

This Matter of Women is Getting Very Bad: Gender, Development and Politics in Colonial Lesotho, by Marc Epprecht, University of Natal Press, 2000, pb, 282 pp. 9 780869 809532

MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, historians and policymakers draw a conceptual distinction between the public and private sphere, the sphere of public (male) action, politics and affairs of the state, and that of the private—the domestic and the household, women and children, in order to deal with the one or the other. In this book Epprecht demonstrates, with subtle and witty arguments and descriptions, that the distinction between these spheres can be maintained no more comfortably than the distinction between the conservative and the radical, or the traditional and the modern.

The specific texture of historical events relies on the strategies that people adopt in complicated circumstances, the way they seize opportunities that present themselves and reject, when necessary, the modern in favour of the traditional, the Church against the State, the family against independence and vice versa. In this reading, prudent agents can subvert both conservatism and radicalism in a variety of ways to their own ends.

A second methodological tool underlying this work is a materialism that recognizes the fundamental importance of the ownership and control of production and distribution and the consequences of this on the realm of beliefs, ideas and ideologies. The pre-Independence history of Lesotho provides a rich field for this approach; couched as it has been from earliest days by ambiguities and contradictions. When there is a wholesale attack on the existing mode of production and it is replaced, as in the case of Lesotho, by the destruction of agriculture and the commodification of male labour, culture cannot survive intact.

The third tool worthy of note is Epprecht's insistence that the women of Lesotho were far from being passive victims, despite centuries of oppression and manipulation by their own men (and sometimes by each other, as a way of controlling men, or even by their sons, whose wards they were); by colonial governments; by the different groups of French Canadian Catholic and Anglican missionaries; by the predatory

economic and political requirements of neighbouring South Africa; and despite embedded hierarchies structured by gender, class and race. Forced by economic necessity, they turned to whatever resources that were to hand—education by the missionaries, self-help through the Homemakers Association and voluntary religious associations, perhaps the darker side of traditional religions, chiefly power for at least some, including the Paramount Chieftainess 'Mantsebo, flight and employment, including self-employment, in South Africa—to fight for survival. Epprecht talks of a nation of survivors whose courage and resourcefulness has enabled them to make the best use of usually dismal opportunities.

One such opportunity was submitting to the stereotype of submissive womanhood expected of them by the patriarchy. Indeed, as Epprecht points out, this submission was not so much a cunning subterfuge for political gain, but a position internalized by many of the women themselves: they were not, in the period under consideration, feminists in the modern way. If women had not concurred with their position as homemakers and with their own subservience, if they had defied their chiefs and the colonial administration, if they had not joined the Christian missions and made use of them, they would not have been able to advance their own interests and those of their families.

Yet when the occasion demanded, women were not slow to stand up for themselves. The telling defeat of the Basotho National Congress Party in the 1965 elections was partly the result of the vote of women who were angered by its leaders' naked misogynism and hypocrisy over universal franchise. Similarly, in the 1950s 'Mantsebo was able to retain and increase her political power with an interesting range of weapons, including:

... methods of obstruction that only a Basotho women could resort to with dignity, "throwing a fit" or falling into hysterics"... her tendency to break into tears at crucial moments of negotiation, [was] something which clearly alarmed the British and contributed to their perception that she was a "very uncertain quality" (p. 114).

The 30 or so groups that formed the Basotho people coalesced in that country at the beginning of the nineteenth century, bringing with them a set of customs so fluid that they were open to interpretation and reinterpretation. These customs provided the underpinning of a mode of subsistence agriculture in which the rights of women were, at the least, ambiguous, and, at the most, rigorously repressed. The oppression of women by patriarchies both traditional and modern was not unusual in the world at the time: it was, for instance, only in 1940 that women in Quebec, Canada, got the vote.

The gendered division of labour, however, received further painful reinforcement when the British colonial administration started encouraging men to leave the country as migrant labourers on South African mines and plantations. By the early 1920s the numbers of men involved in migrant labour exceeded 16 per cent of the male population. Soon women, lonely in their virilocal homesteads, impoverished by the absence of male labour in the fields and hampered by their own lack of education and authority in a racist and patriarchal state, started to join the migrancy, as workers, as brewers of beer and as prostitutes in the camps.

In 1936 over 22,000 women were issued passes to go to South Africa where, unfettered by their chiefs, their families and the administration, they were able to keep themselves and their families alive and even earn bridewealth money (*bohali*) for their sons.

That their methods of doing so were unorthodox—or, as Epprecht says, “non-traditional—is described in a rollicking account in Chapter 5, “‘Loose women’ and the crisis of colonialism”. This reveals both the degree of hardship that men and women suffered in the camps, and the degree of freedom and resourcefulness such experiences gave them. Faced with independent-minded women, the colonial authorities, the Sesotho chiefs and the South African government were unable to exert control. While individual women were able to carve out a livelihood for themselves in South Africa, the migrant labour system continued to contribute, directly and indirectly, to the economic and political rape of Lesotho, the destruction of the social fabric and the denudation of the countryside. Epprecht concludes,

Gender was a central organizing principle in the political economy as it changed over time.... Regardless of class, Basotho women normally shouldered primary responsibility for the welfare of their families. As the *de facto* primary “breadwinners”, they often saw through the self-serving or idealistic statements of male elites.... Scholars... need to investigate further the material factors and cultural dynamics of domestic struggle” (212–214).

This is a historian’s account of women in colonial Lesotho but it has interesting ramifications for social activists and policymakers throughout Africa and perhaps elsewhere. It reinforces, yet again, the importance of understanding that women, however poor or uneducated, like other social agents, actively participate in their own self-improvement in situations of extreme hardship and make use of whatever opportunities come their way to do so.

It demonstrates the numbers of different paths open to them, even in times of hardship; and stresses that the methods available to such people both to interpret their own situation and to act, are ambiguous and contradictory. It shows, finally, that the context in which they move contains other agents and institutions whose goals are equally ambiguous, whether homegrown or foreign, “traditional” or “modernizing”.

REVIEWED BY CAROLE PEARCE, EDITOR