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Polygyny as myth:
towards understanding extra-marital relations in Lesotho

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The interpretative mode into which much recent anthropological work has moved is concerned to represent to the world the humanity of the people with whom anthropologists work and about whom they write. Today many anthropologists are concerned to record the ways in which people represent themselves to themselves, and to use this as a means of achieving a rehumanisation of ethnography and an escape from the detached formalism of structuralist analyses of various kinds. This paper attempts to adopt that approach. My aim is to bring people's own perceptions and understandings to the fore, and to examine how they use images and ideas from their own cultural stock to make sense, for themselves, of constantly changing circumstances. In this way I hope that I am allowing people to speak as if for themselves.¹ I do this because I believe that without our hearing these voices, we will never really come to grips with the impacts of broad structural processes on ordinary people, and the ways in which their most adaptive responses actually help to shape those structures.

Why extra-marital relations?

I smile with other people's wives
Let's make love again
Even if they smile at me at the bus rank
I can get "home" with the women of other people
Sotho migrant's poem (Coplan et al, 1987)

Throughout the period of my most intensive research in Lesotho, from the early 1970s to the early 1980s, my attention was repeatedly drawn to the widespread occurrence of marital infidelity in Lesotho (cf. Wallman, 1969: 45).² My first project focused on the effects of migrant labour on marriage (Spiegel, 1975), and my investigations led me directly towards the phenomenon which Basotho describe as *bonyatsi*. Numerous religious

¹ Such a procedure was one already suggested by Malinowski (1954: 94) when he said that he wished his subjects to speak for themselves through his writing.

² I am not suggesting that this is unique to Lesotho. Manning (1987: 149ff) has recently suggested that it is very common among white English-speaking South Africans.

ministers, teachers and others expressed concern over how men's absenteeism, itself a result of labour migrancy, contributed towards this phenomenon. And in the villages where I worked subsequently, I was frequently reminded of its salience for local people. Often I was told of men returning home unexpectedly after having heard that their wives were being unfaithful. They would then threaten to assault their wives and to destroy all the domestic property in their homes which they felt represented the presence of an intruder. Indeed there were cases where the threat was carried out, at least partially, as the following informants' reports suggest:

That husband (man) came home and burned all those clothes and blankets because, he said, he did not know who had been the person to buy them for his wife.

Today Phahlo sent his wife back home to her parents. I have heard that early in the morning he took his wife's clothes and blankets and burnt them. After that he told her to return to her parents' home or else he would slit her throat.

This is not to suggest that migrant men were paragons of marital virtue, even when they returned home. One measure of a man's success as a wage-earner was the amount of money he splashed about on his return. A common way to do this was to spend lavishly in local beerhouses, either in or near the village, or in one of the many such establishments to be found in Lesotho's small towns. Sometimes this was followed by a brief liaison with a woman found in the beerhouse - the kind of woman known in Sesotho as a *letekatse*. But men also established longer-term *bonyatsi* relationships with women other than their wives in or near their own home villages. In many instances these women were themselves the wives of migrant men who were likely absent for the duration of the relationship. In other cases they were the wives of men who were too ill to be able to find jobs which would allow them to support their families.³ Indeed, as I have argued previously, extra-marital relations provided one of the routes along which migrants' wage-earnings were diffused within rural communities in Lesotho (Spiegel, 1980a: 123; 149; 152; cf. Murray, 1981: 157). And for some women these relationships were a crucial means of income generation, particularly for those who were unable to rely on receipts of regular remittances.

The aim of this paper is to examine some of the ways and contexts in which people understood and explained the reasons for the practice of *bonyatsi*, both to me and to each other. Such an approach derives from the recent methodological impetus that calls for greater recognition to be given to folk models of explanation (Holy and Stuchlik, 1981; Holy, 1987). In particular, it is concerned with (1) the ways in which people's folk-analyses of their practices and situations are expressed among themselves, and

³ Since the late 1970s unemployment has become a prominent feature of village life in Lesotho (cf. Spiegel, 1980b; Murray, 1980). I am not sure what effect this has had on either marriage patterns or the practice of *bonyatsi*.

(11) how they are represented to outsiders such as the anthropologist.

The various recent recordings of Sotho migrants' songs (*lifela tsa litsamaea-naha*; Moletsane, 1982; Mokitimi, 1982; Coplan et al, 1987) provide evidence for the first of these concerns. These poems, performed before others for entertainment and in competition, reflect people's representations of their experiences and feelings in a way which no interview or directed discussion can elicit. Coplan's (1987) admirable analysis of this form of poetry shows how it is possible to tap the ways in which people in Lesotho spontaneously express themselves to themselves and for each other. But one should not overestimate the apparent spontaneity of such songs, particularly when the performers are aware that their efforts are being recorded.

Moreover, the opportunity to observe and record practices in which people express themselves quite so openly is not always available to anthropologists. Frequently we thus have to ask our informants to explain behavioural phenomena which they, the actors, do not themselves normally deal with discursively. This is the more common circumstance of the anthropological method. It requires a sensitivity to the context of research and the relationship of ethnographer to informant. If we can achieve such a sensitivity, the data generated can provide a clear window into the ideational world of the subjects of our research. Our ethnographic reflection of their models of reality then becomes possible.

A further aim of the present paper is to relate folk explanations to people's uses of notions about the past. It is clear that people frequently draw on images of the past in order to understand their experience of the present. In the case of *bonyatsi*, at least some of my informants referred to their own conceptions of the institution of polygyny in order to make sense, for themselves, of a contemporary practice which they knew to be morally non-normative. They thus used a myth about a past normative practice to give legitimacy to a present one which they could find no other way of condoning, and which was clearly the result of political-economic constraints over which they had no control. Such an exercise clearly resonates with Malinowski's argument about the function of myth as social charter (1954; 1978(1): 68ff). But it goes beyond the status of that analysis in that it recognises, implicitly at least, that traditions are themselves constantly reformulated in response to changes in the contemporary practices which require explanation (Spiegel, 1989).

Bonyatsi and botekatse

Extra-marital relations were very common in the various villages where I worked, and seemed widespread throughout Lesotho. In the Qacha's Nek villages where I lived in 1976-7, more than one informant was able work through my list of all the local adults and indicate the name of the present paramour (*nyatsi*) of nearly everyone recorded in it. Moreover, while *bonyatsi* was not openly

condoned, various informants made it clear that they regarded it as a normal, although not a morally normative, state of affairs. The expression of such opinions depended, however, on the situation in which they were expressed. Sitting at the local chief's court after a series of hearings, men were apt to brush off my enquiries with comments such as "no, that doesn't happen here. It is not the law (*molao*).". Once in the privacy of their own homes, however, or in the more frivolous atmosphere of a beerhouse, the same people were apt to be much more forthcoming. The situational ease with which people talked about the practice was reflected in the frequent reference to extra-marital relations in migrants' songs (*lifela*).

In 1973, I was fortunate to be able to record one such song. The *sefela*-style poem which the poet sang included the following lines which I have excerpted:

Hey black lady,
know that I'm coming to divorce you
I'm divorcing my love,
I'm retracting
Hey, mother, my love,
I've retracted
I don't want to be insulted by boys
I see you're in love with boys
And I no longer want blood (wounds)
I can divorce you as I've not yet married you
I have no beast in your bridewealth
This is painful news,
please know it

Hey, all of you, hey
Hey, hey

Hey, I nearly quarrelled with a friend, girls
You know, with my friend,
The one who has my love, girls
I quarrel with my friend, my lover
Hey, the other day when I arrived from my journey
I remember waiting for a young newly-wed
Please, beg me, my lover
I'm merely accepting, old man
This thing indeed is not love at all
It is merely to cause trouble
I keep saying I'm a newly-wed
just arrived Hey,
my husband is still away
at the place of the white man

Bonyatsi (the abstract form; sing.: *nyatsi* = a paramour; pl. = *linyatsi*), as implied above, is understood to involve a relationship between already married persons for whom the liaison

may be more or less long-term.⁴ It does not include relationships between young unmarried persons. Although transfers of gifts between *linyatsi* are common, these are not negotiated directly in exchange for sexual favours; nor is there an implication that such transfers should be immediate. Unlike prostitution, therefore, *bonyatsi* implies a relationship over time. One informant explained the difference:

A prostitute is an unattached woman who loves (anyone, anywhere), who is independent and rules herself, who today is married to this one and tomorrow to another, and so on; a woman who seduces other women's husbands: that is a *letekatse*! But *bonyatsi* is when a woman loves the husband of another; she makes him into her *nyatsi* even though she still has a husband of her own. She is his (her lover's) *nyatsi* - for she has a secret affair with that man who is her *nyatsi*.

Unlike the English term concubine, the word *nyatsi* is not gender specific (cf. Spiegel, 1980a: 153; Murray, 1981: 202), a characteristic of *bonyatsi* which is also reflected in the fact that goods may occasionally be transferred from woman to man. Indeed, at earlier times although less frequently today, *bonyatsi* might also have been a social and political resource for men, particularly when their wives had established liaisons with powerful men or families (see below).

I was told that in most *bonyatsi* relationships, men provided small and intermittent amounts of financial support for their paramours with whom they liaised on an irregular basis. As one woman said in 1976: "My *nyatsi* must give me soap so that I will be clean when he comes to me; and he must give me something extra also ... he can even give me R10 a month." But such men continued residing in their marital homes. And they directed the larger portion of whatever earnings they had brought home either towards the support of their wives and children, and/or into investments in resources which would 'build their houses' and create a base for their own later security come the day when they would retire from the migrant wage-labour market (Spiegel, 1980b; Murray, 1981; Ferguson, 1985).

Nobody that I met ever condoned the institution of *botekatse*, probably most precisely translated as prostitution. Indeed, the colloquial term, during the 1970s, for the places where one could be sure to find prostitutes was *khomo liaela* (lit: the cattle are falling; a reference to the loss of wealth which men experienced once they entered such establishments).⁵ *Matekatse* (plural of

⁴ Another less common term for a paramour is *mochelieteti*, pl. *mochelieteti* (cf. Mabile and Dieterlen, 1974). Poulter (1976: 234-5) implies that a woman who has been living with a man for an extended period, but for whom no bridewealth has been transferred, is also described as a *nyatsi*. The evidence I collected in both the Gacha's Nek and Mhale's Hoek districts suggested that, at least in these areas, this designation was appropriate for cohabiting partners only if they had previously been married. They could, of course, have been together for a very long time.

⁵ Ferguson (1985) has discussed the importance of cattle as a locus for the investment of men's earnings from migrant labour. Earnings lost through the purchase of a prostitute's services are at once a loss of purchasing power for cattle, and a signifier that men continue to maintain discretion over significant portions of their wages.

letekatse; botekatse is the abstract noun) were to be found almost exclusively in the towns.⁶ There they plied their trade with men on their way to or from their places of migrant wage-employment on the mines and in the industries of South Africa. A few such women could also be found in roadside hostels on the routes traversed by migrants making their way between home and recruiting station. But in most rural villages, the only *matekatse* were those women who had abandoned their homes and gone to seek this form of livelihood in the towns or at such roadside hostels as could be described as *khomo liaela*.

The origins of bonyatsi

Many of the Basotho to whom I talked about *bonyatsi* were of the opinion that it is a feature of all human social life, that it was part of the Creation. They argued that wherever they had been - and as migrant workers some of them had travelled quite extensively - they had come across cases of marital infidelity. Why, they asked, should Basotho be any different? Others, such as the ministers and teachers I talked to as I first began research in Lesotho, determined that the practice was a direct result of labour migration by unaccompanied men who left their wives behind for periods sometimes in excess of two years.

Indeed, some of the women I met in 1973, and who had been faced with their husbands' absences for extended periods, explained their involvement in relationships of this kind in similar terms, albeit with an overlay of biological reasoning. They argued that a lack of regular sexual intercourse could have severe effects on the female physiology. Faced with the choice of either 'causing the blood to stand' (stop flowing) and (thereby) ultimately losing one's sanity, or an illicit union whilst one's husband was not at home, these women argued that *bonyatsi* relationships were inevitable, even if they were frowned upon and might bring upon them the wrath of their husbands if they were discovered.

Despite the threat of their husbands' anger and the possibility of marital separation, these women also knew that there were at least as many, and probably far more cases where a wife's infidelity went unnoticed or unremarked, than those ending in open conflict. According to Wallman, who worked in the western border-lowlands region of Lesotho during the early 1960s, even births resulting from extra-marital affairs were relatively common. She points out that "it was impossible to assess how often extra-marital births occurred or what sanctions were in fact brought to bear, but a comparison of the dates of husbands' absences and the birthdates of children suggests this to be a not uncommon happening which, given the lack of public outcry, must be more or less amicably settled by the parties involved" (1969 :45; emphasis added).

⁶ Other terms also used include *bohura* (from *bo* 'from' and *hura* 'whore'), *bochuchutha* and *bochuchutha* (from *bo* 'from' and *chuchutha* 'whore'). Interestingly, both *letekatse* and *bochuchutha* are words also used to describe the invasive khaki bush weed, brought to the country by the British as a fodder crop during the Boer War (Mabille and Dieterlen, 1974).

It was common for people who acknowledged the phenomenon of *bonyatsi* in Lesotho to explain it in universalistic terms about the nature of humanity, and to see it as having been part of the Creation. On the other hand, there were many people for whom the subject of *bonyatsi* was taboo, and who refused either to acknowledge its occurrence in Lesotho or to discuss it as a feature of human life. Yet others were equally reticent if the issue was raised in public places, but would happily engage in conversation about the phenomenon, so long as they were in their own homes and out of general earshot. Nonetheless, many of my attempts to open up discussion of the issue received a simple response that such an issue was 'not the law, and we can't discuss it here'.

This was the first response of one old man who was principal adviser to the chieftainness of one of the areas in which I worked. His first words, when I asked him about *bonyatsi* were "What's that? *Bolatsi*? What is that thing, this *bolatsi*? Oh, *monyaku*?" What is that thing you are talking about? You are now talking about something otherwise and silly. What is this thing? It's wrong, man! It's wrong!.... It's just bad talk. And you mustn't write about such things."

As a man of the law, and indeed the local arbiter over customary disputes and repository of Sesotho law, the chieftainness' principal adviser was concerned to emphasise that *bonyatsi* had no place in that body of knowledge which he seemed to assume, and indeed hoped to ensure, was the subject of my studies. Having established with me that *bonyatsi* was not really an issue worthy of discussion, he acknowledged that it was a widespread practice. But he continued to insist that it was outside Sesotho law and custom. "It is," he said, "a thing which in Sesotho we might call a habit (*tloaelo*) of the people who live here ... indeed it is only little splinters and chips of a habit here on earth. It is just a stain ... a stain on life." My further questioning about the origins of the practice brought a response that it was the work of the Devil and had plagued humankind since the Creation. As to whether it had been in evidence during the days of Moshoeshoe, founder of the Lesotho nation, he answered that:

Even when I began to be able to see through my own eyes [when I was very young], it was something which was already in evidence throughout the land ... but now you are asking me something about which I cannot bear witness because I was not there at the time ... You see, King Moshoeshoe is Moshoeshoe Moshoaila who has shaven the beard of Monaheng so that it didn't grow again. King Moshoeshoe Moshoaila shaved Monaheng's beard, and it didn't grow; it couldn't grow. Now this is something of the past. That, in Sesotho, is a thing like a myth. That is something you can write down.

And then, as if to direct my enquiries towards issues worthy of record, he proceeded to recite Moshoeshoe's genealogy and list who his most senior sons were.

2. *Bolatsi* is quite meaningless in Sesotho; *monyaku* is a generic term used to describe a number of wild plants. He used these words to redirect my questions.

For other informants, *bonyatsi* was indeed a result of Sesotho custom, albeit not really a fully accepted part of that corpus. Their explanations of the existence and persistence of the phenomenon took a variety of forms which I discuss below. What is interesting about these kinds of explanations is that they all attempted to put a gloss on the practice by drawing on aspects of what were perceived as Sesotho custom and law and attributing *bonyatsi* to interpretations of those rules under new social circumstances. People's images of the morally normative and the past tended to coalesce and provide a source of ideas for the legitimization of a contemporary practice which they all knew to be fundamentally non-normative.

Some informants, particularly women, suggested that the fact that a woman could expect some form of material help from her *nyatsi* was related to the Sesotho normative practice whereby bridewealth must be transferred to mark a marriage. As one woman who discussed the issue with me and one of her neighbours said: "You see, when a woman is married, then her husband must take out cattle which he gives to her father (i.e. bridewealth). Now when a man takes me as his *nyatsi* he must still pay, but this must be our secret." While bridewealth benefits a woman's agnates, *bonyatsi* gifts are to her own account.

Polygyny as myth: images of the past as charter for the present

1. The demise of polygyny

Another explanation, this time emanating from men rather than women, was that *bonyatsi* was the result of the demise of polygyny among Basotho. In the past, they argued, a man had access to a number of wives. This was particularly important in the two years after a woman gave birth and before her child was weaned. During that time she was prohibited from any sexual activity for fear of 'spoiling her milk' and this meant that her husband had to look for gratification elsewhere, preferably with another of his wives. Today, the men argued, almost nobody can afford the bridewealth for more than one wife, but the restrictions on sex before a child is weaned are still in place. Men therefore turn to other men's wives. And if their husbands are absent labour migrants then so much the better: not only are there fewer risks, but the women are quite readily available.

2. Clientship and *bonyatsi*

Yet another way in which people explained contemporary *bonyatsi* in terms of their ideas about the nature of society in Lesotho in earlier days revolved around the institution of clientship (*bohlanaka*) and its relationship to polygyny. Both Thompson (1975: 52-69) and Sanders (1975: 43-59) have pointed out that one of the prime means used by nineteenth century chiefs for attaching political clients was through providing them with wives by paying their bridewealth for them (cf. Murray, 1981: 125). As Lesotho's first historian, Orpen, has it:

⁸ Ashton (1952: 30) suggests that sexual activity had to be restricted to coitus interruptus. My own informants suggested a total prohibition.

He [Moshoeshoe] purchased wives for the poorer among his people, and bestowed partners upon them, on condition that the cattle received as purchase-money for the female children, when they married, should revert to him ... These women, having been purchased by him, are called his wives ... (Orpen, 1979: 20; emphasis original).) These wives were the *lingoetsi* (sing.: *ngoetsi*) who "are married as servants, and as such are allocated to the houses of more important wives, two or three or even more to each house, according to its importance" (Ellenberger and McGregor, 1969: 279; cf. Sanders, 1975: 140).

Writing about polygyny and bridewealth some thirty years after Orpen, a missionary confirmed that chiefs had often taken a further wife "with no other object than to present her to such and such of his subjects who may be too poor to buy one himself, but on condition that the latter's children will belong to him [the chief]. ... They are called by a rather significant name: *bana ba likhomo* (the children of the cattle)." (Duvoisin, 1885 in Germond, 1967: 537).

Other sources suggest that of the young women who had previously accompanied men who subsequently became clients some were taken up as junior wives of the chief - in the sense that any children they bore would be filiated to his lineage. But for purposes of cohabitation and sexual gratification, many were made available to more favoured *bahlanka*.⁹ This feature of early Sotho life, said my informants, gave clear indication that *bonyatsi* was nothing new for Basotho, and indeed had legitimate precedent (cf. Ellenberger and McGregor, 1969: 279). According to some informants, the contemporary practice of *bonyatsi* was merely a continuity of this earlier practice whereby poor clients who lacked wives were given access to various of the chief's most junior wives. Men had become so used to being able to engage in relations with women other than their own wives, if they indeed had such, that they regarded this as their right.

These informants retold stories of the old days when many poor people came to settle with powerful and wealthy chiefs in order to offer their services in exchange for protection and support. The most powerful chiefs would readily take them in, and set the men to work in their raiding parties and as herdsmen or court messengers (cf. Casalis, 1833 in Germond, 1967: 516). Young women became minor wives in the chiefs' houses, bearing children for the chief and thus helping to expand the dominant agnatic group rapidly.

For young unmarried men, however, the prospects of marriage were slim. Too poor to be able to pay bridewealth for wives of their own, they had to rely on one or other of two possibilities: either they could appeal to their patron for material assistance which would allow them to obtain a wife, or they were given sexual

⁹ This may explain why there is no clarity on the number of wives chiefs such as Moshoeshoe, his senior son Letsie I and his grandson Lerotholi had (Foulter, 1976: 63-4). Many of the wives counted may in fact have been taken only nominally for the chief by virtue of bridewealth payments or because they were clients for whom little or no bridewealth was paid. Orpen (1979: 20) suggests that, by such a count, Moshoeshoe's wives might have numbered thousands.

access to one of the patron's minor wives. Either way, they could not claim the right to filiate any children born of such unions. In the first instance, this was because the bridewealth paid had come not from the client's own agnates: having been provided by the patron meant that children born became part of the patron's agnatic group. This rule is still today borne out by the frequent citing of the Sesotho maxim that 'children are of the cattle' (*bana ke ba likhomo*) - i.e. that children are filiated to the agnatic group from which bridewealth has come. In the second instance too the maxim applied: paternity was vested in the husband of the child's mother and not in her consort.

It is clear that, in some senses, the first option open to poor young men - that they could take wives through pawning themselves to the chief and obtaining bridewealth that way - meant that they did not have the full status of husband. Indeed one could argue that the status they held was always more that of lover (*nyatsi*), as in the second option, than that of husband. People living in Lesotho during the 1970s were able to rationalise *bonyatsi* by playing on subtleties of this kind in their images of these earlier relationships. The ambiguous nature of clients' marriage in earlier times provided people with the openings which they could use in their attempts to explain the occurrence of *bonyatsi* in their own environment.

The importance of the rule concerning filiation through cattle is reflected in the fact that it appears in one or another form in much of the recent literature on Lesotho (eg. Hamnett, 1975; Poulter, 1976; Murray, 1978; 1980; 1981; Spiegel, 1980; Gay, 1980). Moreover, its salience was emphasised to me on a number of occasions by various informants. One old man presented the issue thus, linking it clearly to the practice of *bonyatsi*:

You are asking me about history now. Ache! these are difficult things these. Now see. Chief Moshogeshoe had many wives. There could have been twenty of them.¹⁰ Only he didn't manage to satisfy them all. Now let me talk of those who did do this (satisfied them), now while I am still able to see (before I die) ... [he laughs a little, and then continues in a whisper] ... but the way, the way of a man who has married many women is not to watch jealously over them. Do you hear? He could not watch over them jealously. Indeed, he would allow them to go with *linyatsi* far from his sight. [Again in a normal voice:] And the children who were born from those *linyatsi*, they would be his own, and not the children of the *nyatsi*. He could not say 'they are not mine'. He would say 'they are mine by the cattle which came from me, which married their mothers (to me). Yes', he says, 'the cattle which married their mothers are mine. So then, hey, the children too are mine.' And this (would apply) although they are not his (biologically) but are of the wife's *nyatsi*.

One variation on this theme effectively turned the above explanation on its head. Sometimes, said some informants, a

¹⁰ His figure is a variance with those in many of the texts: see note 9.

chief's clients had included men who had already married and from whom part of the service required was that they allow their patron access to their wives, particularly where a man's wife was attractive enough to interest the patron. In fact, one man added, there were cases he knew of relatively recently where a senior chief had regarded such a practice as his prerogative. Whenever he came across a woman whom he found attractive, he would insist that she be sent to his house for a time. In exchange, her husband could expect to obtain all manner of favours. As a result, said my informant, one found men today who were keen to marry attractive women so that they would readily be able to place them with the chief for a while and thus benefit materially from such placements. Instead of pawning himself to the chief as would have been done in the past, a man could now do so vicariously through putting his wife out as the chief's *nyatsi*. This allowed him to maintain an appearance of independence, and to engage other women meanwhile as his own *linyatsi*.¹¹

3. Political alliance and *bonyatsi*

A further variation on this same theme was based on the fairly commonly accepted role of a chief's many wives as instruments of political alliance. Eugene Casalis, first missionary to Moshoeshoe's settlement at Thaba Bosiu, quoted the venerated old chief as saying about polygyny: "For us chiefs, it is a means of contracting alliances with the heads of other nations, which helps to preserve peace. Moreover, we receive many travellers and strangers; how could we lodge them and what could we feed them on, if we did not have several wives?" (Casalis, 1833 in Germond, 1967: 516).¹²

How did polygyny function for political alliances in the nineteenth century, and how did it provide a means of rationalising *bonyatsi* in Lesotho of the 1970s? It is commonplace among royalty worldwide that marriage is a means of establishing alliances across political boundaries. And, indeed, chiefs such as Moshoeshoe were careful to choose wives strategically in order to cement such alliances with their erstwhile antagonists (cf. Ellenberger and Macgregor, 1969: 108).

But polygyny provided another means of establishing and maintaining friendly relations with potential foes. Junior wives could be made available to visiting dignitaries and other notables whose favour the chief wished to curry. For the people to whom I spoke in the 1970s, their belief that this had been a feature of Moshoeshoe's rule - and that of other chiefs too - provided yet another indication of the longevity of *bonyatsi* as an institution among Basotho, and a reason for them to try and explain the phenomenon of the 1970s as a continuity of a practice from the past.

¹¹ cf. Burman (forthcoming: 13) who cites evidence from the 1870s to suggest that a man might attempt to 'give' his wife to her own lover's husband".

¹² Poulter also quotes this passage; and he adds a note (1976: 64 n2) that the words 'what could we feed them on' does not imply cannibalism. What it does direct our attention to, however, is the manner in which junior wives were used to provide hospitality in all its guises.

This was clearly illustrated when the same old man who had told me about the way in which Moshoeshoe had allowed his wives to have children by *linyatsi* (above) continued by reciting his version of a fairly widespread myth about the way in which Moshoeshoe had learnt how best to encourage faithfulness in his followers. In his endeavour to explain the root of contemporary *bonyatsi* to a group of us sitting with him, he represented the past of Moshoeshoe's day in mythical terms. His story went as follows:

History refers us to Moshoeshoe and Monaheng. Moshoeshoe arrived at Monaheng's place. (Is it Monaheng or Mohlomi?¹³) Monaheng. My history says it was Monaheng. I mean it is Kali. You know that Monaheng is also called Kali.¹⁴ Well, he arrived at Monaheng and asked of him: 'Truly, chief, I see that there are people around who are eager to attend upon you; people who, if others come and invade you, will run to your rescue. What is the reason for this?' And he answered, 'Yes. But I have no problems with them. People are people. I do not quarrel with them. I do not upset them in any way. So they must come to feel my own pain.' So he [Moshoeshoe] said: 'I am surprised. It is widely said when fighting and war starts up here near you, then one will find many people coming to rally round you and assist you. Why is that?' So he [Monaheng] said: 'Be still now, and let us go and sleep in one place.' So they did, the two of them sleeping in one place.

And then early in the morning, when the first crow cried 'tsoee' - that is the one which tempts one early in the morning - then he [Monaheng] said 'let's get up.' And they got up. And when they had risen he said 'Let's climb up to the top of that hill over there... Let's go to the top of that hill and we will sit there. Then I will show you the ways of chieftainship, and the way in which people come to love their chief.' ... So they went, and when they arrived they sat down... And when they were seated he [Monaheng] said 'That person down yonder. Do you see him?' And the dogs down in the village cried 'tsheke tsheke tsheke'. And he said 'That person down there. do you see him?' And he [Moshoeshoe] answered 'Yes'. And he [Monaheng] said 'Do you see, he is coming out of my house?' And he [Moshoeshoe] answered 'Oh. Yes.' And then the dogs barked again saying 'tsheke tsheke tsheke'. And he [Monaheng] said 'Him there. Do you see him too?' 'Yes.' And he said 'He too is coming out of one of my houses.'

Now I say, this man, this Monaheng, had married many women. And he sat there counting them until he had finished their

¹³ Someone listening questioned his reference to Monaheng whose relationship to Moshoeshoe he described as if it were Mohlomi he should have mentioned. In most texts, Mohlomi is presented as Moshoeshoe's early teacher and mentor; Monaheng (alias Kali) is listed as a direct genealogical antecedent sufficiently distant that he and Moshoeshoe were not alive simultaneously (cf. Sanders, 1975; Thompson, 1975; Ellenberger and Macgregor, 1969). The Monaheng whose beard Moshoeshoe is said to have shaved (i.e. whose herds Moshoeshoe and his raiders captured under difficult circumstances) was a descendant of the Monaheng (Kali). The descendant was also known as Ramonaheng.

¹⁴ In this respect he is supported by the written sources (Sanders, 1975: 6; Ellenberger and Macgregor, 1969: 394).

number and had seen people coming out of all of his houses. And he said 'Now, I shall say nothing to any of these people. Yet I know them all. I know who they are. But I won't quarrel with them at all. ... These people all love and respect me because I have seen that they enter my houses and I don't say anything.' And then he said 'That is how it is. Do the same as that and you will see.' That is what he told Chief Moshoeshoe.

In relating a substantively similar version of this story in his *The Basuto of Basutoland* Dutton adds that among the men who appeared out of the various houses "some were Bushmen, some were Matabele, some were of tribes despised by everybody, some were those who had been outlawed from other tribes on account of witchcraft." The moral here is spelt out clearly by Moshoeshoe's teacher:¹⁵ "This is my lesson ... be tolerant. Why? Because all these people come from different parts and they will go back and say what peace and freedom is to be found under my chieftainship" (Dutton, 1923: 35).

By the 1970s, the story of the way in which Moshoeshoe learnt this lesson was being recited as myth, not only to encourage those in authority to be tolerant and peace-seeking, but more often to reiterate that extra-marital affairs have an illustrious history in the affairs of Basotho. Such recitations provided a charter for the present practice. Like all mythical charters they did not spell out in detail what was permissible. But they did serve to provide participants with an explanation whereby they could rationalise their actions.

Reaching an understanding in this way is often far more satisfactory than any instrumentalist explanation can be. People know that their involvement in migrant labour is responsible for the breakup of families and the virtually permanent separation of husbands and wives. They also know that they cannot condone marital infidelity. By looking to aspects of their national past they are able to rationalise their present infidelities for themselves. The fact that this is necessary comes out also in the frequent references to the problems of marital separation and conflict in *lifela tsa litsamaea-naha*, the songs which migrants sing at their places of work and at their homes (see above).

Conclusion: 'not our custom'

Anthropologists frequently hear the words 'it is our custom' in response to their queries about why people engage in certain practices. For many this is reason enough to begin to dig into the ethnographic record to discover cultural continuities from the past. For others, such a search for continuities is by no means obvious (van der Waal, 1988). Philip Mayer's (1980) analytical re-engagement with the ideologies of Red and School among Xhosa speakers makes explicit the kind of historical sensitivity which was already there in *Townsmen or Tribesmen* (1963) and which is

¹⁵ Dutton (1923) says that it was Mohlomi, not Monaheng as in my informant's version.

imperative for any full understanding of cultural practices at any one time. The insistence that contemporary practices should be analytically located in their political economic context is clear in the spate of articles addressing the problem of the unit of study for anthropological investigators in southern Africa (van Binsbergen, 1981; Comaroff, 1982; Sharp, 1985; McAllister, 1987; van der Waal, 1987).

Successful examples of this type of analysis include Murray's (1977) pathbreaking study of bridewealth in contemporary Lesotho as a continuity of form which has undergone a significant change in function. Another is Ferguson's (1985) analysis of the reasons that men in Lesotho maintain a separate sphere of exchange, by keeping cattle aside as men's goods. His argument rests on a contemporary functionalist explanation of the value of cattle to labour migrants as a means for ensuring their future security after 'retirement' from migrant wage-labour. Implicitly, however, his discussion of what he calls the 'bovine mystique' also suggests a continuity of form from the past.

This kind of analysis demands recognition that factors situated at the macro-level of political-economic processes are among the most important determinants of the micro-level practices which are ethnographically most interesting. But this should not blind us to the significance of local-level determining factors, such as the stock of cultural resources which people have at their disposal and on which they must draw in order to make meaning of their lives for themselves.

McAllister's (1985) discussion of the shift from sacrifice to beerdrink, as a means of marking the return of a labour migrant in Shixini in the south-western Transkei, exemplifies the kind of analysis which manages to be sensitive to both macro and micro contexts. He shows how the context of migrant labour dependency has altered the balance in relationships between old men and young, and how this change, which older men see as a threat, is given symbolic recognition. Young migrants are said to come home with a 'snake' which can be fed only by offering it meat through sacrifice. By transforming the return ritual from a sacrifice (*umhlizeko*) into a beerdrink (*umsindleko*) the demands of the 'snake' are rejected, without people abandoning the practice of rituals of return. More pragmatically, the returning young migrant must pay for a beerdrink rather than a beast. Even if he could afford a beast, by slaughtering one he would be demonstrating his independence of the elders in a manner which is regarded there as inappropriate. By providing a beerdrink, however, he is able symbolically to reinforce his household's relationships with others in the area, and simultaneously not to offend the elders. Clearly, the people of Shixini have created a model for themselves which can accommodate the constraints and imperatives of migrant labour. They have done so by using cultural resources which resonate with their own images of their past.

As we have seen, *bonyatsi* in Lesotho is not a morally normative practice. Moreover, people say that its extent and nature have changed in recent times. They argue that, while extra-marital

relations were clearly part of the past, people were more discrete about them, there were far fewer cases of women abandoning their husbands' homes, and there was certainly no practice such as modern *botekatse*.

Because *bonyatsi* is not morally normative the practice cannot readily be seen as a continuity of an earlier 'custom'. People cannot explain it away as 'our custom'. With no clear precedent it is difficult for people to explain the practice. Yet it is so widespread that it does require explanation - both for people's own curiosity and for that of the anthropologist. And because so much of contemporary practice is easily glossed as 'our custom', people attempt to find precedent in custom for *bonyatsi* too. In doing this, people draw on a variety of images of a perceived past, selecting those aspects which can be made to resonate with the practice of *bonyatsi*. Rather than attribute the practice purely to the exigencies of dependency on migrant labour, they create an image of 'traditional' extra-marital relations and look there for cultural continuities in order to make sense of their contemporary practice. This provides them with a way to give meaning to one result of involvement in the migrant labour system.

Anthropologists need always to recognise the processes whereby people themselves construct models which help them to come to terms with, to explain and understand, aspects of their behavioural patterns which they cannot readily explain in simple normative terms. In this instance we have seen how people in Lesotho have used images of a past which they regard as their own so as to be able to construct those models. Through creating, repeating and representing such images they give a sense of legitimacy to their present practices. Moreover, in doing this, they implicitly also mark out the boundaries defining what is their own past from that of other people's pasts. They thereby implicitly endorse a sense of their own cultural identity by participating in building and shaping it.

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