

Basotho Stories

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Doing it their way

I suppose it is being rather trite to say that the more we can understand other people's way of life the better in order to avoid misunderstandings. Never the less, it is true and that applies to Lesotho as well as elsewhere.

Many years ago, as a newly appointed Agricultural Officer, I rode out with a couple of Basotho Demonstrators to a Chief's village to discuss soil conservation measures, amongst other things. When we reached the village I was about to dismount and walk up to the Chief's office. The Demonstrator quietly asked me to remain seated on the horse. The etiquette is to ride to the cattle kraal and send in a messenger to announce your arrival. You then wait a few minutes until he sends a messenger back to invite you in. Only then do you dismount and make your approach. I rather liked this old world courtesy and protocol.

I was also told that discussions ought to be interpreted even if the Chief was fluent in English. This gave him time to consider his reply and, of course, enabled others present to better understand proceedings. It is, however, useful to know enough Sesotho to enable you to check on what your interpreter is saying. On one occasion at a pitso (meeting) I was exhorting the people to get their ploughing and planting done early in the season so as to have a long enough growing period for the maize to mature before the onset of autumn or early winter frosts. The Demonstrator interpreting for me told the gathering that I thought them a lazy bunch and that they should get up very early in the morning to plough and plant. Not quite what I meant! If not corrected it could have lead to a serious misunderstanding and a break down in relations!

Yes, Lesotho is an interesting and romantic country in which to travel. If you are riding a borrowed or government owned horse and if as you come to a village the horse suddenly veers off the path and stops, you can be sure he is making for pepzela because he knows he can have a rest. Pepzela is a white flag fluttering from a pole in the breeze and denotes that beer is for sale. The horse rests while the rider drinks! It is quite amazing how long a horse will stand and wait when the reins are left dangling in front of him.

You will probably see in the village a hut, which has one or two reeds, stuck into the thatch above the door and protruding from it. This tells you there is a newborn baby in the hut and you should not approach, especially if you are a strange male. One reed is for a girl and two for a boy. Another indication of the presence of a new born baby is to fasten a length of plaited grass rope above the door and then to attach it to a peg in the ground a few meters away. This peg is usually cut from the root of a mofifi tree (Dogwood, Blinkblaar, Rhamnus prinoides). The peg is treated with this and that to ward off lightning and evil spirits. It has other medicinal purposes.

Cooking is mainly down outside if the weather is fine. A cunning fireplace is built about a meter high and in the form of a cross or T-piece. This means that no matter from which direction the wind is blowing they can always find a sheltered spot for the fire. In bad weather, of course, cooking is done inside the cooking hut, but it is usually very smoky.

There is a grey, much branched aromatic shrub, which grows mostly near stream banks. It is very common and is called lengana (Wilde Als, Artemisia). It has a very pungent but not unpleasant aroma and persons suffering from colds or chest complaints will place a sprig in each nostril so as to breath in the fumes and so get relief. It works well! It has other medicinal properties as do many other indigenous plants and shrubs. One shrub or tree worth mentioning, however, is the Parsnip or Paper Bark Tree (Heteromorpha aborescens), also known as Wildepieterseliebos. It is common and easily recognized from its brown smooth shiny bark peeling in paper-like flakes. This tree has widespread medicinal uses such

as being a remedy for mental and nervous conditions; it is used as an enema; a leaf preparation controls internal parasites and smoke from burning wood is inhaled to relieve headaches. There are many other shrubs and plants which the Basotho use for medicinal purposes but a discussion of these is beyond the scope of this article, and, indeed, beyond the knowledge of the writer.

The Basotho are a very friendly and hospitable people. Travellers will often be presented with a chicken and, if the party is large, they may even be given a sheep. The meat is for your use but the skin, head and legs must be returned to the owner. When trekking and you wish to camp, you should first approach the Headman for a suitable site where there is grazing for the animals. He will usually allow travellers to make use of their leboella (spare veld). Overgrazing and erosion is a serious problem in Lesotho. Individuals in Lesotho cannot own land: it is held in trust for the nation through Chiefs and Headmen. They have the right to declare certain demarcated areas closed for grazing for a certain period of time.

Fuel for warmth and cooking is very scarce, especially in the cold mountain areas, so the people have to make use of kraal manure for this purpose. When accumulated kraal manure has dried out in the kraal after the rainy season in autumn it is dug out in bricks and stored for fuel. There are also heath-like shrubs, sehalahala, growing in the mountains, which provide fuel. They have the advantage of burning even when green, though they are very smoky. It is a great day when winter fuel has been stacked and the crops harvested and stored in grass grain baskets, where it can be kept for several years. A current of air passes through the grass, which discourages the presence of weevil. The basket is placed on a platform of stones to prevent moisture getting in, and the narrow opening is closed with a flat rock carefully smeared with a mixture of clay and cattle dung.

When a person needs labour to assist with, say, weeding, or harvesting or threshing or whatever he will call a letsema. This means he will let it be known that he needs help at a certain place on a certain day. There will be food and beer provided for the helpers in return for their work. The system works well since the job does get done and it usually ends in a pretty jolly day. One wonders if there are "professional" workers who are followers of Bacchus that travel from letsema to letsema!

Another well established custom is that of mafias. Let us say a person is short of grazing, or is away from home at work for an extended period, or if for any reason is unable to look after his stock, he will mafisa them to a trusted person to care for them without charge, but the progeny from those mafisa'd animals will become the property of the caretaker. When the owner returns he will recover his stock minus the progeny.

There are some lovely expressions and idioms in Sesotho. One of them is to give a toast: "To the cattle" the reply is "to their calves". Another is to say: "The cow has fallen". This means you are in serious trouble and at you wits end as what to do and need. Under these circumstances assistance can hardly be refused! If on your travels you are offered a sheep which you do not need or want, you would not say: "No thank you" but rather: "Thank you, please keep it for me until I return to fetch it". I wish I were a better linguist to better understand their rich and expressive language.

My duties as an Agricultural Officer were to advise and encourage improved methods of agriculture and animal husbandry - the so-called "expert" (and I do not mean a drip under pressure). One day I was riding with a group of Basotho alongside some maize fields, planning the construction of "grass strips" to counteract erosion. I noticed that some poles had been planted here and there at random throughout the field: just poles sticking up above the maize. Intrigued by this I asked the reason. "Oh" came the reply. "They are there to kill rats which are harming our crops". I couldn't see the connection or how it worked, but being the "expert" I felt I ought to know and nodded in understanding. But I didn't understand. Finally curiosity got the better of me and I asked how the poles killed the rats. "Well, you see, at night the owls perch on the poles so that they can see the rats then they swoop down and catch them". Oh well, you learn something everyday!

When a Chief wishes to end a pitso, he will stand up and in a loud voice proclaim Khotso to which the gathering will respond with Pula! Nala!

So on that note: KHOTSO! PULA! NALA! (Peace! Rain! Prosperity!)
I Slept Carelessly

It had been a very long tiring day bouncing about in a Landrover in the Lesotho Mountains, up and down steep

path tracks where there were no roads. We had held meetings with Basotho farmers in remote areas to introduce dipping and dosing methods to control external and internal parasites in sheep and Angora goats. At about nine o'clock that night we reached base at a Livestock Improvement Centre but we were so tired we merely put down our camp mattresses and rolled up in our blankets to sleep

Next morning, feeling refreshed after a good night's sleep, we were preparing breakfast on camp stoves when Matlanyane, the Livestock Officer appeared. On being asked how he had slept, his reply was "Oh, I slept very carelessly". Patsy, intrigued by this unusual turn of phrase asked him what he meant by "carelessly"? He replied that he had been so tired last night that he had slept right through the night without hearing anything or any sounds. As a boy he had been a molisane (herdboy or shepherd) caring for his father's livestock at the cattle post in a remote mountain area. The molisane has to be alert at all times to the threat of stock thieves, especially during the night. He needed to sleep with one ear cocked, as it were. He had several dogs and these were trained to sleep under bushes surrounding his cattle post hut in order to raise the alarm should intruders approach. The molisane had to be alert at all times to hear any alarm calls the dogs might make. To sleep "carelessly" so that you heard nothing just wasn't good enough!

Traditionally, in days of yore, the people of Lesotho lived in villages in the Lowlands, that is areas below the sandstone cliffs, and possibly in the foothills. The mountain areas beyond the first range of the Maluti mountains was reserved for grazing and was known as "cattle post country" where no permanent habitation was allowed. The land was held in trust for the nation by the Paramount Chief and through him the ward chiefs. A stockowner would get permission from the Chief to establish a "cattle post" at a suitable spot. With the passage of time and with increasing land pressure in the Lowlands, villages have been established in what was "cattle post" country. Never-the-less even today there are vast areas of exclusively grazing areas "metebong or cattle posts. Having got permission from the Chief, the stockowner would find a suitable location where he would set up a very rudimentary dwelling and kraals from which the molisane would take his stock (sheep, goats, cattle, and horses) out to graze each morning and kraal them again at night. It is a communal system of grazing, as one cannot "own" the ground. Molisane would trek up to these remote cattle posts in the spring before the new season crops were growing. He would have with him a bag of mealie meal a couple of blankets; a pair of gum boots, cooking pots, his sticks and dogs and that is about all. He would remain at the cattle post throughout the summer, and trek back to the village areas in the autumn or early winter when reaping had been completed. The boys have a strong affinity with their dogs, which are well trained and very loyal. I have heard it said that some thieves can burn certain plants which calm the dogs down and may even put them to sleep, which meant that the boy had to be alert at the first signs of alarm put up by the dogs. I cannot personally vouch for the truth of this belief.

It was a tough existence for the molisane and he had to be self reliant and pretty hardy to stand up to the harsh climatic conditions in the Lesotho mountains. Matlanyane has some interesting stories about the life of a molisane. His first real recollections of life were when one day soon after he was weaned he woke up at the cattle post under the care of his uncle. Normally, he would remain a molisane until there was younger brother old enough to take his place so that he could attend school in the Lowlands where the family home was situated. Unfortunately for him, there were no younger brothers: only sisters, who were able to go to school from quite an early age. He remained a molisane until he was nearly adult (I do not know who eventually took over from him). Most molisane are illiterate and most probably unable even to count. However, they know their animals so well that when they drive them into the kraal they will know at once if any are missing: they will also be able to identify them at once: no mechanical sheep counters for him. Then there is his lesiba. This is a musical instrument the boys make from a piece of bamboo (yes, there are places in Lesotho highlands where a species of true bamboo grows), a length of plaited horse hair string attached at one end while the other end is attached to a shaped section of feather. Sucking and blowing on this feather produce an eerie sound. Cattle learn to follow this sound. A few animals will have cowbells attached for identification in bad or misty weather. Well, since Matlanyane had no younger brothers, he began school late and it was his sisters who eventually arranged for his schooling. Matlanyane finally gained a diploma in Agriculture and completed a year of practical veterinary training employed by the Lesotho Government to assist stockowners with animal health problems.

To get back to the life of a molisane, he lived mainly on maize meal, which his father would bring to him every now and then when he went to the cattle post to check his animals. Matlanyane was able to get some milk from his cows; occasionally he would have some meat if an animal died (naturally he had to be extremely careful not to let too many sheep "die"). Sometimes they could entice a neighbour's sheep to wander and not find its way home. Apart from water over his flocks molisane would entertain themselves by hunting field mice or other little mammals; they would indulge in stick fights with other boys, probably more in fun than with venom. They also acquired a good understanding of the world around them, the vagaries of the weather and so on. Then during the fruit season, they would capture some horses and ride helter skelter to the lowlands at night to steal peaches or perhaps a few maize cobs, and then rush back to the cattle post before morning, having left someone to see to the stock that night. Bear in mind they had neither saddles nor bridles and rode at pace down mountain passes with just a blanket on the horse's backs using plaited horsehair or grass ropes attached to the animal's mouth as a bridle - quite a feat in that terrain! Then they hunted cane rats; indulged in stick fights where they had to stand up for themselves. Snow can fall at any time of the year in the mountains, so they knitted

themselves socks and a head covering from mohair that may have rubbed off on bushes near the cattle post to combat the cold. It has happened that boys have frozen to death when unseasonable severe cold set in before the usual time to return to the lowlands before winter. I suppose they had some sort of Basotho remedies for sickness and accidents

I was once trekking high up in the Mokhotlong area when I came across three horsemen well mounted. Behind them was a molisane in a ragged blanket hobbling along, obviously suffering from a badly sprained ankle. I was told they were taking the boy to a clinic at least a days trek away. I asked how it was that they were riding while the injured boy had to hobble along as best he could. "Oh!" came the reply. "He hasn't got a horse!" Yes, it is tough being a molisane wonderful healthy life if all goes well.

I trust you do not sleep too carelessly, but rather have a good night's rest!

REVISED

Adam Kok's Epic Trek over Drakensburg - 1861/63

The old Dobson Map of Basutoland (Lesotho) published in 1909 clearly indicates "Adam Kok's Road" which he followed his epic trek from Philippolis to Nomansland later known as East Griqualand where he established the town of Kokstad. This trek over the Drakensburg Mountains during 1861/63 must rate as one of the epic journeys undertaken during the 19th Century. This is how it happened.

By the end of the 18th Century pastoralists of Khoi and people of mixed origin had established themselves north of the Orange River in what is now known as the Northern Cape. They called themselves the Bastards and so recognized the presence of people of European descent. Missionaries persuaded them to change their name to Griquas and so it is today.

By the middle of the 19th Century several leaders had collected a band of people and laid claim to large tracts of land. One of these leaders was Adam Kok who established himself at Philippolis north of the Gariep (Orange River). There was much fighting between the tribes. Griqua raiding parties with firearms attacked African groups over a wide area of the interior. They were turbulent days.

Then came the Voortrekkers after 1838, many of which set up farms in Transorangia [that is an area North of the Orange] including the lands claimed by Adam Kok. The area became known as the Orange River Sovereignty. In the 1860's, Adam Kok had sold off much of his land to encroaching Boers and, tired of the continual strife in the area decided to trek with his people from Philippolis across Basutoland (Lesotho) over the Drakensburg to settle in what was known as Nomansland; an unoccupied fertile area which later became known as East Griqualand with the main settlement being at Kokstad.

The only problem concerning this proposed exodus was to find a suitable route over the mighty Basutoland Mountains and the Drakensburg that lay between Philippolis and Nomansland. In 1859 Adam Kok with 100 armed men set off to find a suitable route. They passed through what is now Dordrecht then to Tsomo and finally to somewhere near present day Matatiele. Tribes hostile to the Griquas made Kok decide not to use this route but rather to trek over Basutoland. They therefore returned to Philippolis through Moshoeshe's country marking out a workable route over the precipitous mountains. On the way someone was accidentally shot on the pass, which to this day is known as Ongeluk's Nek. Kok carved his name on a rock at the spot where the accident happened and this carving is clearly visible to this day. Kok then visited Moeshoeshe to get his permission to trek across his territory.

Kok and about 2000 followers; about 20 000 head of stock; something like 300 wagons and numerous donkey carts set off, early in 1861 to cross the mighty, uncharted and the most incredibly precipitous mountains in South Africa to reach No Mans Land on the eastern side of the Drakensberg range.

They trekked past Smithfield, and Zastron and camped for some time below Hangklip in the Mohales Hoek District of Basutoland. On the old Dobson map there is a village marked "Adam", possibly where Kok camped. Near a place called Mekaling there are grooves chipped into a sandstone slab where the trekkers set and tightened their iron wagon wheel bands. 1862 was a serious drought year and the trekkers already suffered stock losses. It is thought they crossed the Orange River at Seaka and then trekked up the south bank of the Orange as far as Mt Moorosi. This in itself is an

arduous journey crossing many streams and gullies, valleys and steep mountains. It was, however, nothing compared with what lay ahead.

Much is written about the historical events leading up to this trek, but very little, if anything is recorded about the arduous and harrowing trek itself. Near Mt Moroosi the Dobson Map clearly shows "Adam Kok's Road". It climbs the steep Mkochomela range near Tosing. It is said that when traversing such steep slopes throughout the trek, they fixed the two smaller front wheels of the wagon to the topside of the wagon and the two larger rear wheels to the lower side in order to level out the wagon so that they were less likely to tip over. Sometimes they dug trenches for the upper wheels to travel in thus levelling off the wagons even more.

Having climbed Mkochomela, the terrain evens out somewhat and the road continues along a high ridge east of the Dalewe Valley, traverses above the headwaters of numerous streams and rivers flowing south to north into the Orange. It was still necessary to traverse across steep gradients and mountains until they reached a pass leading down the Drakensburg to Nomansland. In 1981 some members of the Mountain Club backpacked along this route.

It is necessary to return our attention to Mt Moroosi and the mountain of Mkochomela. It seems that some of the group split off here and traversed further up the Orange River valley, since the remains of a road are still visible traversing along the northern slopes of Mkochomela. The Ward Chief of the area maintains that some of Kok's people trekked up this route. It seems likely but it is not known just how they trekked from Mount Moorosi to Ongeluk's Nek. The route indicated on Dobson's map on the southern side of Mkochomela can be accepted as accurate for at least a large section of the trekkers. It seems highly probable that the trek did split since 200 wagons cannot camp in one valley for reasons of space and available grazing. The actual route taken after the split (if indeed they did split) does not appear to be known for certain, and is largely a matter of conjecture.

Doyle Liebenberg, well known mountaineer and author of "The Drakensberg of Natal" in private correspondence has this to say: "the exact route followed by the wagon column is not known - the first six miles of the route from Seforong to Ongeluksnek (20 miles as the crow flies) is a steadily rising climb of two thousand feet followed by a precipitous drop of a thousand feet in less than a mile to the valley of the Qwadi valley. In the Qwadi valley at least two major rivers and several smaller tributary streams had to be forded. Then came an ascent of about twelve miles at an average gradient of one in twenty; a long slow haul to the summit of Ongeluks Nek at 9518 feet above sea level. The route via the Qwadi valley is certainly different to the route indicated on the Dobson map since it is well north of the direct line between Mt Moroosi and Ongeluks Nek. Anyone following the Qwadi River would go over Pack Horse Nek rather than Ongeluks Nek. The probability is that Adam Kok's people must have split up and taken more than one route.

One can only imagine the trials the Griquas must have suffered in conditions completely different from what they had been accustomed to in Philippolis; mountainous terrain, different types of grazing grasses, excessive rain and rivers flooding, snow, and sleet at altitudes going over 9000 feet high ridges before dropping down to 5-6000 in the valleys only to climb again. Stock losses were enormous and more than likely human deaths were experienced, as was wear and tear on the wagons.

Another serious problem with which they had to contend was that of stock theft by the Basotho, in spite of Moeshoeshe having given them free passage, One of the main culprits was Nehemiah or Sekonyane, Moeshoeshe's brother who had been put in as custodian of Southern Basutoland. Then came the famous descent at Ongeluk's Nek. Dower records how, every morning scores of men were sent out to work with picks and crowbars, hammers and drills, powder and fuse and spades to dig out a passable track down the mountainside. This continued for several weeks. The descent was considered difficult but generally not too dangerous. Some sections, however, were so steep that wagons had to be dismantled and lowered in pieces on ropes and then reassembled.

On 12 May 1863 the Griquas arrived on the slopes of Mount Currie a broken people due to the enormous losses they sustained during their trek. However, they established the town of Kokstad where they set up their own form of Government. Their troubles were by no means over. They simply did not know how to manage farming in these vastly different conditions to those they knew in Philippolis. One factor that confounded them was how to control the ravages of veld fires raging through the tall dry grass found in Nomansland (now known as East Griqualand).

Griqua farmers sold off much of their land to other settlers and tended to move into Kokstad. In 1867 Kok ceded his land to Natal mainly because he needed help in removing small bands of raiding Pondos who were continually stealing the

peoples stock The Griquas suffered severe stock losses from marauding bands of Basotho. In his Notes On A Journey Round Basutoland in 1888, T.B.Kennan writes "in 1865 Nehemiah Moshesh, on his return from a successful raid on Adam Kok's cattle in East Qriqualand, was pursued by the latter chief through the mountains, so Nehemiah took up his position in this Kloof and fortified the cave and the surrounding positions. He had a garrison of fifty men and Adam Kok some 400 to 500 Griquas. The besieged party kept the enemy at bay for some days but at last the pasture for the cattle became scarce, so Nehemiah saw the necessity of escaping. One night he passed out of the ravine with the greater part of the cattle he had captured, or stolen from Kok, and, unnoticed by his enemy gained the Orange River and followed its course, soon escaped into a distant part of the mountains. Next morning the besiegers noticed that the place was unusually quiet, so they sent spies to ascertain the cause. These soon returned with the information that the nest was deserted. When Adam Kok took possession of the place with his people, he only found 50 or 60 cattle and with this same booty he had to return to his distant home, leaving behind several dead men in the neighbourhood of the cave".

Nehemiah's cave, clearly marked on Dobson's map, is indeed an eerie spot. It is approached through a very narrow and deep gorge with immense rocks and jagged precipices of solid rock arising some six hundred feet all around. Scars from bullet marks can still be seen on the rocks of the cave.

There followed various political troubles including an uprising against British Imperialism. In December 1875 Kok while leaning forward across the front of his carriage to whip up his horses fell over the front and was killed when one of the wagon wheels went over him crushing his chest.

References

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