A SOUTH AFRICAN KINGDOM

The pursuit of security in nineteenth-century Lesotho

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1

Introduction

Throughout the nineteenth century the health and livelihood, and sometimes the very survival, of every person living in the region of Lesotho were continually threatened.[1] Recurrent droughts created food scarcities and posed the threat of famines, and large-scale migrations of both Africans and Europeans posed the threat of wars, dispossession, and death or servitude. This climate of insecurity was pervasive. It shaped the choices and actions of individuals, households, chiefs, and nations in the region of southern Africa.

Before the 1820s SeSotho-speaking peoples were scattered in small chiefdoms along the upper Caledon valley, united by ties of language, culture, and traditions of origin. They practiced mixed agriculture and traded sporadically with their neighbors in every direction; only occasional cattle raids disrupted the tranquility of the region. The chiefdoms of SeSotho-speakers occasionally incorporated individuals or families of SeTswana, SePedi, or Nguni-speaking origins through intermarriage or clientship relations, which intensified cultural and economic interchanges. Because of these contacts, political consolidation among their SeTswana-speaking and SePedi-speaking neighbors beginning in the eighteenth century had repercussions for SeSotho-speaking chiefdoms.

Internal change and sociopolitical consolidation in the southern African interior can be traced back at least to the mid-eighteenth century. A process of consolidation among SeTswana-speaking chiefdoms, emerging from competition over land, cattle, people, and trade, had begun by about 1750 and intensified beginning in the 1790s.[2] Internal sociopolitical and economic dynamics originated changes, but competition intensified and the consolidation process accelerated with the arrival of violent new forces emanating from the expanding Cape Colony. Beginning in the late eighteenth century both San-speakers and SeTswana-speakers were pushed out of their southern territories by various groups of Khoi, European, and slave descent, who sought out the best springs and fertile areas along the Orange River.[3] Joined and often led by escaped European criminals, Khoi and "Bastard" intruders from the south were fleeing the enforcement of increasingly restrictive labor laws which reduced supposedly free blacks to the status of unprotected

slaves. Resisting their own victimization, these groups moved beyond the Cape frontier and inflicted devastating raids on the southernmost SeTswana-speakers, reducing them to indigence in the 1790s. Notorious European, Khoi, Kora, and Bastard marauders depended on access to guns and ammunition from the Cape Colony for hunting and self-defense. In exchange they traded cattle which they raided from their northern neighbors. Growing settler demand for slaves spawned increasing slave-raiding across the northern frontier over the first three decades of the nineteenth century, following a pre-existing pattern of enslavement of Khoi and San by Europeans in the Cape Colony dating from the emergence of so-called "apprenticeship" as early as 1721.

Just as confederations of BaTswana chiefdoms were emerging they were faced with population compression caused by the northern movement of San- and SeTswana-speakers who were pushed away from southern springs and fertile Orange River sites by Khoi, Kora, and Bastards. At the same time the BaTswana confederations were challenged by several ecological disasters, including successive droughts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, which resulted in food scarcities and at least one devastating famine at the turn of the century. Oral traditions attribute conflicts over crops and cattle around 1820 to the intensification of competition for food resulting from these droughts.

In 1822 migrants fleeing from incorporation into the Zulu state under Shaka further disrupted political and economic stability in the region. Political consolidation east of the Drakensberg paralleled that in the interior, and emerged from increasing competition over trade networks, fertile land for cultivation, cattle, and people.[4] Pre-existing patterns of competition intensified at the turn of the nineteenth century as a result of drought-induced food scarcity and famine, giving dominant groups both an opportunity and incentive to increase further their wealth and power. Emerging leaders such as Dingiswayo attracted followers with the promise of wealth and security generated from agricultural and pastoral production as well as trade to Delagoa Bay. They built up their military potential based on their growing constituencies, and forcibly expanded their control over weaker neighbors. These processes were well under way by the time Shaka came to power, and growing popular insecurity prompted allegiance to a leader who promised wealth derived from raiding as well as from production. Conflicts arising from food scarcities further interrupted food production and prevented economic recovery, and hunger accompanied the disruptions spawned by migrating chiefdoms seeking a place to settle. Slave-raiding by Europeans and their allies in the Delagoa Bay region and on the Cape frontier intensified these conflicts and perpetuated regional instability.

Destitute refugees from the east crossed the Drakensberg mountains and raided the inhabitants of the Highveld and upper Caledon River Valley for standing crops and cattle beginning in 1822. Their initial attacks prompted the young Moshoeshoe, son of a minor BaSotho chief, to form alliances with

neighboring SeSotho-speaking groups and to seek refuge in the mountains. Aware of the vulnerability of his people, however, Moshoeshoe sent out scouts to find a better refuge, and they located a large flat-topped mountain further south. In June or July of 1824 Moshoeshoe led his people more than seventy miles in three days to take up residence on this mountain fortress. The weather was bitterly cold, and stragglers were attacked and captured by starving groups who, according to oral tradition, resorted to cannibalism in their desperation, but the move proved to be a stroke of genius. Thaba Bosiu, the "mountain of night," was almost invulnerable, and it is from this move that the creation of the BaSotho nation can be dated. Now able to protect people, cattle, and crops, Moshoeshoe attracted followers with his open generosity and warded off subsequent invasions. When the first European missionaries arrived in 1833 they found a nation at peace and on the threshold of prosperity.

After a decade of wars accompanied by chronic hunger and frequent famines, the BaSotho were eager to resettle the lands of their parents in order to expand agricultural production and to build up their stores of food. As a consequence the BaSotho economy expanded so rapidly that the BaSotho were soon supplying surplus food to both their African and European neighbors. At the same time, however, Boers in the Cape Colony were becoming bitterly frustrated with British rule, which imposed new restrictions on land tenure, deprived them of their slaves, and prevented continued expansion eastward into the land of the AmaXhosa. Discontent which had been evident as early as 1831 manifested itself in the Great Boer Trek, when approximately fifteen thousand Boers and their dependents migrated north across the Orange River between 1834 and 1845.[5] By the early 1840s, many of these Boers had settled along the southwestern fringes of lands which had belonged to the forefathers of the BaSotho. As they slowly moved northeast, early Boer settlers acknowledged Moshoeshoe's authority over this land and sought his permission to settle. Later both Boer settlers and the British who were expanding their area of control were more aggressive, however.

The revival of prosperity in Lesotho was therefore short-lived. The BaSotho lost over half of their arable land to the Boers in successive wars in the 1850s and 1860s. British colonial rule stabilized the country's borders after 1868, and the discovery of diamonds allowed the BaSotho initially to profit from selling their surplus grain and their labor at the Kimberley mines in the 1870s and early 1880s. Over time, however, the redirection of production to meet the demands of the capitalist economy fostered the economic dependency of colonial Basutoland, and encouraged direct intervention by the British to strengthen the economic ties between the BaSotho and the mines, especially with regard to labor recruitment. In the long run, then, the BaSotho became trapped in the migrant labor system abroad, while at home no amount of effort could compensate for the lost land. By the beginning of the twentieth century Lesotho was no longer even self-sufficient in food production, and exploitation by chiefs increased to exacerbate the plight of the poor.

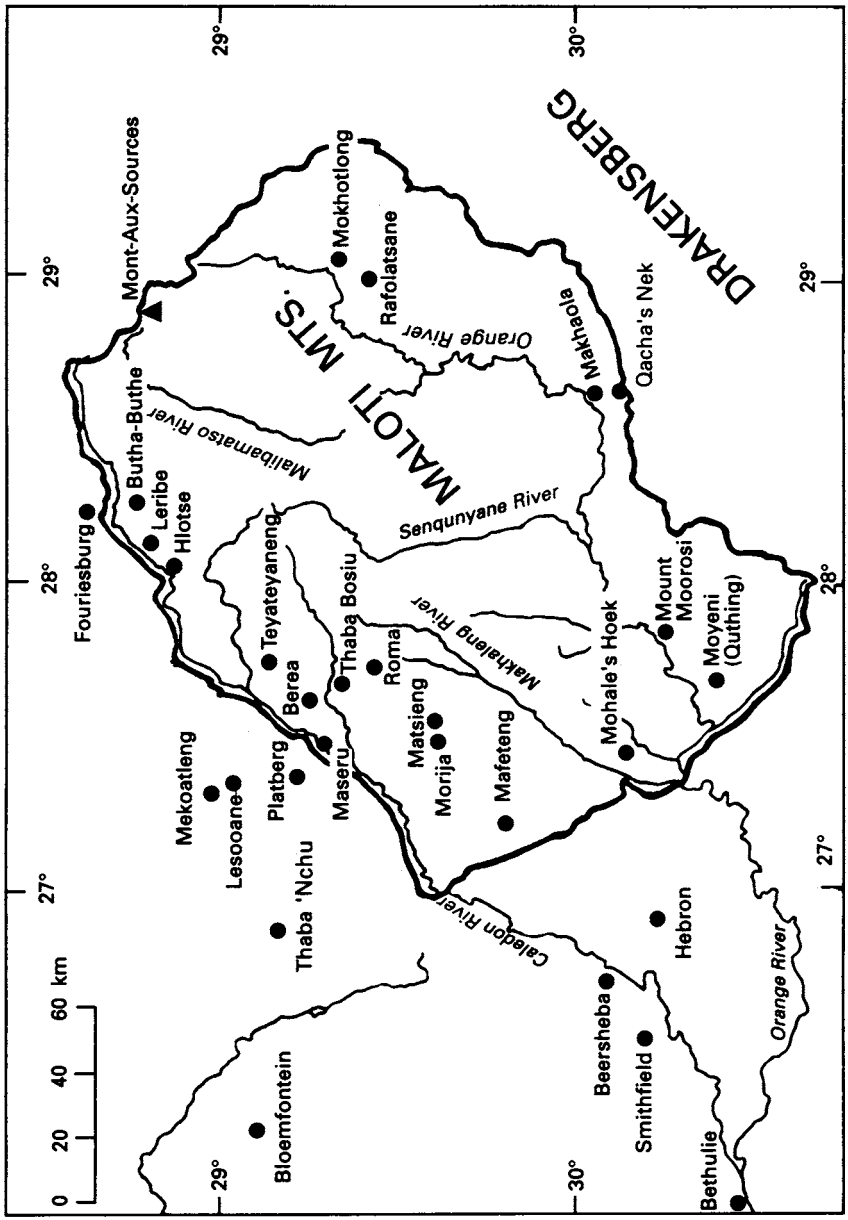

Fig. 2 Lesotho

In Lesotho, economic as well as political developments at the local and national levels can best be explained with reference to the pursuit of security. In interpreting the events and developments of the nineteenth century, an emphasis on security rather than mere physical survival signifies a recognition that the exploitation of resources to meet material needs is governed by the social system which structures and limits the abilities of individuals or groups to exploit these resources. The pursuit of security helps to explain the motivations of subordinate groups who willingly accepted the authority of Moshoeshoe. For them physical survival was contingent on the achievement of security in a political context which could protect their access to productive resources. Constrained by regional politics, individuals and groups often chose clientship under a MoSotho chief in preference to more severe servitude or total deprivation under a less generous ruler, African or European.

The motives of the dominant groups in Lesotho were also shaped by the pursuit of security. Given the regional context of struggle, first among Africans during the 1820s and subsequently between Africans and Europeans, the motivation of dominant groups within African societies cannot be reduced solely to a desire to exploit subordinate groups within their own societies. Chiefs also sought to achieve security from outsiders by consolidating their control over larger and larger groups of subjects, but they could broaden and sustain this popular base only by accumulating and reallocating wealth in such a way as to attract supporters. Harsh exploitation would only have driven clients away. Both dominant and subordinate groups thus achieved a measure of security through clientship relations.

Because societies in southern Africa did not develop in isolation from one another, implicit underlying "class" struggles and gender struggles were not allowed to play themselves out. Subordinate groups identified their interests not with those of their counterparts in other societies but with those of their rulers, to whom they were bound by linguistic, cultural, and political ties. When subordinate groups perceived a threat from the foreign societies with which they struggled, they tolerated the injustices of their own societies in pursuit of security against the external threat. The imperatives of national unity thus undercut class struggle here as elsewhere in the modern world.

The driving force of pre-colonial societies in southern Africa was the accumulation of people. People were necessary for increased and intensified agricultural production, and for the production of tools and weapons and other implements useful for survival. People were also necessary for military protection against neighbors who might covet the resources of production on which a society depends, notably land, livestock, and people, all of which were sometimes lost in war. The greater the intensification of agriculture, the more specialization in production could be sustained, allowing for both innovations in military organization, such as maintaining a standing army (comprising men no longer needed in food production), and innovations in military technology.

The events of the 1820s in southern Africa necessitated the restructuring

of societies to meet the needs of many hungry, desperate people. Military advances upset the prior balance between neighboring societies, compelling all societies to adjust or risk conquest or dispersal by a stronger neighbor. The new nation built by Moshoeshoe offered security and potential prosperity to the people living in the area which became Lesotho. Land of varying quality was readily available, but access to land was of little use when people could not protect their crops and cattle from marauders. In the beginning it was primarily the safety of the natural mountain fortress of Thaba Bosiu which Moshoeshoe had to offer; as his followers increased, security was found in numbers. In addition Moshoeshoe redistributed wealth by loaning cattle to his followers, and attracted by this promise of wealth people placed themselves under his governance.

Power, wealth, and gender in nineteenth-century Lesotho

I begin with a survey of regional settlement patterns and trade relations before the 1820s to demonstrate that cultural and economic contacts across wide areas were not new with the arrival of Europeans, but rather were pre-existing and created a local dynamic for change. This chapter provides an important context for understanding subsequent political and economic relationships between the BaSotho and their neighbors, since early trade patterns among SeSotho- and SeTswana-speaking peoples indicate that these societies were already engaged in surplus production for exchange in the eighteenth century. In this context I then examine the demographic and political setting as the BaSotho nation emerged in the 1820s, and changes which ensued with the advent of European settlers bordering on Moshoeshoe's territory beginning in the 1830s. The political and economic fortunes of the BaSotho were intricately interwoven, tied as they were to control over land.

Agriculture provided the productive base for BaSotho social and political organization. I examine not only BaSotho success in cultivation and the raising of livestock with the aim of producing food, but also the politics which created situations of food scarcity and famine during times of environmental stress. It is important to establish that BaSotho agricultural prosperity was already evident to the French Protestant missionaries when they first arrived in Lesotho in 1833 and was not merely a function of the subsequent integration of the BaSotho economy into the regional European economy. Evidence that sophisticated techniques of agricultural production such as intercropping, crop rotation, and pasture rotation were traditional among the BaSotho demonstrates that they had long since been taking conscious measures to maximize output and obtain surpluses. The arrival of a European market for food did not initiate the production of surpluses among the BaSotho; it merely created a new outlet for surpluses which had previously been stored or exchanged with Africans elsewhere. The BaSotho experienced a boom in agricultural production in the middle decades of the

nineteenth century. High levels of production were achieved initially because of high labor inputs supplied voluntarily by the BaSotho, and later by technological innovations as well. The explanation for the hard work and productivity of the BaSotho in the nineteenth century lies in their shared historical memory. During the 1820s every MoSotho had faced starvation, including the wealthier members of society. The BaSotho who survived the 1820s learned to produce as much food as possible, to store against future need. If the memory of the 1820s receded over the decades, the memory of starvation was renewed by recurring famines which resulted from the interaction of natural factors, such as droughts, with human factors, such as wars and dispossession.[6]

Throughout the nineteenth century the ways in which the BaSotho managed their resources and organized themselves politically continued to be determined by their responses to threats to their survival. When the BaSotho failed to provide for themselves and found themselves in want, it was the result of politics. Early suffering from famine, and the failure of the BaSotho to sustain self-sufficiency in food production by the end of the century, were the result of political struggles with Europeans which interrupted food production during wars. These wars eventually left the BaSotho with insufficient land resources when the country's colonial boundaries were fixed, so that the economic success which had been predicated on the expansion of cultivation was precluded by the disastrous outcome of the struggle for land. With the advent of formal colonial rule politics continued to interfere with BaSotho efforts to achieve and sustain self-sufficiency in food production, as the BaSotho were compelled to sell their dwindling food supplies under adverse market conditions in order to pay colonial taxes.

In addition to agriculture, the BaSotho engaged in a variety of local craft industries. Important regional productive activities prior to the European arrival included an iron industry involving mining, smelting, and smithing; pottery; weaving; and the manufacture of leather goods and wooden implements. These activities were central to the working of African economies, and the undermining of local specialization in craft production has been explained in various ways. Indicating both the complexity of patterns of the production and exchange of locally-produced goods, I demonstrate that the process of import substitution was selective and deliberate on the part of the BaSotho. The adoption of European commodities did not reflect the emergence of "artificially induced wants," but rather the consumption of imported goods represented a rational choice based on labor time in production, opportunity costs, and transaction costs. In noting which locally-produced items continued to be made long after cheap European imports were available, and which were replaced by imports, the logic which governed local manufacturing is clear. The partial decline in specialization reveals this phenomenon not as a simple, inevitable result of competition from European goods, but rather as a deliberate choice by Africans who selected what to continue producing themselves (custom-made luxury

goods) and what to purchase from Europeans (generic, labor-intensive goods). This selective process on the part of producers and consumers demonstrates deliberate African initiative "in pursuit of security," in this case economic security.

Internal patterns of social and economic stratification changed as internal BaSotho politics changed. The economic boom of the mid-nineteenth century benefitted the chiefs by increasing their personal wealth, but chiefs were not the sole beneficiaries of agricultural expansion. The benefits of economic growth were widely shared among all segments of the population. Economic expansion, achieved through voluntary inputs of labor, was not mandated from above by Moshoeshoe, nor was the boom in production the result of coercion by chiefs. As the threat of invasion by other Africans receded, the BaSotho became less dependent on the protection that Moshoeshoe had provided, and they were able to move about freely. Moreover, people could accumulate wealth through their own enterprise and not solely through clientship relations with chiefs. Many people acquired livestock by selling grain, tobacco, salt, cosmetics, and craft goods which they produced themselves.

The chiefs were not able to monopolize wealth, which limited their control over their subjects. Moreover, the power, wealth, and prestige of a chief were determined by the number of his followers, so the extent to which a chief could exploit his followers was constrained by the ability of his people to emigrate. Chiefs were motivated to attract and retain followers through generosity and fairness because a chief's wealth increased through the payment of tribute in labor and in kind. The ability to move away from a chief's domain served as a source of leverage for commoners over their chiefs.

The capacity of the chiefs to coerce and exploit their followers was thus distinctly limited, and cannot explain why the BaSotho worked so hard. Furthermore, evidence from slave societies indicates that oppressed people who do not directly benefit from their own efforts engage in passive resistance by working slowly and sabotaging work efforts. Consequently economic growth in Lesotho can be attributed mainly to individual initiative rather than to chiefly control. Economic decisions were taken at the level of the household, and it is therefore appropriate to examine household economy in order to identify the dynamics of economic expansion.

Later in the century, however, as people became impoverished following the loss of arable lands to the Boers, the chiefs were increasingly able to exploit their people. Most obviously, the fixing of the colonial boundaries of Lesotho after 1868 circumscribed the area available for BaSotho expansion, which hindered and eventually eliminated the ability of people to move away from exploitative chiefs. In addition, the continuing threat of European expansion, including the plans of the Cape Colony to expropriate more BaSotho land, encouraged the BaSotho to continue to support their chiefs. Only the chiefs could provide effective resistance to Europeans. The influences governing the political and economic decisions taken by households

and by chiefs consequently changed. As the chiefs increasingly collaborated with the colonial authorities and labor recruiters from abroad, the people were unable to resist.

BaSotho relations with their chiefs were moderated by a political discourse among commoners and intellectuals, and not by a hegemonic ruling class ideology.[7] BaSotho repetitions of platitudes about the positive roles of chiefs in the late nineteenth century appeared merely to have reflected the perpetuation of an ideology of dominance, but the reality was tested and explicitly explored by BaSotho intellectuals who called into question chiefly rights and popular obligations throughout the nineteenth century. The turning point at which the relations between the BaSotho and their chiefs were revealed most explicitly was the Gun War of 1880–81. Working from false assumptions in her earlier work, Kimble depicted the steady acquisition of guns in the period prior to the war as a Bakoena conspiracy to consolidate their internal political dominance.[8] Since guns can easily be turned against rulers when their possession is so widespread, however, popular acquiescence if not enthusiastic support for chiefs was implied in popular participation in the accumulation of guns, which were then turned not against their chiefs but against their colonial rulers. The subsequent consolidation of power by the chiefs and their gradual betrayal of popular interests does not negate the fact that as late as the 1880s the BaSotho consciously chose to support their chiefs. Oral traditions reveal the dynamics which explain this support. The persistence of popular support for chiefs in this period cannot just be attributed to the ideological hegemony of a ruling class, but rather cultural continuity over time with regard to popular attitudes towards, and perceptions of, chiefs which were consciously accepted, not unconsciously received. Where tradition persisted, it was the result of the ongoing test of reality, and it was molded and reinvented to meet the changing needs of the BaSotho.

Woven into my analysis of politics and wealth in nineteenth-century Lesotho is evidence of gender relations and the many roles of women which elucidates many facets of the internal dynamics of BaSotho society. The demand for people necessitated the protection of the existing society and its perpetuation through reproduction. Hence women played a central role in the process of achieving wealth and power, and social and economic stability, growth, and prosperity. The evident value placed on reproduction created a clear incentive to protect and control women, operating as an incentive both to maintain them in good health and to subordinate them to male social controls. Women were also valued for producing the daily food requirements of their families, a task which has sometimes been subsumed under the category of reproduction. As women cared for and raised their children, they imbued in them social and cultural values which were the ideological glue binding the society together; hence women reproduced culture and reproduced the social relations dictated by that culture. In other words, women played indispensable roles in biological reproduction, daily reproduction (which can also be categorized as production), and social reproduction.[9]

Through their children, women reproduced descent lines, and reproduced political relations which rested on alliances between lines of descent. In other words, the notion of reproduction can be extended even further, into the realm of politics: women not only reproduced the social relations internal to their societies, they also reinforced old and forged new political relations between societies, serving as core components in political networks from which emerged chiefdoms on larger and larger scales.

Women's productive roles were also critical. As the primary laborers in arable agriculture, women in particular actively promoted economic expansion. Women and children suffered disproportionately during times of food scarcity, since they had little control over food supplies. Pre-colonial BaSotho were surplus producers, and women regularly invested their labor voluntarily in order to produce surplus grain. Surplus grain was critical for food security, especially for women and children. In times of drought, the value of livestock declined dramatically relative to grain because grain was an efficient food which could feed many people over a long period of time, whereas livestock were perishable, and meat is an inefficient food source relative to grain. As livestock began to perish, men drove them far afield to find better pastures, and ate those animals which happened to die. The women were left to fend for themselves, and if they did not have stores of grain at hand they had to survive on the tiny amounts of grass seed which could be foraged during droughts. Thus women had a strong incentive to produce surplus grain for storage against future shortages. For this reason women actively supported the expansion of cultivation, in spite of the fact that they shouldered most of the burden of agricultural labor. Women also acquired food which they controlled themselves by producing and trading surpluses from their work in home industries such as pottery, weaving, digging salt, and making cosmetics. When their own work was finished, women worked in the fields of their neighbors and were paid with baskets of grain. The hard work performed by women seeking to accumulate food for themselves and their children constituted a central dynamic generating economic growth in nineteenth-century Lesotho.[10]

Beyond the sustenance of the family, however, surplus grain had other important uses. Food was money, and grain was a primary means of obtaining livestock through exchange. Hence the surplus grain produced by women was converted through trade into livestock, especially cattle, which was a primary measure of and source of wealth among the BaSotho. Cattle as well as smaller stock could be traded for a variety of valuable goods and services, and cattle were exchanged in the form of bridewealth for women. Hence through a circular process, women's labor produced surplus grain which was exchanged for cattle which was exchanged for women; men were merely the brokers controlling the social and economic relations embedded in the bridewealth system, reflecting women's fundamental importance because of both their reproductive and productive functions in BaSotho society.

The case of Lesotho is unique in southern Africa in several ways. Further

from the domains of early white settlers, the BaSotho remained less affected by the European intrusion longer than did the AmaXhosa and other neighbors to the south. The boom in agricultural production in Lesotho began at least a decade before the BaSotho were integrated into the regional European economy. It also occurred long before the area available to the BaSotho for cultivation was circumscribed, so that new lands could still be brought under cultivation. As a result, economic prosperity was widely shared among the BaSotho. In addition, a dramatic increase in the production of grain by the BaSotho occurred before the adoption of the plow, before Christian influences were significant, and without a transition to individual land tenure. Given that the number of Christians in Lesotho was minute throughout the nineteenth century, the boom in production from the 1830s and the adoption of the plow and other innovations from the 1850s onward cannot be attributed to Christian influences related to an emphasis on individual rather than communal interests. Neither individual land tenure nor Christianity, which have been emphasized in studies of successful peasant producers elsewhere in southern Africa from about 1870, were linked to the rapid expansion of agricultural production and marketing in Lesotho which occurred earlier in the century. The BaSotho retained their political independence for decades after economic relations were established with white farmers, so that a boom in the sale of grain to whites preceded rather than followed white colonial rule.

Like Swaziland and Bechuanaland, Basutoland came under British colonial rule, which buffered the BaSotho from some of the direct effects of white rule experienced across the border, including almost total land dispossession. While the British protected the remaining lands of the BaSotho from further white encroachment, however, they subjected them to direct taxation, failed to provide external financial support for development, and bolstered the chiefs whose exploitative activities often went unchecked as long as they served colonial administrative ends. Because of the British colonial system the experience of the BaSotho diverged in several ways from that of their neighbors who were brought within the boundaries of South Africa. On the other hand, the story of the decline of production in colonial Basutoland closely paralleled the fate of other Africans in the region. In Lesotho as elsewhere the decline in agricultural output was linked to disadvantages deliberately imposed on African producers by white settler governments across the border, which favored white farmers over African farmers and created a labor supply for the emerging industrial economy of the twentieth century. This book therefore ends with an examination of the dilemma faced by the BaSotho once they had lost their political and economic independence and had come to rely on economic returns accruing from the migrant labor system. In a vicious cycle economic depression and political oppression reinforced each other, and prevented the BaSotho from ever reclaiming the economic prosperity and popular leadership which they had known in the nineteenth century.