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The impact of migrant labour in Lesotho

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The impact of migrant labour in Lesotho

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To the dead
especially Semahla, Motloang and 'MaLineo

and to the living
especially Moetsuo, Mahashe, 'MaTšehla, Nkiling and 'MaBatho
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Preface

In 1863 Lesotho was described as ‘the granary of the Free State and parts of the [Cape] Colony’ (CB: 459). Today it is an impoverished labour reserve. A study of this transformation poses urgent and fundamental questions. What are the effects of an increasingly refined application of the machinery of apartheid, not only inside but also outside the political boundaries of South Africa? How is it possible to condone high unemployment, extreme poverty and social deprivation in the labour reserves of the rural periphery, while the coffers of the South African state are swelled by the gold boom of the 1970s? How can the systematic destruction of family life through mass labour migration be reconciled with the principle of self-determination which is supposedly enshrined in the granting of political independence, both to the erstwhile British territories of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland and to the Bantustans within South Africa?

In this book I present empirical evidence relating to some aspects of the transformation of Lesotho from granary to labour reserve. I also analyse the impact of this transformation on the lives of migrants and their families. The material is mainly drawn from a period of two years’ anthropological fieldwork in five villages in 1972-4 and from a further brief visit in 1978. The book is not therefore a history of labour migration from Lesotho. Nor is it a full account of the social, economic and political changes that have taken place. But the way I have written it reflects two convictions in particular. One is that no aspect of contemporary village life can be understood without central reference to the dependence of villagers for their livelihood on earnings derived from the export of labour. The other is that this dependence must be understood in its proper historical context.

In Chapter 1, accordingly, I outline the historical background to Lesotho’s predicament and offer an analysis of contemporary trends in the political economy of migrant labour. In Chapter 2 I illustrate the experience of particular migrants and discuss the problems of analysing
Preface

Household composition in circumstances where household members move repetitively between home in Lesotho and work-place in South Africa. Chapter 3 offers an account firstly of the political context in which rights to arable land are administered, and secondly of the most important agricultural operations. I then draw on the evidence in Chapters 2 and 3, together with the results of other empirical studies undertaken in Lesotho, to undermine conventional wisdom on the relationship between migrant earnings and domestic agriculture, and to propose a more realistic assessment of differentiation in rural communities.

In Chapter 5 I question the usefulness of well-known descriptive stereotypes of the family such as the extended family and the nuclear family; seek to clarify the empirical evidence relating to processes of family constitution in Lesotho and elsewhere in the southern African periphery; and attempt to resolve some ambiguities in the ethnographic literature concerning Sesothe kinship structure. I conclude, in particular, that the apparent continuity of custom must be analysed as an integral and vital aspect of underlying structural transformation. Chapter 6 is an attempt to exemplify this argument with specific reference to marital transactions in Lesotho. High bridewealth in the mid-nineteenth century was a structural correlate of the process of political and economic differentiation between chiefs and commoners. High bridewealth in the late twentieth century is a mechanism by which migrants invest in the long term security of the rural social system and by which rural kin constitute claims over absent earners. Detailed case studies are used to substantiate the latter proposition. Chapter 7 concentrates specifically on the experience of women, as migrants themselves, as rural household managers left behind by migrant husbands, and as widows. They are at an acute structural disadvantage in the South African labour market; their conjugal careers are characterized by the separation of husband and wife; and they are economically vulnerable to the exigencies of migrant support.

In a short concluding Chapter I attempt to place the present work in comparative perspective, with reference to previous regional studies of migrant labour, to recent historiographical developments in southern African studies, and to some wider theoretical and political issues. The most important of these issues is the threat of mass unemployment which faces the people of Lesotho in the 1980s, as a result of changes in South African policies of labour recruitment.

I should like to acknowledge financial support from the following sources: the Chairman’s Fund of the Anglo American Corporation of South Africa, which provided a generous grant for fieldwork in 1972–4,
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My intellectual and personal debts are many and various. I should like particularly to thank Monica Wilson, who supervised the original field-work on which this book is based; Esther Goody, who supervised the Ph.D. thesis of which this book is a substantial revision; and Shula Marks, who gave me encouragement and stimulus and several opportunities to express ideas at her London seminars. She also commented very helpfully on the manuscript for this book. I should like to thank the following persons, severally, for their critical comment, support and hospitality: David Ambrose, William Beinart, Sandy Cairncross, Julian Clarke, David Cooper, John Gay, Judy Gay, Jeff Guy, Thabiso Mafisa, Pepe Roberts, John Sharp, Andrew Spiegel and Francis Wilson. I remain responsible for the views and the evidence presented below.

Above all, I thank my friends and erstwhile neighbours in northern Lesotho for an experience which I shall never forget. This book is dedicated to some of them, invidiously perhaps; and to Linda Pepper, who became known as 'MaBatho, and who bore the brunt of the writing.

Colin Murray
9 June 1980
Note on conventions

Orthography

In reference to the Southern Sotho with whom this book is concerned, I have retained the prefixes they use themselves. Collectively, they are Basotho. Their homes are in Lesotho. Individually, each is a Mosotho. They speak Sesotho, and Sesotho also pertains to any aspect of their culture. The old forms Basuto, Mosuto and Sesuto are used only in direct quotation. I have not followed the convention of dropping prefixes which is often adopted by ethnographers of Bantu-speaking peoples. In this case, the root Sotho is likely to cause confusion, for it is commonly used in a sense that embraces both the Tswana of Botswana and the western Transvaal, and the Pedi of the northern Transvaal.

There are two orthographies of Sesotho, one used in Lesotho itself, the other adopted for use in South Africa at a convention in 1959. In deference to the Basotho, who feel strongly about their linguistic and cultural identity, I use the Lesotho orthography in this book. It has several peculiarities. (1) A double consonant is invariably a prolongation of the single consonant: thus, ho lla (to cry) is quite distinct from ho laola (to divine). (2) An l before an i or a u is pronounced as a d: thus, the greeting lumela is pronounced dumela, and bohali (bridewealth) is pronounced bohadi. (3) An sı is an aspirated s: thus, matšeliso (consolation, indemnity) in the Lesotho orthography is written matschediso in the South African orthography. (4) A th is an aspirated r and is not pronounced as th in English. Otherwise, there are no particular difficulties of pronunciation, except that differences of tone which are extremely important in Sesotho are not easily conveyed in the orthography: an example is o (third person singular pronoun) and u (second person pronoun) – the sound is the same but the tone is high in the first case and low in the second.
Note on conventions

Currency
The currency in use in Lesotho throughout the 1970s was the South African rand. Its rate of exchange with the pound sterling was R2 = £1 prior to devaluation of the pound in 1967, and the present rate of exchange is a fluctuating one. However, Basotho retain the use of £.s.d. (the pre-1961 currency) in speech and calculation for ordinary market purposes as well as, almost invariably, in the accountancy of bridewealth. This implies no computational problems as no account is taken of the devaluation of either currency. Basotho continue to translate between pounds and rands at the old prevailing rate of £1 = R2, and this translation remains valid irrespective of floating official exchange rates. Lesotho's own currency, the Loti, was introduced in December 1979, initially at par with the rand.

Symbols used in text
The following symbols are used in the text:

- △ ○ Living male, female
- △ ○ Deceased male, female
- △ ○ Full siblings
- △ ○ Half siblings
- △ ○ Marital relationship
- △ ○ Sexual or extra-marital relationship
- △ ○ Conjugal dissociation or divorce
Abbreviations

ACROL  Anglo Collieries Recruitment Organization of Lesotho
AHCM  Association of Home Countries of Migrants
ASB  Annual Statistical Bulletin
BCP  Basutoland Congress Party
BNP  Basutoland National Party
CAR  Colonial Annual Report
CB  *Chronicles of Basutoland* (Germond 1967)
FAO  Food and Agriculture Organization
FFYDP  First Five Year Development Plan
IBRD  International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
ILO  International Labour Office
LASA  Lesotho Agricultural Sector Analysis
NCOA  Natal Coal Owners’ Labour Association
NRC  Native Recruiting Corporation
PDL  Poverty Datum Line
PEMS  Paris Evangelical Mission Society
SAIRR  South African Institute of Race Relations
SALB  South African Labour Bulletin
SFYDP  Second Five Year Development Plan
SIDA  Swedish International Development Agency
TEBA  The Employment Bureau of Africa
USAID  United States Agency for International Development