

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10709-9 - Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho

Colin Murray

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## FAMILIES DIVIDED

*The impact of migrant labour in Lesotho*

### AFRICAN STUDIES SERIES 29

#### *Editorial Board*

John Dunn, Reader in Politics and Fellow of King's College, Cambridge

J. M. Lonsdale, Lecturer in History and Fellow of Trinity College,  
Cambridge

D. M. G. Newbery, Lecturer in Economics and Fellow of Churchill  
College, Cambridge

A. F. Robertson, Director of the African Studies Centre and Fellow of  
Darwin College, Cambridge

The African Studies Series is a collection of monographs and general studies which reflect the interdisciplinary interests of the African Studies Centre at Cambridge. Volumes to date have combined historical, anthropological, economic, political and other perspectives. Each contribution has assumed that such broad approaches can contribute much to our understanding of Africa, and that this may in turn be of advantage to specific disciplines.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10709-9 - Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho

Colin Murray

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## BOOKS IN THIS SERIES

- 1 City Politics: A Study of Léopoldville 1962–63 *J. S. La Fontaine*
- 2 Studies in Rural Capitalism in West Africa *Polly Hill*
- 3 Land Policy in Buganda *Henry W. West*
- 4 The Nigerian Military: A Sociological Analysis of Authority and Revolt 1960–67  
*Robin Luckham*
- 5 The Ghanaian Factory Worker: Industrial Man in Africa *Margaret Peil*
- 6 Labour in the South African Gold Mines, 1911–1969 *Francis Wilson*
- 7 The Price of Liberty: Personality and Politics in Colonial Nigeria *Kenneth E. J. Post and George D. Jenkins*
- 8 Subsistence to Commercial Farming in Present Day Buganda: An Economic and Anthropological Survey *Audrey I. Richards, Ford Sturrock and Jean M. Fortt (eds.)*
- 9 Dependence and Opportunity: Political Change in Ahafo *John Dunn and A. F. Robertson*
- 10 African Railwaymen: Solidarity and Opposition in an East African Labour Force  
*R. D. Grillo*
- 11 Islam and Tribal Art in West Africa *Rene A. Brawmann*
- 12 Modern and Traditional Elites in the Politics of Lagos *P. D. Cole*
- 13 Asante in the Nineteenth Century: The Structure and Evolution of a Political Order  
*Ivor Wilks*
- 14 Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel *Emmanuel Obiechina*
- 15 Saints and Politicians: Essays in the Organisation of a Senegalese Peasant Society  
*Donal B. Cruise O'Brien*
- 16 The Lions of Dagbon: Political Change in Northern Ghana *Martin Staniland*
- 17 Politics of Decolonisation: Kenya Europeans and the Land Issue 1950–1965 *Gary Wasserman*
- 18 Muslim Brotherhoods in Nineteenth Century Africa *B. G. Martin*
- 19 Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspectives *Joseph Smaldone*
- 20 Liberia and Sierra Leone: An Essay in Comparative Politics *Christopher Clapham*
- 21 Adam Kok's Griquas: A Study in the Development of Stratification in South Africa  
*Robert Ross*
- 22 Class, Power and Ideology in Ghana: The Railwaymen of Sekondi *Richard Jeffries*
- 23 West African States: Failure and Promise *John Dunn*
- 24 Afrikaners of the Kalahari: White Minority in a Black State *M. Russell and M. Russell*
- 25 A Modern History of Tanganyika *John Iliffe*
- 26 A History of African Christianity 1950–1975 *Adrian Hastings*
- 27 Slaves, Peasants and Capitalists in Southern Angola 1840–1926 *W. G. Clarence-Smith*
- 28 The Hidden Hippopotamus: Reappraisal in African History: The Early Colonial Experience in Western Zambia *Gwyn Prins*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10709-9 - Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho

Colin Murray

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

# FAMILIES DIVIDED

The impact of migrant  
labour in Lesotho

COLIN MURRAY

Research Fellow in Sociology

University of Liverpool

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge

London New York New Rochelle

Melbourne Sydney

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-10709-9 - Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho  
Colin Murray  
Frontmatter  
[More information](#)

---

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521107099](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521107099)

© Cambridge University Press 1981

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1981  
This digitally printed version 2009

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

ISBN 978-0-521-23501-3 hardback  
ISBN 978-0-521-10709-9 paperback

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10709-9 - Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho

Colin Murray

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

To the dead

*especially Semahla, Motloang and 'MaLineo*

and to the living

*especially Moetsuoa, Mahashe, 'MaTšehla, Nkiling and 'MaBatho*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10709-9 - Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho

Colin Murray

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Contents

|   |  |     |
|---|--|-----|
|   | <i>List of tables</i>                                    | ix  |
|   | <i>List of figures</i>                                   | x   |
|   | <i>Preface</i>   | xi  |
|   | <i>Note on conventions</i>                               | xiv |
|   | <i>Abbreviations</i>                                     | xvi |
| 1 | <b>From granary to labour reserve</b>                    | 1   |
|   | The country and the people                               | 1   |
|   | The failure of economic dualism                          | 7   |
|   | The decline of agriculture and the exodus of labour      | 10  |
|   | The political economy of migrant labour                  | 22  |
|   | The phase of incorporation                               | 22  |
|   | The phase of relative alienation                         | 26  |
| 2 | <b>Migrant labour: a way of life</b>                     | 37  |
|   | The migrant career                                       | 40  |
|   | Village and household demography: a synchronic view      | 46  |
|   | The definition of the household                          | 47  |
|   | Absentees, migrant labourers and paid employees          | 49  |
|   | Dependency ratios  | 53  |
|   | Residential turnover: a diachronic view                  | 56  |
| 3 | <b>Managing the land</b>                                 | 65  |
|   | The chieftainship  | 66  |
|   | Administrative and usufructuary title                    | 70  |
|   | Agricultural operations                                  | 75  |
| 4 | <b>Differentiation, poverty and class formation</b>      | 86  |
|   | A misplaced orthodoxy                                    | 86  |
|   | Some evidence on land, livestock and income distribution | 89  |
|   | Class formation and the developmental cycle              | 97  |

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10709-9 - Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho

Colin Murray

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Contents*

|          |   |     |
|----------|---|-----|
| <b>5</b> | <b>Changing family structure</b>  | 100 |
|          | The extended family and the nuclear family  | 100 |
|          | Mobility and the developmental cycle  | 104 |
|          | Temporal processes: the constitution of the family                                | 107 |
|          | The agnatic family and the kindred  | 113 |
|          | The house–property complex  | 116 |
| <b>6</b> | <b>Marital strategy: an essay in custom and conflict</b>                          | 119 |
|          | The definition of marriage  | 120 |
|          | Polygyny and marriage with cattle   | 125 |
|          | Interpreting the evidence   | 128 |
|          | Detailed case studies   | 132 |
|          | One household’s marital budget  | 132 |
|          | A question of paternity   | 134 |
|          | Marrying a mother-with-child  | 136 |
|          | The interpretation of marital transactions  | 142 |
| <b>7</b> | <b>Women at home and at work</b>  | 149 |
|          | Keeping house: the ‘work of custom’   | 150 |
|          | House keeping: the ‘facts of life’  | 153 |
|          | Wives left behind   | 158 |
|          | Female household heads  | 160 |
|          | A case of structural violence   | 163 |
|          | Labour and value: some theoretical considerations                                 | 165 |
| <b>8</b> | <b>Changing perspectives on migrant labour</b>                                    | 171 |
|          | <i>Appendix 1: Biographical notes on the Thapelo family, Ha Molapo</i>            | 178 |
|          | <i>Appendix 2: Bohali transfers recorded in twenty-eight marriages, Ha Molapo</i> | 181 |
|          | <i>Appendix 3: The Letlala family, Ha Molapo</i>                                  | 185 |
|          | <i>Notes</i>  | 195 |
|          | <i>Bibliography</i>   | 204 |
|          | <i>Index</i>  | 216 |

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10709-9 - Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho

Colin Murray

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Tables

|      |   |     |
|------|---|-----|
| 1.1. | African population of Lesotho, 1911–76  | 4   |
| 1.2. | Comparison of maize yields, 1950–70   | 8   |
| 1.3. | Agricultural production in Lesotho, 1950–70   | 17  |
| 1.4. | Lesotho citizens employed on South African mines, 1963–79   | 20  |
| 1.5. | Lesotho's trade figures, 1973–6   | 21  |
| 1.6. | Geographical sources of black labour distributed by TEBA, as at 31 December 1973 and 1978   | 30  |
| 1.7. | Average annual cash earnings of black labour on the gold mines, 1972–8  | 31  |
| 2.1. | Resident and absent populations, by village, 1974   | 47  |
| 2.2. | Distribution of paid employees from Ha Molapo, by sex, country of employment, occupational category and presence in or absence from the reference community, October 1974 | 53  |
| 2.3. | Distribution of households by <i>de jure</i> household size and sex of household head, Ha Molapo, October 1978  | 55  |
| 2.4. | Alternative dependency ratios, Ha Molapo, October 1978  | 56  |
| 4.1. | Distribution of land holdings by farm size, Lesotho, 1950–70  | 90  |
| 4.2. | Distribution of land, Lesotho, 1970   | 90  |
| 4.3. | Livestock and human populations in Lesotho, 1921–76   | 91  |
| 4.4. | Distribution of livestock, Phuthiatsana and Thaba Tseka, 1976   | 92  |
| 4.5. | Economic profile of three groups of tax-payers, Qacha's Nek, 1934   | 93  |
| 4.6. | Distribution of rural household income in rands per annum (R), by source of income, income strata and mean household size, Phuthiatsana and Thaba Tseka, 1975–6           | 95  |
| 6.1. | Marital transactions: their cumulative significance   | 124 |
| 6.2. | Average earnings and the average market price of cattle, selected years 1936–74   | 130 |



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10709-9 - Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho

Colin Murray

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Tables*

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| 6.3. Details of a single dowry, Ha Molapo, 1974   | 133 |
| 6.4. Recorded transactions in Puseletso's marriage, Ha Molapo   | 134 |
| 7.1. Distribution of paid employees, Ha Molapo, by size of household and sex of household head, October 1974 and October 1978 | 155 |

**Figures**

|   |       |
|---|-------|
| 1.1. A map of Lesotho, showing relief, district administrative headquarters and approximate areas of fieldwork  | 2     |
| 1.2. A graph showing net exports/imports of maize, Lesotho, 1890–1970, based on a 5-year rolling average  | 18    |
| 1.3. Geographical sources of black labour (TEBA), 1970–8  | 32    |
| 1.4. A map of the labour reserves: Lesotho and the South African Bantustans (1969)  | 33    |
| 2.1. Distribution of Lesotho population (1966) by sex, residential status and age cohorts 15–59   | 40    |
| 2.2. Schematic representation of absentees, migrant labourers and paid employees identified as <i>de jure</i> members of a reference rural community in Lesotho | 52    |
| 2.3. A histogram showing the frequency distribution of 150 households (Y-axis) by number of <i>de jure</i> household members (X-axis)                           | 54    |
| 2.4. Household 172  | 57    |
| 2.5. Household 117  | 59    |
| 2.6. Household 130  | 61    |
| 3.1. The nineteen principal and ward chieftainships held by the 'Sons of Moshoeshoe'  | 68    |
| 5.1. Household 140  | 111   |
| 6.1. Household 120  | 132   |
| 6.2. A question of paternity  | 134   |
| 6.3. Marrying a mother-with-child   | 136   |
| 7.1. Histograms showing distribution of male and female household heads, Ha Molapo, by age cohorts and presence/absence, October 1974 and October 1978          | 156   |
| 7.2. Household 142  | 161   |
| 7.3. The three houses of Phiri  | 163   |
| A.1. The Thapelo family   | 178   |
| A.3. The Letlala <i>letlapa</i> , Ha Molapo   | 192–3 |

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10709-9 - Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho

Colin Murray

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## 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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10709-9 - Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho

Colin Murray

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*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 Sesotho 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,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10709-9 - Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho

Colin Murray

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*Preface*

and to whose officers I am indebted for their unfailing courtesy and practical assistance; and the Research Fund of the London School of Economics, which made possible a brief visit to Lesotho in 1978.

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

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10709-9 - Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho

Colin Murray

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## 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 *š* is an aspirated *s*: thus, *matšelis*o (consolation, indemnity) in the Lesotho orthography is written *matshediso* in the South African orthography. (4) A *th* is an aspirated *t* 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.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10709-9 - Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho

Colin Murray










Frontmatter

[More information](#)*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     |

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10709-9 - Families Divided: The Impact of Migrant Labour in Lesotho

Colin Murray

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## 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    | <i>Chronicles of Basutoland</i> (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                  |
| NCOLA | 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    |