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Basotho Tribe

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A person's culture is an integral part of their fabric as a being, shaping many facets of their life and informing their understanding of the world.

South Africa is home to a wide array of vibrant, rich tribes and their cultures, each with their own deep history.

1. Setup of the Basotho Tribe

The Basotho people have developed a unique hierarchy. As one of the few African tribes living in a mountainous environment, they have made many adaptations to their conditions. The Basotho blanket is one example. All around the country you will see people dressed in woolen blankets, often with beautiful patterns. This is the ideal garment for a cold environment, and also has the versatility of keeping the rain off.

Villages are often located high in the mountains, usually on the mid-levels well above the deep river valleys and the flood dangers they carry. Villages are very structured. They are made up of a number of *kraals*, ie. a collection of buildings belonging to one family. Some are for sleeping, some for storage and one for cooking. Each kraal will also have an enclosure for livestock. Each village has a chief, or headman, who will fall under the chief for the area.

The Basotho are agriculturalists. All around the village will be many fields and these are allocated by the chief to villagers. Many crops are cultivated including maize, wheat, sorghum, beans and peas as well as vegetables such as onions and cabbage. Many local herbs are also gathered as green vegetables, which the Basotho call Moroho.

Animals are very important in Basotho society. The Basotho pony represents the best form of transport in the mountains, and donkeys are often used as pack animals. Most families will have some cattle, and oxen are used to plough the sloping mountain fields. Wool is a major source of income both from Memo sheep and mohair from Angora goats, and you will see many herds of both deep in the mountains. They are looked after by shepherds, often young boys, who live in simple huts called motebo, often perched on ridges at well over 3000m and very well hidden.

Passing a village you will frequently see a flag flying from a tall pole. This indicates a place where something is being sold. A white flag means "joala", a locally brewed sorghum beer. Yellow means maize beer, red means meat and green means vegetables.

2. Social Organization

At one level Moshoeshoe's Basotho were culturally and politically unified. Yet cultural divisions, based on clan- and kinship, were evident in the nation-building era and persist to today. Administrative divisions - districts, sub districts, wards and villages, used and reinforced by the British administration of Basutoland, also persist, albeit only in Lesotho. All Basotho belong to a clan, a social category whose members share a clan name that associates them with an animal totem or ancestor. Association is patrilineal, each person bearing the clan name of his or her father, paternal grandfather, etc. Unmarried mothers give their clan names to their child unless the father acknowledges paternity.

According to Basotho legend, people first evolved from a marsh at a mythical place called Ntsuanatsatsi. They left the marsh in groups that became clans 'liboko', each of which was allocated an animal as god-protector. The totem for Moshoeshoe's clan, for example, was the crocodile 'koena'. Totems were sacred, endowed with the quality of a molimo 'a god or invisible being', and had to be revered and feared. All members had to observe taboos and other usages in connection with the animal or object revered.

The village 'motse' was the basic unit of administrative control. The number of inhabitants of a motse varied from a score to many hundreds. Most of the adult male inhabitants were related along the paternal line, but men of different clans often lived in one motse. In earlier times, dwellings were built of mud reinforced with grass, plastered over a framework of saplings.

About a century ago, with the influence of missionaries, thatched houses of dressed stone became very popular. They were circular or rectangular, with one room or several. Where stones were not readily available, houses were made of mud blocks, and decorated with small stones stuck into the walls, or patterned with lines in the mud.

Today many Basotho build rectangular houses with flat corrugated iron roofs. Houses built entirely of corrugated iron are found in the burgeoning towns of Lesotho and the Free State. Many old Basotho villages were picturesque, blending in well with the environment. Set on raised terraces and rises, they left arable valleys and lowlands for agriculture. Efforts to aggregate settlements in the colonial 1950s and 60s forced people in Lesotho into larger villages.

As in the past, villages today consist of homesteads. Typically each has a husband and his wife and children, but many are headed by an unmarried mother, with three or four generations of children. The wide diversity in households today can be ascribed to the men's history as migrant workers on South African mines.

Previously, homesteads included married sons, their wives

and young children. Some men with many wives had a homestead for each wife and her children, while others just had separate dwellings within a single extended homestead. Smaller homesteads had only one building, but some had a house, outhouses, storerooms and cooking huts. These might be connected by a reed fence or mud walls. Friends and close relatives usually lived near to each other, their dwellings contiguous or, particularly in the lowlands of Lesotho, with enclosed gardens separating them.

The layout of the rural village was based on a few basic principles, which might be modified according to personal choice and the demands of the topography. In the past, the chief's private dwelling was in the centre of the main homestead, that of his principal wife next to it, and those of junior wives in rough order of seniority around them. The court 'lekhotla' was in front of his dwelling and next to it were the cattle kraal and stables.

3. History and Origins of Basotho Tribe

Lesotho was originally inhabited by the Bushmen who roamed southern Africa, as evidenced by the Bushmen drawings and paintings in the river gorges. During the 1700s and 1800s, tribal wars in southern Africa decimated many tribes. Survivors of the wars fled into the highlands of what is now Lesotho and, under the leadership of an African chief named Moshoeshoe, formed the current Basotho ethnic group.

The Basotho nation was founded by King Moshoeshoe, early in the nineteenth century. Moshoeshoe is seen as the father of the Basotho people as he was responsible for drawing together the scattered Sotho peoples who had been driven apart by Zulu and Ndebele raids, and for creating Lesotho, the Basotho Kingdom.

Moshoeshoe was the son of Mokoleti. After his initiation education, he received further education on chieftainship from the hands of the great sage and doctor, Chief Mohlomi, his paternal uncle. Thereafter, heeding the advice of the great Mohlomi and of his own counselors and men-of-the-court-place , he developed gradually into a mighty king. His greatness grew as more tribes joined him to become his own people and as he fought and won battle after battle on the interior plateau of Southern Africa.

He was joined later by other Bakoena tribes as allies, the Makhoakhoa, the Batlokoa and the Bataung. Persons fleeing King Chaka of the Zulus also joined him in large numbers.He defended a mountain fortress at Butha Buthe in northeastern Lesotho and, although this camp was in a strong position, the tribe was still attacked by various other groups, like Sekonyela and the Tlokwa. Moshoeshoe didn't feel safe at Butha Buthe any longer and started looking for another location.

He developed great diplomatic prowess while dealing with the Hlubi King Matiwane, King Chaka and later, the Boers. King Moshoeshoe preferred peace to war and generally did all he could to avert the latter, but when circumstances obliged him to fight, he did so with ferocious bravery and with the wisdom to stop and negotiate peace when his enemy had been sufficiently routed to accept reasonable terms.

Moshoeshoe appealed to Great Britain for protection and the remaining area became a British protectorate. In 1966 the nation gained independence and the constitutional monarchy of Lesotho was established. Moshoeshoe II, great-grandson of Moshoeshoe I, was installed as king and head of state, and Leabua Jonathan served as prime minister and head of government. Although Lesotho has undergone politic strife and change during the past thirty years, the Basotho are bonded by a deep reverence for the royal family and a fierce determination to remain an independent nation.

4. Education

Lesotho follows the British education system. Children spend 7 years in primary school, with Sesotho the medium of instruction. English is supposed to be learnt in the final years to prepare students going on to high school where English is the medium of instruction. Three years of secondary school culminates in the Junior Certificate, with the best candidates going on to spend a further two years doing Cambridge '0, levels. With many boys spending years as shepherds one generally finds more girls than boys at the schools, and often the boys are older.

Most schools in the country are connected to missions. Missionaries started arriving in the country in the early 1800's and some were close advisors of Moshoeshoe. French missionaries were the first to transcribe Sesotho. The Roman Catholic church is very influential as are the Lesotho Evangelical church and the Anglican church. Almost every mission has a school attached.

University and college entrance is based on '0' level results. The country has one university, the Lesotho National University in Roma. Originally the university catered for students from Lesotho, Botswana and Swaziland. The three countries were all British protectorates and were administered very similarly, particularly in terms of education. Today Botswana and Swaziland have their own universities. There is a Polytechnic in Maseru.

The education system means that some Basotho speak English. In the rural areas, however, older people do not usually speak English and neither do those who did not reach high school.

5. Food

A three-stone fireplace in the courtyard is the focal point of the Basotho women's daily activity. Here they prepare the pot of cornmeal porridge (*pap-pap*) which is the staple of the Basotho. Usually a sauce of peas, chopped greens, or other vegetables accompanies the thick porridge, and on special occasions a chicken is added to the pot. During the summer season, local peaches, and small, hard fruits add variety to the diet. In the winter, family members sit around the three-stone fireplace and roast ears of dried corn. They also domesticated animals for food. These animals included sheep, goats, fowl, and cattle with cattle.

Local beer (*joale*) is brewed in a large vat placed on the three-stone fireplace. This beer is the center of informal neighborhood gatherings and provides a small income for the family. Milk is often served as a soured drink.

In the villages, cultural rites are predominately centered around the sacrifice of a cow. Funerals often drain a poor family's assets as a cow must be purchased at great expense. A family's honor is dependent on the quality and quantity of food at wedding and funeral gatherings—spit-roasted cow and chicken are mandatory.

6. Religion and Beliefs

a) Life and Death

Basotho beliefs and doctrine regarding death and the after-life have been influenced by Christian gospel spreading. Consequently, growing Basotho doctrine, beliefs and practices have been modified over time. The Basotho believe that man 'motho' has two elements: the corporeal body 'mele' or flesh 'nama', and the incorporeal spirit 'moea' - also the word for wind, or shadow 'seriti'. The body is temporal and subject to death and decay, but the spirit is indestructible and immortal.

During life the spirit lives in the body, some believe it is in the heart, others in the head, but the more general view is that it suffuses the whole body. The spirit may leave the body at night and roam about, dreams being the manifestation of these wanderings. Witches and wizards can make their spirits leave their bodies at will and direct their activities.

At death, the spirit leaves the body and hovers nearby. Until the grave is sealed, the spirit is vulnerable as it could be turned into a ghost if the dead person's tongue were cut out or a peg driven into the head by medicine men to make strong medicine. To prevent this, the body is treated with special medicines and a vigil kept over it until burial. After the final funeral rites have been completed, the spirit departs and proceeds, some believe, to the ancient home at Ntsuanatsatsi or, others believe, to a home in the sky. Spirits can be either malevolent or benevolent. It is in this spiritual benevolence that the practice of ancestor worship is grounded.

b) Link to the Ancestors

Traditionally each kin group was considered to be under the direct influence and protection of its own ancestors 'balimo' and the chiefdom as a whole under those of the ancestors of the chief.

Belief in ancestor influence in daily life is common, particularly in sickness. All illness used to be attributed to the ancestors, who were believed to induce sickness among the living to cause their death, thus securing companionship in the spiritual world. Today only a few ailments, e.g. hysteria, insomnia and epilepsy, are directly ascribed by some to their ancestors.

They believe these can be cured by appeasing the spirits and restoring good relations, by sacrificing an animal, or by performing a neglected duty. On the other hand, Basotho continue to believe that, in general, the ancestors play an important role in curing a wide variety of diseases and ailments. Their assistance is invoked through divination by an 'ngaka' doctor, when the remedy is revealed.

c) Healers and Diviners

An ngaka is very influential in local Basotho society. He or she diagnoses and prescribes remedies for ordinary ailments and diseases, alleviates and prevents misfortunes, protects against sorcery and accident and brings luck and prosperity. The ngaka helps in situations which people cannot control alone, or where they feel insecure. To do this, he or she uses medicines made mainly from herbs, bark, other forms of plant material and animals. The ngaka tends to view disease and its treatment organically, and therefore little, if any, recourse is made to the supernatural.

A selaoli divines ailments by throwing bones, shells etc. Depending on their position and angle, the selaoli diagnoses the patient's illness and interprets the treatment. The approach is generally based on the influence of supernatural phenomena and the invocation of magic. Treatment tends to rely more on ritual and appeasement of offended spirits, through sacrifices and observance of taboos, than on medicines. A senohe is a person who can see what others are unable to, which enables him or her to diagnose illnesses and to foretell future events.

d) Initiation Ceremony

Initiation or Lebollo la banna is a cultural and traditional practice that the Basotho society follows to construct the manhood identity. It is a rite of passage in the sense that boys or 'bashemane' pass the puberty stage and enter the adulthood stage to become men or 'monna'. Part of the rite of the rite of passage includes a circumcision, learning sacred songs tribal ceremonies. The initiates are tutored on the knowledge of family life and extensive lessons in sexuality.

Traditional initiation schools of the Basotho are conducted over a period of time, (varying from a few weeks to 6 months) in secluded areas away from settlements. The traditional initiation teachers, known as basuwe in Sesotho, are commonly elderly men with substantial economic, political and social standing within Basotho communities. Currently, most of the initiates are between the ages of 12 and 15 with only a few initiated above the age of 15. The boys usually attend the initiation school during the holiday break between primary school and high school.

The newly initiated, who are seen as 'men' by the larger traditional society, are still seen as boys by the formal education system which means that the 'manhood status' granted by the ritual is situational.

The initiate practice can be classified into 3 stages: the Separation Stage, the Transitional Stage and the Incorporation Stage. During the Separation Stage, the boys are separated from all social activities and kept in a secluded place where their transition from adolescence into adulthood or from boyhood into manhood takes place. During the Transitional Stage, the initiates are educated on the social concepts of their identities. After the physical circumcision,

the boys' open wound is dressed with a special plant which aids healing. The initiates rise early each day to perform a variety of tasks, and thereafter undergo a harsh physical regimen. Skills, such as warfare and cattle-raiding are taught and improved. Initiates are also taught to compose praises and songs to their chiefs and to themselves, the proper expression or articulation of which constitutes the important adult (male) quality of eloquence or "bokheleke.

After completion of the training period, the initiates leave all their clothing behind in the lodge, which is then set alight by the instructors. The young men then run ahead without looking back at their childhood, which has symbolically ended with the burning of the lodge. The initiates arrive at their villages smeared with red ochre and covered in their traditional Basotho blankets while surrounded by men and elders, where they are given a new set of clothes.

e) Marital Process and Bridal Responsibilities

Arranged marriages used to be common among Basotho leaders and chief's children, ancestry and kinship connections were important to regulate social and legal relations. The boy's father usually proposed by approaching the girl's parents. If they were receptive, he asked for a calabash of water. If her parents consented, the boy, with a few friends, formally visited the girl. If she agreed to the match, she gave him a scarf 'moqhaka'. She normally offered him food which he declined, lest it be said that 'he came for food not love'.

Although the couple might not have met before, they usually approved the choice made, but in earlier times they had to go through with the marriage whether they liked it or not. More recently a greater leniency has developed — today individual choice is the norm and many unmarried women become mothers.

In the past, marriage was formalized by the transfer of bohali 'bride wealth' from the groom's kin group to the bride's. Payments of cattle and other livestock signified that children would be of the father's clan and kin group, and not the mother's. The number of bohali was more or less fixed at 20 cattle, one horse, and 10 sheep or goats, but it was seldom paid in full. After a transfer of up to 10 cattle, further payments helped ally the two kin groups in bonds of reciprocity and friendship.

In the past a wedding would normally be held shortly after the marriage was arranged. Until then, the couple were not supposed to have sexual intercourse or live together. Today many marriages occur after elopement or when the man and his friends abduct 'shobela' his chosen girl and take her to his home, where she is welcomed as if a wedding had taken place.

An animal may even be slaughtered to mark the occasion, while the bride's trousseau is sent after her. The first bohali transfer, of six cattle or their cash equivalent, is an acknowledgement by the groom that he has had sexual relations with his wife, but does not mark his right to claim her children as members of his kin group; for this at least 10 cattle, or their cash equivalent, need to be transferred and acknowledged publicly.

Today a new couple still does not expect to have its own homestead. The bride lives with the groom's parents. She cooks, helps with chores, and works in the fields, at all times obeying rules of respect 'hlonipho' for her father-in-law that include not saying his name or any word that sounds similar to it. In the past a man could apply for land and a building site at the start of the first season after marriage, and slowly the new household's independence in the extended family structure developed. Pressure on land today means that he may wait far longer than a year. However, many brides resist this, and demand their own households immediately upon marriage.

f) Culture

The Basotho delight in song and dance, which accompany many ceremonies and social activities. Song is also used to mark the experiences of men's long absences as labour migrants: men compete to recite lifela tsa litsamaea naha 'songs of the travellers' about their experiences in mine hostels and underground, and women use a similar form of recitation to lament their lives as grass widows. The most common dances are the mokorotlo, the mohobelo and the mokhibo. The mokorotlo is performed by men for the chief on important occasions, such as political meetings, or when the chief and his followers go on a tour of inspection. It consists of rhythmic swinging backwards and forwards, combined with a regular slow foot stamping; the leader sings in a high-pitched voice which is followed by a deep throaty refrain from the group.

From time to time, one of the men breaks from the group and leaps and prances before the chief, miming a battle attack. He is egged on by the others who stop singing and call him by his dancing name. He may also recite his own or the chief's praises. He then returns to his rank and the slow dancing movements continue. The mohobelo, performed by men, requires energy and endurance and is danced mainly in the evening, for amusement and entertainment.

The mokhibo is a women's dance performed on the knees, the body gently rising and falling as the hands are swept upwards. An informal choir stands behind the line of dancers, singing and clapping. The maqekha is a special dance that forms part of the first rites of girls' initiation.

The Basotho have a variety of musical instruments. The morupa, a small drum used at girls' initiations, is made from a clay pot over which a taut skin is stretched, and is struck with flat hands. The lekoko is made of a roll of hardened cow skin which is beaten with sticks, producing a dull thumping sound. Its use is restricted almost entirely to maqekha seances.

The lesiba consists of a horse-hair stretched along a stick between a quill and a holding bracket. Light sucking against the quill causes the horse-hair to vibrate, producing a haunting sound commonly accompanied by the player's voice. The thomo consists of a bow, across which a horse-hair or thin wire is stretched, and which is tautened with a wire fastening in the middle. The bow is attached to a calabash - or, in recent times, an old oil tin - which acts as a

resonator. The instrument is played by plucking the string or picking it with a stick.

g) Contemporary Life of the Basaotho: Labourers

The strongest influence on Lesotho's Basotho is their involvement as labourers in South Africa's mining and productive industry. This represents their main source of income and has affected their practices.

Its effects are obvious in their domestic arrangements, men separated for long periods from their families, and changes to how marriage is viewed, men as absentee wage-earners and women relict homemakers. Bride wealth signifies men's right to demand support from their children once they are earning, rather than just their association with a kin group.

Ancestors and diviners 'lingaka' are implicated in men's experiences as labour migrants and women's experiences of being left at home.

They are called upon to provide protection from dangers lurking in the mines and factories; they are expected to help heal injuries, physical and emotional, associated with such work; and they are turned to with the stresses faced by women left alone to care for children, fields and livestock with little, if any, money.

h) Rural Life

In earlier times the Basotho daily life followed a routine, with a rigid division of labour based on age and gender. The day began at sunrise, when the family would rise. Since maize replaced sorghum as the staple food, a typical breakfast has been maize meal with boiled or sour milk and, very occasionally, meat. Household members usually ate together in the main house or, on sunny mornings, in the courtyard. When visitors were present, the men ate first and women and children ate the remains.

Historically, Basotho men ate in the lekhotla where their wives waited on them. The men assembled in the lekhotla to participate in a trial, or in helping to settle a dispute that had been brought to the chief or headman; or they discussed current issues. Those with special avocations, for instance herbalists, diviners and basket-makers, spent some time practising their professions and collecting ingredients and raw materials. Much of their time was devoted to the welfare of their livestock; when cattle-drawn ploughs were introduced from Europe the men took on the responsibility for ploughing, a task that was previously the work of women using digging sticks and hoes, although it was men who cleared new areas of bush for use as fields. On the whole, the men's routine was uncomplicated and leisurely except in times of cattle raiding.

Women's duties, which varied according to season and status, were more strenuous than men's. They swept and cleaned the home, prepared breakfast, fetched water, and weeded and harvested the crops. This could keep them in the fields from long before sunrise until sunset. Grinding corn was often done by older daughters. During quiet periods, women tended to the upkeep of their homes, replastering walls and floors with mud, replacing broken reeds in the fences and doing other domestic chores. What little leisure time they had was usually spent visiting friends and relatives. From an early age children were given specific duties to perform each day. Boys herded the family's goats and, when they were older, cattle. Girls helped their mothers with domestic chores.