# THE STATE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN LESOTHO

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## Introduction

'Should Lesotho be incorporated into the "new" South Africa?' is a much debated question throughout Lesotho. It is actually an old question, but its currency today stems from the political transformation of South Africa. Proponents point to Lesotho's economic dependence on South Africa, and tenuous existence as a state since its birth in the 19th century, to suggest that citizens might be better off if Lesotho became part of South Africa. Responses inevitably incorporate nationalist pride, and a recounting of Lesotho's history of successful resistance, first against colonial settlers, and later against incorporation into South Africa and apartheid. But proponents answer that the South African nemesis is crumbling and ask what, therefore, there is to resist? Consensus is rare, for the question is really a rhetorical summation of the real concerns of the country's inhabitants: what is the future of the Lesotho state, and hence, of its citizens?; what is it to be Basotho?; what is the significance of Lesotho's history to contemporary political and economic circumstances?

In short, the popular debate is about how Basotho identify themselves collectively. It is a debate that poses a particular problem for enquiry, namely, the relationship between the state and national identity. I see in the debate a crisis of legitimacy for the state in respect to its citizens, particularly amongst the rural populace. On the one hand, there is a popular perception of a correspondence, in the past, between the state, civil society and national identity that is based on a history which can be read to have produced the Basotho nation with an homogenous population and a common language, and a state which upheld inclusive and indigenous concepts of government and economic practice. On the other hand, there is a popular recognition of a divergence between identification with Lesotho and the ability of the state to meet the needs of the people. Migrant work in South Africa is an integral part of the population's existence. The price of this, however,

has been treatment as outsiders, however, and subjection to the inequities of apartheid. While that treatment has helped delineate a boundary of identity as Basotho, the people depend on South Africa for the material means to sustain homes in Lesotho, and hence, their cultural heritage.

I address this uncertainty in the popular imagination by outlining recent interventions of the state, to show that the state's efforts to impose its authority on the populace has created considerable political tension in the country. Then I examine why the state has to make such an effort, to show that it is wrestling with an historical process which has led to a rupture between state and nation. The discussion focuses on chieftainship. I argue that chieftainship has been a key referent in the people's efforts to sustain a national identity. In conclusion, I suggest that chieftainship is a 'modern' institution despite being judged as archaic by successive governments, and in that lies the crisis facing the state today.

## State Interventions: The Indications of Crisis

There have been marked political and economic changes within Lesotho since the early 1980s. Seen independently of each other, these changes illustrate a familiar pattern of efforts by poor countries to develop their economies. Seen in relation to each other, they indicate a sudden spate of state intervention in the lives of the predominantly rural population.

Lesotho has received substantial foreign aid since it gained independence in 1966, particularly in the last decade (Ferguson 1990). This assistance has been underwritten by considerable political interest. Apart from the longstanding presence of the embassies and aid organisations of the USA and western European countries, the early 1980s saw the establishment of a Russian embassy, amidst sparring between Taiwan and China which led to increased business investment by the former and establishment of an embassy by the latter. In 1986 a military coup dislodged the Basotho National Party government which had governed the country since 1966. An economic blockade of the country by South Africa prior to the coup, and the speedy recognition of the new government by the American and British governments, suggest collusion to create a new basis for interaction with Lesotho. The coup was followed, four years later, by the forced abdication of the king, and appointment of his son in his place. The military regime's proclaimed promises to re-establish civil rule were eventually honoured in March 1993 when general elections were held for the first time since 1970. The Basotho Congress Party (BCP) which originated in, and which has long espoused, the Pan Africanist Congress ideology of the 1950s, won a landslide victory (Khaketla 1971; Leeman 1985).

The 1980s also saw substantial economic intervention in the rural areas. The notable development has been the Lesotho Highlands Water Project (LHWP), a multi-billion rand scheme involving a number of multi-national consortia, to build five dams in the interior and a water tunnel into the Vaal river system. The aim is to sell water and electricity to South Africa. The plans were drawn up in the early 1980s, but they were only implemented after the 1986 coup. Indirectly linked to this scheme are government efforts to re-structure the agricultural economy. The plan is to develop arable farming and intensive livestock production in the lowlands, and, in the mountain region, extensive livestock production based on, but incorporating modifications to the heritage of communal use of grassland (The Lesotho National Livestock Development Task Force [LNLDTF] 1990; Swallow et al. 1987). This intervention has been promoted in rural communities through Village Development Councils (VDC) (LNLDTF 1990). VDCs were created in their current form in the 1970s as a means for rural residents to participate in local government, and to provide access for district government officials into rural affairs (Thoahlane 1984).

The *de facto* concentration of livestock production in the mountain region follows the creation of a new district, Thaba Tseka, in the interior in 1978, around a town of the same name which had become an administrative centre for the government and a base for a livestock 'development' project (Ferguson 1990: 75). In the early 1980s, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) began to support the re-structuring of the livestock economy. A Range Management Division was established and it continues to supervise the creation of Range Management Areas (RMAs). RMAs are demarcated areas in which resident stock owners have sole right to grazing land, subject to management controls prescribed by American and Basotho officials (Lawry 1986; Swallow et al. 1987; Weaver n.d.).

This programme coincided with efforts by the South African government to improve relations with Lesotho. In spite of ruptures such as the South African Defence force raid on African National Congress refugees in Maseru in 1982, common ground was reached on agricultural questions. One result was a South African government funded project, co-ordinated with USAID officials, to devise a conservation policy for the mountain region. A particular aim of this project was to minimise soil erosion in the alpine valleys, in the interest of preventing silting of the proposed LHWP dam reservoirs (Bainbridge et al. 1991).

Remarkable features of these interventions are their magnitude and their concentration in such a short period of time. This poses the questions: why the sudden impetus, and to what end? I propose that the answers indicate a crisis for the state in two respects. First, they indicate that the state is being driven by changes in South Africa's international relations. Secondly, they indicate a

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struggle within the state over how to accommodate these changes.

On the one hand, the economic interventions are a development from government and donor agency policies of the 1970s. There was a calculated decision by Lebuoa Jonathan's BNP government to proclaim an anti-apartheid stance in the late 1960s (Hirschmann 1979). The state gained international legitimacy and substantial foreign aid, but popular support within the country declined in the face of widescale patronage which restricted the distribution of aid, and limited access to jobs that arose out of aid funding, to BNP supporters. Seen in this light, the recent interventions reflect not only Lesotho's acceptance of its dependence on external support for survival. They also indicate consolidation of that experience by both the state and donor agencies, and demands by the latter for more ambitious and larger initiatives. In other words, there has been a subtle change in Lesotho's relationship with donors. Donor agencies will continue to provide support, but they have demanded that Lesotho acknowledge the need to align itself economically to South Africa. Acquiescence to these demands has been fostered by the threat of decline in extensive aid, following international acceptance of South Africa. The Russian embassy in Maseru has closed, for example, while the USA does not intend to replace its departed ambassador.

On the other hand, the changes in the relationship between Lesotho and its donors require the state to re-constitute its relationship with its citizens if it is to exploit the potential of tourism, and its water, wool and mohair resources. In order to fulfil these demands, the state must exercise control over the populace, not just through patronage, but also through direct intervention into local methods of rural resource use. The ramifications within local society of recent interventions towards this end are profound. The RMA programme, for example, imposes changes to the transhumance system that ignore locally inspired changes, reduce chiefs' authority over use of grazing land, and challenge local methods of grassland management (Quinlan 1995).

If the military coup signalled donors' impatience with the BNP government's failure to recognise shifts in international relations, the 1993 general elections highlighted the subsequent demand for legitimate representation of the state's interventions in the rural areas. This is a speculative point, but that Lesotho exists on terms dictated by more powerful states seems transparently true. The clothing of this new dispensation is akin to the tailoring of the Emperor's new clothes, and that is the problem which the state faces with regard to its relationship with its citizens. Although the state is legitimately represented in the form of the BCP, the magnitude of recent economic interventions in the rural areas threatens the continued acceptance of this representation. Although the state is attempting to re-structure the economy, it is faced with a rural society which binds people more

to chief and locality than to the government, and livelihoods which link people more to South African towns than to Maseru. Although nationalist sentiment has been expressed in the elections, and propagated by the BCP's Pan Africanist ideology, the grounds for drawing political boundaries in these terms are being swept away by South Africa's political transformation. Therefore, popular support for the BCP reflects, perhaps, more a yearning for concordance between the state and national identity than commitment to the party's manifesto and support for the interventions.

This does not mean that the BCP government is unlikely to retain a country to govern. The events of the last decade indicate the opposite, although the current ineptitude of the government highlights the quandary in which it finds itself, trying both to satisfy the donor agency and to meet the concerns of the populace. The BCP government has inherited a situation in which it has little chance of re-constituting the state in the image desired by itself or by the populace. The reasons for this lie not only in its subordination to donor countries and to South Africa. They also lie in the way these demands exacerbate the disjunction between the state and national identity. This is putting the case too bluntly, but at the core of the problem is the BCP's difficulty in finding in nationalist sentiments the means to cultivate popular support for the state. And that difficulty stems not only from current circumstances, but also from the history of the country and the cultural heritage of the people.

## The State and National Identity

Lesotho's tenuous historical existence underlies the current crisis of legitimacy of the state. Lesotho has existed as a separate geo-political entity for little more than 150 years. It arose out of Moshoeshoe's efforts to secure the survival of his Mokoteli chiefdom during the depredations of the *lifaqane* (a period of upheaval during the early 19th century, amidst growth of the Zulu state), and to maintain a place for African people on the highveld in the face of colonial incursion. After many conflicts with other chiefdoms, and against colonial forces, Moshoeshoe and his followers acquiesced to the geo-political framework demanded by Britain and the emergent Afrikaaner republics (Eldredge 1993; Kimble 1978; Lagden 1909; Thompson 1975). 'Basutoland' was gradually circumscribed as a territory. Final agreement on boundaries was reached in 1870, and in 1884, following a period of nominal rule by the Cape Colony, the territory and its inhabitants became a British Protectorate (Thompson 1975).

Lesotho came into being as a colonial state, but its existence has always been in question. As a result of colonial policies to integrate the people into the economy of South Africa, political incorporation was considered as early as the time of Union, and reverberated through to the 1960s when Basotho sought political

independence from Britain (Spence 1968: 1-26). Although Lesotho took its place within the global framework of nation states in 1966, its economy was almost totally dependent on external sources, and remains so today. Although rural residents continue to make considerable investments in arable farming, like their forebears, they rely on migrant labour wage incomes to sustain rural livelihoods (Murray 1981; Quinlan 1984; Spiegel 1979).

'Dependency', in short, has been central to the iconography of Lesotho, and has constituted the basic concept in every description and analysis of the society for the last twenty five years (e.g. Eldredge 1993; Murray 1981; Southall and Petlane 1995; Wallman 1969). Much political capital has been made out of it as the strategy of Lebuoa Jonathan's BNP government demonstrated. The events of the last decade indicate that it has been formally incorporated into donor and government planning of Lesotho's future. But what is of interest here is the use of 'dependency' within Lesotho to define the nation. And there are grounds for arguing that the state and the rural populace differ in the way they have drawn boundaries to delineate the national identity.

Although 'dependency' has been useful for politicians and civil servants as a means to attract economic support for themselves, it provides few means for rural residents to escape the trap of continued reliance upon, but limited access to external sources of survival. Simply put, the rural people cannot afford to delineate a national identity as bluntly as politicians do, for they have to contend with life at the interface between the ideal of maintaining a rural home and the reality of dependence on jobs in South Africa. It must be acknowledged, however, that the state could not draw such boundaries if 'dependency', real and imagined, was not woven into the social and cultural fabric of society in Lesotho. The difference is that the state has focused on the history which produced Lesotho as a subordinate but distinct geo-political entity, but the rural populace has focused on the history which forced people to share a life at the margins of regional society.

This apparent dichotomy between the state and the rural population provides a clue to the understanding of why the BCP government is unlikely to find the means to cultivate popular support for the state in nationalist sentiments of its citizens. The government has to contend with a population which has constructed a national identity that is based more on a struggle to maintain homes in Lesotho than on the existence of Lesotho as a politically independent state. The questions which follow are: what is the historical basis for such a dichotomy, and how did it evolve?

I argue that the seeds were sown in the 19th century when Moshoeshoe created a model of authority based on the notion of patrilineal descent, and in the form of a hierarchy of chiefs - the chieftainship. This model was the antithesis of colonial

concepts of statehood. It was based on a conception of the society as a network of familial bonds between people, of which the relationship between chief and subject was a representation, rather than on territorial demarcations of society and separation of political office from social relationships. This difference of vision was obscured, however, as a result of collusion between colonial officials and Moshoeshoe's heirs. Before the colonial government had established a commanding presence throughout the country, Moshoeshoe's heirs were able to elaborate his model, and to entrench the chieftainship as the institution of the state. Subsequently, the chieftainship was retained as the colonial government established itself in the territory, but it was gradually re-fashioned to suit colonial precepts of the state, and subordinated to colonial institutions of government.

Before describing this historical process, two caveats need to be stated. Firstly, I am not suggesting that there was a simple process of bifurcation of Basotho and colonial imagination of the nation. Secondly, I am not suggesting that the chieftainship, as a product of history, now stands outside of, and in opposition to the state. My argument is that the chieftainship was the central institution of the state until the early 20th century, and is still the core of rural government. This is to say that it has been the object of a wide range of ideas about political authority, and has been subject to modifications and re-positioning within the state. For instance, it was codified in the Laws of Lerotholi which were written in the early 1900s (Hamnett 1975: 38). The authority of chiefs was modified by colonial government interventions during the 1930s and '40s, and later by the BNP government (Ashton 1952: 186-192; Chieftainship Act, No 22 of 1968). Furthermore, the BCP has consistently sought to dispense with the chieftainship (Leeman 1985, vol 3: 1) - an aspiration that is well known throughout the rural areas.

The critical factor is that the chieftainship has been a nexus of political conflict throughout the history of Lesotho. The conflict has been, and still is, about the appropriate social order for the prevailing circumstances. This is to say, it is a struggle over the principles - the ideas about social order - which have coherency and form in the chieftainship, but which have been challenged in the course of Lesotho's genesis, growth as a colonial state, and existence as an independent state. On the one hand, the continued existence of the chieftainship shows that the social principles which underlie its constitution have been retained. On the other hand, as the current state attempts to impose its authority, using ideas of social order inherited from the colonial regime and borrowed from the international context of modern nation-states, it confronts the chieftainship not as a seemingly archaic obstacle, though that is often the reified sentiment of government officials, but a heritage of ideas which the rural populace have used and re-interpreted in different ways to define their place in their world. This is the set of dynamics which are examined here.

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The Basotho nation evolved from the incorporation of many Sotho and Nguni-speaking refugees into the Mokoteli chiefdom under Moshoeshoe (Ambrose and Brutsch 1991: 85, 99, 107; Lagden 1909: 41-44). The identity, 'Basotho', was as much a product of interaction between Moshoeshoe and colonial settlers, however, as it was of interaction between himself and other chiefdoms. It emerged as Moshoeshoe established a secure position for his following in relation to other chiefdoms, and as the threat of internecine conflict declined in the face of the greater threat of colonial intrusions.

The conflict of the 1820s, stimulated by developments such as expansion of the Zulu state and the passage of an offshoot, Mzilikazi's 'Matabele', across the highveld, led to the dispersal and re-constitution of many chiefdoms (Lye and Murray 1980: 30-39, 45-50). In the heat of these conflicts many groups were identified by their respective leaders, but on the basis of the nomenclature of previous identities. Oral records which traced male ancestors back to a single legendary ancestor, like branches of a tree to a trunk, provided a formal representation of human society as a process of fission marked by male primogeniture. Chiefs were the contemporary individual markers of this process. Through them people could explain the existence of different groups as products of fission amongst the male descendants of the legendary ancestor. Reference to the genealogies of chiefs also provided a formal means to determine the affinity of one group with another. Those groups whose chiefs shared a common ancestor were in principle part of a broader imaginary group. This broader affinity was summarised in the use of totemic categorisations which correlated the familial model of society with known, and long forgotten but imagined, clan affiliations.

The indigenous conception of history and society was thrown into disarray, however, by political developments in the 19th century. Formal identities in terms of totem and clan names did not necessarily signify a distinct political identity and independence. Moshoeshoe, for example, paid tribute during the 1820s to more powerful chiefdoms such as the Ngwane and the Zulu and, at one stage, even acknowledged himself to be a vassal of Matioane, the chief of the Ngwane (Thompson 1975: 44-52). As Moshoeshoe secured freedom for independent action, he forged alliances with other chiefdoms such as those of Moroka and Moorosi, which were identified by the totems of their leaders, Barolong and BaPhuthing respectively (Murray 1992). Although Moorosi generally retained an independent status, Moshoeshoe came to regard Moroka as a subordinate chief within his sphere of control (Thompson 1975: 126-132; Murray 1992: 15). In contrast, Moshoeshoe's totem, Bakoena, was superseded rapidly by the epithet Basotho, but became the basis for a distinction of status within the polity. It marked Moshoeshoe's propensity to appoint agnates as subordinate chiefs, and the eventual dominance of these agnates *vis-à-vis* other non-related chiefs in the hierarchy (Thompson 1975: 176-180). In short, a chiefdom's political identity,

and the terminology used to express it, changed as its fortunes changed.

Moshoeshoe tried to build a following on the same basis as other leaders through use of the patrilineal model. To be a Mosotho was to acknowledge Moshoeshoe as the patriarch of a society structured in familial terms. Applied in a context of colonial intervention, however, the model could be no more than a premise for construction of a collective identity. As a pre-colonial construct, the model was not designed to promote political groupings on a large scale. Once people were congregated together, there was little that Moshoeshoe could do to prevent the subordinate chiefs from leading their followings independently. Each chief was patriarch to his own followers and, therefore, committed to extending his own authority as opposed to subordinating it to other chiefs (Thompson 1975: 257-258, 283). In the context of external threats, however, the model's ideological emphasis on familial bonds was a means to unite people to face those threats, thereby enabling Moshoeshoe to demarcate a political boundary between his followers and colonial settlers. For example, Mopeli Mokhachane, an agnate of Moshoeshoe, reportedly led his own following during the 1850s, but, in the face of colonial domination, he joined Moshoeshoe and accepted a status as a subordinate chief within the Basotho fold (Quinlan 1988). Therefore, were it not for the common threat of denial of access to land, Moshoeshoe might not have been able to maintain his supremacy *vis-à-vis* his subordinates. Indeed, his son Molapo seceded from his polity in 1869, following an offer from the Free State government to define the area which he controlled as a reserve under his authority (Thompson 1975: 289-290).

Despite such tribulations, colonists' acknowledgement of Moshoeshoe as a leader ensured that the model was kept alive for subsequent use in organising a government for Basutoland, and for construction of a national identity. The critical factor in this history was the influence of the colonial forces who translated Moshoeshoe's model into their terms, and, in the process, used it to distinguish the status of different Sotho chiefdoms. Moshoeshoe's success in building up a large following, and in combining both diplomacy and military prowess, secured him status as "majestic", a "stately" ruler" with "absolute" authority over a distinct "Basutoo"/"Basuto"/"Basutu" "tribe", and commensurate dispensation as acknowledged ruler of 'Basutoland' (Orpen 1979: 10-12; Thompson 1975: 59, 64, 80, 81, 122, 123).

Other leaders salvaged whatever status they could from the colonial dispensation. Mopeli Mokhachane's career, for example, is a case of desperate collusion with colonial authorities. Following his incorporation into the Basotho polity, he appears to have been in conflict with Moshoeshoe's sons (Damane and Sanders 1975). In 1869, in the face of threats to his status as a chief, he was tempted away from the Basotho polity by the offer of a 'reserve' in Witsiehoek, within the

Orange Free State Republic (Eybers 1919). There, he consolidated his status as a leader by using the Bakoena totem to distinguish his group from others, and to be accepted as a 'tribe' by the colonial officials (Quinlan 1988).

There were also martyrs. Moorosi, for example, who refused to accept colonial domination, was killed during a campaign against his following by a colonial military force (Thompson 1975). There were also subliminal gestures of colonial authority in these events. The award of a large number of Victoria Crosses to individual soldiers involved in the campaign is a case in point (Forsyth Thompson n.d.). It was an act of Imperial largesse to assuage British citizens' and colonists' concerns about the way the 'Basotho' had defied settler aspirations, and managed to secure a separate geo-political status within colonial South Africa (in contrast to the Zulu state and others, whose subjects were ultimately incorporated into territories occupied by colonial settlers).

Such acts may be footnotes to history, but they highlight not only the subtle balancing of power that was part and parcel of Imperialism, but also the novel political conditions which were created for its subjects, African and colonial. The creation of Basutoland, the colonial state, in 1870, established new boundaries within which Moshoeshoe's heirs were relatively free to define the political framework and content. In particular, the territorial circumscription of the Basotho polity, and Imperial support given to Moshoeshoe's heirs to follow in his footsteps, enabled these leaders to achieve a concordance between the state and national identity.

## Creation of Concordance Between the State and National Identity

The minimal colonial presence in Basutoland, coupled with Imperial protection, provided Moshoeshoe's heirs with a secure domain, free from competition by other African groups (Lagden 1909; Mohapeloa 1971: 12-13, 33). Taking Moshoeshoe as founder of the Basotho polity, they constructed a chieftainship to govern the territory. Moshoeshoe's oldest son, Letsie became paramount chief. His three brothers, Molapo, Masupha and Majara, and two of Moshoeshoe's brothers constituted a nucleus of senior chiefs who had the authority to appoint other agnates, advisors and leaders of immigrant groups, as subordinate chiefs whenever circumstance demanded (Hamnett 1975: 26). Furthermore, Moshoeshoe's heirs entrenched the principle of patrilineal descent to determine succession such that the oldest son of any chief would inherit the position of his father.

However, as Hamnett (1975: 27-34) has demonstrated, use of this principle did not lead to a well defined hierarchy of chiefs. On the one hand, the principle

affirmed the lineage structure of authority and formally safeguarded the claim of Moshoeshoe's heirs to superior status, as direct descendants of the founder, Moshoeshoe. On the other hand, it also justified every chief and each succeeding generation of chiefs in acting like lineage founders. Since the younger brothers of the paramount chief had become chiefs, so too other chiefs were empowered to appoint not only their oldest sons as heirs, but also other sons to subordinate positions of authority. Consequently, the hierarchy grew as more and more chiefs were appointed through what was commonly called the 'placing system'. Furthermore, there was a propensity for chiefs in later generations to counter the dissipative effect of this increase in the number of subordinates on their own authority by placing their junior sons as superiors over previously placed chiefs (Hamnett 1975: 33-34).

Hamnett's analysis indicates how "the conceptual unity of the chieftainship in Sotho consciousness" came about and, in turn, how a national identity was constructed (Hamnett 1975: 43). His analysis, nonetheless, over-emphasises structural determinants of consciousness. The implication is that application of the model created a vast political structure which, by its presence and suffusion throughout a finite area, determined a national identity that coincided with the territorial boundaries of Basutoland. In effect, Hamnett presumes that Basotho saw Basutoland through the eyes of the colonial authorities, and proceeded to create the chieftainship on this basis. This is improbable because, as I noted earlier, Moshoeshoe' model for political authority did not recognise territory as a criterion of collective identity. Therefore one must acknowledge that the profusion of chiefs and subsequent suffusion of the institution throughout the territory did not determine a national identity, but expressed a deeper struggle by Basotho to define their world.

Put differently, Moshoeshoe's heirs not only asked how to occupy Basutoland, but also how to re-draw 'Basutoland', the colonial and territorially defined political space, so that it accorded with familiar concepts of political space. Moshoeshoe's model provided an answer to the first question. As the population grew along with a concomitant demand for land on which to survive, Moshoeshoe's heirs appointed subordinate chiefs and despatched them with subjects to establish new settlements in the interior of the country. In answering the second question, a concordance between the state and national identity was engineered.

As Moshoeshoe's heirs placed chiefs to fill up the territorial space, they also changed the relationship between chiefs and between them and their subjects. In the past, Moshoeshoe's chieftainship had been a loose combination of leaders with their own followings and some of his agnates appointed to organise communities, all of whom were struggling to secure access to land and indigenous principles of usufructuary tenure. Once contained within Basutoland, the paramount chief was

the authority over a defined area, and subordinates were dependent on his patronage to become leaders of communities, and to manage use of land. Similarly, chiefs no longer retained their status as leaders primarily through their capability of commanding a popular following. People were dependent on chiefs to gain access to land through the expression of allegiance to particular chiefs and, through them, to the paramount chief. In other words, Basutoland, the colonial construct, was redefined by patronage on a large scale to the extent that the state was the chieftainship.

The construction of the state in this manner created the framework for a national identity. People's access to land through chiefs was reciprocated by the chiefs' dependence on people for their own sustenance. On the one hand, the opportunities to extract services and products in a usufructuary system come from the use of land, rather than directly from control over its allocation. On the other hand, agricultural livelihoods were the mainstay of the people, but not a means to great wealth in the face of regular environmental hazards and a broader socio-economic process of decline in the capacity of agriculture to support the population (Murray 1981). Accordingly, in a general context of relative poverty and economic uncertainty, to be a chief was a means to economic security. The 'placing system' was, therefore, as much a consequence of this context as it was a logical feature of Moshoeshoe's model. The quest for economic security encouraged junior sons of chiefs to seek appointment as chiefs. The placing of agnates over previously placed chiefs was a means to re-affirm the nexus of patronage around the incumbent chief. The consequent proliferation of chiefs not only consolidated the centrality of the chieftainship as the institution of the state, but also ensured that every citizen was bound intimately to it.

The hegemony of the state does not necessarily generate a concordant national identity, but it did in this case because the chieftainship reflected its subjects' conception of social order. As I outlined earlier, society was formally understood in familial terms, and described on the basis of belief in male primogeniture. That conception of society was carried through into life in Basutoland because there never was a sharp rupture in the existence of the Basotho polity. As a result, the chieftainship was an accentuated expression of the type of society which Moshoeshoe had sought to build, which his subjects had endorsed, and which had been retained in popular imagination through resistance to colonial incursion onto the highveld.

This concordance was established in the early days of expansion into the interior of the country by settlement of groups led by leaders appointed by the paramount chief and his brothers. For example, following the 'Gun war' of 1881 - a dispute between the Cape colony government and Basotho - the paramount chief Letsie I granted an ally, Lelingoana Sekonyela, the right to settle with his followers on

land east of the Malibamatso river and north of its junction with the Senqu river. In the 1890s, Letsie's successor, Lerotholi, despatched a brother, Rafolatsane, to settle in the same area, but on land south of the Senqu river near present day Mokhotlong town (Burman 1976: 132-147; Ashton 1952: 200). Both chiefs answered directly to the paramount chief, thus being senior chiefs in the budding chieftainship, with authority to manage settlement in eastern Lesotho.

The placing of these chiefs was not only significant in terms of creating a political structure, but also, as a local explanation shows, in drawing boundaries for a national identity. On the one hand, it is said that Lelingoana was placed as a barrier against possible encroachment by 'Zulus' into Lesotho. This explanation is plausible if one recognises in the term 'Zulu', a general reference to Nguni-speaking people who lived beyond the eastern and southern borders of the country, and to the political context at the time. There was still turmoil in the Cape Colony while Zulu resistance to colonial settlement in Natal had only come to an end recently (Beinart and Bundy 1987). Furthermore, refugees had fled from Natal through the eastern mountain region in the past, during the course of the rise of the Zulu state and subsequent colonial incursions (Heard 1976; Thompson 1975). On the other hand, it is said that Rafolatsane was placed to prevent possible collaboration between Lelingoana and the 'Zulus'. This explanation rests on Lelingoana's heritage. He had been heir to the re-constituted Batlokoa chiefdom which resided in the Cape Colony and from which he had departed, after a succession dispute with his regent, to fight against the colonial forces during the Gun War. Furthermore, during the early 19th century, the Batlokoa had come from Nguni-settled areas in Natal, and had been an enemy of Moshoeshoe before he defeated and dispersed them (Thompson 1975: 40-42).

Perhaps this explanation delineates political identities too sharply, for it is a contemporary explanation of events long ago. It indicates, nonetheless, early efforts to draw political boundaries, and to establish a common identity for the country's inhabitants. The placing of Lelingoana established the presence of the paramount chief in the eastern region, thereby confirming the external boundaries of Lesotho *vis-à-vis* neighbouring states. By establishing a stronger presence in the form of an agnate, Rafolatsane, the paramount chief provided a tangible representation of the new political order. What is striking in the local explanation, and in the creation of a political structure in eastern Lesotho, is the minimal reference to territorial boundaries. They were obviously a consideration, but the emphasis was clearly on clarifying boundaries in terms of political affiliation to leaders rather than in terms of territory.

This emphasis is highlighted by an episode shortly after Lelingoana arrived in the mountain region. The environs of present day Mapholaneng were inhabited by a Makholokoe group, according to present day residents of the village. These people

were under the patronage of chief Joel, an agnate of the paramount chief, who lived in the lowlands. They rejected Lelingoana's authority, an act which led to conflict and ultimately their expulsion from the area. Joel responded by leading an armed force to challenge Lelingoana but never fulfilled the intention. In this case, Lelingoana's formal status as a delegate of the paramount chief carried little weight in his dealings with these people. By rejecting Lelingoana's authority, they distinguished themselves as a group (which is perhaps why they are identified as 'Makholokoe' in the oral record) aligned to a different authority.

Once the political boundary had been drawn, Lelingoana faced a critical challenge. If he acceded to this division he would establish a precedent for others, including ambitious followers, to deny him his status as a chief. There was also the possibility that he would become simply the leader of one of a number of separate groups under different chiefs, which would be tantamount to giving up the opportunity afforded by the paramount chief to become the senior authority in the area. In choosing to eject the Makholokoe group, Lelingoana effectively drew a political boundary in respect to other residents of Basutoland: they would have to express allegiance to him if they wanted to settle in the eastern region. Likewise, Joel's response, irrespective of its failure, confirms this pattern of identification. By choosing a military option, Joel sought to contest Lelingoana's capability to be the patron of settlers in eastern Lesotho.

This form of political identification was subsequently entrenched by the pattern of settlement in the region. As people came to settle, Lelingoana appointed sons as subordinate chiefs and sent them with small followings to establish settlements. Likewise, he allowed a Batloung group to settle in the area under his control, and acknowledged their leader as a chief under his overall authority. The paternalistic character of authority is reflected in village names. For example, Lelingoana's village, Malingoaneng, means literally, 'where Lelingoana's people are'. Likewise, the area where the Batloung settled became known as Khatleli, in reference to the name of the chief of that group. Similarly, changes in village and area names highlight reproduction of this familial pattern of authority. There is, for example, a village which used to be called Ha Thakatsilo, but which has become commonly known as Likomeng ('where the klipsringer are). Thakatsilo was a son of Lelingoana, who was appointed as a chief, and founded the settlement, after the latter moved to establish Malingoananeg. The lineage of Thakatsilo subsequently died out, and authority over the village and its environs was transferred to another agnate descendant of Lelingoana, Qaqailana. Once he became a chief, the area became known as Qaqailana.

These illustrations can also be read as reflections of how political authority, and the hegemony of the chieftainship, were established through patronage. Many

settlements grew from single homesteads which had been established by a man and his wife or wives. In the normal course of events the sons would establish their own homesteads in the same place, along with friends and affines, to create a hamlet. In accordance with the pre-colonial model of society, authority over the hamlet was placed in the hands of its male founder who would be regarded as the 'Father' (*Ramotse*) of the settlement, and that authority would be inherited by the oldest son in succeeding generations. Many villages in Lesotho thus carry the prefix *Ha* followed by a personal name in reference to the original founder.

Elevation to a broader political status depended on the patronage of existing chiefs, and often coincided with the establishment of a settlement. For example, some of Lelingoana's councillors established their homesteads beyond, but near to Malingoaneng. As these settlements grew, the founders were popularly acknowledged as village authorities, and as chiefs through their service to Lelingoana. Internal distinctions evolved as the chieftainship expanded, but each person in the hierarchy was a chief to his subordinates while the title *morena* was a common means of showing respect. In other words, the status of a chief was relative, and reflected social relationships which overtly expressed a patriarchal ideology of authority and identity. The placing system led to a profusion of chiefs that bordered on the absurd, but it was not a contradictory process. Not only did it ensure replication of familiar concepts of society, but it also promoted uniformity of political practice.

The critical point here is that a national identity was built upon the creation of local identities, as is reflected in village names. In each locality, chiefs were patriarchs to their subjects. Through the placing of agnates as subordinates, a locality acquired a distinctive political identity. Thus, in time, Lelingoana's area became identified as Tlokoeng (literally: 'where the Batlokoa are') in reference to the fact that it was controlled by Sekonyela agnates as well as being populated by people whose heritage lay with the Batlokoa chiefdom of old. The relationship between chief and subject in a locality reflected the familial conception of society. The chieftainship as a whole evolved out of those relationships, the placing system being both an endorsement of those relationships and the means to create a political structure. In short, to be Mosotho was first to align oneself with a chief; through him the individual acknowledged affinity with others as members of a unique social and political order.

I draw attention to the creation of local identities because it lies at the root of the present crisis of legitimacy of the state. This is not to say that the creation of local identities in the early days of Lesotho entailed creating rigid internal political boundaries between the state and locality, and that the state has now inherited longstanding deep divisions in the society. As long as the chieftainship was the state, albeit buttressed by Britain, the boundary between the state and locality was perceptible but not substantial. Only as the chieftainship lost its predominance,

and became an institution within the state, was the boundary sharpened. And only as this occurred did the boundary become politically significant by creating divisions between the state and its subjects.

The process originated in the late 19th century, but became politically significant in the 1940s. Furthermore, the delineation of the boundary involved a re-positioning of the chieftainship and consequent change in the dynamics of collective identity. In particular, the chieftainship became an expression of a national identity which did not depend on the existence of Lesotho as a state, but which reflected the realities of people's existence on the margins of regional society.


## The Disassembling of the State and National Identity

The creation of local identities in opposition to a national identity was not a pressing political threat to the state in the late 19th century, though, as is intimated in the local explanation of Lelingoana's and Rafolatsane's placing, the danger was perceived by Moshoeshoe's heirs. That fear would have been only momentary, however, reflecting consciousness of earlier struggles between chiefdoms, and the weakness of Moshoeshoe's model in retaining the allegiance of chiefs. In the context of containment within Basutoland, and Imperial support of the Moshoeshoe's heirs, the threat that clan and totem affiliations might become fault lines for fragmentation of the Basotho polity was a temporary possibility. The days of chiefdoms had passed, and with them the political and economic conditions that had given credence to their individual identities.

The threat to Moshoeshoe's heirs lay in the appropriation of these identities by colonial authorities to divide the people, and restrict access to land. At that time the colonial authorities' attempts to lure Molapo away from the Basotho polity would still have been fresh in people's memories. Likewise, Mopeli Mokhachane's departure to Witiseshoek as leader of the newly designated 'Bakoena tribe' was testimony to the potential for collusion between ambitious men and the colonial authorities, at the expense of efforts by Moshoeshoe's heirs to defend the integrity of the Basotho polity. Furthermore, those efforts were tested by the intransigence of the colonial authorities in recognising Moroka's Barolong as a constituent part of the Basotho polity, and incorporating the area where they lived into Basutoland (Murray 1992).

However, the underlying cause of this threat, namely, the desperate need to gain access to land, was dispelled by the availability of land in the interior. Even those who held onto particular group identities, such as Lelinogoana's Batlokoa and Khatleli's Batloung, were provided with land in abundance. This did not mean that

local identities in these terms simply disappeared. They receded as politically significant sources of internal tensions into the cultural consciousness of the people, and found expression in everyday life as markers of different social practices amongst the inhabitants. The different origins and heritage of the Batlokoa in relation to other Basotho, for example, were reflected in different bridewealth payment practices, and in the association of particular clan identities with particular villages (Ashton 1952: 17).

The sublimation of ethnic origins occurred because colonial rule changed the circumstances for use of familial concepts of political order. Put schematically, local identities in terms of ethnic origins receded in the face of development of an overarching national identity, but, in time, politically significant local identities re-emerged. The latter were characterised by stronger attachment to locality than to Basutoland, and to particular chiefs as opposed to the chieftainship. Central to this 'revolution' were the colonial authorities who sought to align the chieftainship with their concepts of administration. In particular, the imposition of territory as a criterion of authority had the effect, in time, of consolidating the close bonds between individual chiefs and their subjects in each locality, at the expense of a distancing of people from the chieftainship as a whole.

The initial intervention was to demarcate large districts, which in the 1870s were nominal rather than substantive. The country was divided into four administrative areas, three of which were designated as being under the authority of the paramount chief and two of his brothers, and one under the authority of a magistrate. However, these areas did not include much of the interior which was defined simply as 'very rugged ground' (Lagden 1909: 462). By 1904 the entire country had been demarcated into seven districts. One must remember, however, that the chiefs had greater control than colonial officials over the administration of much of the country, for the latter had yet to establish a commanding presence. The eastern region, for example, formed part of Qacha's Nek district which extended from the southern borders of the country virtually all the way to the north eastern borders. Yet the colonial presence was limited to a District Commissioner in Qacha's Nek village in the south, and a police camp at the site of present day Mokhotlong (Jones n.d.: 1).

The demarcation of districts consolidated the efforts of Moshoeshoe's heirs to build a chieftainship. Some of his heirs became chiefs of the new districts, thereby affirming their seniority, but others retained equal status because seniority was still defined primarily in terms of Moshoeshoe's model. The demarcation of districts, however, enabled these chiefs to specify the position of subordinates. The creation of Qacha's Nek district, for example, confirmed Rafolatsane's and Lelingoana's subordinate status *vis-à-vis* chief Makhaola,who was a son of the paramount chief and an appointed district chief of Qacha's Nek.

The situation changed when the colonial authorities began to replicate the territorial criterion of authority within districts. An initial step, taken in the 1920s and in response to the profusion of chiefs, was to categorise chiefs like Rafolatsane and Lelingoana as 'sub-chiefs' on the grounds that 'chiefs' were the principal descendants of Moshoeshoe (Ashton 1952: 187-188; Judicial Commissioner 1946). This step was followed by a systematic restructuring of the chieftainship in the 1930s and '40s. The colonial government enacted a series of Proclamations to reduce the number of chiefs and the scope of their authority (Hamnett 1975: 34-36; Ashton 1952: 188-193). The government consulted senior chiefs in order to designate those who would be officially recognised as 'native authorities', and to rank them in order of seniority (Jones n.d.: 14). The ranking was neither uniform nor consistent, but the general result was a territorially defined hierarchy: the paramount chief was the authority over the whole country above, in descending order, district, ward, and sub-ward chiefs, and headmen.

In the late 1940s the colonial government distinguished the administrative authority of chiefs, on the basis of territory, from their judicial authority, on the basis of their ranking in the hierarchy. In other words, the intervention introduced the British principle of separation of the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary. The government drastically reduced the number of chiefs' courts (Ashton 1952: 224). A national treasury was established, and regulations regarding payment of chiefs, their duties as administrators and the role of chiefs' courts were laid down. The salary scales of chiefs were specified, for example, in proportion to the number of tax payers in each chief's area of jurisdiction (Hamnett 1975: 34). Fines collected at chiefs' courts, which had previously been distributed generally within the chieftainship, were thereafter to be remitted to the national treasury (Ashton 1952: 237). Chiefs' courts were subordinated to a Judicial Commissioner's court (which gradually took over the judicial functions of District Commissioners), from which cases could go to a High Court, and ultimately, in principle, to the Privy Council in England (Ashton 1952: 226-230).

The rapidity and force of these interventions was marked by a flurry of *liretlo* - politically inspired 'medicine' murders - in which chiefs up to the highest level were implicated (Ashton 1952: 307-313; Hamnett 1975: 34, 117-136; Jones 1951). These murders have been appropriately attributed to the tensions which the colonial interventions caused within the chieftainship, as chiefs struggled for position (High Court 1946; Judicial Commissioner 1946; Jones n.d.; Ashton 1952: 200-202). The murders also support structuralist explanations of the history of the chieftainship, as illustrations of the moment at which the chieftainship was finally codified into a coherent form and integrated into the 'modern' state (Hamnett 1975; Jones n.d.; Breytenbach 1975). It is tempting, indeed, to confirm the totality of such explanation by using terms like 'resistance' to draw together the

particular, such as *liretlo*, against the general pervasiveness of colonial rule in society in Lesotho. Yet such explanation rests on the basis of the apparent contradiction between two very different models of political order, which is not as solid as it might seem. The chieftainship was a construction of both colonial officials and Basotho. It contained, from the beginning, elements of different models of political authority. Its 'final' form in the mid-20th century retained embellishments which had been crafted to ensure that it would become the institution of the state. The contradiction, therefore, lay not in the origins of the chieftainship but in the attempt to 'modernise' it, because in this process the institution lost its capacity to reflect a national identity that was in concord with the state.

On the one hand, the chieftainship had become one statutory institution among others within the colonial state, and chiefs were being pressured to become its agents. Demarcation of areas of jurisdiction eroded the indigenous notion of political authority as a representation of familial relationships. The restriction of chiefs' authority meant that the chieftainship no longer encompassed virtually every public facet of people's lives in the rural areas. The specification of roles, duties and salaries for chiefs imposed a quasi-class barrier between chiefs and their subjects, distancing the chieftainship from its wellspring, the people. On the other hand, the colonial interventions re-emphasised popular identification with locality and chief. Territorial demarcations of authority sharpened the boundary between locality and Basutoland as a whole. The restriction of chiefs' authority emphasised their role as local authorities in close contact with citizens, as opposed to the distanced position of colonial officials resident in district capitals. The specification of chiefs' roles and duties emphasised the power of individual chiefs in the administration of a locality. In short, the chieftainship itself had been re-cast to represent the boundary between the state and locality.

A notable illustration of the process is a dispute which began in the 1920s, was resolved only in 1946, and involved Lelingoana, his heir Mosuoe, the paramount chief, and the colonial government. The contest began over Lelingoana's objection to being categorised as a 'sub-chief'. It escalated, however, once the paramount chief placed his heir, Seeiso, in the Mokhotlong region. This placement included a demand for an area (land and settlements) to be excised from those controlled by Lelingoana and Rafolatsane, and given to Seeiso as a material basis for him to be a chief. The contest was a muddled affair as it carried on after the death of Lelingoana and Rafolatsane in the 1930s, and Seeiso in 1940, before being resolved in the colonial courts (High Court 1946; Judicial Commissioner 1946; Jones n.d.). It is not possible to cover the details of the contest, but several developments are pertinent here.

Firstly, the status of the chiefs in relation to each other was the central political issue. Eventually the case was resolved in a way that affirmed the colonial effort

to define the chieftainship as a territorial hierarchy. By 1946 Mokhotlong had been demarcated as a district. Lelingoana's and Rafolatsane's heirs and the populace, moreover, had acknowledged the status of these chiefs as subordinate to the district chief, and the authority of the paramount chief to dictate who would be the incumbent of the latter position.

Secondly, the contest inevitably addressed the political identities of the rural populace. However, though the Batlokoa heritage was revived as a construct of identity and has been formally sanctioned in official descriptions of the chieftainship up to the present day, it was not a principal means by which Lelingoana and his heir, Mosuoe, achieved a distinct and relatively senior status in the chieftainship. It was the colonial government's rationalisation of the chieftainship which inadvertently secured this status for the 'Batlokoa' chiefs.

On the one hand, the colonial interventions came at a time when Seeiso was still struggling to acquire a material basis to be a chief, but long after Lelingoana and Mosuoe had established their own hierarchy of authority in the region. Seeiso was able to establish a formal status as the 'senior' chief, and to acquire land from Rafolatsane's area (following his death, and aided by an internal feud amongst his heirs), with the direct support of the colonial government. The various rationalisation measures precluded any intrusion into the 'Batlokoa' area, because they actually allowed Mosuoe to consolidate his authority in his area of jurisdiction. For instance, forced reduction in the number of chiefs and headmen, subject to consultation with acknowledged senior chiefs of particular areas, enabled him to retain close agnates as gazetted 'native authorities', as well as to increase the proportion of the tax income accruing to himself and to his subordinates. In effect, Mosuoe was able to reinforce the political boundaries around the population under his authority as his father had done long ago, although by different means, and to project an image of a 'Batlokoa' fiefdom.

Thirdly, Mosuoe managed to avoid excision of land and settlements from his area of jurisdiction following the colonial government's distinction between the administrative and judicial authority of chiefs. The irony is that the High Court in 1946 dismissed the paramount chief's attempt to acquire land from Mosuoe on the grounds that the proper procedures for the exercise of administrative authority, as dictated by colonial jurisprudence, had not been followed (High Court 1946). Confirmation of Mosuoe's success in combining novel demands upon the chieftainship with historical tenets of authority lay in the absence of *liretlo* in the 'Tlokoeng ward', as opposed to their continuation elsewhere in the district (Jones n.d.).

While particular chiefs contested opportunities afforded by the colonial

interventions, changes in local livelihoods supported the general process by which the chieftainship came to express local identities as much as a national identity. The changes in question were the combination of agricultural activities and migrant employment in the late 19th century, their subsequent integration in the social life of the population, and the people's increasing reliance during this century on migrant work to sustain rural livelihoods.

Following the circumscription of Basutoland in 1869, Basotho relied on farming and occasional wage employment as complementary means of survival. The development of markets in agricultural commodities, through expansion of the mining industry in South Africa, provided occasional periods of prosperity for Basotho farmers. They were vulnerable, however, to environmental hazards such as drought, occurring at least once a decade, and to political upheavals in South Africa. For instance, they suffered the rinderpest epidemic in the 1890s, in addition to efforts by South African farmers to establish tariff barriers against grain exports from Basutoland, and trade was severely restricted during the Anglo-Boer war of 1899-1902 (Murray 1981: 10-15). Although the historical evidence suggests that *per capita* income from agriculture was steadily declining by the early 20th century, farming was still the primary economic interest of Basotho (Ashton 1952: 173-177; Eldredge 1993: 187-192). Coupled with the opportunity to use land as needed, according to usufructuary principles of land tenure, this interest supported the existence of the chieftainship.

Firstly, the constraints on farming, and the efforts of people to cope with them, focused people's attentions on the locality in which they were born and raised rather than on the territory as a whole. Guaranteed access to arable land, for instance, had to be deferred by the 1930s. The general lack of land, and the threat of landlessness, were ameliorated by chiefs who allowed subjects to inherit fields from their parents, even though inheritance was not sanctioned by the principles of usufruct (Ashton 1952: 149; Sheddick 1953: 60, 1954: 168). In a different vein, colonial officials' efforts to develop the livestock economy endorsed the authority of chiefs to manage livestock production and use of pastureland. Basotho responded readily to efforts to improve the production and sale of wool and mohair (Basutoland 1904, 1920, 1938, 1948, 1950-57; Phororo 1979). When the government began to rationalise the chieftainship, the authority of chiefs over livestock management was endorsed. For instance, stock pounds in subordinate chiefs' areas, and standardised fines for stock trespass, were introduced in support of the general aim of developing 'modern' institutions of government. But these measures were also categorised as 'administrative' functions to be retained by chiefs.

Secondly, the migrant labour system created an alternative set of referents to the state and the chieftainship for collective identities. On the one hand, restrictions on employment in South Africa, coupled with insecure urban residence, forced

Basotho workers to invest in rural livelihoods as a means of gaining social security for the long term (Murray 1977, 1979; Spiegel 1979). On the other hand, reliance on jobs in South Africa led to the establishment of an expatriate population whose existence was closely bound to the regular flux of migrant workers. Many Basotho established homes in South Africa during the 1930s and 40s, but rarely gave up their *de jure* domiciles in Basutoland in view of the difficulties of gaining rights to permanent residence in South Africa (Murray 1981: 15). An effect of these close but fluid links between rural residents, migrants and 'permanent' residents in South Africa was the construction of national identity in reference to the exigencies of life in South Africa. In the case of Basotho shaft-sinkers on mines, for example, it was constructed in reference to the working environment. They used their reputation as the best workers for this work as a construct of identity as Basotho (Guy and Thabane 1988).

In summary, the reference points for collective identity sharpened in the face of heightened social and economic barriers that governed the people's lives in and beyond Basutoland. As people were being driven, directly and indirectly, to invest in the political economy of rural localities, so too the authority of chiefs became focused on those localities. In other words, the political and economic history of Basotho incorporated a process in which national identity was disassembled from the state.

The political consequences of this disassembling were apparent when Lesotho became an independent state in 1966. Popular support for independence reflected a long history of political and economic subjugation of the population. However, that expression of Basotho nationalism could not be sustained in the face of the incapacity of the state to improve the existence of its citizens. The state, moreover, had little command over a population whose existence, and, indeed, national identity were based on the bonds between chief and subject, and on links between rural home and urban South Africa, rather than on any substantive affinity with the state. In short, political independence brought into the open the fragmented nature of society in Lesotho. Despite the gloss of common language and an homogeneous population, Lesotho was divided into numerous political units which were expressed in the chiefs' territories with their own local hierarchies, and in their subjects' efforts to survive on the basis of whatever resources were available in the locality.

Following the BNP government's usurpation of the 1970 general elections, and Lebuoa Jonathan's *volte face* with regard to relations with South Africa, Weisfelder described the political situation in the following terms:

> …[T]hese all too real domestic divisions and conflicts must also
> be perceived as desperate expedients in a frantic, ad hoc,

diplomatic game which is aimed at preserving the maximum
residual options for the nation or at least for the chance to survive.
(Weisfelder 1971)

It would have been more correct to assert that the situation reflected the state's
struggle to survive rather than a collective struggle by the nation. The government's
actions highlighted its ability only to build the barriers between the state and its
citizens. The 1968 Chieftainship Act, for example, simply reiterated the colonial
interventions of the 1930s and 1940s, in terms of seeking specifically to subordinate
the chieftainship to the demands of the government. Other interventions strengthened
those barriers. These ranged from the implementation of aid schemes as a form of
patronage, to politicisation of the Village Development Councils along political party
lines, to use of physical coercion by a paramilitary force and the police (Khaketla
1971; Murray 1981: 6).

The outcome was a deeply divided society, expressed in the formation of BNP
vigilante groups, passive resistance by chiefs and villagers to BNP programmes, and
military resistance by *likhukhuni*, the guerrillas of the BCP's Lesotho Liberation
Army (Leeman 1985: 40-110). Mokhotlong district, for example, became a centre of
BCP activity and aid benefits were restricted as a result. Furthermore, these divisions
were politicised in everyday speech. Travel to the lowlands, for example was (and
still is) described as 'going to Lesotho' as often as 'going to the lowlands'. The
interventions could not succeed in securing the hegemony of the state over the rural
populace, for they were like those of colonial settlers and governments in the past:
intrusions which promised little in the way of significant improvements to people's
lives but which threatened the means which people had developed to survive.

In view of all this, the interventions of the state during the 1980s up to the present
day reflect an intensification of its efforts to penetrate the rural areas. Again, the
faultline is the chieftainship because the state contends with the recently consolidated
divisions between itself and its citizens. The general context is well defined. The
interventions, notably the effort to re-structure the agricultural economy, confront a
multiplicity of local political entities which have become sharply defined through
localised efforts to derive some sustenance from agriculture. As the state attempts to
challenge the authority of chiefs, so people are driven to use the chieftainship as their
basis for assessment and response to the interventions. The dynamics of this
confrontation are, however, different from those of the past.

On the one hand, the re-structuring of the agricultural economy promises
considerable inflow of state resources into the rural areas. This promise raises
opportunities for the rural areas to be a basis of political power. Furthermore, it

opens up the possibility for contestation over the distribution of the state's financial resources, and subsequent differentiation of wealth amongst rural residents. Given the centrality of chiefs in the rural areas, the chieftainship is again the focus of political attention. There was, for example, vociferous debate in the National Assembly about the chieftainship, particularly the principal positions, before the 1993 general elections. The debate included demands for the installation of a Baputhing chiefship in southern Lesotho as a distinct political entity like the Batlokoa chiefship. There was also much debate over the occupation of all but three of the principal positions by the descendants of Moshoeshoe.[1]

On the other hand, although such debate evidences the perception of the chieftainship as both a barrier to state intervention and a potentially significant 'gatekeeper' for the distribution of state resources, it does not take into account the diminishing relevance of chiefs to their subjects. More and more people do not have arable land, and are unlikely to gain access to it, particularly as land holders make increasing use of the 1979 Land Act which promotes private property rights to residential sites and arable land. Furthermore, the growth of a regional consumer economy is producing a relatively wealthy elite in Lesotho (including e.g. traders) who are gaining the capacity to sidestep the authority of chiefs.

Nonetheless, the situation is complicated by state interventions in the livestock economy. The authority and relevance of chiefs is likely to be buttressed in the face of these interventions for several reasons. Firstly, they are a direct challenge to stock owners' grazing and livestock management practices, which hinge on chiefs' entrenched, and popularly legitimate control over the use of communal resources. Secondly, the interventions ignore the nexus of investment management, namely, the villages, and thus they ignore a critical locus for political organisation under the aegis of chiefs. Thirdly, in the context of increasing unemployment and lack of access to arable land, livestock are a critical resource to rural residents, although, without regular access to wage incomes, fewer people will have the capacity to maintain their herds. The question which remains is whether the state can incorporate the majority with few animals in programmes which are actually designed for people with large herds, and which provide greater benefit for the wealthy than for the poorer stock owners (Quinlan 1995). The lines of conflict, therefore, have been drawn between the state and the

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[1]   Personal communication, T. Petlane, Institute of Southern African Studies, National University of Lesotho. Advocacy for a Baphuthing chiefship had already been voiced in 1988 by some senior civil servants who proclaimed a Baphuthing heritage: personal communication, S. Gill, Lesotho Evangelical Church museum, Morija.

majority of the rural populace, and the chieftainship is at the interface.

## Conclusion

Clearly it would be simplistic to assert that the chieftainship remains a basis on which rural Basotho define their world and construct a national identity. The chieftainship is still a significant reference point, but it is itself subject to popular re-assessment. Its longstanding political and economic significance to rural residents is a reason why the institution stands out and, in view of the plethora of 'modern' institutions of the state, a dual structure of government appears to exist in the country. To accept such a perspective, however, would be to reify the chieftainship. It would imply that the chieftainship is a solid rampart behind which exists a definitive Sesotho culture, and from which Basotho resist interventions that threaten to change that culture.

The chieftainship still expresses to a large extent the social relationships which constitute family and society in rural Lesotho. Such relationships change, however, as people witness and participate in the transformation of the world around them. Rural Basotho, moreover, have not simply responded to interventions tending to change rural society with resistance. Accordingly, an explanation of the continued existence of the chieftainship as 'resistance' is of suspect validity. Rural Basotho have held up the chieftainship as an illustration of the type of society which they have sought to construct in the face of external threats. The institution is, however, really a manifestation of a deeper struggle by rural residents to direct the transformation of their world rather than to be passive subjects of others' interventions. In a word, the chieftainship is a 'modern' institution. It is, therefore, appropriate to see it as a faultline whose fissures and cracks mark the course of rural Basotho efforts to define concepts of authority and political order, in a society which is as troubled today as it was 150 years ago.

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