

# Socio-Economic Structure and Traditional Authorities in Lesotho

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the socio-economic structure of the peripheral state Lesotho, sovereign since 1966 and a former British colony surrounded by South Africa. It is part of a larger study of the development policy and mechanism of exploitation in Lesotho.

South Africa is commonly looked upon as a sub-imperialist nation exploiting the neighbouring countries. Aggregate figures of trade relations show extreme, and growing dominance.<sup>1</sup> To look upon southern Africa as a system of hierarchically ordained nations may be useful for some purposes,<sup>2</sup> but explains little of the actual mechanisms of exploitation and possibilities for change in these mechanisms. For this purpose we have to know more about both the expansion of capital and trends in the socio-economic structure. According to the economic plan of the Republic of South Africa<sup>3</sup>, the two legs South African economic growth stands on are cheap foreign capital and cheap migrant labour. Eighty per cent of South African production was controlled by foreign capital in 1973 according to the President of the Afrikaans Handels-Instituut. Around 500,000 migrant workers are recruited every year through the migrant labour system.<sup>4</sup>

We shall firstly look at the present socio-economic structure in Lesotho, secondly summarize changes over time in that structure, and thirdly make a few comments on the traditional authorities in Lesotho and their changing roles from colonial to neo-colonial times.

## TODAY'S LABOUR RESERVE SOCIETY

Lesotho today is a labour reserve society with a minor agricultural sector. A majority of the people have long been in contact with the industrialized sector. Their habits are shaped by wage employment in South Africa and the consumption of manufactured goods produced outside their home country. In spite of the association of the people with the industrialized sector, the structure of society in Lesotho resembles that of most Third World countries including those dependent on raw material production, both mineral and agricultural.

An underdeveloped country is commonly believed to be a society dominated by traditional agriculture. This is thought to be the case also in so-called labour reserves. In Lesotho's five-year plan dated 1970, 85 per cent of the population is described as peasants although it is well known that nearly 200,000 persons work in South Africa at any given time.<sup>5</sup> The population census shows that there are four dependents for every income earner. A recent study of agricultural households shows that 80 per cent of the total income of all households comes from off-farm production (60 per cent from South Africa and 20 per cent from Lesotho). Less than 10 per cent of the income of all 'farm' households comes from agricultural production in the studied area of Thaba Bosiu, which is not an extreme migration area. Another 10 to 15 per cent came from commercial wool, mohair and cattle production.

TABLE 4A  
SOURCES OF INCOME IN THE AREA OF THABA BOSIU<sup>6</sup>

All farms	Crops	Livestock	Misc.	Migrant labour	Other off-farm	Total
%	6	13	1	59	21	100

#### THE GRAIN EXPORT SOCIETY

If this picture of a society almost totally dependent on off-farm production (80 per cent in peasant areas) is correct, it differs totally from the descriptions of the former colony of Basutoland seventy five years ago. What is now Lesotho used to be a very efficient agricultural economy, both self-reliant for food and certain handicraft products and integrated into the money economy of southern Africa through large exports of wheat, maize and other agricultural products as well as through consumption of manufactured goods.<sup>7</sup>

The country seems to have accumulated wealth throughout the nineteenth century despite periods of war and drought. Although the country was annexed by Britain in 1870 and lost its best agricultural areas to the Boers in the Orange Free State, it recovered quickly, and in 1872 exported 100,000 *muids* of grain (wheat, mealies and kaffir-corn). In 1837, the Sotho of Basutoland (which then stretched west of the Caledon river) 'had grain stored for four to eight years', and in 1844 'white farmers flocked' to them to buy grain.

The Basotho cultivators benefited from a long experience of agricultural production in an area which is the best irrigated region of South Africa's interior and they managed during the whole of the nineteenth century to compete successfully with inexperienced Boer farmers in the dryer areas. The Basotho responded quickly to new techniques and new crops like wheat and maize.

As long as South Africa was not integrated into the world economy, it was easy for the Lesotho people to compete. An observer at the end of the nineteenth century wrote: 'The establishment of the railway has profoundly modified the economic situation of Basutoland. It produces less and finds no outlet for its products. Its normal markets, Kimberly and the Free State, purchase Australian and colonial wheat. Money is scarce, so scarce that the Government has had to receive tax in kind'.

It should be noted, however, that this gloomy picture is somewhat contradicted by the evidence given before the Transvaal Labour Commission in 1903. A missionary, a store-keeper and the resident Commissioner of Basutoland, spoke of intense agricultural activity and high production.

'There is no country that produces anything like the cereals it [Lesotho] does: every man is a farmer, and all arable land is under cultivation. It supplies all the actual food requirements to the natives. I think it is, taken all round, the greatest granary of South Africa. Speaking from memory again, after a good season, perhaps 120,000 bags of wheat and a great quantity of wool is exported.'<sup>8</sup>

Basutoland might have had a boom during the Boer War. They provided not only grain but also horses and guns to both sides. Little has been written about this so we can only make guestimates.

Although men and women from Basutoland were already working in South Africa in the 1870s and 1880s, it seems as if it was only during our century that the socio-economic structure came to be dominated by migrant labour. People went on short-term contracts; they were able to choose to work near their home and they were well paid in relation to the cost of living at a much higher rate per hour than today.

## THE IRON WORKERS AND PEASANTS OF THE PRE-1830S

Why was it that the Sotho society was able to absorb innovations and accumulate wealth so successfully during the nineteenth century and yet be so increasingly exploited during the twentieth century? The changes with regard to the traditional authorities and in the socio-economic structure took place gradually and an exact explanation will not be given here. We have, however, tried to go back to the period before the famous king Mosheshue, who gathered together scattered Sotho groups and united them into a nation which resisted white rule until 1870.

Records concerning Sotho society before 1830, when Mosheshue invited missionaries from the Paris Evangelical Mission, are scarce. Anthropological and archeological sources give us some information about the economy and social structure of the Sotho society.

Language determined who belonged to the Sotho people. There is a tendency to confine the definition to those who live in Lesotho, but king Mosheshue, who created Lesotho a century ago, was of the same stock and spoke the same language (albeit a different dialect), as the Tswana of Botswana and the Pedi of South Africa. In 1965, there were five million Sotho speakers scattered throughout southern Africa of whom one million were in Lesotho. One hundred and fifty years ago they were concentrated between the Limpopo and Orange rivers, north and west of the Drakensberg.

Iron was worked in what is today southern Transvaal from A.D. 1000 and in the now Orange Free State from between A.D. 700 and 800. Whether the Sotho iron workers arrived in the area in which smelting was already practised is uncertain. The Sotho speakers originally came from the north and there are some indications, although no conclusive evidence, of the time of their arrival.

In the region of today's Lesotho there was, however, no iron ore. Instead cattle-keeping and the production of grain were predominant.

The following examples of the size of the Sotho towns indicate that they were fairly large and much larger than any of the white-settler towns:

Kadtshwene 13,000–16,000 inhabitants (1820)

Masweu 10,000–12,000 inhabitants (1820)

Taung 1,300–1,400 (1824) and 20,000 (1836)

Kgwakge (1824) covered a large area and was larger than any South African town known to the eye-witness in question, a European missionary.

Phitshane, on the Molopo river, had a population of 'upwards of 20,000' (1824)

Thaba Nchu 9,000 (1839)

Each large settlement was a capital in which an independent chief lived with most of his followers, and each was surrounded by cattle-posts. Small groups of hunters, customers of the chiefs and leading families, occupied areas distant from the capital and cattle-posts. Many of the settlements were on hill-tops, exactly like the capital of Mosheshue at Thaba Bosiu described by the missionary Casalis between 1830 and 1870.

The cultivated fields spread out around the capital, sometimes covering 'several hundred acres', 'at least twenty miles in circumference' in the valley below. During the sowing and reaping seasons families could camp in the fields, but their huts might be burned if they failed to return to the capital when the work in hand was done.

Sotho society was not only diversified economically. We can also anticipate a diversified social structure. The chief and the families surrounding him ranked high in the society. There were groups of soldiers, cultivators, herders, miners, skilled craftsmen, hunters and traders. They depended largely on game for meat, using the cattle for milk and transport. Pack-oxen were constantly used for bringing in grain from the fields (some of which lay twenty five miles from the owner's home) and for transporting

articles of trade. The Sotho were distinguished from their neighbours not only by their skill as craftsmen (they refused to buy knives from European traders as being not as good as their own), but also by the fact that most of them lived in large permanent stone-built settlements rather than scattered homesteads.

They grew sorghum and sweet reed, kidney beans, pumpkins, sweet melon and gourds. Maize was probably unknown until 1822 and was only later on introduced on a large scale. In exchange for hides of wild animals, some of the Sotho speakers purchased grain from other people living in neighbouring regions. Hemp and tobacco were used both for consumption and barter.

In 1843, David Livingstone reported from the Transvaal: 'The manufacture of iron seems to have been carried on here uninterruptedly from a very remote period.' Travelling eastwards through the Transvaal, he came to 'Banalaka', and reported: 'they smelt iron, copper and tin and in the manufacture of ornaments know how to mix the tin and copper so as to form an amalgam. Their country abounds in ores.' He also described how between 20,000 and 30,000 hides were tanned and sold to China.

No wonder that Livingstone's reports spread quickly and led to a rapid inflow of capital and men from Europe and to the British Government's orders to colonize the country. It seems fair to assume that the mineral deposits were not discovered by the Europeans but taken over directly from the Sotho. The Sotho were probably also consulted and later employed as miners, a profession they knew well.

We know little about who ranked high in the social structure. Trade was monopolized by the chiefs. None of the Sotho societies were organized in the form of military kingdoms similar to those of the Zulu and Swazi. Order was assured rather through negotiation and compromise, and early travellers noted that the freedom to criticize authority in public assembly was much greater than was permitted in Europe.

Cleavages were traditionally expressed in terms of opposing lineages, but they were not necessarily considered as opposition. Much of traditional history is concerned with tracing divisions and showing the links between the ruling lineages of existing chiefdoms, but there is little known about the actual underlying causes of fission.

The independence of a chief was asserted by a leader moving away with his followers and establishing himself in a territory which might or might not overlap with that claimed by the chief whom he left. He also asserted the independence of his court, *kgotla*, no cases being sent on appeal to any other authority. Independence did not mean, however, that the chiefdoms were isolated from each other. Emissaries were exchanged, trade relations existed and the chiefs often met.

#### AUTHORITY DURING COLONIAL TIMES

In Basutoland, like in Bechuanaland and Swaziland, the British colonial policy in annexing the country as a colony was to delegate most of the administration and decision-making at the local level to the chiefs, the missions and the traders. The title of chief existed before colonization, nor were missionaries and traders new. But the functions of these three groups changed. The chiefs were made tax-collectors in addition to their old roles of judges and distributors of land. The greatest change, however, was an increase in the number of chiefs, who became wage-employed for life as well as colonial bureaucrats.

For a long period the missions held the supreme right to decide on the organization and content of education, health and other services. The white traders had the exclusive right to buy the produce of Basutoland and to import manufactured goods into the colony. They were also responsible for the roads in Basutoland. Many Basotho worked for the traders to keep the roads in condition.

In contrast to the chiefs in South Africa, those of Basutoland came to serve the colonial power and represent it. In many areas of South Africa, the chiefs were discriminated against and the British

magistrates took over their functions as tax-collectors and judges; in the Cape Colony, for example, common land ownership was abolished during a period of twenty to thirty years around 1900.<sup>9</sup> In Basutoland, the chiefs were looked upon as traitors, whereas in certain areas of South Africa they were on the same side as the rest of the people in relation to the colonial power.<sup>10</sup>

British colonial policy in Basutoland has often been described as *laissez-faire*. According to some sources, this meant freedom of choice for the people. The fact is probably that the élite groups, chiefs, traders and missionaries, had quite a high degree of freedom in relation to London. As long as these élite groups served the interests of the colonial power, few British administrators were needed and they only played a minor role.

It was in the British interest that its colony of Basutoland should cost nothing, serve British capital in South Africa and provide labour where it was most needed, i.e. in mining. As long as the élite groups of Basutoland served these interests and assumed the necessary state functions at the ideological, economic and political levels, the British administration did not intervene. During the 1930s, however, this was no longer the case. Tax collection did not function and labour was too scarce in the territory for the migration offices to recruit.

A British commission, known as the Pim Commission, was sent to Basutoland to investigate the state of affairs. Pim reported in 1935 that there was a complete lack of any kind of government. What he might have meant was that the traditional authorities, which Britain had used for ruling, no longer had the same control as before. In Tanzania (then Tanganyika) and Nigeria, a reorganization had been carried out long before, and Pim suggested reforms for building up a bureaucracy to take over from the chiefs.<sup>11</sup>

As we have discussed already, Basutoland had changed from a peasant society, dependent on land distribution by the chiefs, to a society of freely moving wage earners. New offices for tax collection were set up in South Africa, the Sotho were integrated into a pass-law system where the movement of labour was better controlled. The two interests of the British colonial power were met. The chiefs were reduced in number from 1,300 to 122 over a period of eight years and their function as judges was taken over by trained lawyers, who were seldom chiefs.

However, the few chiefs who were left still held a certain amount of power. They were still the richest land holders in most villages and had indirect access to the financial sources of the colony, even if tax collection had been successfully taken over by educated Sothos and British employees who did not issue from the chiefs. The common belief that the chiefs in Basutoland, and in today's Lesotho, base their power on land distribution has to be reconsidered since only a few Sotho get their income from land.

#### AUTHORITY DURING NEO-COLONIAL TIMES

The neo-colonial practice of building up an élite to serve the interests of capital and government in the centre had already started before independence. Centralization within Lesotho, and a certain decentralization from the colonial power to the authorities in Lesotho, has continued from the 1930s until today. The government in Lesotho has strengthened itself at the ideological, economical and political levels and centralized all decision-making processes in the capital, and more recently to a junta.

Changes in the structure of authority and in the socio-economic structure in Lesotho resemble that in many other African countries. An African bourgeoisie grew up within the context of an essentially externally-oriented economy. The educational system played a major role in the process of recruitment. During the 1960s, Britain's dominant position in Lesotho was gradually reduced as the influence of South Africa, the United States, Israel and the Scandinavian countries, partly via UN assistance, grew.

Almost no effort was made during the post-independence years to change the socio-economic structure within the country and meet the basic needs of the majority of the people, nor were any changes

made in the basic relationship with overseas capital. Instead, the government, dominated by *status quo* interests (chiefs, former British administrators and Catholic missionaries), took no decisions on internal affairs and used all its time to increase the inflow of aid in order to improve infrastructural services and thereby expand capital intensive production and Africanize the state bureaucracy.

Some inflow of capital did occur: in agriculture, tractor-hire services were established, fertilizers and high-yield crops supplied. But the new technology neither increased productivity nor production. The result was no increase in employment within the country. Tourism expanded enormously from 3,000 to 150,000 visitors per year in the three years from 1970 to 1973, but no tax was paid in accordance with an agreement signed between the government and the foreign tourist companies.

The Africanization of the civil service expanded the African professional class, but did not come anywhere near meeting the demands of employment at this level since the output of secondary school graduates had risen so rapidly by the late 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s that competition for jobs was greatly intensified.

The new Sotho bureaucrats started investing their savings in share-cropping and small businesses. They were authorized to give orders to the chiefs on what land to use for industry, winter-crops or soil conservation.

The impact of foreign capital investment upon the Lesotho society as a whole was very limited, but it was of crucial importance to the Basotho élite which had taken over the state after independence. Financing the state sector depended very heavily upon growing aid subsidies from the United States and Europe and on the customs union agreement with South Africa in 1970, which after the decrease of grants-in-aid from Britain was the largest single financial source of government revenue.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have found that South Africa was not an empty country when the Boers and the British settled in the area. The Sotho ancestors of today's poverty-stricken migrant labour reserve were the iron workers and craftsmen ruling the interior of South Africa until the middle of the nineteenth century. This fact is censored in South African history books and known only by oral tradition in today's Lesotho.

The Sotho of Lesotho were producing grain both for their own consumption and for export to the rest of southern Africa until the beginning of the twentieth century. Subsistence agriculture has been of minor importance since the end of the nineteenth century. This is unknown to the development agencies aiding Lesotho to 'build up' agricultural production after independence.

These conclusions are important if we want to characterize the mechanisms of exploitation and assess the government's development policy and the social, economic and political base of the government in Lesotho.

### Notes and References

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