LESELINYANA LA LESOTHO AND SOTHO HISTORIOGRAPHY

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On 3 November 1863 the first issue of Leselinyana la Lesotho, datelined Morija, was published by the Revd. Adolphe Mabille of the Paris Evangelical Mission Society. Leselinyana continues to be published today. Its contents have been recently used by two biographers of Moshoeshoe and in the present paper I hope to suggest some other ways in which the materials in this publication can be of value to historians of the Sotho.

Mabille had arrived among the Sotho in 1860 and had already published several small pamphlets written by himself on a small primitive printing press. The first issue of Leselinyana comprised just a single sheet containing two pieces of writing -- an editorial signed "Leselinyana la Lesutho" in which, inter alia, the newspaper introduced itself in the first person to the Basotho. The other piece was the first of what came to be a series of articles with the general title "Mogaogeli oa Moetsalibe" ("The Sinner's Pardoner"). From the beginning Leselinyana emphasized articles of a religious and catechetical nature, clearly indicating its basic purpose as a vehicle for religious instruction and propaganda.

According to Gérard the publication of Leselinyana was interrupted only twice. The first hiatus was from 1865 to 1869 when the Boers of the Orange Free State invaded and temporarily occupied areas west of the Drakensberg mountains, evicting the French missionaries who had supported the Africans there. The second occurred during the so-called Gun War of 1880/81 when the Sotho successfully resisted efforts by the Cape government to disarm them and to open Sotho lands to white settlement. In the following discussion I will touch briefly on a few representative materials in Leselinyana which suggest the richness of the paper as a source for historians, not only of the Sotho themselves but of their relations with the whites of the area and with the missionaries.

By 1883, though still predominantly religious in orientation and content Leselinyana was beginning to display a diversification that had been absent previously. For instance there

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appeared a historical series entitled "Tsa Lesotho" ("About Lesotho") recalling Chief Jonathane's address to the Mateteka (a nickname for the Basotho loyalists during the Gun War) on 27 November 1882, a little over a month before the article appeared. There was also an area set aside for "Mangolo" ("Letters") in which readers could express their opinions on various matters or simply share their experiences with their compatriots. One begins too to see brief coverage of events outside Lesotho proper.

However, matters pertaining to Lesotho naturally continued to claim first attention, and they were debated heatedly, especially those that were considered vital to the nation's survival. Prominent among these was the Ntoa ya Lithunya or Gun War when the Basotho were tragically divided on the disarmament issue and civil war ensued in which brother fought against brother, Christian against fellow Christian, and traditionalist against fellow traditionalist, all mobilized into two camps -- the Mateteka and the Marebele (the rebels). The Paris Evangelical Mission Society was of course deeply involved in the whole affair. Following Samsone Nasone's second instalment on the war there appeared a long commentary signed "E.C." (probably Eugene Casalis) on the tension and constant fighting, particularly between Joele and Jonathane, the sons of Molapo and grandsons of Moshoeshoe. Among other things "E.C." noted that it was not only the church at Kolonyama that was burned down by Hlasoa and his like, but the churches at Peka and Hleoeng were also burned down. And we understand that those three churches were set alight deliberately for, it was argued, that was where the loyalists congregated. Does not God belong to everyone? Isn't there enough in this nation to anger God without adding other offenses to these, such as the burning of church buildings? Isn't that dishonoring God, not men? Please examine yourselves, lest you mark yourselves as those who are fighting against God.6

By 1883 European liquor and its devastating effects on the Basotho had become matters of concern and were frequently aired in Leselinyana, both editorially and in articles otherwise articulating official missionary opinion. There was genuine concern, and even alarm, to the point that the fathers of the missionaries of the churches of Lesotho who are living in France are writing to king Letsie and
his children and his younger brothers
and his nephews and his grandchildren
and to the entire [Sotho] nation, and
also to the churches

The author was palpably appealing
to the Basotho's baser instincts -- their belief in witchcraft
-- in a desperate attempt to turn them away from the new evil.
He began his appeal by referring to a letter he had just re-
ceived from Casalis, then in France, in which the latter
declared that the drinking habits of the Basotho made him feel
ashamed. "He would feel afraid to visit Lesotho," continued
H.D., "the country of his friend Moshueshue, who did not drink
even the sorghum beer." He recalled asking Moshoeshoe why he
dreaded liquor so much, to which Moshoeshoe replied, like the
man of wisdom he was, with the rhetorical question: "How can
a king drink madness?" But the interests of capitalism over-
rulled moral considerations and the trade in liquor continued
pace.

For a long time there was little differentiation in Leseliny-
yana between readers' letters and what might be called free-
lance contributions of news by various and sundry. This was,
of course, in the true Sesotho tradition of taking advantage of
the traveler to learn the news of the place whence he had just
traveled. This is not to argue that such a format was the
deliberate policy of the missionaries but simply that it was a
matter of necessity and part of the evolution of this new
venture at a time when formal newsgathering would have presen-
ted formidable problems involving great expenditure of time and
resources.

One constant source of news was the parish from which the
local preacher sent regular reports of progress and of the
latest secular developments as well. Some of these simply
blended into some discussion of importance already running in
Leselinyana at the time. For example, correspondents, parti-
cularly teachers and preachers (often one and the same person)
would report how the establishment of a circumcision school
drew some of the children away from the missionary school and
of course from the church as well. This kind of titbit was
sent most regularly at the time when the institution of cir-
cumcision was under severe attack in the columns of Leseliny-
ana from missionaries and black converts alike. The reported inci-
dent would then be cited as further proof of the 'evil' of this
custom. The debate on lebollo (circumcision) continued for
years, with the missionaries and their supporters coming down hard on those who continued to practice it.

Or it might be something informative without being controversial such as Jobo Moteane's report of his visit to the source of the Sengu (later known as the Orange) river in January and February, 1888. Or Daniele Methusala's account of his visit to Ntsawanatsatsi, golimo e ntso (Ntswanatsatsi, the black heaven), Ntswanatsatsi being, according to Basotho mythology, the place of origins where in the beginning all living things came out of a bubbling spring in the ground. Methusala told how he tried to locate the exact spot described by older living Basotho and that he found this somewhere near the present town of Bethlehem in the Orange Free State.9

Sometimes, though, a debate was unintentionally initiated by a casual report amounting to little more than gossip. For instance, the debate on whether or not Basotho women were over-worked began when one Yosefa Mokhathla wrote to Leselinyana telling how he had been visiting a friend named A. Motlakuana when the latter's wife entered, began to prepare food, and then complained that men simply ate without doing any work. She argued that men "do not grind corn, do not cook, do not draw water, do not even collect dried-dung fuel" and went on to enumerate other complaints, singling out grinding corn on a stone mill as the most exacting task a woman had to do.10 Several months later Motlakuana wrote to Leselinyana that his wife spoke thus only because she was lazy but in the interim a lively discussion had ensued as to what should be done to relieve Basotho women of the drudgery of such tasks.

By this time the editor found it necessary to control the flow (or at least the publication) of letters rather strictly but serious writers had already begun to emerge whose articles were almost automatically assured space in the paper. Among these were Azariele Sekese, Everitt Segoete, Z.D. Mangoaela, Jobo Moteane, Mareka Nchakala, and Cranmer Sebeta.

The continuing growth of Leselinyana was also reflected in the addition of new departments so that already quite early in its career it carried (albeit usually slightly out of date) summaries of international news and events. This was especially noticeable after 1895 when Mabille seems deliberately to have reduced contributions pertaining to Sotho culture and tradition in favor of brief reports of news from all over the world. Events of exceptional importance such as World War I (or "the war of the Kaiser," as the Basotho called it) were of course followed closely. Nevertheless, matters of urgency and survival closer to home continued to be given first priority. These included the rinderpest epidemic of the 1890s; the Anglo-Boer war of 1899-1902 and how it affected the Basotho both at home and abroad; the alliance of the erstwhile warring Boers
and Britons to form the Union of South Africa in 1910; and the viciousness of the policy of segregation on the blacks generally, including Basotho visiting or living in the Union. The readers themselves often articulated their concerns with clarity and eloquence. Joseph M. Mofolo, writing from Bethle- hem in the Orange Free State, raised several of these concerns. He observed that the Basotho and other blacks in the Free State were as good as being in a state of war with the whites. "This war," he continued,

...is made up of the laws that are made for the black person. When you examine these laws you see that their language says: 'Go back to your own home.' When a white person steals he goes to jail for a specified period of time and that is the end. If the black person falls into the same error he [also] goes to jail but is sometimes given the cat o' nine tails as well. ... We carry both punishments.

Turning to the pass laws then in force Mofolo complained that a black person has no right to go any place whatsoever. Only when he is sent by his baaś [master] is he free to go wherever he has to; or when he is driving cattle. The big fellows [i.e., the whites] for their part may go wherever they wish, be it near or far ... When are we going to be free from this slavery?

Turning to matters of education Mofolo again drew comparisons between blacks and whites. The white child could go to school unhindered but black children were taken out of school "against the wishes of their fathers and mothers" to "look after the noöl's [white mistress'] child." As a result "black schools are neglected, none of them being under government control." What, Mofolo asked, did the government do with the tax monies that they demanded with such insistence from the blacks? He answered his own question with bitter sarcasm: "For lack of a better answer, let us say that it is used to buy the ropes with which they [the blacks] are whipped."¹¹ Nine months later this same correspondent was urging the Basotho in the Orange Free State to demand government schools since such schools were better financed, and therefore better equipped, than missionary schools.¹²

The survival of the París Evangelical Mission Society's missions in Lesotho was always of primary concern to Leselin- yana's management and there had been unmistakable animosity
between the P.E.M.S. and the Roman Catholics (who first arrived in 1862), since the Society resented competition from the newcomers. For the moment there is no way of determining what reactions to Roman Catholicism in Lesotho were expressed in *Leselinyana*'s earliest years since the issues between 1865 and 1883 are not available. Nevertheless, sparks were flying in 1888 when Fr. J.M. Deltour accused *Leselinyana* of misreporting a meeting at Matsieng at which both Protestants and Catholics were present. Again in 1897 Fr. J. Cenez took issue with "H.D.'s" representation of the Catholic teaching and interpretation of the Second Commandment. Deltour's letter referred to a meeting called by king Letsie in the previous June to discuss the attitude of the churches to the Sesotho form of marriage involving the passing of cattle from the young man's parents to the parents' of the girl (bohadi). One of the P.E.M.S. missionaries' complaints about the meeting was that Letsie had invited the Catholics on a matter which they considered to be between themselves and Letsie -- an attitude with which Deltour not surprisingly disagreed.

But the most important point of difference between the two groups was their respective attitudes to the question of bohadi. The Protestants adopted an uncompromising attitude, declaring that the custom was opposed to Christian concepts of marriage and that in effect it constituted the sale of the bride by her own parents. The Catholics, on the other hand, argued that there were Biblical parallels for the custom and that it was therefore acceptable. Most important, however, they claimed to see no evidence that the passing of cattle among the Basotho represented 'buying.' Deltour argued that

> even the heathens [Basotho] can demonstrate to you that a woman is not bought. A human being cannot be bought with a paltry ten or twenty or [even] thirty cattle. That is unheard of. Why is it that when a man and his wife have fought, the woman runs home to her father? Why is it that the father then makes his son-in-law pay a fine just as if the wife did not belong to him [i.e., that he had not purchased her]? Where is the concept of purchase in that?  

Deltour's letter was extremely long and the official responses of *Leselinyana* (and hence of the P.E.M.S.) were given in brackets after each question or accusation. The argument sometimes reached a very low level indeed, as when Deltour described the Catholic church as Jesus Christ's bride and declared that the Protestants, as represented by Luther and Calvin, were like the mistress who was chased out of the house because of, among
other things, her adultery.

Earlier Deltour had accused Leselinyana of having falsely stated that Chief Masopha had in his turn described the Protestants as the legitimate wife and the Catholics as the mistress who was not entitled to be present during "a family discussion." Mabille replied that it was not Masopha who had so spoken, but Chief Salomone of Qwaqwa, who had done so on Letsie's instructions in order to indicate that the Catholics had come to Lesotho after the Protestants. And so it went. At the conclusion of the debate Mabille had a parting shot at Deltour. Leselinyana, he noted, was not made to carry the disputes between the Roman Catholics and other people. We criticized the Catholics in Leselinyana of June because we saw fit to alert our readers to their errors. The Roman Catholics have answered with this letter of Mr. [sic] Deltour. This dispute ends here . . . We will welcome no further correspondence on the issue. If the Catholics wish to answer they can make their own newspaper.14

Another threat to the P.E.M.S. materialized toward the end of the century in the form of a movement, then known as Ethiopianism, of blacks breaking away from the white-dominated churches. Among the leading figures in this movement was Mangena Mokone, who defected from the Wesleyan Methodist Church to form a church in which blacks would participate fully in the administration and in policy decisions. By linking with the black Episcopalians of the United States, this movement eventuated in the formation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, with black American bishops. The A.M.E. Church went from strength to strength in Lesotho and its primary purpose of being a totally independent black church was never lost sight of. In the 1960s it was considered enough of a threat to be banned in Southwest Africa during the political crisis there.

G. Rolland, a P.E.M.S. missionary in Lesotho at the time, reacted strongly to Mokone's resignation from the Wesleyan church, stating that Mokone had refused to offer any reasons for wanting to leave. However, stated Rolland, at the first mass meeting of his followers Mokone gave as the driving motivation for his action his desire to establish a church where blacks would be free from the tutelage of the whites. Rolland accused Mokone of receiving all and sundry into his new church -- malcontents from other churches, those excommunicated by their own church, and so on. He criticized the "shortness" of the trial period in Mokone's church before new converts were
baptized. He summed up by declaring that "these people do not yet have the ability to govern themselves. They fail in their specific tasks because they are not yet educated; they are still in pitch black darkness. And, after all, when a blind person leads other blind people the cliff will swallow them all."¹⁵

One of the most important roles of Leselinyana was in publishing and preserving the results of research and in encouraging exchanges of opinion on controversial issues. As far as the former is concerned, we see arising from the total complex of the new era an entirely new breed of Mosotho, namely, the literary person, obsessed with an urge to make the paper speak and at the same time be a more reliable storehouse of the human memory. The period of the 1890s was particularly fertile in this regard. It opened with men like Azariele Sekese and B. Sekokotoana and others mentioned already in this essay. Sekese in particular contributed numerous articles on the traditions, legends, and history of the Basotho, as well as other aspects of early Sesotho culture. Leselinyana carried several install- ments of his work on Sesotho proverbs, finally publishing them in book form in 1895. Sekese made his debut as a contributor in 1886 with a piece entitled "Lefa" ("Heritage" or "Inheritance").¹⁶ Thereafter he appeared frequently; his publications included short allegories, parables, and folktales with new morals attached to them -- most of them cast in poetic form.

Sekese's major contributions, though, were in the realm of historical writing, in which he traced the fortunes of the various groups comprising the Basotho from the beginnings to his own time. Perhaps the most important aspect of Sekese's writing in this regard in that he wrote entirely from the point of view of a Mosotho. Both in terms of bias and details the articles add a new dimension to the meanings of old facts. Sekese tried consciously to reconstruct the history of the Basotho and, where necessary, of their neighbors in pre-European times. That most of his contributions addressed them- selves to events after the arrival of the whites in southern Africa is due to the fact that he found the affairs of the ancients locked in a secret chamber for which even he had no key. He noted that the Basotho had

hidden the most important events of their past in the circumcision institution, cam-ouflaged in their songs. Also at times they are couched in old, old Sesotho, the meaning of which is difficult to understand. Another thing that has been preserved like that in songs are some of the names of the Ancients.¹⁷
One of Sekese's discussions in this vein concerned Mopedi who, he says, was always cited as "the First Ancestor." He spoke of Mopedi in these terms: "He is also called Tlake who, it is said, transgressed; but it is not explained to us what the transgression was."18 Here Sekese fell into a trap to which the new Christian faith strongly predisposed the Basotho, viz., finding facile parallels to their own traditions in the Bible. This is unfortunate since it means that Sekese eschewed a more thorough search into interpreting Sotho traditions in favor of the less difficult alternative. Some missionaries were themselves all too ready to find "significant similarities" between the Basotho and the ancient Jews. Sekese continued that "It appears that Tlake is Adam, according to the way the Basotho called him. The 1come that he is said to have worn, let us suppose it to be fig leaves[!]" Not content with this Sekese attempted to carry the Biblical analogy still farther:

Another name which is mentioned is that of Napo. Napo is the son of Tlake because it is said: he is Napo Mosito (Tlake is the one who transgressed).19 It is told of the tremendous distance of the place where he lived, which is called Tebang, that is to say, deep, deep down or far, far away. Now it is said that we -- people of all kinds -- are the children of Napo. It appears that Napo is Noah, according to the way the Basotho, for their part, called him.20

Sekese then was committed to a Sotho point of view, trying both to establish the validity of Sotho-hood and its relevance to what he perceived as a superior culture.

There is other evidence of Sekese's diligence as a researcher and of his eagerness to secure all the evidence available, as well as of his conviction that the story of a people should be told in the best way that available data made possible. In protesting against the editorial corruption of Chere Monyoloza's articles on ła (patterns assumed by the divining bones when they are thrown during divination) and their praises he stated that "it is common practice that a person is judged at the conclusion of what he has to say, not before he speaks, because he Monyoloza was [as good as being] in a court of law in his Leselinyana contributions."21

Contrasting this position with his own he argued that

I for my part wish very much that we should get to where this matter of divination is leading us, and where the feelings of the people complement each other, and to find
out why there are so many sage words found in the [praises of the] falling patterns. Is it the diviners who have taken them from the people, or is it [the people] who have taken them from [the diviners]?²²

At this time the indefatigable Sekese was also busy compiling the proverbs of the Basotho. The paragraph that concluded the letter on Monyoloza reveals to us the essential Sekese in this regard: "So must all the customs of the Basotho be collected because there must be a book in which whoever is able to read Sesotho will find all the customs of the Basotho. . . . It is a very beautiful thing when a nation has books which have been crammed full of their story."²³

Sometimes an important detail surfaces which enriches the context in which historical events are to be interpreted. For example, we gather from Sekese that

the day Col. [Charles D.] Griffith, the Governor [sic for Government Agent] of Basutoland visited the [Cape] Colony, he came back from there and told how the Ba-Kone[Xhosa] of Segele had once become drunk and started fighting, and there was much quarreling, during which they grabbed their guns. That was the beginning of the affair concerning the guns, the occasion when it was decided that they would be taken out of the hands of the black people.²⁴

This version of course is quite consonant with the colonists' basic assumption that black people were like children who had to be protected by their white 'fathers.' While many Basotho, including Sekese himself, did submit and surrender their guns, most refused to do so and a clash ensued with British troops in the Cape Colony. Nevertheless, it remains testimony to the double standards of colonial administrators.

Sekese's series under the title "Buka ea taba tsa ba-Sotho" began on 1 February 1892 and continued until at least December of 1893, during which it appeared twice a month. By the time it ended the series had covered such topics as "Bara ba Peete, Libe le Mokhachane" ("the sons of Peete, Liba and Mokhachane"); "Kopano ea Moshueshue le Lethole" ("the alliance between Moshoeshoe and Lethole"); "Go nyologa ga Chaka" ("the coming of Shaka"), which referred to Shaka's disciplining of Matiwane for interfering with his vassal Moshoeshoe by, among other things, preventing the Basotho from hunting freely, thus stopping the flow of plumes and animal skins as tribute; "Ho tlha ga Moshueshue" ("the coming of Moshoeshoe") which included
praises of Moshoeshoe and his son Molapo; and "Tsa Ntoa ea Lithunya ka nga ho Morena Yoele Molapo" ("concerning the war of the guns as it relates to Yoele Molapo").

Even after this Sekese continued his vigorous writing, each article appearing with its own specific title. Then in 1905 he again assumed a general title for a series he initiated at that time — "History ea Basotho" ("History of the Basotho"). There is therefore in Leselinyana a tremendous "Sekese archives" of Basotho history, legend, and myth, as well as of his writings on other topics, especially of a cultural nature, which awaits the attention both of the humanist and the social scientist.

In 1896 a new series called "History ea Le-Sotho" ("History of Lesotho") began to appear in Leselinyana. Although it appeared regularly until 1901 it remained anonymous to the end.25 By the conclusion of the series the author had traced much of the earlier history of the peoples of the Sotho group and had brought the history of Lesotho proper up to ca. 1871.

The anonymous author of "History ea Le-Sotho" was followed by D.F. Ellenberger whose series was entitled "History ea Ba-Sotho" ("History of the Basotho") and first appeared in 1901. Later the series was collected into a volume called Histori ea Basotho—Karlo eo Pele which was published in 1917.

By this time then Leselinyana had firmly established its reputation as a clearing house for writings which in many cases eventuated in books. It became commonplace for a book to be serialized right up to its final chapter and then published in more or less identical form. Leselinyana was also a convenient place of storage — an archives where not only an author but other interested parties could retrieve the required material and re-examine it. But perhaps one of the most important things here is that these writings were engaged in in full view of the reading public. This encouraged and facilitated criticisms and corrections by others before the author made a final commitment to publication.

As is to be expected there was throughout this entire period a great deal of writing on religious topics. In this regard the most outstanding name is Everitt Segoete whose religious meditations, homiletic articles, parables, and other moralistic writings appeared regularly and with increasing frequency beginning in 1901 and continuing to (and even beyond) his death in 1923.

The early years of the twentieth century also saw the appearance of some of the best known names in Sesotho literature. The giant among these was Thomas Mofolo, whose Chaka was to become an internationally acclaimed classic. In addition Mofolo’s satirical fable Pitso ea Linomyana (A meeting of the birds), Segoete’s Monono ke Moholi ke Mowoane (Riches are mist, they are vapor), Z.D. Mangoaela’s Har’a Libatana le
Linyamatsane (Among the wild animals, big and small), and E. Motsamai's Mahla ea Malimo (In the days of the cannibals) appeared in whole or in part in Leselinyana and brought their authors fame.

It is clear then that Leselinyana is a rich source of information for a variety of scholarly interests. Its usefulness would of course be enhanced greatly if the existing gaps could be filled. The earliest years of the life of this newspaper, in which most of the gaps are found, are the most important and interesting for a variety of reasons. Most important among them is that these were the most critical years in the life of the Basotho, the years when old values were being put to a severe test as they were relentlessly leveled down by a ruthlessly aggressive new religion and an equally ruthless political and economic system.

NOTES

1. This paper is based on research in microfilm copies of Leselinyana la Lesotho at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. These holdings cover the years 1883 to 1913, 1915 to 1935, and 1947 to 1965. A lending copy is held by the Center for Research Libraries, Chicago, Illinois.
4. I retain the original orthography of titles and headings although this sometimes creates problems since the orthography was in a very fluid state in these early years of literacy.
7. Ibid., 1 March 1883.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 1 January 1889.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 1 December 1896.
12. Ibid., 1 September 1897.
13. Ibid., 1 September 1888.
14. Ibid. Ellenberger, A Century of Mission Work, pp. 240-1, opined that the Catholic attitude on bohadi contributed to their increasingly successful proselytizing effort, especially among wives of chiefs.


17. Ibid., 1 February 1892.

18. Ibid.

19. *mosito* comes from the verb *sitwa* (to transgress) and might be translated freely as "the one who transgressed."

20. *Leselinyana*, 1 February 1892.

21. Ibid., 15 July 1892.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid., 15 September 1893.

25. It is not unlikely that the author was James C. McGregor since the contents bear a marked similarity to his *Basuto Traditions*, first issued in Sesotho in 1904 and in English a year later.