



INTRODUCTION TO THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF BASOTHO

Dr. Makateng Seetsa David

Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat-395007 (Gujarat, India).

Dr. Arun N. Pandya

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat-395007 (Gujarat, India).

Abstract:

This paper explores the foundational elements of the Basotho social structure, tracing its roots from the genesis of the Basotho tribe in the Middle East of Africa. Beginning with an exploration of the tribe's origins and migration history, it examines the formation and establishment of Basotho society and nation. The article delves into the historical context of the Basotho nation, highlighting the diverse clans and totemistic origins within it. The methodological approach primarily applied in this article is a descriptive research design supplemented by personal observations using secondary data. Through a comprehensive analysis, the study seeks to comprehend and synthesize the social fabric of Basotho society, focusing on key components such as marriage and the traditional education system, the institution of initiation (*Lebollo*). Furthermore, it underscores the significance of the political institution within Basotho society, emphasizing its role in maintaining social integration and stability. Ultimately, the paper underscores the crucial role of political foundations and regulations in upholding social cohesion and stability within Basotho society.

Key words: *Basotho; Social Structure; Clan, Totemism, Tribe; Lesotho*

Introduction

This study discusses institutional and cultural representations of the Basotho people, as well as structural sociological conceptualizations. Both visions determine the idea of social structure that consists of institutions that constitute the understanding of the social structure of Basotho society. Phafoli and Zulu (2012) proclaimed that anthropologists have studied about African society and have subscribed to few writings. Throughout the history, Basotho people are composed of many tribes all across Middle East of Africa and speak Sesotho¹. The term 'Sesotho' is a combination of language and culture of Basotho. Anthropological analysis has uncovered findings that help define Basotho society, with Makuebu (2025) noting a complete alienation from society; however, there remains a lack of scientific literature on the social structure of the Basotho in the Kingdom of Lesotho².

¹ Historically, Sesotho¹ was one of the first African languages to develop a written form, and it has an extensive literature. Sesotho is spoken by all the Basotho regardless of the different ethnic groups to which they belong. That is why it is always said that Lesotho is “one nation, one language” (Akindele 2007).

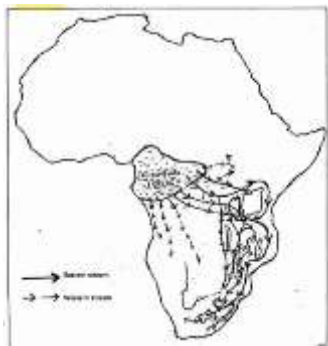
Methodology

The methodology of this paper is heavily influenced by keyword searches, focusing on terms like "social structure," "Basotho people," and "clans." The methodological approach utilized in this article is a descriptive research design and supplemented by personal observations; using secondary data collected from various reliable online data bases such as books, review articles, and general media reports of Basotho history.

The origins and historical establishment of Basotho:

Coplan (1993) shared some light that for some time, historians and anthropologists have been collaborating on the excavation of Africa's history through the analysis of transcriptions of unwritten sources. With 54 African countries, African continent is divided into various ethnic groups and studies have been conducted on tribes and ethnic groups throughout the history. The total number of tribes in Africa is approx. 3000. And among them there are approximately 500 tribes represented under the Bantu people across the continent from West Africa, East, Central and Southern Africa. It also includes seven oldest tribes in Africa, namely Maasai, Berbers, Sandawe, African Pygmies, Hadza, Nama and Khoi San. It is said that before they moved to Tanzania, the Bantu-speaking peoples lived in Cameroon (Rakotsoane 1996). As most sub-Sahara African tribes has their origins in central and west Africa. Various reasons led to their migration across the continent, and this sharing of main origin is seen clearly in their common root languages (Africa 2022).

The origins of Basotho can be traced from pre-historic age. The history of Basotho nation, who live in the territory known as Lesotho in the early 21st century, can be traced from the development, and separation, of Nguni and Sotho-Tswana cultures before 900 CE, and migrations that led to the occupation of early 21st-century Lesotho since the 1600 (Thabane 2023). Magubane (2022b) stated that they left the marsh in groups that became clans '*liboko*', each of them was allocated an animal as god-protector. The Basotho people, also recognized as Sothos, are affiliated with various clans that link them to a particular animal totem or ancestor. The totem for Moshoeshoe's clan, for instance, is the crocodile '*koena*'. Similarly, the Bataung clan identifies with the lion, the Basia with the cat, the Bafokeng with the rabbit, the Makgolokoe with the chicken, and the Baphuthi with the deer. However, there are a variety of other clans such as Nguni clans residing in Lesotho that share some characteristics with the aforementioned clans. These clans emphasize descent through the father's side, yet there is flexibility in defining clan membership. On the other hand the BaPhuthi clan also regarded as BaPhuthi tribe have strong affinities with Nguni communities, as the non-Nguni show strong evidence of recent African admixture possibly related to late Iron Age migrations. The Ba-Phuthi may have an interesting connection to the early iron-age Bantu- speaking communities (Daniels et al. 2022). And therefore, the focus of this paper is to unpack the genesis of social structure of the Basotho tribe living in Lesotho, which exists within the Sub-Saharan region.

Figure 1: The Origins of Basotho

Source: Rakotsoane 1996

Tšiu (2008) revealed that the concept “Basotho”, originates from the word, *lesôô*, which according to Mabile and Dieterlen means ‘a leg of a tanned skin used to tie the *thari*³ on the back of a woman. The broader meaning of ‘Basotho’ refers to people who share the language and culture of Sesotho, inside and outside the borders of Lesotho (Phafoli and Zulu 2012). Some groups settled in the west, while others settled in the east and further south (Mohale 2022).

Kompi (2016) postulated that Moshoeshe allowed some of the tribes to retain their customs and traditions but some adopted the Basotho traditions and customs. Phafoli and Zulu (2012) stated that “the Sesotho language is a mixture of language variations spoken by different clans under the leadership of the Basotho founder Moshoeshe I. Ellenberger (1912:34) highlighted that the variation of Bapeli (plural of Pedi tribe) was Sesotho, although it was harsh and crude compared to the soft and graceful Sesotho variation of the Bakuena and Bafokeng”.

The social structure of Basotho

Social structure refers to the framework of organized pattern of relationships and institutions that constitute a society. To understand this composition of institutions within the context of Basotho people, it is significant to expound some social arrangements of the Basotho. The social structure of Basotho is identified by its patriarchal society with a homogeneous culture, where lineage decentralizes along the male line.

The Clans of Basotho

Although Lesotho is a nation of one tribe, Ntekhe (2012) reveals that the Basotho are separated into various clans. Each clan has an animal totem that serves as both a source of guidance and, in many ways, a description of the traits and personalities of the clan's members. In connection with

³ *Thari* is a baby carrier made of animal skin.

Basotho totemism, all members had to observe taboos and other usages in connection with the animal or object revered as the totems are sacred. However, some scholars differ on the origins of Basotho clans.

Figure 2. Hierarchy of Basotho clans



Source: (Ntšekhe 2012).

Traditionally the hierarchy of clans exists but in real life doesn't apply. Basotho families and clans are still in clusters but together as units in the numerous small rural villages, where social cohesion is strengthened by the persistence of clan and family loyalties (Cobbe 2021). Moreover, Fields (1995) highlighted Durkheim's thoughts which substantiate this point that every clan has a totem that belongs to it alone, two different clans of the same tribe cannot have the someone.

The Idea of Kinship and Marriage in Basotho:

A feature of Basotho kinship was that a person was allowed to marry a cousin (*ngoana oa rangoane*) who was a member of the same clan. The line of descendants is through the male, and members of the same clan are allowed to marry relatives as close as cousins. In context of Basotho kinship systems, the complexity stems from promotion or prohibition of certain forms of cousin marriage, resulting in a form of symmetry called bifurcate merging where the parents of one's cross-cousins have a set of names different from the parents of one's parallel cousins. The Sesotho system displays a slight bit more complexity than the standard other systems in that, when it comes to one's mothers and fathers, the terminology further classes them based on relative age to one's biological parents.

Sociologists are concerned in the relationship between the institution of marriage and the institution of family because, historically, marriages are what create a family, and families are the most basic social unit upon which society is built. Both marriage and family create status roles that are sanctioned by society. Marriage is playing a significant role within the social context of the Basotho as it has some natures such as polygamy. Polygynous marriages among Basotho are not uncommon among the elite, but they are rare among commoners especially nowadays.

Women usually get married after initiation or on leaving school, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four. Marriage used to be, and to some extent still is, approached from the family standpoint. In choosing a wife for the senior son, the family is influenced by two considerations the girl's suitability and her family standing. Normally the wedding is held shortly after the marriage has been arranged. Modern weddings in Lesotho now revolve round a religious ceremony especially the Christians held in the church to which the bride belongs.

Marriage amongst the Basotho, as with many other cultures, is viewed as the joining together of a number of

families through a variety of rituals. Similar to other cultures, *mahlabiso* in Sotho culture is where partners celebrate the marriage in the presence of the families and loved ones, and officially welcome the bride.

Basotho follows a certain procedure and rituals for the validity of customary law marriage, In terms of Section 34 (1): (a) Part II of the Laws of Lerotholi⁵ 58, the basic requirements include but are not limited to: a) Agreement between the parties intending to marry; b) Agreement between the parents of the parties or between those who stand in loco parentis to the parties to the marriage and as to the amount of *bohali*; and c) Payment of part or all of the *bohali*.

Traditionally marriages are arranged by transfer of *bohali* (bride wealth) from the family of the groom to the family of the bride. Upon marriage, a woman is expected to leave her family to live with the family of her husband. Even now, this practice still in use.

The number of *bohali* (dowry) was more or less fixed at 20 cattle, one horse, and 10 sheep or goats, but it was seldom paid in full. After a transfer of up to 10 cattle, further payments helped ally the two kin groups in bonds of reciprocity and friendship. An important aspect of the marriage ceremony is the naming of the bride and the exchange of the much-loved, now iconic Lesotho blankets. It's well known that blankets are pivotal in the society of Basotho: *kobo ke bophelo* (the blanket is life). And when a bride gets married, she's wrapped in blankets and given to the groom.

Traditionally, a wedding would normally be held shortly after the marriage was arranged (Magubane 2020). Though it is uncommon, this practice is nevertheless carried out in some of Lesotho's rural communities. Things have changed in the modern day, with the majority of young people staying together outside of marriage. This kind of shift is becoming more prevalent in urban areas.

⁵ The Laws of Lerotholi, which were promulgated in 1903, is the main source of customary law. It contains provisions that relate to matters of successions to the chieftainship, land allocation, and inheritance. Succession is decreed by birth in accordance with age-old customary practice (Tampane 2021).

The family⁶ structure of Basotho

Family serves as the cornerstone of every society, playing a pivotal role in generation, reproduction, and socialization. Family structure definitions are highly variable, as there are many different ways to form a family. Usually, the term "family structure" refers to the people who live together in one household, even though many other people may be part of those individuals' families by blood, marriage, or adoption. Despite evolving societal dynamics, the family unit has demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability over time.

Like many African countries, Basotho are a patriarchal society characterized by engendered social roles and responsibilities as part of their socialization to transit into adulthood phase (Pitikoe 2017). The formation of the Basotho family structure has been significantly altered by the migration pattern. Despite this, many individuals in rural areas still follow the nuclear family structure, with the father serving as the head of the household. Cohabiting with extended family members in the same community. Furthermore, single parenthood is most common in urban areas due to a high divorce rate and other variables including men having children outside of marriage. The prevalence of blended families, which are primarily found in Maseru, the nation's capital, where the majority of people live and work from all over the districts, continues to have a significant influence on Basotho family structure.

Migration plays a major role in the structure of Basotho families. This effect primarily affects those who moved to South Africa in search of better employment possibilities; the majority of them labour irregularly or take on low-paying jobs in order to make ends meet. The majority of families divorce as a result, leaving their children behind. One of the negative effects of migration on the family structure of Basotho is that most of them are single-parent homes or even broken households.

Culture of Basotho

Orality is the cornerstone of Basotho culture, as it is in many other African traditions. Because of the science of the times, culture changes. Contrary to popular belief, oral transmission of knowledge is not a simple task. It is an art that often carries some poetry or musicality to it. Basotho has a culture, which is expressed in domains such as clothing, hairstyle, food, dance, *litolobonya* and crafts. Even as these domains change (as they often do), culture does not cease to exist.

The Basotho believe that the essence of man '*motho*' has two elements: namely, the corporeal body '*mele*' or flesh '*nama*', and the incorporeal spirit '*moea*' - also the word for wind, or shadow '*seriti*' (Magubane 2022a). A *ngaka* (Traditional doctor) is very influential in local Basotho society. He or she diagnoses and prescribes remedies for ordinary ailments and diseases, alleviates and prevents misfortunes, protects against sorcery and accident and brings luck and prosperity. The *ngaka* helps in situations which people cannot control alone, or where they feel insecure (Magubane 2022a).

In Basotho culture, the indigenous knowledge systems embedded in the different festivities as performed by males and females, and how they are understood and practised by diverse groups in Basotho society. The practices form part of the culture of Basotho that is still fundamentally practised in the rural areas of Lesotho, in spite of the advent of western education and Christianity (Lineo Rose Johnson 2018). Through a critical analysis of various Basotho cultural elements, oral prayers, sayings, beliefs, songs, rites of passage and other customs, a picture of early Basotho religion begins to emerge focused around the Supreme Being, Water Snake, and his different manifestation. The anthropocentric⁷ perspective of religion of Basotho dates.

Traditional Education system of Basotho: *Lebollo*⁸(traditional initiation school)

Initiation school for boys in context of Basotho is called *lebollo la banna* and for girls is called *lebollo la basadi*. *Lebollo* is a Basotho cultural tradition, because here individuals are taught Sesotho of their forefathers (Mohlaloka, Jacobs, and De Wet 2016). This usually happens for a period of two to six months, especially during winter season. Among the Basotho, traditional initiation (*Lebollo*) has three meanings, which mark a change and a passage to maturity. Basotho initiation practices entail cultural education together with traditional male circumcision as central components of the rite of passage from boyhood to becoming an adult man (Ngale 2021; Rathebe 2018).

Ngale (2021) also revealed that *lebollo* is a unique and original framework of indigenous knowledge, which can effectively and efficiently contribute to individual and collective spiritual, moral, psychological and social emancipation and empowerment. For Basotho males, culture influences the social construction of their masculine identity where they learn the socially acceptable roles and responsibilities of 'Basotho men'.

Economic system of Basotho:

Traditionally the Basotho's are used to largely rely on agriculture for survival but due to negative climate effects agriculture is being affected negatively. The economy was based on the rearing of cattle and the cultivation of grains such as sorghum.

Men and boys would tend to the animals and their wellbeing while women worked the fields and collected water from springs (Mohale 2022). Livestock management plays a critical role in the development of the Basotho economy. Livestock development in the mountainous areas was predominantly mounted on the premise that the extensive range and livestock population represented by far the greatest potential asset to be developed generally (Lineo R. Johnson 2016).

⁷ Anthropocentrism literally means human-centered, but in its most relevant philosophical form it is the ethical belief that humans alone possess intrinsic value (Goralnik 2022).

⁸ Also known as indigenous Basotho education system.

Ferguson (1992) presents the hierarchy of traditional wealth of Basotho. He revealed that there are six economic structures, namely; fields; livestock; cash and consumer goods; and housing of Basotho society. Understanding the social significance of cattle for African pastoralists has been a concern of anthropologists at least since the publication of Herskovits' classic work (1926) (Turkon 2003). Traditionally, the social and cultural significance of cattle for Basotho cannot be overstated. A family with cattle had milk, draught, dung, insurance against crop failure, and the primary vehicle for ritual sacrifice and bride wealth transfers. Cattle represent wealth in Lesotho and the majority of the Basotho value cows above money.

In relevance to Basotho economic system (Berry 1993) introduced the concept of wealth in people that it is a concept developed by anthropologists and historians to describe social systems in which status, power, and influence are achieved and mediated through the number of one's dependents, followers, or other social ties and affiliations. For Basotho the concept of wealth in people society is relevant within married couples in a sense that the husband is supposed to provide financially to his wife. In this case the wife is the one benefiting but the benefits come with the responsibilities as a wife, such as house duties, child bearing, agricultural duties like “*ho hlahola*⁹” and other women obligations. on the other hand, men obtain these benefits through marriage.

In the villages, an automobile is an unusual and significant symbol of upper social status. With particular reference to Lesotho, the gap between the rich and the poor has remained almost the same over the past decade; hence inequality and poverty remain the greatest challenges to Government (Mohano-Mochebelele et al., 2010; Advameg 2022). Even though most studies focus on economic inequalities and race especially after the apartheid era, however the main focus in this study is social structure to get an understanding of Basotho.

The wealthy villager usually lives in a concrete block house with a metal roof instead of a *rondoval*¹⁰, and usually has two outdoor bathrooms as opposed to the single outhouse other families possess and often share. To this day the importance of a cow is still recognized as the Sesotho saying states “*khomo ke molimo o nko e metsi*” meaning a cow is a god with a wet nose. Moisture on a cow's nose represents life, and where there is a cow there is life in all social and economic perspectives. It simply means the significance of a cow in context of Basotho shares the similar attributes with deity in a way that its role in a community serves as a mode of transport, food, agricultural purposes, and also, it is used as a way of connecting families “bride-wealth¹¹”.

Turkon (2003) shared some light that a family with cattle had milk, draught, dung, insurance against crop failure, and the primary vehicle for ritual sacrifice and bride-wealth transfers.

⁹To get rid of undesired plants is essentially what *ho hlahola* means.

¹⁰ Rondoval is a round form house of Basotho, mostly found in rural areas.

¹¹ As the principal currency of bridewealth (*bohali*), cattle were instrumental in cementing social relationships (Turkon 2003).

Political system of Basotho:

In the early nineteenth century, several kingdoms developed as a result of a series of wars that engulfed much of southern Africa. Traditional authority is the basis of village government and the system of chieftaincy follows the progression of paramount chief (the king), senior chiefs, sub- chiefs, headmen and sub-headmen (Advameg,2022). Goralnik (2022) mentioned that the country has a King as the Head of State and Government and the King's ascendancy to the throne is through succession and not an election. The Senate, which is the Upper House of Lesotho's bicameral Parliament is made up of 22 hereditary Principal Chiefs and 11 other Senators appointed by the King on the advice of the Counsel of State (Makonese 2020).

The chiefs still have a major significance within the society of Basotho because they hold some administrative positions for recommendation purposes. Their prime role is the authority to allocate the land of the nation to the citizens. From a traditional perspective, the royal family of Lesotho is the one exercising its traditional rights because the country is a constitutional monarchy, meaning that their territory belongs to them and village chiefs serve as administrators.

The nation of Basotho is comprised of constitutional monarch government with the King Letsie III as the head of state and the prime minister as the prime minister. The nature of justice system is constituted of both traditional customary law and common law (Honde 2005). In rural areas traditional customary justice is still active. People still solve their conflicts under the local chieftaincy justice. However, in terms of major cases such as murder, Honde (2005) pointed that parliament has the power to alter the Constitution by a majority vote of the National Assembly and the Senate, and requires assent by the King but amendment of some of the sections requires a referendum in addition to the above.

Conclusion

This paper reveals the importance of understanding the history of Basotho from the social context with the aim of detecting social problems which shakes the stability within Basotho nation and society. The understandings of the various totemic qualities of the Basotho tribe, as well as the common features amongst Basotho clans provide a picture of the social structure of Basotho. Another element of importance is a traditional education system classified as Lebollo. Lebollo as a social institution shapes the social structure of Basotho as its mandate is to prepare young boys and girls with rich knowledge of understanding their society from traditional approach of life. Another element of importance is a traditional education system classified as Lebollo.

The Basotho people were traditionally reliant on agriculture and animals, such as goats, sheep, and chickens, which were used not only to produce food but also to represent social status among the Basotho society. Since their purpose was to support the economic institution, these kinds of personal assets actually played a significant role inside the social structure historically. For example, cattle in particular plays a significant role in the traditional economy of Basotho; it is utilized for festivities and family get-togethers, as well as for things like dowries, or "*mahali*," in Sesotho. Additionally, the Basotho economy was influenced by trade and commerce, with local marketplaces acting as sites for the exchange of products and services. Trade routes allowed the interchange of items like livestock, agricultural products, and handicrafts between Basotho settlements and surrounding communities. Over a period of time, the Basotho economy has advanced with the introduction of modern economic activities and industries such as Mining, fishing market which mostly owned by foreigners. This study demonstrates that the majority of families are broken or have a single parent because most Basotho people migrated to South Africa in search of better living conditions. However, agriculture and animal husbandry remain important economic sectors, particularly in rural areas where traditional livelihoods persist alongside modern developments. The social elements such as the political system of Basotho helps one to have a clear picture of traditional and modern governance and its influence in the context of social stability.

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