This belief militates against women even as proprietress of small scale businesses today (Maqutu 1993; ). In spite of this shortcomings, the Sotho socio-political structure; together with the Khotla and Pitso, the numerous feasts, the initiation lodges, makes up the enduring cultural legacies passed on from generation to generation. The author succeeded in bringing the entire world view of the sotho to the fore. For example the role of Molimo and Balimo ancestors, the different institutions; the extended family system and its functions; the traditional doctors, the cultural education system, the existing mechanism as support system and the legal means of punishing the guilty are all entrenched in the sotho social system.

However the cultural tradition of a nursing mother having to breast feed her baby for about two years during which time the husband was free to meet the wife of an age mate or any other chosen women in a relationship of *setsoalle*; left much to be desired and probably laid the foundation of sexual immorality that presently pervades the sotho society (Maqutu 1992:132, 135). The description of death (*lefu*) was very shallow and therefore unsatisfactory. This culturally rich ceremony full of symbolism was glossed over. Explanations were not given for many of the rituals and actions for example; why was the body removed through a hole in the house? Why was the body placed in a fetal position sitting up? The author probably assumed that readers are already conversant with the culture. Also the inclusion of heroic figures and role models such as Mokheseng and Mohlomi (page 59) in chapter 2, was a poor decision. It would have suitably served as the introduction to chapter 3 which to me is the chapter that actually deals with heroic figures.

Chapter 3 deals with the birth and development of Lesotho as a nation. The author gives a very good background history of Letlama, i.e. the great King Moshoeshe. The King had a humble beginning as a son of a minor chief of the Moloteli arm of Koena. Though ill-tempered, his early contact with the great philosopher and teacher Mohlomi completely transformed his life. This new character was what he needed to go through the **Lifaqane** (turbulent periods) which started with the process of nation building in Northern Natal among the

Nguni, coupled with drought and famine; Moshoeshoe's defeat in 1822 by the Nkwane of Matuoane who invaded the Caledonia River Valley. The authors narrative style is captivating and his imagery is vivid. One is made to see through Moshoeshoe's predicament especially this time that the Southern Sotho chiefs bluntly refused to come together to form a formidable force. The tactical relocation of Moshoeshoe from Butha-Buthe to the mountainous Thaba-Bosiu after having been attacked by a sotho group Tlokong of Manthatise in 1824, was the survival strategy needed at that material time. Moshoeshoe's ingenuity was further made manifest through his ability to fight Matusane's Nkwane in self-defence and to send raiders to; for example Transkei to captured Thembu cattle for the purpose of increasing his wealth and attracting more subjects into his emerging kingdom. The author captured vividly Moshoeshoe's anxieties, especially with the invigorated Kora, who were joined by those fleeing from the expanding sphere of Dutch settlement and domination at the cape, and also the threat from Mzilikazi with his powerful Ndebele nation army, who Moshoeshoe gave gifts to turn him away. Little wonder that Moshoeshoe was very quick in responding to the Paris Evangelical Mission Society (PEMS) with the hope that it would help to stop all aggression from invading forces, enable him to obtain weapons and force his enemies to change their course. The author was able to show how the coming of the new Christian mission coincided with the cessation of hostility from Ndebele and Kora and led to the development of a new era of improved population and commerce for the Basotho nation.

Moshoeshoe's greatest hours of temptation came with the Boer's forceful reoccupation of the Highveld following British annexation of Eastern Cape. The Boers eventual dispossession of Kaffir, the Xhosa and some part of Sotho land in spite of Moshoeshoe's treaty with the British is remarkable. However, his foresight to make treaty with the British eventually prevented his Thaba-Bosiu headquarters from being stormed by the Boer during the two sotho-Boer wars. All these information were conveyed by the author in a simple and straight forward manner that portrays his ingenuity.

Chapter 4, which like other previous chapters stands separate, (though a segment of a whole life process of the Basotho) is the beginning of a new era - the colonial era. Here the contending powers of the new king Letsie and his brothers Molapo

and Masopha mattered very little especially with colonial laws that undermined Chieftancy power and cultural institutions coming into being. The authors idiographic narrative ingenuity made manifest the daily social processes that make for a progressive nation. The highlights include the transition from subsistence agriculture to commercial farming especially with the introduction of steel plough, the stepped-up trading between Lesotho and foreign companies and the establishment of about 70 trading firms in Lesotho including Frasers. With Lesotho men migrating en masse to Southern African firms, their women's role in sustaining agriculture became evident (Kishindo 1992:30). Lesotho's prosperity climaxed in their acquisition of guns which of course led to the "War of Guns" and eventual direct British administration which turned out to be the indirect British rule policy, King Moshoeshoe had for long been looking forward to. The struggle for power by the royal sons of Moshoeshoe, the church conversions and existing suspicion between the churches and the traditional authorities, the emerging richness of the commoners due to increased commercial activities and the dependence of the paramount chief on the Colonial Governor for his continued relevance are events the author ably coated in idiographic excellence. International prominence of Lesotho shown through their inclusion in the formation of African Native National Congress (ANC), the booming grains trade and works of literacy genre Thomas Mofolo were also highlighted by the author. Except in a few instances of the use of wrong words like 'delimited' for 'delineated' (p.115) or wrong quotations like Psalm 683 on page 149, the chapter stands out as excellent using idiographic narrative techniques.

Chapter 5 is the epitome of the dynamics of change in full manifestation. The highlights include the controversial figure and decisions of Paramount Chief Griffith, the struggle between Roman Catholic and Evangelical churches for supremacy, the rise of the educated class and their struggle for power as exemplified in the formation of Basotho Progressive Association (BPA), the commoners league, the changing nature of the constitutional council, pressure for constitutional reforms and the advocacy and defense of Lesotho autonomy within the committee of nations. The chapter shows that Lesotho is responsive to global reactions to the first and second world wars especially the call on colonised nations to self determination. The country is also responsive to the Apartheid events taking place within their next door neighbours. Little wonder that young

educated elite like Mokhehle formed Basotho Congress Party (BCP) with the focus on self rule or independence.

Chapter six trays the contemporary Lesotho political class and the complexities occasioned by the involvement of churches in the political life of the people. The patriotic humble beginning of Mokhehle who sacrificed his High School job for BCP, in sharp contrast to the dictatorial seizure of power by the defeated Catholic Church-backed Prime Minister Jonathan are all re-occurring features of present day Lesotho politics. The author uses the techniques of suspense to sustain and heighten the flow of events. Based on what has been happening since independence (1966) the new Prime-Minister elected in March 1993 appears to face a herculian task of leading the country into soul searching among his country men and into relationship with democratic South Africa Co-operation and possible merger of the two countries. The undercurrent running through the six chapters is that of a nation still in the process of formation.

In conclusion the book is itself an enduring legacy of Sotho culture and unfolding development. The book is highly recommended for the academic course - Lesotho heritage; that could be taught in Social Anthropology or History Department.

**References**

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