

KOMA, THUTO AND 19TH CENTURY BASOTHO'S REFUSAL TO CHOOSE BETWEEN THE TWO: A REMARKABLE INSTANCE OF INTERCULTURAL ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

African postcolonial theological reflections presuppose and regularly demonstrate the ethnocentric naiveté and arrogance which pervaded the thought and conduct of otherwise well-intentioned Euro-American Christian missionaries of especially the 19th century. But in their commendable struggle to affirm and empower the once marginalized, such historical reviews generally proceed on the basis of subversive rereading's of literatures produced by those 'culprits'; this keeps the latter at the centre of the discourse whilst simultaneously perpetuating the lamentable historical state of the side-lined. But what happens if yesteryear's intercultural interactions are explored on the basis of writings composed by voices from the margins? Specifically, how are binaries like 'centre' and 'margins' affected in such instances? This paper argues that where mutually critical engagement obtains, benefits accrue to all concerned; it takes its lead from a piece written to launch *Leselinyana la Lesotho* by one pioneer mid-nineteenth century Mosotho writer.

Keywords: 19th century Basotho, intercultural engagement, *Leselinyana la Lesotho*, missionary instruction, Filemon Rapetloane

INTRODUCTION

Generalizations follow after and/or presuppose exposure to and interaction with an Other about whom such sweeping submissions can then tolerably be made. By seeking to order and simplify perceived reality, generalizations prove to be an indirect admission that reality is in fact far more complex than the oversimplifications imply. In other words, a generalization's utmost significance lies in its role as an invitation to look deeper, an encouragement to peel off layers upon layers of the Other's (as well as layers of the Self's) "culturally bound and culturally defined common sense" (LeBaron 2003:n.p.). By presupposing some interaction between entities, generalizations also serve as guideposts meant to make future engagements more predictable, more manageable or, at the very least, less awkward. So, sweeping observations are crutches first, and may serve only secondarily as weapons of mass denigration. That is to say, one who believes that s/he has grasped another's defining qualities tends also, in subsequent engagements, to seek to use "that understanding to one's own advantage" (Rogoveanu 2010:14).

To answer the question why an advantage should so desperately be sought during intercultural exchanges as well as among students of cultures, we turn to another generalization: "most of the ways of studying culture, communication and negotiation are derived largely from Western concepts" and/or Western "cultural assumptions" (LeBaron 2003). That culture's intellectual assumptions prominently include the overwhelming desire to explain, predict and control the Other; this is *its* common sense. It is a common sense inspired by a

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strong sense of Self as distinct from (and thus superior to) the Other, if we may linger on in the world of generalities:

Before an object, the European distinguishes the object from himself, keeps it at a distance. He dissects, and somehow kills the object. This is in order to make use of it; to make a means of the object... The African on the other hand does not form distance, he does not analyse the object. Rather, with his inner being he discovers the Other. He is more faithful to the stimulus of the object. He is at one with its rhythm. (Oguejiofor 2005:87-88, paraphrasing Leopold Senghor)

The foregoing bold claims serve only to indicate general tensions pertaining to the interlocutors here under investigation and thus do not warrant extensive critique. Furthermore, ongoing engagements with one another have enabled a continuous give and take which benefits all concerned. On the one hand, the African has come to appreciate her innate analytical capacity, while on the other the European has been empowered to recover an appreciation of the sacredness of nature and its rhythms (see e.g. Sanneh 1995). Consequently, it is now fairly self-evident among observers that One's common sense cannot automatically be an-Other's. Common sense is neither universal nor common, thanks to local exigencies and cultural tastes. As Catherine Belsey (1980:3) illuminates, "common sense itself is ideologically and discursively constructed, rooted in a specific historical situation and operating in conjunction with a particular social formation"; which is to say "that the 'obvious' and the 'natural' are not given but produced in a specific society by the ways in which that society talks and thinks about itself and its experience."

And nowhere does a society's self-perception come sharply into focus than when it encounters an-Other who does not palpably share its common sense. It is at such encounters

where the quest for some advantage manifests almost as a kneejerk reaction. Such a situation developed when the PEMS (Paris Evangelical Mission Society) missionaries came to work among the Basotho from 1833 onward. Their possession of literacy alongside several other portentous contraptions afforded them serious advantage over their Basotho counterparts; after all, it was for access to such implements that the Basotho had actively sought out their own missionaries. While these powerful implements were presented as incompatible with what had priorly obtained among the Basotho, the Basotho insisted nevertheless that the overriding framework wherein these artefacts are appropriated must be that of Sesotho worldview and institutions. It is because of such sustained engagements – and the article read at length below is a great example of such – that Sesotho Christianity evolved in ways that neither party could have fully anticipated.

Expatriate missionaries' ways were dubbed *thuto* ('instruction'), while the Basotho's age-old cultural fortress of *koma* ('initiation') became the cultural framework within which *thuto* had come to operate. Our present interest concerns how these two competing perspectives conceptualized the notion of 'truth'. Our exploration is guided by the leading article of the Sesotho newspaper which came into being some thirty years into the sustained encounter. *Leselinyana la Lesotho* (The Little Light of Lesotho) is the name given to this pioneer newspaper which continues to be published to this day. (For detailed background to, inter alia, *thuto*, *koma* and *Leselinyana* see Tshehla 2009.)

The discussion retains relevance for African life and thought partly because of Christianity's ongoing influence in this broad geographical context and partly also because both religio-cultural worlds continue to shape Basotho's Christian self-under-

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standing. A brief background about nineteenth-century Basotho and the dynamics shaping their world will be followed by a close reading of Filemone Rapetloane's article which was written and published in *Leselinyana's* launch issue.

MOSHOESHOE'S BASOTHO COME INTO LITERATE SELF-EXPRESSION

"The Basotho as a people coalesced after 1824 from at least thirty different groups of refugees, Bushmen, and hitherto independent chiefdoms" (Epprecht 2000:15); add Asians and Caucasians to Africans from near and far, you will then get the distinctive landlocked Kingdom of Lesotho. Because King Moshoeshoe took advantage of displacements of peoples due to wars, "identification with Moshoeshoe's polity was built not around language or culture, but through recognition of allegiance to him" (Manson, Mbenga and Peires 2007:133). The greatest challenge the Basotho faced came from the Voortrekkers; unending conflict with these led to Moshoeshoe 'opting' for or succumbing to colonialism.¹

But this happened after the Basotho King had explored a different route whereby to secure his nascent nation. He perceived the *baruti* (European missionaries) as perfect brokers between his people and the hostile encroachers from the south. Thanks to Moshoeshoe's foresight and initiative, the so-called Great Trek of the mid-1830s was anticipated by the 1833 arrival of the PEMS missionaries among the Basotho.

¹ The eventual "acceptance of colonialism by the Sotho represented a compromise: British protection in return for a limited territorial integrity. It was a more desirable option than incorporation into the Orange Free State. That the kingdom survived in the face of white expansion, taxation, labour demands, and internal stress caused by tension between chiefs and commoners is an extraordinary achievement." (Manson, Mbenga and Peires 2007:154)

And the founding Basotho King so sagaciously managed relations that “notwithstanding this nakedly utilitarian objective, and in spite of Moshoeshoe’s resolute refusal to convert, the PEMS soon came to regard Moshoeshoe as a leader and the Basotho as a people for whom they were willing to take considerable diplomatic risks” (Epprecht 2000:30).

One of the many reasons why the *baruti* could not resist the Basotho concerns the latter’s generosity of spirit, especially with regard to who can be regarded a Mosotho, a designation that remains traversable from the nation’s inception to date.² Thus embraced by a people who were faithful to the PEMS stimulus and rhythm, these expatriates proceeded to set up Christian instruction which had literacy as its distinguishing non-negotiable component. It is thanks to that emphasis on literacy that we can have writings from indigenous Basotho hands during the period prior to full-blown colonialism. Even if missionary supervision hovers over such writings (Kunene 1977), there is a sense in which “Africans were in control” (West 2008:42) especially in relation to mastery of the local tongue.

It follows then that engaging mother tongue self-expressions should shed light into how the natives perceived and negotiated the developments of their day far better than relying on second-hand representations of these interlocutors which fill missionary and colonial ledgers. Mediated indigenous “control” (West 2008:45) derived from second or third-hand ac-

² Like their founding paramount, the Basotho are so generous of spirit that, in the interest of *Botho (Ubuntu)* they regularly confer *Bosotho* (Sothoness) on others. As Professor Setiloane’s dated phraseology has it (1976:21): “The words ‘MoSotho’ and ‘Motho’ [Human Being] may be used inter-changeably, implying that ... and without any suggestion of superiority to other men, ‘MoSotho’ is humankind.”

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counts (e.g. West 2003; Magomba 2004) tends to get restricted to chiefs' decisions whether or not children or women may be instructed, whether and where the missionary may reside among the people, which of the topics that the missionary broaches will be afforded an audience, which artefacts will be exchanged with the explorer, trader or missionary, and so forth.³

Direct access, on the other hand, is much more revealing of the intricate nuances with which people's thinking and convictions are expressed, nuances which reported speech often cannot successfully convey. Having been produced on the basis of concepts loaded with Sesotho world's meanings, the Bible could not but be brought to bear on questions pertaining to cultural matters, in particular those matters which the expatriate instructors found unpalatable. Possessing an 'open' Bible in the precolonial period, therefore, in addition to enjoying the space to express their thoughts around life's issues via the medium of their mother tongue in such places as *Leselinyana*, became important features which conferred on literate Basotho some meaningful hermeneutical 'control' (West 2008). Thus armed with the Sesotho text of the Bible as well as with Sesotho literacy, Moshoeshoe's Basotho enjoyed a significant measure of hermeneutical independence from their missionary instructors as we see anon.

It was still a qualified freedom because, inter alia, *Leselinyana's* editor regularly asserted his power to reject pieces

³ Here the overriding perspective is that of the expatriate missionary. Here the expatriate reporter offers the Bible as *the* solution to Basotho problems, but the people are inexplicably drawn more to his gun and other more pertinent implements. The concession then becomes inescapable that local African communities had no significant power over a "closed, un-translated, bible"; and, actually, that "it was only with the advent of the bible in local vernaculars that the bible passed from the hands of the missionaries into the hands of the local African communities." (West 2008:43)

whose content was either incorrigible or illegible, to edit those which were salvageable, and to 'trim' lengthy pieces as well as 'elucidate' opaque submissions. The editor's control extended even to how authors were acknowledged; the earliest authors generally go unstated and in places some inscrutable initials or symbols are used to designate authorship. This practice meant that we shall remain uncertain about especially the local African authorship of some pieces. But students of early literatures are not untrained in how to deal with anonymity, pseudonymity and such other authorial larks.

Given the above challenges as well as the abundance of secondary representations of nineteenth century Basotho, the writings we are certain have come from Basotho hands thus become precious gems. Prioritizing such writings seeks neither to undermine the value of oral history nor to imply that these few neoliterates enjoyed a comprehensive grasp of, and were therefore the most qualified to represent, their generations' views on the subjects of our interest. Rather, it is fundamentally only a concession that individual members of each cultural group have the right to express their thoughts either as individually held or as supposedly typical of their group. There is something about the might of the pen which confers on various 'graphers' the passion for persuasion as well as for representation. However, the eagerness to speak or write on behalf of the collective is a double-edged sword,⁴ even one that in postcolonial contexts may not be so easily jettisoned.⁵ Accordingly, we may graciously accept, albeit always with a pinch of salt, individual projections as windows to

⁴ "In pretending to speak for Africans in general, ethnophilosophers indeed speak for themselves. It is [a] clear instance of presenting one's own interpretation of one's cultural symbols as a collective interpretation" (Oguejiofor 2005:83). And what is true of ethnophilosophy applies to other fields of inquiry wherein Africans expend their energies, including the present exercise.

⁵ "The history of the people of Africa leaves in its wake, both a psychological

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the collective mood. That is the sober awareness we bring to our exploration of *Leselinyana's* leading piece which was penned by Ntate Filemone Rapetloane with the chief goal of introducing and commending the newspaper to southern Africa's natives.

NTATE RAPETLOANE

At the time of writing the piece discussed below, Rapetloane worked as Adolphe Mabile's right hand man at Morija. In this capacity he had already assisted with the translation into Setsotho of both the Old Testament and *The Pilgrim's Progress* among various *thuto* tools. He had earlier been considerably more hands-on with various mission activities, but

While helping to place the new roof on the church he had fallen and been hurt rather seriously. Since he was incapacitated for other work, Mabile took him into the school. So infirm that sometimes he had to lie upon his back while teaching, and quite untrained though he was, Filemone was zealous and faithful and for many years rendered good service. Mr. and Mrs. Mabile gave him lessons out of school hours and in return he helped Mr. Mabile in his literary work. (Smith 1939:125)

That in a nutshell is what has survived about Rapetloane; we owe Smith a good deal of debt for this detail even though the image he conveys is of one to be pitied more than celebrated – an incapacitated, untrained man who was taken in by a kind-hearted couple that paid him through lessons for his assistantship in their important work. Though explicable from

burden of inferiority complex and the physical burden of underdevelopment on the Africans. The burden, reinforced and exacerbated by colonialism and missionary evangelism of all sorts, was accompanied by a real doubt of the humanity of the Africans..." (Oguejiofor 2005:83-84). Hopefully things have changed and Africans now understand themselves as human beings with own thoughts and culturally determined common sense, at liberty to describe the world and their experience of it as they see fit.

the perspective of the power relations of the time, it is nonetheless still cause for concern that we should lack so much else that we take for granted vis-à-vis his contemporaries (e.g. birthdate, birthplace, name of life companion, etc.) in connection with this important Mosotho evangelist.⁶ However, we know indubitably that Rapetloane was Mabile's more than competent assistant who, though crippled, continued to prove his worth as a school teacher, printing assistant, as well as translation consultant.

What we lack in biographical detail about Rapetloane gets made up for in the skill with which he presented his 03 November 1863 piece on the front page of *Leselinyana's* launch edition. This article competently instructs us in the social and religious issues with which his generation were occupied. Furthermore, it displays his exceptional abilities as a teacher, consultant, writer and thinker of note. He belonged to that earliest generation of literate Basotho writer, which also was predominantly male (concerted efforts to instruct Basotho girls took off principally in the 1870s, Epprecht 2000:35). How things have changed, with the face of literacy in present-day Lesotho being female; literacy rates among the latter edge those observable among the males 95% to 75% respectively.

We do well to keep in mind the reality that it is thanks to contributions such as Rapetloane's that *Leselinyana* could subsequently stake the claim of being "one of Africa's most venerable weekly newspapers" (Epprecht 2000:32). His commendable blend of Sesotho's oral and literary qualities set the

⁶ It is now common cause that, "as a rule, the most striking achievement of nineteenth-century missionaries was not the conversion of individual Africans but the introduction of agricultural techniques such as irrigation and ploughing, the inculcation of literacy, and the dispensing of rudimentary Western medicines. The most successful evangelists were African Christians themselves." (Giliomee 2007:100)

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tone on which subsequent debaters could build. As shall soon become self-evident, he persuasively engages several interest groups in this fairly brief article. The employment of direct and reported speech, the sympathetic oscillation between *thuto's* and *koma's* rhetoric, the self-identification with as well as the critical distance from fellow-Basotho and their customs, all these manoeuvres render his piece a well of insight into how nineteenth century Basotho understood and negotiated the gospel as presented through predominantly western lenses. He both conceptualized and wrote in his mother tongue, this enabled him to speak persuasively as an authentic Mosotho.

Working from a strong local linguistic base, Filipino scholars dub *pantayo* the discourse directed at promoting self-understanding among members of a group; and the discourse directed at helping outsiders develop a better understanding of the group they style *pangkami* (Curaming 2016:68). Having practically no colonial baggage to contend with, unlike say *Pantayong Pananaw*, Rapetloane is able to blend both the 'From-Us For-Us' and the 'From-Us For-You' modes. He is then able to commend Christian faith along with its attendant artefacts to the Basotho while also elucidating the pertinence of established Basotho customs to Christian faith. His piece both illustrates and challenges his fellow-Basotho on the one hand, and expatriate missionaries on the other, to engage each other "based on how well they have made use of their respective sets of practices/institutions that are attuned to their own environment or values" (Curaming 2016:69) instead, that is, of blindly imposing their own cultural standards on the Other. Perhaps it is best at this juncture to defer to Rapetloane's own turn of phrase; my English rendition of it being counterbalanced by the original Sesotho text for the benefit of those who can work from the latter.

KOMA, THUTO, NNETE: AN INTRIGUING INTERACTION

Basotho ba ma'nete a koma, bohoholo mona re leng teng, ho bo ho thoe ke hole-hole, Phetla; ho no ho tsotoe Mohlomi ha a fihla teng. Lea tseba hore ha Tjhaka, le Bopeli, le Mabutsoanyaneng, le Tlokweg, le Kholokoe, le Basieng, le Khalahali, ebe eka ke pheletsong ya lefatše. Ya tsoang tjabeng tseo ebe e le sebatso, e le setsoto, ho thoe, "O tswa koo-koo."

True and dependable Basotho! Long, long ago, this place where we now reside, used to be called 'Far, far away, over at Quthing'. It was such a marvel when Mohlomi travelled this far. As you know, Shaka's land, Bopedi, Mabutswanyaneng, Botlokwa, Kgolokwe, Basieng, Kalahari — all those places seemed like the ends of the earth. Whoever came from those regions was a spectacle, a marvel admirably referred to as 'One from over yonder'.

In these opening lines, Rapetloane adroitly orients us to the dynamics which were at play in the interface. The opening phrase, *Basotho ba ma'nete a koma*, here rendered *true and dependable Basotho*, addresses *Leselinyana* readers as only an authentic Mosotho could. Some postures are ingrained from childhood through both active and passive enculturation. Knowing full well that only a small fraction of Basotho can read and write, Rapetloane nevertheless directs his words towards the entire nation, towards all who can be regarded true and dependable Basotho. In other words, he takes it for granted that those Basotho who are armed with literacy do indeed take pride in mediating written messages to their unlettered relatives and fellow natives. In a word, literacy does not, for him, qualify or disqualify anyone from being culturally

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authentic, so to speak. By framing his address along these lines he thus renders *Leselinyana* an insider, a fellow-Mosotho, a fellow-pursuer of truthful being.

Rapetloane addresses the hearers of *Leselinyana* contents just as a cultured Mosotho man would address any august *pitso*. *Pitso*'s were gatherings regularly convened to discuss developments of public interest to the polity. The *pitso* tradition had ensured that no Mosotho could happily be disinterested in the goings on of his/her day, and that whoever had access news should share it with fellows. Wherever a naïve neoliterate might have entertained inward-looking ideas of private literacy, the community's ardent demands for the public use of his/her literacy skills eventually made such a dream unrealizable. On the other hand, those who used their literacy to keep fellow Basotho informed show themselves to be true and dependable Basotho.

But Rapetloane is not merely buying the face of those he naturally hopes will buy and enthusiastically engage this pioneer Sesotho newspaper. *The koma* through which he qualifies genuine Basotho represents the age-old Sesotho institution by the possession of which men are distinguished from boys, women from girls. At the traditional initiation school (*lebollo*) Basotho youth are taught *likoma* (sacred lyrics) whose function is to preserve and communicate age-old truths reserved only for the initiated. Before the advent of Christian missions, mastery of *likoma* functioned as the ultimate qualifier of a true and dependable Mosotho. Furthermore, as a cultural institution, *koma* bound generations of Basotho to both their rulers (as loyal regiments) and their ancestors (as grateful heirs and custodians of tradition and custom). Armed with *likoma*, initiates could be presumed schooled in the best of Basotho folklore/history, customs/ways and values/ethics.

Among such “circumcision songs”, elucidates Mabafokeng Makara (2002:38), we find for instance “those that narrate the origins of the Basotho.” A true Mosotho is one who knows from where s/he has come; s/he is de facto a dependable ambassador of Sesotho heritage. For *the* Basotho a person cannot speak truthfully if s/he does not draw on *likoma*. The latter comprise the framework within which truth finds ultimate expression. This is perhaps the reason why *likoma* are terribly inscrutable to the uninitiated, in a manner that is surely reminiscent of Jesus’ instruction to *not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces.* Whether this impenetrability is the reason behind the institution’s survival is not so farfetched a supposition.

Basotho sacred songs known as *likoma* or *lifela* (hymns) are a good example of African cultural elements which have managed to retain their purity amidst many missionaries’ attempts to either trivialize or mock them. Although these are, as we have said, the best sources in as far as tracing genuine African religious thought is concerned, a serious problem is encountered when one has to find and analyze those which are shrouded in secrecy such as those associated with initiation in the case of Basotho. (Rakotsoane 2001:n.p.)

Francis Rakotsoane’s reference to expatriate missionaries’ hostility towards the ‘mountain school’ is on point. Whereas *lebollo* and its *likoma* had always sufficed as a veritable guarantee of a Mosotho’s authenticity, *thuto* was presented as a fervent rival seeking to oust *likoma*. The white teachers regarded *likoma* as one of the bastions of heathenism and backwardness among the Basotho,⁷ this being a reaction un-

⁷ Emille Rolland, who, having been born in Lesotho, was fluent in most things Sesotho, regarded *lebollo* as “the starting point and mainstay of heathenism”

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derstandably informed in good measure by *likoma's* impenetrability. Battle lines were drawn in *Leselinyana's* second issue (March 01, 1864) where the editor tells of a massively successful function held to celebrate the four Morija schools' performances during the previous academic year. The community happily donated livestock and various other food items for the fete. Schoolchildren from neighbouring towns were also invited, and they observed Morija school-children being quizzed by their confident instructors in front of all who were in attendance. Then,

...Batho ba nna ba makala, ha ba utloa kamoo bana ba hlalefisitsoeng ka Evangeli le ka ntho tse ngata. Ba abeloa libuka, le matlapa, le mesebetsana e meng, e mong le mong kamoo a sebelitseng; e le teboho ya hore ba tsoele pele, ba tle ba finyelle moo moputso wa bona o bolokiloeng teng; moputso oo ke Jeso. Ha jeoa le lijo, ha khora bana, ha ba ha khora le ba baholo; e seng majakane feela, le bahetene ba ne ba le bangata. Ba tloha ba maketse ha ba utloa tsa lebollo le sa patoeng; joalekaha la bona molao o moholo

...And the people were amazed at how the Gospel had enlightened their children. Prizes distributed included books, slates, and other useful works. This was done in order to encourage them to strive even more to attain the true reward hidden in those works; that reward is Jesus. Everyone had their fill of the food provided, not just the converts, but the heathens too who had come in their numbers. As the people left they displayed amazement at this secret-free initiation school. Theirs, as you know, its number one

as well as "the school of Satan". To him it was "the grand corrupting and seductive influence in the country." (Machobane 2001:44-50)

oa lona e leng “Le seke la li bolela hae, e tla ba le ngalohile”....

Hoja le ka baka ho 'na le isa bana ba lona sekolong sa bohata, se molao oa sona o moholo o reng, le seke la di beha hae, na ho patoa life? Ha le tsebe le lona hore hloho ya lebollo la banna le basadi e se e tsejoa le ke ngoana oa letsoele? ...sekolo ke lebollo la nnete....

rule is: “Not to be repeated at home! Otherwise you’d be regarded a deserter!”....

Oh Basotho, if only you would stop sending your children to that false school, the one whose principal virtue is secrets! Don’t you realize that even a suckling infant knows what is taught at your mountain school? ...the mission school, now that is the true initiation school....

Basotho parents were supposed to choose whether to send their children to the mission school or the mountain school, to parochial knowledge hidden in sacred songs from uncountable generations (*koma*) or to universal knowledge hidden in books accessed through initiation to literacy (*thuto*). As far as *thuto*’s proponents were concerned, it could never be both; it had to be either/or. In reality though, and to the instructors’ ire, Basotho parents generally chose both. With their actions, they deliberately treated the pseudo-antagonism presented to them as a non-starter. Needless to say, many ultimatums went unheeded, and many representations to the chiefs for cooperation against *likoma* proved fruitless. It was difficult for the Basotho to see what the fuss was about. As a result, the *koma* discourse continued to pervade even literate Sesotho expressions.

For Rapetloane, as for many other Basotho, the antagonism was misguided and uncalled for. So he makes a point to elicit

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the culturally loaded '*nete ea koma* (*koma* truth) on the front page of the launch issue of a mission newspaper whose supreme purpose was to spread *thuto's 'nete ea Evangeli* (Gospel truth). In this regard, Rapetloane's conscious self-identification with Sesotho heritage unapologetically designates him a true and dependable Mosotho. Both 'truths', as it were, forged a harmonious coexistence in the world of nineteenth century Basotho whose voice Rapetloane bravely radiates. That their descendants continue to struggle with such issues is an unfortunate disclosure of their own ignorance as heirs of a proud and culturally sound Christian heritage. In thus making *Leselinyana* to speak in authentic Sesotho idiom, Rapetloane achieved for this newspaper an unprecedented coup among black southern Africans. Here was space for one and all to express themselves in their own authentic native dialect! The 'Basotho' being addressed needed no other form of self-identification than competence in native cultural custom and parlance, regardless of specific mother tongue.

Two more items from Rapetloane's opening lines deserve fleeting comment before turning to the rest of his article; they are 'Mohlomi' and 'the ends of the earth'. Unblushing mention of Chief Mohlomi achieves a few more spectacular effects for Rapetloane. Mohlomi was the young Moshoeshoe's inimitable mentor, secured at the request and foresight of the young royal's father, Chief Mokhachane. In mentioning this legendary mentor, therefore, Rapetloane is both recognizing and saluting the Basotho Paramountcy. Aside from mentoring the most famous Mosotho ever, Mohlomi was also a renowned diviner, traveller (explorer) and collector of wisdoms from near and far; all these exploits earned him pride of place *even* in missions history as a "religious and political reformer" (Walls 1998:475). Through moulding the young Moshoeshoe,

Mohlomi's influence on the evolution of Sesotho culture and self-understanding was thus cemented.

For instance, *inter alia*, whereas Basotho long practiced cousin marriage, Mohlomi is credited with making a systematic case for the practice of marrying outside one's immediate clan (Gill 1993:59–61). According to Thoahlane (1978:5) in relation to Morena Mokheseng, also known as Ratladi, the practice of marrying beyond one's immediate relatives was not unknown among the Basotho. But it was Chief Mohlomi who weaved some significantly elaborate and systematic reasoning around its benefits. If you add polygyny into the mix, as Rapetloane does shortly, then you find a model which the Basotho applied even to spiritual matters: take one from closer home, another from over there, a couple more from further still—having meaningful alliances from as wide a range of 'places' as possible is sure to come in handy during times of upheaval. It is not hard to imagine how frustrating this turned out to be for the *baruti* who needed their converts to choose one way or the other. Informed in part by this logic, Moshoeshoe's refusal to convert on missionary terms remains to this very day a thorn in the flesh of both Protestant and Catholic missions to Lesotho (see e.g. Gill 1993:93; Ellenberger 1933:21).

Lastly, the phrase 'the ends of the earth' is also pregnant. Through it Rapetloane intimates to his fellow-natives that the world of true and dependable Basotho is now much larger than it once was. It used to be a marvel to encounter fellow-natives who spoke different languages and exhibited unfamiliar customs. But it has now become evident that there are other races too on this earth outside of the brown one.⁸ Towards all these the Basotho should adopt an attitude akin to

⁸ The noun *sotho* denotes the shade 'brown'; the tag 'Basotho' used to be

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Mohlomi's, namely, open-mindedness. And, inevitably, from Basotho these other peoples too can also learn as intercultural exchanges unfold.

It is *Leselinyana's* incalculable privilege, then, to aid Rapetloane's contemporaries with the transition into this unbound world. And although space constraints here prohibit the unpacking of every allusion and reference, making available the entire piece in both Sesotho and English should at least enable interested others to continue decoding its loaded nuances.

ENTER GOD'S WORD

Joale ha hlaha faqane, ea qhalanya batho, merabe ea teana, le borena ba eba bong ba Lesotho lohle. Joale ha hlaha sethunya, ke hore Bakhothu; ba 'na ba napa batho joaleka liphoofole. Ha ntoo fihla baruti kamorao, ba tliša thuto, eaka ba tla e le setlhare; athe ho joalo, setlhare ke lentsoe la Molimo. Ntoa tsa ka tsa re nya; ha khutloa le Makhooeng, ha boa le Bokone ke Basotho. Makhooeng ba tla le khomo le puli le nku le pere le

Then calamity arose. It scattered people. Nations intermingled. Lesotho's rulership got consolidated. Then the gun appeared, i.e., the Koranna. They took people down as though they were shooting animals. Next came baruti, bringing thuto, coming as though they were a medicine. And yes it is so; the medicine is God's word. Then wars ceased. Basotho even returned from Makgwoeng as well as from Bokone. From Makgwoeng they brought with them cattle, goats, sheep, horses and

applied generically to all people with 'brown skin'. It only acquired its narrower scope following the work of ethnographers and colonial agents decades after Rapetloane.

sethunya, motho a bile a na le mosali le bana. Ra re, “Jae! Le tsoa jaka ho joang le tlang le sheshekile mehlape?” Ba re “Tjhee! Ke khotso ea teng, ho lefshoa motho ka khomo, a thotsoe. Ebile ra reka lipere le lithunya ka masela.”

‘Me nka bala ka reng? Basotho, a re nkeng ka thabo Leselinyana la Lesotho!

Sethoto: Le thusing?

Bohlale: O rata koro le peipe, o hana litaba!

Sethoto: Ke tsa eng, tsa pasa?

Bohlale: Bothotho efela e le lefu.

Leselinyana la Lesotho la ba fetola la re: Le tsekang, Sethoto le Bohlale? Nna ke tla amoheloa khotla, ha Ramohato, eena ea buang ka lengolo,

guns. Some even had wives and children. We said, ‘Wow, on what manner of sojourn have you been, returning now as you do driving flocks?’ They replied, ‘Well, that’s the kind of peace which exists over there; where people are remunerated in cattle. We even bought horses and guns and all manner of cloth.’

What more should I recount? Dear Basotho, let us gladly receive Leselinyana la Lesotho.

Ignoramus: What does it help?

Wisdom: Pshaw, you love wheat, and the pipe, but you refuse news!

Ignoramus: News about pass documents?

Wisdom: Folly sure is death.

Then Leselinyana la Lesotho answered them and said: ‘What are you two quarrelling about? I shall be welcomed at

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ea rui loeng ke mofu-
mahali oa Makhooa,
eo ba buisanang le
yena ka marife. Ke
tla ba sephatho
khotla ha Letsie, le
serethe ha Molapo,
le tlhakoana ha
Masopha; Mopeli
eena a tibe ka tlhako
joaleka pitsi, ha a
mpona. Sekhonyana
a re: "Ke be ke sa ri-
alo." Ke re ho
Mabeoana a boQadi,
a ha Tsholo ho ka
hlokoa koranta, ho
se ho teoa le mosili;
ke thabeloe le ke bo-
rametse le metsana
bohle, ke bonese ka
leseinyana la ka ha
Mokoteli. Ho balu-
meli ebe monyaka.
Hape le re ke fihla ka
life? Tjhee! Ke na le
tabanyana tsa
mafatshe a mang;
hape ke ho le
hopotsa tsa 'Mopi oa
lona, wa Makhooa, le
oa litjhabatjhaba.

Lumelang! Ke nna,
Leselinyana la Leso-
tho. Tabana ea ka ke
ena.

the palace, at Ra-
mohato's place, the very
one who communicates
through letters. He en-
joys the protection of the
Queen of the whites,
with whom he con-
verses through letters. I
shall be to Letsie like his
sephatho, to Molapo a
serethe as well; just as
to Masopha too I shall
be a tlhakwana. Mopeli
will skip like a horse
when he sees me. Sek-
gonyana in turn will say,
"That's what I'm talking
about." To Qadi's
Mabeoana, Tsholo, I will
say, "How can people
who now grind gunpow-
der lack a newspaper?"
All the headmen and el-
ders will welcome me; I
will enlighten Mokoteli's
domain with my little
light. Great joy will come
to believers. You ask
what I come bearing.
Well, I have news per-
taining to various na-
tions. I have come to re-
mind you about your
Creator, who is also the
Creator of the whites,
and of all other nations.
Greetings! I am Leselin-
yana la Lesotho. And
that is what I am about.'

Leselinyana will disseminate information among the Basotho, but it will not shy away from the tougher issues of life. The Basotho it envisages have as much to give as to receive. Editorial touch-ups notwithstanding, Rapetloane can most certainly not be accused of either shirking controversial questions or capitulating to expatriate instructors' tastes. So much more than a mere bricoleur, he is a genuine creator and pioneer within Sesotho literature. Sesotho writings in existence at that point in time were Sesotho books of the Bible, a Sesotho translation of the *Pilgrim's Progress*, a Sesotho hymnbook; the remainder were non-Sesotho texts. His article's peerless quality is thus accentuated by the fact that it had hardly any Sesotho precedent after which to be modelled. And it is neither timid submission nor deceptive conformism, Rapetloane was not given to "warily avoiding unpleasant questions both within and without the black world." (Du Bois 1903:13)

Rapetloane's second paragraph deals with a number of recent historical developments about which subsequent history books are replete. These include the *Lifacane* (or *Difaqane*), the advent of the gun (so much more effective than the spear), and Moshoeshoe's consolidation of several petty chiefdoms around the navel of South Africa into a formidable force consequently known as the Basotho. In a move that is definitely not loud flattery, Rapetloane recognizes the arrival of *Molimo's word* as the pinnacle development of those days. He concedes *baruti's* role as its agents, as bearers of the medicine they had wrapped with *thuto*. The effective medicine is *God's word*, which for him is distinguishable from both *baruti* and *thuto*. *Thuto* represents the Gospel as interpreted and propagated by the *baruti*. But *God's word* is the ultimate medicine that the Basotho required and to which they ultimately

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enjoy independent access. What is to stop God's word engaging *likoma* after the same manner that the Gospel's engagement with European cultural realities resulted in the *thuto* the *baruti* are propagating?

Rapetloane insists that credit for the cessation of wars and the welcome return of migrant labourers should go to the effectiveness of *Molimo's word*. He does not define it; but given the evangelical background of his teachers, it is not unreasonable to surmise that he means the Bible. This distinction between *Molimo's word* and its culture-bound carriers obviously applies to all missionaries, both black and white, both local and foreign. But in Rapetloane's day it cut more deeply into the white missionary's ego, for the latter was persuaded that 'civilization' as 'he' conceived it was supposed to be the norm for all peoples. True and dependable Basotho are of course free to assimilate what they find desirable from *thuto*. In the final analysis however, it is not *thuto* but *God's word* (independently accessible in the pages of the Sesotho Bible) which ought to be their authority and vital remedy!

Migrant labourers are able to return home because peace now prevails in Lesotho. Not even King Moshoeshoe, who is famed for considering peace to be his sister (Thoahlane 1978:33; Gill 1993:82-84; Ellenberger 1933:5-8; Khaketla (1947) 1954; Couzens 2003:89; Ambrose and Brutsch 1991:9), can claim sole agency for this prevailing stability. Peace prevails, Rapetloane underlines, because of the agency of *God's word*. Thanks to this peace, Lesotho will benefit from the diverse worldly goods and skills and implements which the returnees are bringing along with themselves. One of the things they picked up in *Makhoweng* (industrializing towns typified by white settlements) is the reality of newspapers; they have come to appreciate the value of being kept regularly abreast of developments both near and far. These

erstwhile migrants are thus expected by Rapetloane to be among the first people to embrace *Leselinyana la Lesotho*.

Leselinyana has come about in order to make it unnecessary for people to travel far in order to learn about world happenings. The respect which was accorded persons such as Chief Mohlomi before *Leselinyana*'s advent can now belong to all Basotho, provided that they let *Leselinyana* take them near and far without the treacherous hassle of physical travel. For these reasons, *Leselinyana* is confident that it will be as welcome in the King's courts as in the junior chiefs' homes. After all, King Moshoeshoe already enjoys the honor of being the first Mosotho 'author' (Willet and Ambrose 1980:xxiii) and a regular writer of letters to the British queen. Indeed, even beyond the royal households, *Leselinyana* will be welcomed among the various influential Basotho families, not least among whom are the believers themselves. For that specific reason, *Leselinyana* will not apologize for its religious content; after all there is only one Creator of all.

Several words in Rapetloane's piece defy translation. Case in point, *Leselinyana* presents itself to the heir-apparent, Prince Letsie, as a *sephatho*. Moshoeshoe was 79 years old when *Leselinyana* was launched, and so Letsie was increasingly the person through whom to influence the nations' direction. A *sephatho* is the chief's favorite person; the one to whom the royal is always likely to give an ear; an advisor, if you will. Such a person is clearly very influential and is often used by others to soften or harden the leader's heart around particular issues. Rapetloane presents *Leselinyana* as having been created to play this enviable role in the life of the king-in-waiting. That is the bold challenge put up to the Basotho royalty; a challenge which nevertheless affirms existing Sesotho cultural institutions as adequate tools for decoding *Evangelii*.

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Also, the junior princes Molapo and Masopha will gladly receive *Leselinyana* as their *serethe* and *tlhakoana* respectively. Having affirmed *koma* at the beginning of his piece, Rapetloane now concludes his article with approving references to polygyny. *Serethe* and *tlhakoana* are tags used for junior wives within polygamous families. In true *likoma* style, *serethe* (a heel) and *tlhakoana* (a small hoof) are simultaneously both doting and euphemistic. You can tell by the anatomical position of the body parts denoted that the female referents and their offspring will enjoy a lower status in regard to the family's affairs. Yet their value in propping up the family is undeniable. It seemed better for Basotho that consorts be known and formalized⁹ than that immense energy should be expended in entertaining them clandestinely. Rapetloane unapologetically offers *Leselinyana*—a Christian missionary newspaper of firm evangelical persuasion—in the capacity of a junior wife. The allusions are metaphorical of course, but they are affirming of the institutions being approvingly made mention of.

These approving mentions are made within a very charged mission context where polygyny was so frowned upon that even Morena Moshoeshe himself had to succumb to his believing wives' demands for divorce on grounds that Christianity is incompatible with polygamy. As against *koma*, Mabile was just as vociferous against *sethepu* (polygyny). So pas-

⁹ Once cattle have been exchanged, there can be no such thing as even a paternity dispute: "once a woman has been legally married it is impossible to speak of her children as illegitimate even where it is clear that they were not fathered by her legal husband." (Bereng 1987:66; cf. Epprecht 2000:16–26)

sionate was he that the entire May 1872 number of *Leselinyana*'s short-lived English sister newspaper, the *Little Light of Basutoland*, was made up of his one piece entitled "Cattle Marriage, I"; the treatise was continued in the subsequent two numbers. The crux of his Cattle Marriage series was that 'bride-price' encourages polygamy: "A polygamist who has sold a daughter to advantage" he concluded, "will always be able to purchase an additional wife with the proceeds, and parents attracted by the price offered, will always find ways and means of coercing the will of their daughters if necessary."

It was in the face of constant and consistent expatriate missionaries' sermons and teachings against the cultural institutions like *likoma* and *sethepu* that Rapetloane penned the telling piece we have just glanced. What a confident assertion of independent thought and honesty to self! What an example for posterity! The confidence he exhibits permeates even the last lines. "Mopeli will skip like a horse when he sees me. Sekhonyana in turn will say, 'That's what I'm talking about!'" And on he goes through the various prominent Basotho households and what they stand to gain by associating with *Leselinyana*.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In the foregoing review, we have witnessed a native writer stand toe-to-toe with his teachers and affirming his own cultural background as a legitimate ingredient of the melting pot that is Christianity. His writing style and content unabashedly confirm the following summation of nineteenth century Basotho appropriations of literacy: "From the very early missionary inspired fiction, the Sotho writers came up with the 'not so acceptable' ways of writing, since these were not according to Western tradition." (Moloi 1973:7)

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Thuto, if it is to have lasting local import, requires authentic local self-expression (authentic Sesotho in the present case) as much as it inexorably incorporates incoming customs. The wisdom of having a Mosotho pen *Leselinyana*'s leading piece has been vindicated. And the risks as well as opportunities involved in bringing Sesotho on board have been boldly illustrated in *Leselinyana*'s leading article. If this newspaper is to be about us and for us, says the Mosotho writer, then it will have to speak in tones and terms that are close to Basotho hearts. And *koma* resides at the heart of Sesotho identity as a guardian of (culturally informed) truth; it represents the people's accumulated collective wisdom and thought without which they would find it impossible to recognize themselves. *Leselinyana*, insists Rapetloane, is about truth, and truth is no respecter of persons even if it be discoverable only through culturally coloured eyes. *Koma*'s truth is not contrary to the truth of *Molimo*'s word, even if it may in places run counter to *thuto*'s truth. One seasoned missionary put it eloquently thus: "For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth" (2 Cor. 13:8, RSV). After all, he adds, the Creator of the Basotho is also the Creator of the whites and of everyone else.

It would seem from the foregoing reading of a single, non-reactionary and paradigmatic piece that nineteenth century Basotho had quietly and confidently grasped the truth of Christian faith as opposed to the intolerant ethnocentric version of cultural imperialism that often gets masqueraded as Christian faith. In the Basotho's understanding, the God's word works with and through, rather than by seeking to overhaul, the cultural common sense of its target audiences. In this way God's word can never be accused of ethnocentrism, only *thuto* is liable to that allegation. *Thuto* involves interpretation and application—the hermeneutical processes which

are vulnerable to ambitious cultural forces. This insight resonates even within postcolonial biblical hermeneutics (e.g. Sugirtharajah 2001:280)

The author's authentic articulation of truth amid an hostile context surely renders his truth more persuasive than a later reader's anachronistic appropriation thereof. Some attention has been drawn to factors that would have had a bearing on Rapetloane as he composed his piece. It emerged quite vividly that his own cultural background was the source par excellence of his conceptions and expressions. He could not have spoken in any other manner. He is a Mosotho Christian who is at once familiar with *likoma*; he is a Mosotho who receives, reads and grasps God's word through the cultural worldview of his upbringing. He is, most importantly, not seeking to impose but only to embrace and celebrate *Molimo's word* within the confines of his own cultural common sense. And what a refreshing and exemplary reception and application thereof.

The common sense of Rapetloane's world comes through even more persuasively because he did not need to compose his piece in French or English. Reading, writing and reflecting in one's mother tongue simply undercuts much of the cultural baggage that accrues to texts, whether hegemonic or otherwise, which are produced in an-Other's tongue. Without Sesotho contributions such as Rapetloane's for example, the PEMS missionaries might have continued to labour under the misguided notion that *thuto* is synonymous with *Evangelii*. In his Sesotho composition, what is obvious and natural to Rapetloane takes prominence over against *thuto's* common sense.

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By only scratching the surface of nineteenth century Lesotho discursive modes, I have here only sought to show that descendants of the erstwhile colonized have access to ample examples of their forebears' bold and creative manoeuvres in the face of powerful edifices. Rapetloane's piece is not apologetic and antagonistic or accusatory in any sense. It is creative in the best unencumbered sense of the term. Far from preaching 'a return to innocence' (some presumed state of perfect existence marred by the arrival of *thuto*), Rapetloane's piece encourages the postcolonial reader to pursue 'an embrace of authentic self' (with which *Molimo's word* is happy to engage).

Clearly, and in spite of the expatriate missionaries' critical gaze, Basotho ancestors have left behind impressive ways of thinking and articulating vis-à-vis life's various aspects. The obscure but significant nineteenth century Mosotho writer read herein is only one of many competent representatives of earliest generations of Basotho literates whose exertions can save present generations the toil of reinventing the wheel and of perpetuating misguided or dead-end rivalries. It is not simply a matter of 'We too have wise ancestors whose stories are worth rehearsing and learning from!' It is a necessary and ongoing quest for truth pursued through authentic lenses.

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