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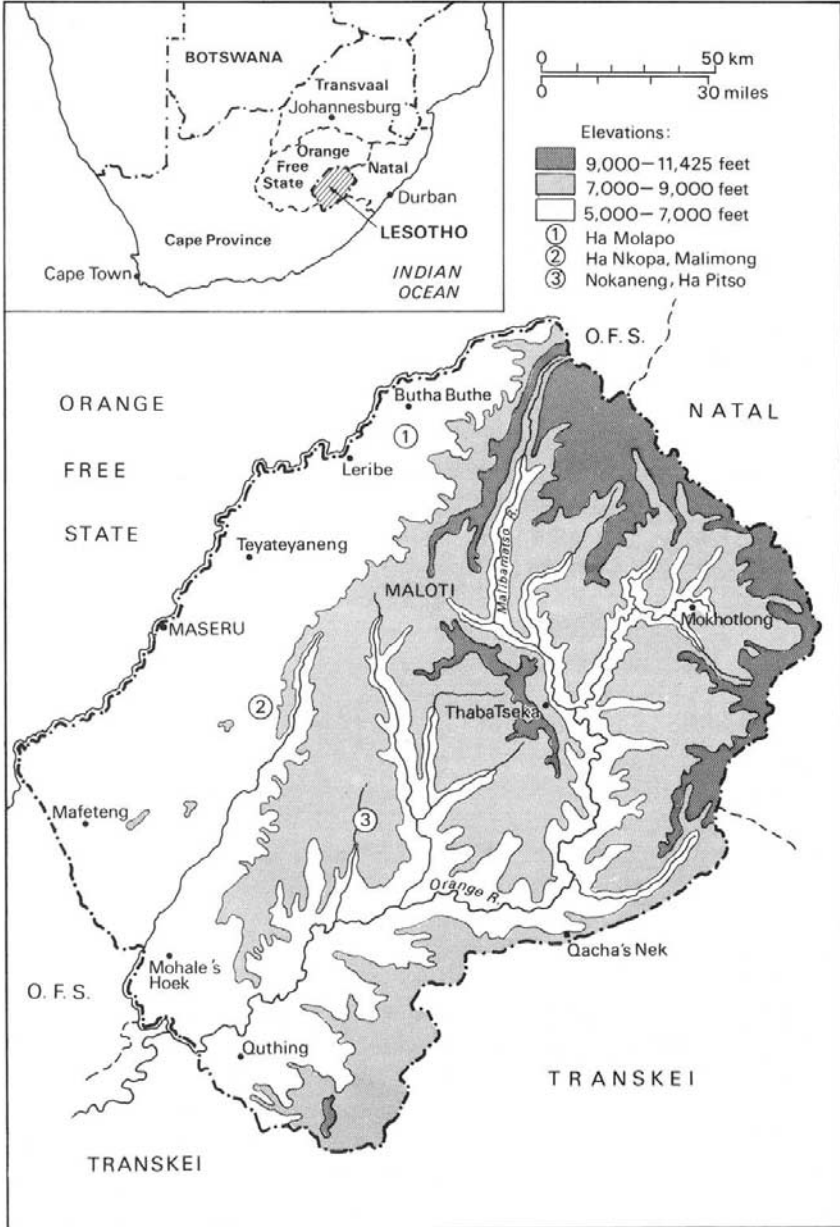
From granary to labour reserve

The country and the people

The Kingdom of Lesotho is a small, barren and mountainous country entirely surrounded by the Republic of South Africa. It lies astride the watershed of southern Africa, amid the rugged peaks of the Drakensberg from which rise the tributaries of three great rivers – the Vaal, the Tugela and the Orange. The country is divided into four ecological zones (see Fig. 1.1). The Lowlands are a narrow strip of land lying west of the mountain ranges and less than 1,830 metres above sea level.¹ Dotted with flat-topped hills and scarred with erosion gullies known as dongas, they constitute less than 20 per cent of the total land area of 30,344 square kilometres. A conspicuous sandstone escarpment at a height of about 1,830m crosses the country along an axis from north-east to south-west. It divides the Lowlands from the Foothills, an irregular series of plateaux intersected by river valleys and the lower mountain spurs. Beyond the Foothills lie the Mountains, rising to a rolling upland plateau in the north-east at about 2,740m. The highest peak is Thabana Ntlenyana (3,841m) on the eastern escarpment. The mountain ranges are divided by a series of deep gorges running southwards and westwards, in which flow the Senqu or Orange river and its major tributaries such as the Malibamatšo and the Senqunyane. The Orange River Valley is conventionally distinguished as the fourth ecological zone.

Because of the high altitude, the climate of Lesotho is healthy and temperate. The average annual rainfall of about 700mm is concentrated in the summer months from October to April, and very little falls in the winter months from May to September. Rainfall varies considerably between years and Lesotho is subject to an extended drought in about one year in five. The country is also subject to extremes of temperature. The hottest months are December and January, with mean daily temperatures ranging up to 28°C in the Lowlands, while 40°C has been recorded. The coldest months are June and July, particularly in the

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1.1 A map of Lesotho, showing relief, district administrative headquarters and approximate areas of fieldwork

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Mountains where the temperature often falls below freezing, and may be as low as -10°C (Bawden and Carroll 1968: 15). Night frosts are recorded regularly throughout the winter months. The higher peaks are capped with snow during June, July and August. Large areas of the Mountain zone are sometimes cut off by snow, and their inhabitants threatened by famine.

Lesotho is divided into ten administrative districts (Fig. 1.1). Six of these have their headquarters in the small towns or 'camps' connected by the main arterial road running north to south in the western Lowland belt. These are Butha Buthe, Leribe, Teyateyaneng, Maseru, Mafeteng and Mohale's Hoek. A seventh, Quthing, lies in the Orange River Valley in the south. The remaining three districts have Mountain headquarters: Mokhotlong, Thaba Taeka and Qacha's Nek. The capital Maseru was a small and dusty stone-built town of about 9,000 people in the early 1960s. Since independence in 1966 it has grown rapidly in size and population, having about 30,000 people in the early 1970s. The other towns remain much smaller.

More than 92 per cent of Lesotho's population live in the rural areas. They live in villages whose mean size varies between 94 persons per village in the district of Mohale's Hoek and 232 persons in Leribe district.² The actual range of variation in village size is much greater, from a minimum of about 40 to a maximum of about 1,000. Village homesteads in Lesotho are clustered around a central area, the chief's place (*moreneng*), and not dispersed across the landscape as in the Transkei and Zululand. This relatively concentrated settlement pattern is consistent both with highveld ecology (Sansom 1974) and with the Sotho political tradition (Kuper 1975). Villages huddle in folds of the undulating Lowland plain; they nestle beneath the flat-topped outcrops of the sandstone escarpment; they are perched on the lower mountain spurs; and they straddle the dolerite ridges which ascend into the steep ranges of the Maloti.

About 70 per cent of the population live in the Lowlands and Foothills, whereas the Mountains, the largest of the zones in area, are relatively sparsely populated. Resident population densities in 1976 were projected as 35 persons per km^2 in Lesotho as a whole, and 275 persons per km^2 of *available arable land*. The corresponding figures for the Lowlands only were 80 and 219 persons per km^2 (Monyake 1973: 90, 92). These figures illustrate the intensity of the pressure on the country's very limited land resources. The population has increased rapidly in the twentieth century, from 428,000 in 1911 to nearly 1,250,000 in 1976 (Table 1.1). In view of the large number of people who are away at work in South Africa at any one time, census practice since 1911 has been to

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[More information](#)*Families divided*Table 1.1. *African population of Lesotho, 1911–76.*

Year	Males		Females		Total		
	A	B	A	B	A	B	C
1911	204,797	21,658	222,752	2,972	427,549	24,630	5.8
1921	260,675	37,827	283,472	9,314	544,147	47,141	8.7
1936	317,918	78,604	343,892	22,669	661,809	101,273	15.3
1946	342,340	95,697	347,579	32,331	689,919	128,028	18.6
1956	383,546	112,790	410,737	41,992	794,253	154,782	19.5
1966	463,437	96,350	502,476	19,550	965,913	115,900	12.0
1976	587,331	129,103	629,484	23,551	1,216,815	152,654	12.5

Key: A. *De jure* population (residents plus absentees). B. Absentees. C. Absentees as percentage of *de jure* population ($B/A \times 100$).

Sources: Monyake (1974), and 1976 census preliminary results, Bureau of Statistics, Maseru.

Note: The number of absentees was not recorded in the 1946 census; the figure given is an interpolation based on the figures for 1936 and 1956. The 1976 figures are preliminary, and include approximately 5,000 non-Africans.

distinguish the *de facto* population – those present at the time of enumeration – from the *de jure* population – those present plus those recorded as absent members of households. The importance of this distinction is elaborated in Chapter 2. Table 1.1 shows the number of recorded absentees expressed as a percentage of the total population for each census year.

Almost all of the country's inhabitants refer to themselves as Basotho. Their language, Sesotho, is classified by comparative linguists as Southern Sotho, one of three language clusters which belong to the Sotho language group of the South-eastern zone of Bantu languages (Doke 1967). The other two clusters in the group are Northern Sotho, spoken in the northern and eastern Transvaal, and Tswana or Setswana, spoken in the northern Cape, the western Transvaal and Botswana. The relative uniformity of Southern Sotho is attributable to the incorporation of various Sotho clans under one political authority, the chief Moshoeshoe I, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, following the devastating upheaval known to the Basotho as the *lifaqane*.³ These clans formed the Basotho nation, whose territorial base was the western foothills of the Maloti range of the Drakensberg and the lowlands of the Caledon valley. They lost their independence in 1868 during a debilitating war with the Afrikaners of the Orange Free State, when Moshoeshoe sought British protection in order to prevent further loss of land. For nearly a hundred years Basutoland was subject to British over-rule, until in 1966 it emerged as the independent Kingdom of

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Lesotho. Today the Basotho of Moshoeshoe, as they describe themselves, are distributed between Lesotho itself, the tiny barren Southern Sotho Bantustan of Qwaqwa, on the northern edge of Lesotho; two other Bantustans – the Transkei and Bophuthatswana (see Fig. 1.4); and the 'white' farming areas and industrial centres of the Orange Free State and the southern Transvaal.

The following brief review of events at the national level since independence is intended only to facilitate understanding of the intense factional rivalries which dominate politics at the village level. The developments that led to Lesotho's independence and the internal tensions that have prevailed since then have been fully described elsewhere.⁴ These tensions have involved a variety of political forces of which the most important are the monarchy, represented by King Moshoeshoe II; the ruling Basutoland National Party (BNP) led by Chief Leabua Jonathan; and the opposition Basutoland Congress Party (BCP) led by Ntsu Mokhehle. By and large, the BNP has the support of the Catholic church, large traders and many of the chiefs; whereas the BCP, Pan-African and socialist in orientation, derives its popular support from commoners, migrant workers, teachers and some small traders (Breytenbach 1975; Ström 1978). Although Chief Jonathan's government has a very limited capacity to change the conditions under which the majority of the citizens of Lesotho spend their working lives, it is of course a more politically accessible target for the expression of their frustrations than the South African government.

The first post-independence elections were held in January 1970. The result would have been a victory for the BCP, but Jonathan declared a state of emergency, suspended the constitution, arrested opposition leaders and put the king under house arrest. He took these steps under pressure from hard-line cabinet ministers, in order to pre-empt the electoral defeat of the BNP. Violence flared up as a result and several hundred people were killed in various parts of the country. Chief Jonathan subsequently attempted to 'abolish politics' in the interests of national reconciliation and concerted action for development. He established an Interim National Assembly in 1973 but this was boycotted by Mokhehle and several of his followers because members of the Assembly were to be effectively nominated by Jonathan and not elected.⁵ An abortive outbreak of violence in January 1974 was harshly repressed by the police and the para-military Police Mobile Unit. Following this the BCP split into an 'official' section under Gerard Ramoreboli, who was incorporated into the cabinet late in 1975 as Minister of Justice, and an 'unofficial' but much larger section which remained loyal to the exiled Mokhehle.

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Meanwhile Chief Jonathan was developing a foreign policy more explicitly hostile towards apartheid. As a staunchly conservative 'anti-communist' he had had the South African government's support against his political opponents in the early years of independence. But from about 1971 onwards this amicable relationship steadily soured. Tensions arose over South African pressure against investment by certain multinational companies in subsidiaries in Lesotho (Ström 1978: 115; also Selwyn 1975); over specific incidents such as the shooting of five Basotho miners by South African police at Western Deep Level mine in September 1973; over Lesotho's claims before the United Nations to 'conquered territory' in the Orange Free State, an area whose precise dimensions have not been publicly declared, but it includes the tract of land between the Caledon and the Orange which the Basotho lost by the two Treaties of Aliwal North in 1858 and 1869;⁶ and over the common border with the Transkei following the latter's 'independence' in 1976 which was unrecognized by Lesotho. More generally, the anticipated benefits to Lesotho of a friendly relationship with South Africa had not materialized; little technical or financial assistance was forthcoming; and it proved impossible to reach agreement for South Africa to purchase water from the Oxbow–Malibamatšo hydro-electric scheme which had been proposed in the First Five Year Plan. In response to such difficulties the Lesotho government pursued a more open and aggressive foreign policy. Various diplomatic initiatives were undertaken which allowed Lesotho to diversify and multiply its sources of international aid (Ström 1978; Hirschmann 1979) and to conclude a series of agreements with Mozambique and other socialist countries.

However, there were also internal considerations behind this shift of orientation in foreign policy. Jonathan's domestic political credibility and his attempts to undermine the popular challenge of the BCP depended in part on an approach more overtly critical of South African policies. It appears that the government's increasingly sophisticated capacity to articulate its grievances against South Africa has allowed the BNP to steal some of the BCP's thunder in this respect. Lesotho's diplomatic aggression sufficiently irritated Prime Ministers Vorster and Botha to give rise to persistent rumours of collaboration between the South African security police and armed BCP insurgents who, representing the self-styled Liberation Party (*Lekhotla la Topollo*), infiltrated the northern mountains of Lesotho towards the end of 1979. A series of violent incidents, involving these insurgents and members of the Police Mobile Unit, led to an exodus of several hundred refugees from Makhoakhoeng to the Free State town of Bethlehem, where they were placed in a fenced encampment by the South African authorities. These

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events induced speculation over the ruling party's connections with the mainstream of the South African liberation movement.

The failure of economic dualism

There is a well-established tradition in South African economic historiography which attempts to explain poverty in the labour reserves by invoking African failure to respond to changing conditions and, specifically, features intrinsic to African social structure which inhibit the capacity to innovate. The report of the Native Economic Commission in 1932, for example, drew attention to the absence of a saving propensity, the force of indigenous sanctions which discourage individual initiative, and the unwisdom of commoners attaining wealth which upsets the accepted proprieties of rank (Houghton and Dagut 1973: 73). This tradition of economic dualism is most clearly elaborated in D. Hobart Houghton's standard text book on the South African economy (1973). In successive editions he discusses the differences between 'market-oriented' (white) farming, characterized by a 'scientific and experimental' approach, and 'subsistence' (black) farming, characterized by a 'traditional' approach, as 'so great that they cannot conveniently be treated together' (1973: 46; also Sadie 1960). In this way the theory of economic dualism posits the co-existence of discrete economic sectors, most commonly a 'static traditional sector' and a 'progressive industrial sector' (Houghton 1974: 406). Poverty and lack of development are here represented as aspects of an original state, for which the remedy is seen as progressive economic incorporation.

Writers on Lesotho, particularly those associated with the Africa Institute in Pretoria, are well represented in this tradition. For example, Leistner attributed the underdevelopment of Lesotho to 'the remarkable tenacity of traditional institutions, concepts and values' (1966: 35–6). In a thesis on 'Problems and prospects of the economic development of agriculture in Lesotho', Jack Williams identified a phenomenon which he called 'socio-cultural congruity', made up of three elements: the irrational and sustained belief in superstition and magic; the sharing propensity supposedly inherent in extended family institutions; and a collective impulse not to behave conspicuously. All these factors, he alleged, 'impinge on rational decision-making at the farm level' (1970: 251).

The objections to this sort of argument may be summarized as follows. Firstly, as Merle Lipton (1977) has shown, the differences in productivity between white farming and black farming are not in fact as great as official statistics and white mythology represent them to be. Secondly, even if official figures are taken seriously, the comparison shown in Table

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[More information](#)*Families divided*Table 1.2. *Comparison of maize yields, 1950–70*

Year	(100 kg per hectare)		Lesotho ^c
	White farmers ^a	South African peasants	
1950	7.4	5.7 ^b	11.9
1960	9.1	2.1 ^a	7.4
1970	11.9	2.3 ^a	5.1

Sources: (a) Houghton (1973: 267); (b) Converted from Houghton and Walton (1952: 162); (c) Table 1.3 below.

1.2 between maize productivity in Lesotho and that of African ‘peasants’ and white farmers in South Africa over the years 1950 to 1970 suggests that substantial differences in productivity are relatively recent. Thirdly, if productivity is assessed in terms of net value added, that is by relating the value of output to the cost of inputs, then it is possible, even probable, that small-scale black farming represents a more efficient allocation of resources than large-scale white farming (Lipton 1977).

These criticisms illustrate the static and impoverished quality not of traditional agriculture but of dualist theory. There is little evidence to justify Houghton’s attribution of the contemporary differences between the sectors to the ‘scientific and experimental’ approach of white farmers and the ‘traditional’ approach of black farmers. On the contrary, the differences are best explained in terms of generous political support and capital provision made available to white farmers by the South African state and in terms of specific political and economic discrimination by the state against black farmers (F. Wilson 1971; Morris 1976). There is now plenty of evidence to demonstrate that there was a widespread and vigorous response by Africans to new market opportunities in the late nineteenth century (M. Wilson 1971; Beinart 1973); but that those opportunities were increasingly circumscribed by instruments of discrimination such as the Land Act of 1913, by constriction of access to markets and capital, and by increasing dependence on the export of labour. Colin Bundy’s book *The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry* (1979) clearly documents this process of underdevelopment in the Transkei, the Ciskei, Natal and the Transvaal. As will be seen, Lesotho provides a particularly virulent example of the process. The essays in Palmer and Parsons (1977) illustrate a similar story further north, in Zimbabwe, Botswana and Zambia. At different times in different places, an initial period of prosperity was followed by a long spiral of decline.

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Thus the failure of economic dualism consists in the following points. On the one hand, a relationship between the two sectors of the economy is, of necessity, recognized; for example, oscillating migrants, as 'Men of Two Worlds' (Houghton 1973: 82–99), move repetitively between them. On the other hand, explanation of the difference between the two sectors proceeds by invoking features that are allegedly intrinsic and implicitly exclusive to each sector, respectively. This central contradiction remains unresolved because the particular relationship between the two sectors is not itself regarded as problematic. Rather, it is regarded as a natural consequence of the existing distribution of resources, skills and attitudes of mind. In this way proponents of dualist theory tend to construct analytical boundaries that coincide with the physical boundaries between the sectors. Neglect of economic history is an indispensable condition of this construction; and the habit of reductionism is its inevitable corollary.

Some of these problems are to be found in analyses of Lesotho's predicament which can otherwise be taken much more seriously than those of Leistner and Williams cited above. For example, Hugh Ashton, the principal modern ethnographer of the Basotho, ascribed low agricultural productivity in the 1930s partly to a lack of capital equipment, partly to a shortage of male labour – both very plausible reasons – and partly to a prevalent attitude of indifference. 'The Mosotho is not an agriculturalist by tradition, and tends to regard agriculture as women's work (which it used to be), and even if he does not positively despise it, he just is not interested or enthusiastic about it.' Owing to the ready availability of employment in South Africa, the Basotho lacked any 'driving incentive ... to develop their lands and improve their agriculture' (Ashton 1939: 155).

Much more recently, Sandra Wallman (1972) argued that a complex syndrome of factors constrains the individual Mosotho from making any effort to improve his lot and from co-operating with development initiatives. She concluded that

non-development in Lesotho is a function of a complex of poverty, migration and ideology, and can only be successfully treated when attention is paid to the whole syndrome. It is easy to prescribe negatively, economic development will not be assured by an injection of cash to cure the poverty, nor by a tourniquet to stop the flow of migrants, nor by an amphetamine to lift the pessimism, nor by any one specialist effort alone. More positively – and therefore more diffidently – I would venture that the present emphasis on agricultural development for Lesotho will continue to be nugatory in so far as it exacerbates the unfavourable contrast with urban South Africa (1972: 260).

Wallman is surely right to insist on the connections between the various elements in the syndrome and also on the 'unfavourable contrast' between poverty in Lesotho and wealth in the industrial heartland of

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South Africa. But the emphasis in her article is on the way in which 'the economic facts of village life in Lesotho are perpetuated by their effect on the individual villager' (1972: 251). In so far as these arguments are based on the premise that lack of development is to be explained in terms of individuals' perception of their predicament, they are both reductionist and ahistorical. Ashton's diagnosis of complacency in the 1930s and Wallman's diagnosis of pessimism in the 1960s are both, no doubt, of incidental relevance. They are not in themselves adequate explanations of poverty or 'non-development'.

The following review of Lesotho's economic history, albeit brief and provisional, makes it clear that the appropriate question is not 'Why are the Basotho still poor?' but 'How have the Basotho become poor?'.⁷ This review also exposes as bizarre and self-contradictory Wallman's assertion in a later article that the contemporary 'facts of life' – poverty and economic dependence – may be regarded as conditions 'intrinsic to Lesotho, having no necessary reference to the presence of South Africa' (1976: 105–6). In the first place, Wallman herself had already acknowledged the importance of the long conflict with the Boers over land. Its resolution in 1869 determined the present boundaries of Lesotho, to the considerable disadvantage of the Basotho, and this partly explains the present shortage of land and gross over-crowding of population. In the second place, similar conditions are 'intrinsic' to the Transkei, Ciskei, KwaZulu and most of the other reserve areas in South Africa which have been constituted as African 'homelands'. Yet these, Wallman would doubtless acknowledge, have everything to do with the presence of South Africa. 'Foreign' identity is relative, as the citizens of Transkei, Bophuthatswana and Venda have discovered.

The decline of agriculture and the exodus of labour

The year 1870 was a historical watershed for the Basotho. Moshoeshoe, the founder of the nation, died in March of that year. His people had just emerged from a crippling war (1865–8) with the Afrikaners of the Orange Free State and had been incorporated, at Moshoeshoe's request, into the British imperial fold. The present boundaries of Lesotho were fixed in the Treaty of Aliwal North of 1869, by which the Basotho were forced to cede much of the land they had previously occupied and farmed (Sanders 1975: 306–7).

Basutoland was administered by the Government of the Cape Colony for a brief and somewhat unhappy period, 1871–84. The first Governor's Agent, Charles Griffith, reported that as a result of the war with the Free State the Basotho had been reduced to famine and near-destitution