

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON CLASS DIFFERENTIATION AND CLASS
CONFLICT WITHIN THE LABOUR RESERVE OF BASUTOLAND

by

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Summary

The major purpose of this paper is to reinterpret the history of Lekhotla la Bafo (The Council of Commoners) in terms of our knowledge of class differentiation in colonial Basutoland. Lekhotla la Bafo, together with the Basutoland Progressive Association (BPA), emerged about the time of the First World War, attacked the practice of the abuse of powers of the chiefs, and pressed for the elected representation of commoners in government. In the hegemonic modernization and functionalist perspective of bourgeois social science in the sixties and early seventies, movements such as Lekhotla la Bafo were interpreted ideologically. The movement was seen as both "radical" - in its attacks on colonial rule, the missionaries, and its criticisms of the abuses of the chieftaincy - and "conservative" - seeking the resurrection of a pre-Moshoeshoe concept of popular chieftaincy. The reinterpretation presented here, albeit tentatively, seeks to relate the struggles of the movement to the actual process of class differentiation in Basutoland and to the rearguard battle, against all the odds, for the acquired rights of the peasantry. In doing so we have to take issue with certain economic versions of the underdevelopment school which have argued that, since massive impoverishment and ecological decline were so endemic in the labour reserves of southern Africa, and that since the decisive role in the class struggle had shifted from the peasantry to the urban working class, the actual progress of internal differentiation and class struggle can safely be ignored. While the focus of this paper is both tentative and historical, attempts will be made to draw out the relevance to current class struggles in the labour reserves.

Underdevelopment in Basutoland

In an earlier critique of the then hegemonic dualist interpretations of the "non-development" of Lesotho, I argued that "backwardness or non-development in Lesotho is not a result of a pristine traditionalism of the Basotho people but of the political violence waged against them at the crucial period of their economic development". (1)

In brief, the "crucial period" referred to here were the years of the last half of the nineteenth century which brought about the incorporation of the fundamentally subsistence economy of the Basotho under capitalism. This period - particularly after the intercession of the British in the wars between the Boer commandos and the Basotho and the formal establishment of the British Protectorate in

1868 - witnessed the rise of a Basutoland peasantry geared to supply the commodity markets of Kimberley and, later, of the Witwatersrand. This process occurred within the territory of Basutoland despite the fact that, at the Convention of Aliwal North in 1869, the bulk of the corn-growing lands of the Basotho to the west and north of the Caledon river were ceded to the Free State. The conditions of peace and the exploitation of the diamond mines at Kimberley provided the essential conditions for the establishment of the peasantry in the valleys and highlands of Basutoland.

The main structural and analytical elements of the rise and fall of the southern African peasantry have been admirably delineated by Bundy. (2) His definition of the peasantry draws heavily on the work of Saul and Woods (3) and draws attention to the "peasantry as process":

A peasant society emerging during the era of the integration of a peripheral economy to the metropolitan capitalist economy is subject to rapid structural change; under the capitalist development of Africa, stratification within the peasantry means that some agriculturalists have moved out of the peasant economy and must be redefined, perhaps as capitalist farmers; other peasants have been proletarianized; in other words 'the further development of capitalism has begun to phase out the very peasantry it defined and created ... the existence of a peasantry could be viewed all the more as a transitional phenomenon. (4)

This emphasis on peasantry as process (peasantization) is particularly important in the case of Basutoland, where commodity production and labour export were parallel and contemporaneous processes. My earlier article was specifically designed to counter the apologetic interpretations of Leistner and others (5) who ignored the vast flows of Basotho migrants in the last thirty years of the nineteenth century and preferred to locate the proletarianization of the Basotho peasantry in the years of the great depression of the nineteen thirties. In so doing such apologetics tended to ignore not only the process of proletarianization - about which such contemporary historians as de Kiewiet (6) had been well aware but which, by the end of the century, was being put forward by the colonial administration in Basutoland as a positive defence of colonial policy:

Though for its size and population Basutoland produces a comparatively enormous amount of grain, it has an industry of great importance to South Africa, viz. the output of native labour. It supplies the sinews of agriculture in the Orange Free State, to a large extent it keeps going railway works, coal mining, the diamond mines at Jagersfontein and Kimberley, the gold mines of the Transvaal and furnishes in addition a large proportion of domestic services in surrounding districts ... these facts are the best rejoinder to those who urge that Basutoland is a useless native reserve. To others, who urge higher education of the natives, it may be pointed out that to educate them above labour would be a great mistake. Primarily the native labour industry supplies a dominion want and secondly it tends to fertilize native territories with cash which is at once diffused for English goods. (7)

The "underdevelopment" thesis has rightly focussed attention on the "non-economic" forces which restricted African participation in commodity production and circulation. These non-economic forces operated less directly in the case of Basutoland, where the political power of white settlers and mining interests was mediated by a variety of forces, particularly after 1884 when the administration of the Protectorate passed from the direct rule of the Cape Colony to the type of parallel rule discussed in detail below. But direct political intervention was clearly important in the process of the proletarianization of the peasantry. For example, successful Basotho competition for commodity markets was debated in the Volksraad of

the Orange Free State and the Transvaal and a number of measures passed to restrict competition from Basutoland. The annual report of the Resident Commissioner for 1887 refers to the deleterious effects of a tariff on Basotho grain entering the Transvaal and estimated to cost 20,000 pounds annually, and, five years later, reports lament the closure of large corn markets in the Free State and Transvaal to Basutoland.

Clearly, in the case of the labour reserves that were encapsulated directly within South Africa itself, direct political control over usufruct rights to land was the most important lever in bringing about the demise of the South African peasantry. Bundy's analysis of this process focusses on the cumulative effects of the Glen Grey Act of 1894 and the Natives Land Act of 1913 which undermined the position of the squatter peasant where his historical analysis closes:

The narrative has been carried to 1913, and the passage of the Natives Land Act. The argument has been advanced that by that date African peasant areas showed serious signs of degeneration, and that their transformation into teeming rural slums - or the process of their underdevelopment - was well under way. Areas that had been able to provide for themselves, and in favourable seasons to export foodstuffs, were being reduced to a state of precarious self-reliance or already to a dependence on imported food and the remittance of wages by migrant labourers. (8)

In the case of Basutoland, the problem of the exact historical location of the period of the demise of the peasantry is not so easy to locate. One problem here is that, despite massive labour export, the territory continued to be a net exporter of maize until the early 1930s. (9) This fact has been used to advance the thesis that, until this time, Basutoland was essentially "self-sufficient" in staple foodstuffs and that hence the argument that the Basotho were "forced" into migrant labour at a much earlier date is fallacious. What this argument largely ignores is the prima facie evidence of growing differentiation within Basutoland and large disparities of income and land-holding in this period, and the perpetuation of a peasantry clustered around the institution of chieftainship as it was practised in colonial Basutoland.

But before elaborating this argument it is important to see how and why certain formations of the underdevelopment thesis tend to ignore the process of class differentiation. My own earlier analysis of the process of underdevelopment in Basutoland drew heavily on the by now classic analysis of the process of proletarianization of the peasantry in Southern Rhodesia by Arrighi. (10) One feature of Arrighi's analysis is that, once the effort price of peasant participation in commodity markets has become so high that the process of proletarianization is set in motion, this process is largely self-perpetuating. Once the "political violence" of a set of non-economic forces has severely damaged the capacity of the African peasantry to compete on commodity markets, then the pressure of growing population, the satisfaction of new "subsistence" demands and the resulting over-grazing and falling yields create an automatic vicious circle of immiseration and underdevelopment. In brief, once the process has been set in motion it is self-perpetuating and increasing numbers are thrown onto the labour market regardless of the level of real wages.

One result of this form of analysis, and it is endemic in much of the underdevelopment school, is to ignore the actual process of class differentiation within the labour reserve. In an illuminating overview of the commoditization of the rural economy of Zambia, Cliffe seeks to demonstrate the range of stratification that occurred within the rural labour reserves. In doing so Cliffe explicitly attempts to:

scotch the implicitly accepted notion that because such patterns of labour migration as have developed in Southern Africa have produced, and in fact required, a

particularly virulent and backward form of underdevelopment in the 'reserves', then any tendency toward differentiation among the peasantry is swamped by the general impoverishment. Rather we shall attempt to show that although the source areas are not primarily producing commodities (other than labour power) nevertheless the cash nexus, entering by the back door, does set in train a process of class formation in these areas. (11)

Recent analyses of the process of class formation in the bantustans have emphasized the growth and consolidation of an African kulak peasantry and petit bourgeoisie as fostered by the state. (12) But specific historical analyses of this process are thin on the ground.

Class Differentiation in Colonial Basutoland

The major argument of this paper is that under colonial rule a type of chieftaincy emerged, taking on the characteristics of a petit bourgeoisie and consolidating a place in commodity production denied both to the emerging stratum of educated commoners and to the mass of commoners. By defining the chieftaincy as "petit bourgeois", the role of the chiefs as agents of state power - ideologically and repressively - is emphasized. While the extent of the control of the chieftaincy over commodity production can only be indicated - in the absence of specific research - the political debate about the "abuses" of specific chiefs indicates the importance of growing class differentiation as part of the specific strategy of colonial rule.

After the Gun Wars and the formal handover of administrative power in Basutoland from the Cape Colony to Britain, Godfrey Lagden, the British Resident Commissioner, enunciated the principle that "nothing should be attempted beyond the protection of life and property and the maintenance of law and order on the border" (13), and that "the Basotho were to be encouraged to establish internal self-government sufficient to suppress crime and settle internal disputes". According to Sheddick, "this system of laissez-faire fully satisfied the Basuto peoples for it was in close accord with the idea of trusteeship formed by Moshoeshe in 1862". The reality was somewhat different.

In practice, the British sought to consolidate a form of feudal aristocracy by vesting in the ruling house and the "sons of Moshoeshe" the ideological and repressive functions of state power. The system had certain important characteristics:

1. Unlike the system of "Indirect Rule" as practised in West Africa, which involved a fairly clear demarcation of state power as between colonial government and tribal authorities, the practice of colonial rule in Basutoland was to hand over to the chieftaincy all executive and judicial authority within the territory, e.g. all issues of land tenure and usufruct rights, tribal courts from which there was no appeal, taxation and internal police functions.

2. The system involved active attempts by the Resident Commissioner to institutionalize the monopoly powers of the chieftaincy. This gave rise to the establishment of the House of Chiefs in 1903 and the formation of the Basutoland National Council in 1910, in which the only commoners were those nominated by the Resident Commissioner.

3. Unlike the loose federalism practised in the early years of the formation of the Basotho nation - under conditions of fairly constant guerrilla war - in which the power, authority, wealth and position of individual chiefs fluctuated according to the conditions of struggle and was held in check by fluid national boundaries and the institution of the pitso, the institutionalization of the chieftaincy undermined its popular basis. Ashton, who was well aware of the role of the chieftaincy in the process of differentiation, commented:

Formerly the chiefs, whose position was largely dependent on popular support, spent their surplus on feeding their people, helping needy but influential persons, and providing the poor with gifts, loaned stock (*mafisa*) and even, in a few cases, with wives. Now that political power is largely independent of popularity, there is no need for them to do this and they and other wealthy people can, if they wish, expend their wealth on advanced education for their children and luxuries for themselves such as expensive tailor-made suits, large houses built on European lines, motor cars, travel, liquor and race horses. (15)

4. In theory, the system of chieftaincy involved the establishment of District, Sub-District Chiefs and Ward headmen in an hierarchical system. In practice, the practice of "placement" meant that relatives of the paramount Chief could be placed in authority over Sub-Chiefs and Ward headmen. This entailed an enormous proliferation of chieftainship leading Pim to quote as fair comment the remark of a speaker in the National Council that "there are now as many chiefs in Basutoland as there are stars in the heaven". (16)

5. The specific measures used by the chiefs to ensure their dominant place in commodity production can only be outlined here. The most important were the system of tribute, the distribution of land and, to some extent, stock, and court fines. The most important system of tribute was labour tribute on the fields of the chief, the *tsimo ea lira*. Originally the system of *lira* - collective work on the lands of the chief - was confined to the lands of the Paramount Chief but there is evidence that District and Sub-Chiefs increasingly acquired *lira* and that, by the nineteen thirties, cash payments and fines were increasingly replacing labour tribute, *letsema*. Control of the distribution of usufruct rights to land, the share-crop system and the practice of *mafisa* by which stock were loaned out to commoners in a system of disguised wage labour, all served to enhance the capacity of chiefs to engage in commodity production at the expense of commoners. Ashton remarks specifically on the practice of "eating up a person", i.e. dispossession of wealthy commoners:

They obstinately opposed economic development that might enrich and emancipate their subjects, and were given, even then, to the practice of 'eating up a person': namely, punishing a prosperous man for some misdemeanour by seizing all or the greater part of his stock. (17)

Little is known, even today, of the actual extent of class differentiation in the territory. Figures put forward by the present regime to indicate a remarkably egalitarian distribution of wealth are clearly fraudulent. (18) The preoccupation of colonial authorities with the system of administrative control led contemporary observers such as Ashton, Sir Alan Pim and Hailey largely to ignore the extent of inequality, and totally to ignore the struggles of Lekhotla la Bafu against their increasing marginalization. At the instigation of the Pim Commission a survey was carried out in the District of Qacha's Nek in 1934. The survey found that 80 per cent of taxpayers of less than five years' standing, 32 per cent of those of between five and ten years' and 17 per cent of those of over ten years' standing were recorded as having no stock. On this same sample, 84, 30 and 9 per cent, respectively, were recorded as having no stock. A tiny sample carried out in the Highlands in 1936 showed that c. 11 per cent had more than twenty head of cattle and 50 small stock and that 30 per cent had little or no stock. (19)

But, measured in terms of consumption patterns, contemporary observers were quite clear on the extent of inequality. They distinguished between a "wealthier" class, principally of chiefs with extensive holdings of land and stock and with conspicuous consumption patterns, a "middle" class of village headmen and commoners who could feed and clothe themselves on imported commodities, possess land, stock and farm implements and educate their children, and a "poor" class without stock who, even in non-drought years, could neither feed, clothe nor house themselves and their families adequately.

The position of the proletarianized commoners who, by before the end of the nineteenth century, had become the "sinews" of the labour force in mining, agriculture and public works in the Free State and the Transvaal is most manifest. Less clear is that of what contemporary observers referred to as the "middle class" of educated commoners. The absence of opportunities to engage in large-scale trading, confined by the colonial government to whites and, in the northern districts, a few Asians, prevented the consolidation of this class and led it, as we shall see, to adopt collaborationist positions in internal politics. The position of the wealthier chiefs in commodity production was disguised by a variety of factors - not least the practice of mafisa. What contemporary observers could see of the wealth of district and sub-district chiefs clearly impressed them:

In 1934, one chief, who kindly showed me his books, owned 200 cattle, 1,500 small stock, 90 equines, and 31 large lands, which in a fair year yielded 300 bags of grain; he had also a revenue from his court of about 200 cattle, 225 small stock and 20 pounds cash, and an allowance of 100 pounds (subsequently raised to 300 pounds) from the administration. He was one of the wealthier chiefs, but not as wealthy as the late Chief Jonathan, who died leaving an estate worth over 20,000 pounds. (20)

Political Protest and the League of the Common Man

Of modern political organizations in Basutoland, the Basutoland Progressive Association (BPA) founded in 1904 was most closely associated with the new "middle class" of educated commoners. Its core was composed of teachers, clerical workers and traders who had been educated at the missions of the Paris Evangelical Mission Society (PEMS) which had dominated missionary education in the nineteenth century. Their key political objectives were greater elected representation in decision-making - specifically the inclusion of an elected element in the National Council - and to press via the colonial administration for the abolition of specific abuses of the powers of the chiefs. The zenith of the BPA was reached in the late thirties with an estimated membership of 3-5,000. In political terms, the BPA stood half-way between the more progressive elements within the chieftaincy and the colonial administration itself. As the colonial administration, for its own purposes, sought to curb the power of the chiefs in the forties, so the influence of the BPA declined. By the early thirties the system of parallel rule (*laissez-faire*) was, from the British viewpoint, clearly breaking down. This viewpoint was primarily concerned with the economic cost of the administration of the territory and the issue - outside the terms of reference of this paper - of incorporation of the territory into the Union of South Africa. By the early thirties, the long-term underdevelopment of the labour reserve, together with drought and the crisis of the world market, had produced for the first time a deficit in government accounts. One result of this was to convince the colonial administration of the necessity of more direct state intervention in the territory. One result of this line of thinking was the Pim Commission which advocated the abolition of parallel rule and the official gazetting of chiefs who became in effect, when these reforms were implemented during and after World War II, a salaried civil service. With these reforms - which included a drastic reduction in the numbers and powers of the chiefs - the BPA was largely satisfied and their influence dwindled.

Lekhotla la Bafo ("the council of commoners", hereafter referred to as the "League") was far more closely involved with the commoners (chiefs and their families were explicitly excluded from membership) and specifically with that strata of commoners who had experienced the boom in commodity production of the 1870s. The League, with a very loose organizational structure, is closely associated with the character of its founder, Josiel Lefela, whose history reveals much of the class character of the movement.

Josiel Lefela was born in Mapoteng, a village in the Berea district, in 1885, the third son of Molebo, a commoner. After mission school with the PEMS,

Lefela went off to the mines in Johannesburg. According to one account, he hated the thought of going underground and absconded after his very first shift. He seems to have spent some years in Johannesburg, where he developed a considerable range of contacts - including, according to one account, Kadalie of ICU fame - and devoted much of his time to his own education, particularly on the history of South Africa and Basutoland (he is said to have been able to quote Theal's Basutoland Records at length). By 1910 he had returned home, married the first of three wives, and built up a small business, including a bar and a butcher's shop. (21)

The League, which was constituted shortly before the First World War, had as its prime aim to attack not only specific abuses of the chieftaincy but the institutionalization of the chieftaincy under colonial administration, described above. This objective is most clearly formulated in the preamble to constitution to the League, which begins:

Whereas the late Chief Moshesh and his successors in office did not satisfy the people in their government by the establishment and sustenance of a national assembly known as a 'Pitso' and held at Thuto-Ea-Moli. And whereas the said Pitso was in the year 1903 abolished and the present Basutoland National Council constituted composed of the chiefs and their advisors. And whereas the present composition of the National Council is not in the best interests of good government of the territory by reason of the exclusion from membership of persons and associations other than the chiefs and their advisors. It is resolved: (a) to form an association to safeguard, promote and protect the best interests and welfare of its members and persons other than the chiefs and their advisors ... (22)

A key feature in this issue was the absence, under the institutionalized chieftaincy, of any forum for the redress of the grievances of commoners. Lefela himself was, periodically, a nominated member of the National Council and used this forum regularly to emphasize that the Council regularly refused to consider commoners' petitions. The Paramount Chief, Griffith, sought to place the burden of these demands on the colonial administration by seeking the advice of the Resident Commissioner, Edward Garraway, who replied:

I say if such matters do not interest members of the Council and they do not find favour with you, these people can do nothing and even if they succeed in obtaining the sympathy of a member, I still have the right ... to refuse a discussion in the Council (23),

and, in a later comment, advised Griffith to "just acknowledge receipt without comment excepting to say they should mind their own business". (24)

One feature of the League which distinguished it from the BPA was its recurrent attacks on the Mission churches, not only on the Catholic Church, which underwent great expansion during Griffith's reign and under his sponsorship, but also on the PEMS. The League was closely associated with the independent church movement, and specifically with the church movement that broke away from the PEMS and established the "Church of Moshoeshoe" (Kereka Ea Moshoeshoe) in 1922.

But the key feature of the League which distinguished it from the BPA was its refusal to ally itself with a reformist administration against the chieftaincy as such. To contemporary "modernizers", such refusal indicated the innate conservatism of the League on the issue of chieftaincy reform. But what is clear from the writings of the League is that they regarded the whole question of chieftaincy as a matter to be considered, struggled and fought for within an African context: an issue which was not to be settled by the proclamation of colonial "authority", an authority which they did not recognize. Thus, fundamental to an understanding of the League is their rejection of colonial authority per se. Lefela himself saw this in a much wider

context than the territory of Basutoland. His attacks on colonialism were considered too radical by most of the leadership of the African National Congress and, in 1928, he was denied access to the ANC journal, Abantu Batho. Lefela then began to publish articles in the South African Worker and, on behalf of the League, invited Gumede to address meetings in Basutoland. This was prevented only by strong-arm tactics engineered by the chiefs. (25) Indeed the whole position of the League on the issue of colonialism was well to the left of the ANC. One manifestation of this was the issue of military recruitment during World War II. While the ANC demanded the right of African volunteers to bear arms but supported the war effort, the League publicly urged the Basotho not to serve. For their efforts, the leadership of the League were detained during the war.

One characteristic of the League, on which I have speculated, is the absence of sustained struggle on a whole variety of issues which affected Basotho commoners as part of the southern African working class. Despite the involvement of the League on the issue of incorporation, issues that affected commoners as migrant workers - recruitment, taxation, accidents and mortality, etc. - figure far less prominently in the available records. When, in the mid-fifties, Lefela virtually disbanded the League and, at a public meeting of the Basuto Congress Party at Thaba Bosiu on Moshoeshoe Day in 1957, gave his public blessing to Ntsu Mokhehle (himself a former member of the League), declaring that the BCP was "the son of Lekhotla la Bafo", the League was merged in a mass organization which, until a major split occurred in 1958, regarded itself as the organization of the ANC within the territory. By contrast to the BCP, the League defined both the arena of political struggle and the issues it raised in terms of the territory.

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Notes

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- (2) Colin Bundy, The Rise & Fall of the South African Peasantry (London, 1979).
- (3) J. S. Saul & R. Woods, "African Peasantries" in T. Shanin (ed), Peasants & Peasant Societies (Harmondsworth, 1971).
- (4) Saul & Woods, ibid., p. 107.
- (5) G. M. E. Leistner, "Lesotho: economic implications of migrant labour", South African Journal of Economics, xxxix, 2, June 1971.
- (6) C. W. de Kiewiet, History of South Africa. Social and Economic (London, 1942).
- (7) Basutoland. Annual Colonial Report 1898/1899, No. 288.
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- (9) Paul Spray, "A Tentative Economic History of Lesotho from 1830", MPhil, University of Sussex.
- (10) G. Arrighi, "Labour supplies in historical perspective: a study of proletarianization of the African peasantry in Rhodesia", Journal of Development Studies, vi, 3, April 1970.
- (11) L. Cliffe, "Labour Migration and Peasant Differentiation: Zambian experiences" in B. Turok (ed), Development in Zambia (London, 1979).
- (12) For example, H. Wolpe, "The Changing Class Structure of South Africa: the African Petit-Bourgeoisie", University of Essex, November 1976, mimeo.
- (13) G. Lagden, The Basuto (London, 1909), p. 560.

- (14) V. G. Sheddick, "The Southern Sotho", in Ethnographic Survey of Africa, Daryll Forde (ed), (London, 1953) p. 44.
- (15) H. Ashton, The Basuto: a social study of traditional and modern Lesotho (Oxford, 1967), p. 175.
- (16) Sir Alan Pim, Financial and Economic Position of Basutoland, Cmd 4907 (London, HMSO, 1935).
- (17) Ashton, op. cit., p. 220.
- (18) For example, the figures on income distribution quoted in Lesotho's First Five Year Development Plan 1970/71 - 1974/75.
- (19) Ashton, op. cit., pp. 174-175.
- (20) Ibid., p. 173.
- (21) Gordon Haliburton, "Politics and Religion in Lesotho: a Survey", University of Botswana, Lesotho & Swaziland, Roma, November 1973, mimeo.
- (22) Haliburton, ibid., pp. 41-42.
- (23) Lekhotla la Bafo file, Lesotho National Archive.
- (24) Noted on a letter from Eleazare Masupha to Sir E. Garraway, 19th February 1925.
- (25) Haliburton, op. cit.