

IN A STATE OF EMERGENCY: DEMOCRACY, POWER, AND NATIONALIST DISCOURSE IN LESOTHO

David B Coplan

The chief role of the political theorist today is to shout 'theatre!'
in a crowded fire.

Terry B. Strong

The Drama

During the first week of 1994, a group of junior officers in the Royal Lesotho Defence Force (RLDF) successfully coerced the resignations of four of their senior commanders. This action, ominous on the face of it, was reported in Lesotho's print and broadcast media with little accompanying discussion. In public pronouncement, nothing is ever cooking in Lesotho until it burns, no matter how acrid the smoke. Only a week later however, spokesmen for the same group, based principally at Maseru's Makoanyane Barracks, demanded a 100 per cent pay rise for all military personnel across the board and gave Lesotho's civilian government until 24 January to respond. Only ten months before, during Easter 1993, the Basotho Congress Party (BCP) had replaced the military as the government by sweeping all 65 seats in Lesotho's first parliamentary elections since 1970. By now however the honeymoon, if not the whole military/civilian marriage, of democracy was over. Before the government could or would issue a definitive counter-proposal, soldiers appeared one morning at its central administrative complex and drove civil servants from their offices at gun point. A few days later factions surfaced within the army itself; the larger and more antagonistic to the government based at Makoanyane, the smaller and nominally more loyal at RLDF headquarters at Ratjomose Base at the other end of the capital. On Wednesday 19 January, elements of the Ratjomose faction hauled armour up on to the ridge¹ that snakes from behind their barracks southwards around the perimeter of Maseru, and the following morning began lobbing shells in the direction of Makoanyane, causing most damage to residential areas lying immediately below the line of fire. On Friday and Saturday fierce fighting, or at

least a good deal of sound and fury (later shown on South African television), ensued as troops from Makoanyane, enraged by the shelling, stormed and occupied the southern parts of the ridge with their superior ground forces. Despite the noisy and visible expenditure of ammunition only about five combatants were killed, including one unfortunate soldier gunned down at a petrol station in town in an opportunistic drive-by shooting by members of the opposite faction. Whether this was due to the inexperience of the troops, their reluctance to engage one another at close range, or the indifferent training received from their British instructors, one cannot say. A quiet stand-off ensued, aided by drenching rains on Sunday, and when I took a taxi into town the following day all was calm.

At the start of open hostilities, Prime Minister Ntsu Mokhehle called upon his old friend and strange bedfellow, then South African Foreign Minister Roelof 'Pik' Botha, to talk what he considered to be some sense into the heads of the soldiers. Botha duly responded - having first gotten the backing of the newly installed Transitional Executive Council - by mobilising South African military units around Lesotho's borders and flying to Maseru to announce that South Africa would under no circumstances recognise any military takeover or any Lesotho government save the present democratically elected one. This, followed by a series of lengthy meetings between the factions and chaired by the government, succeeded at least in calming the anger and sense of astonished outrage - 'They fired on us!' - that both factions now felt towards one another. More important the government, having stated they would not be coerced, undertook to do *something* to address the soldiers' demands and the underlying causes of the crisis directly. Over the following three months this they manifestly failed to do, despite a flurry of meetings and offers of international mediation from leaders in Botswana, Swaziland, Zimbabwe, and by President De Klerk and Nelson Mandela. By mid-April the frustration in the officer corps and lower ranks of both army factions brought them together in common cause. On the morning of 15 April soldiers went to the residences of four of the most powerful ministers in the BCP government in order to detain them. Three were in fact taken into custody but Deputy Prime Minister S. Baholo, refusing, as he was alleged to have shouted, to be captured by (former Prime Minister) Leabua's minions, himself opened fire on the soldiers and was killed by a return volley. Perhaps more than any other, this tragic event shocked Lesotho's 'cosmopolitan' class out of their usual self-protective response to crisis: 'We are all Basotho and we can settle this among ourselves'; into a recognition of the severity of the fractures among Lesotho's elites. Most other ministers, with the exception of the Prime Minister himself, fled the country, and Pik Botha was forced to reiterate his non-recognition threat.

Announcing that they had no desire to overthrow the government but only to

have their salary demands and other grievances attended to, the soldiers released the three ministers, and their colleagues also soon returned. In the week that followed, death threats were made against certain other ministers, who again briefly fled the country. During the second week in May the situation was finally resolved in a compromise in which the army received only a 10 per cent raise in pay, but in addition very substantial increases in benefits and expense and equipment allowances. This allowed the government to save face by appearing to resist the soldiers' demands while essentially satisfying them. I was told the army negotiators left the talks with smiles on their faces. But peace was not long to reign. Before May was out - only a few weeks after South Africa held its own first (heavily brokered) democratic non-racial elections, inspiring the world with its 'reconciliation politics' - the Lesotho Police Force went on strike. They demanded a 60 per cent pay increase and a sense of parity with the army. After a few chaotic days in which Basotho gleefully ran robots by day and robbed houses by night, the government was forced to admit its weakness and call in the soldiers to restore order and exercise police functions. After three weeks the strike ended in a settlement comparable to that reached earlier with the army. The soldiers remain disgruntled, however, over an appeal that was lodged - unannounced and without consultation - with the Organisation of African Unity by the Lesotho government for assistance in restraining both the army and police at a time when the former were saving the public order from the effects of labour action by the latter. The situation was exacerbated by President Robert Mugabe's public threat to send OAU-sanctioned military forces to Lesotho to 'knock some sense' into those disrupting Lesotho's fledgling democracy, a threat which was unfortunately seconded by President Mandela who apparently failed to get sound advice on this occasion. Finally the Lesotho army, shunning the politics of reconciliation that is integrating, albeit with much residual awkwardness and contestation, the ANC's Umkhonto we Sizwe into the new South African National Defence Force, remains fearful of and adamantly opposed to government efforts to establish control over the 'BNP' (the late former Prime Minister Leabua's Basotho National Party) soldiers by integrating into their ranks the veterans of their old antagonists, Mokhehle's guerrilla Lesotho Liberation Army (LLA).

These were not the last of the improbable developments that would in fact occur. Another was foreshadowed in a short paragraph in the *Cape Argus* on Friday, 15 July which stated that E. R. Sekhonyana, leader of the BNP, was demanding that King Letsie III abdicate in favor of his father, the deposed Moshoeshoe II, but that before so doing he should dissolve the current government for failing to govern and, in emulation of South Africa, supervise the formation of a new government of national unity. This would allow Sekhonyana

and the BNP to return from the political wilderness to a share in government. As Finance Minister under Leabua and as one of the only cabinet members to retain his post under the military administrations that followed, Sekhonyana remains one of the most powerful figures in Lesotho and he was not about to go gently into his electoral good-night. As there had never been any love lost between Moshoeshoe II and the BNP this move appeared surprising. Further, the creation of a government of national unity, not on the face of it an illogical way out of the present impasse, would seem to have been made a good deal less likely by concurrent demand for its potential facilitator's abdication. Yet only a month or so later the king did indeed issue a decree dissolving parliament and calling for the reinstatement of his father as monarch, the latter action possibly a means of reducing the political heat that would surely be ignited by the former. Such an action was of course unthinkable without at least majority support within the army. The government was summarily dismissed and replaced by an interim council that included Sekhonyana as Minister of Foreign Affairs and other BNP party loyalists in senior ministerial posts. Zimbabwe's President Mugabe, backed by Mandela and by Botswana's President Masire, would not let stand such a blatant move. Threatening 'sanctions' and if necessary military intervention, the neighboring leaders demanded and got, from a much chagrined Letsie III, the reinstatement of Parliament and the BCP government. On 25 January, 1995, Moshoeshoe II did finally reascend the throne, but the crisis continues and the form of its resolution is seemingly impossible to predict. The latest wrinkle is an apparent surfeit of monarchs, as the status of Morena Bereng Seeiso (Moshoeshoe II) and his son Mohato (Letsie III) with regard to the throne remains, a year since the outbreak of the original crisis, undetermined.

The Narrator

Readers will have noted the unstable blend of putative description and opinionated rhetoric characterising the foregoing account. I indulge in this voice to signal my renunciation of any claim to function as a 'neutral' observer, or to possess an idealised, liberal journalistic 'objectivity' established by a careful documentation and marshalling of the supposed facts in the service of dispassionate analysis. Rather my position is that of a *participant* in the dialogic of 'popular' 'expert' and 'authoritative' explanations and predications; of rumor, gossip, and opaque public reportage that constituted nationalist discourse in Lesotho in the unsettled and unsettling year of 1994. This discourse took on such a heteroglossic character, as Bakhtin might have termed it, because the press both within and without Lesotho so manifestly abdicated any role in constructing or promulgating an authoritative account. Lesotho's print and broadcast media are strongly controlled, and any journalist who impugns the integrity of govern-

ment ministers, no matter how strong the evidence supporting the accusation, will not be tolerated for long. Local media reports during the crisis were uniformly uninformative, consisting of flat announcements of events, official statements that not even governing party officials bothered in conversation to support, and earnest but feckless appeals by the Prime Minister for peace and reconciliation that were soon obviated by events. As to the external news sources, only the BBC bothered, eventually, to send one of their own reporters to cover the crisis, while the Johannesburg press, including the vaunted, investigative *Weekly Mail* and the black-operated *Sowetan* couldn't be bothered with events in their diminutive neighbour and largely ignored the situation in Lesotho at the time. In such a vacuum popular, conversational networks and processes of narrative, explanation, and consciousness flourished, and my own understanding and reportage are products of them.

An illustrative story that comes to mind is that told by the Stanford anthropologist Akhil Gupta about his ethnographic field research in a smallish Indian city. Engaging a group of men chatting on a street corner one evening, Gupta was greeted cheerily by one who said, 'Well we are just gossiping but for you this is work, ay?'² So in the sense intended by Gupta's interlocutor and for present purposes I am an ethnographer - a participant/observer who not only inescapably but admittedly trades in the informally performed exchanges that comprise in partialness and partiality popular communicative events. Unlike the ethnographer, however, I conducted no research and my notes are more akin to those of Dostoevsky from the Underground than to those of even the most unaccomplished fieldworker. I willingly divest myself too, of the authority of the journalist or the historian, though accounts of less substantive factuality than mine have been known to find their way into journalistic and historical narration. As Sandra Scarr puts it, 'All the world's a stage, but the script is not *As You Like It*, it is *Rashomon*' (Scarr, 1985:499).

Lesotho's political melodrama is enacted both with and within a nationalist discourse driven by interests, values, perceptions, understandings, reflexes, and self-justifying, advancing, and constituting representations that resemble reality less than they construct it. As I compose this narrative, far from the family, friends, and acquaintances who collaborated in the formation of the experience that provides the excuse for it, it may be that things to others were indeed otherwise, but this makes no difference to my argument.

The Script

To the argument, such as it is, then. We in Africa have become all too sadly familiar with the subversion and misrepresentation of democratic processes and institutions, carried out with increasing frequency in the name of democracy.

Witness the recent Kenyan and Nigerian elections and their aftermaths. This regression is facilitated by self-serving, totalising ideologies of personalistic political legitimacy, whose authors and beneficiaries are only too ready to exploit entrenched divisions, for which constructions of regional and ethnic identification are the most ready idioms and instruments of expression. We need look no further than Gatsha Buthelezi over the Drakensburg in KwaZulu-Natal for an object example. More sympathetically, regional and ethnic solidarities, however created, are not surprisingly the first alternative for political mobilisation among segments of the polity to whom the state has manifestly failed to deliver. But the Basotho are one people with one language (though some of Xhosa descent are bi-lingual in Xhosa), one history: the inheritors, moreover, of King Moshoeshoe I's effort at autonomous, indigenous, self-conscious state formation. Such cultural pluralism as exists (the resident Indian, Chinese, and Korean traders and the handful of white expatriates excepted) is not only cheerfully recognised by Basotho but regarded as fundamentally *constitutive* of Basotho political identity. While Basotho do talk of their language and culture, *Sesotho*, in the reflexive sense as well as sharing many implicit, habituated preconceptions and practices, they do not in practice conceive of themselves in any essentialised way as an ethnic category. On the contrary, the Basotho explicitly construct themselves as the descendants of the four 'great' and several lesser 'clans' (chiefdoms really) that were politically amalgamated into a *nation* by Moshoeshoe in the early 1820s. They readily acknowledge their cultural kinship and historical relation to other Sesotho speakers over in South Africa, but unless these people's ancestors were subjects or vassals of Moshoeshoe, *Basotho ba Moshoeshoe*, they are not Basotho. So as Prime Minister Mokhehle pleaded in his public addresses during the January crisis, could Basotho not, as their own political culture prescribed, talk their problems over and reach, at whatever length, a consensus? Manifestly not. What then is the explanation for this extraordinary, dare I say benighted sequence of events, and what, if anything, can be learned from it about the potential for democratic transformation in our southern African region? Some selective history, if I may.

As Basutoland moved toward independence from Britain and its first elections in 1965, power seemed most likely to devolve upon Ntsu Mokhehle and his Basutoland Congress Party: nationalists with ties first to the African National Congress and then to the break-away Pan-Africanist Congress, and inheritors of the mantle of anti-colonial resistance earlier worn by Josiel Lefela's Commoners' League. The BCP's main opposition was the royalist but still anti-South African Marema Tlou Freedom Party. Chief Leabua Jonathan, however, a staunch Catholic and leading conservative - Jonathan was a great-grandson of King Moshoeshoe I in his second house and the son of Chief Jonathan Molapo, a

British 'loyalist' during the anti-colonial Gun War of 1880-81 - saw a vacuum at the other end of the political spectrum. Leabua campaigned against the BCP, successfully painting them as anti-religious political radicals financed by Peking. With the help of the South African government and the Catholic Church - the largest denomination in Lesotho - Leabua's newly founded Basotho National Party (BNP) came out of nowhere in the year before the election to steal a narrow victory over the BCP. Moshoeshe I's direct heir, Prince Bereng Seeiso, who had been enthroned in 1960 as Moshoeshe II, was limited to the status of a constitutional monarch, and in recurrent conflicts with Leabua and his Molapo-dominated government (Moshoeshe's second house versus his first), the king came off very much the worse. By the time of the next elections in 1970, the electorate seemed ready to give the BCP a chance to govern, and though Leabua used the old arguments and his new incumbency to good effect, the BCP won a narrow but clear majority of seats. Whereupon Leabua declared the election null and void and, using the Para-Military Unit (PMU - satirically known as the 'Prime Minister's Unit') he had created during his term of office, declared a State of Emergency and violently suppressed the BCP and its followers. Ntsu Mokhehle fled into exile in South Africa where he remained until Leabua was overthrown in a military coup in 1986.

So for the last sixteen years of his two decades in office, Leabua ruled without popular consent, manipulating democratic institutions such as parliament democratically, it's members convened as rubber stamps and sham legitimators when they were useful, dismissed when they were not. To entrench his power, Leabua pursued the total penetration of the civil service through the nepotistic promotion of the 'Tory' fraction of the elite - 'Dealing with the government is like entering a shop full of cuckoo clocks,' commented a friend: 'It's Mo-LA-po, Mo-LA-po, Mo-LA-po!' At the same time, he suppressed the royalist faction of the aristocracy (the 'sons' of King Letsie I, Molapo's elder brother) and, more important, suborned local chiefs and the newly-created Village Development Committees to the BNP. The effect was both to compromise and disorganise local administration. International development aid - with the ignorance or complicity of its agents - was made to serve the interests of the ruling party to such an extent that initiatives large and small were often frustrated by local communities who identified 'development' (*tsoelopele* with domination '*muso*'; 'government'). The ultimate guarantor of Leabua's rule, however, was the military he had created. Ironically but perhaps predictably, by the 1980s, in an atmosphere of growing popular dissatisfaction with BNP rule, the main-line officers and the army rank and file had become the chief threat to Leabua. Unable to trust the military or to retain power without them, Leabua was widely said to be 'riding the tiger'.

The Prime Minister was courting danger in other ways. Smarting from the Catholic clergy's principled criticism of his rule and seeking the international legitimacy - and foreign assistance - granted to southern African 'Frontline States,' Leabua had changed his ideological spots and forged an alliance with the ANC. Further, he had sent out feelers to eastern bloc countries and in 1978 invited a Cuban diplomatic delegation to Lesotho. The South Africans - Pik Botha in particular - reacted with characteristic paranoia and made not only public threats but secret warnings and overtures to the Lesotho military. Nor was this the only threat. Mokhehle and his core of supporters, whose outrage time had not diminished, founded the guerrilla LLA which, with South African complicity and support, planted bombs and attacked postal and police installations in Lesotho. In response, Leabua recruited special units of the army to be trained in North Korea and whose loyalty to the government was to supersede that given to their senior officers. These units, in tandem with the thuggish civilian operatives of Leabua's BNP Youth League, and a rural *Lekhotla la Khotso* ('Peace Corps' [!]) terrorised Lesotho during 1984-85. Finally, early in 1986, the South Africans secretly informed the senior commander of the PMU, Major General M. J. Lekhanya, that Leabua was planning to have him removed, and that he should move against the government, confident of South African support. This began on 23 January, with the near closure of all Lesotho's border crossings by the South Africans, an effective material strangulation of the country. On 26 January, the phlegmatic General Lekhanya acted at last, and television viewers around the world were treated to scenes of jubilation in the streets of Maseru as Leabua was ousted and placed under house arrest.

For the first but not the last time, the chickens of the 1970 State of Emergency, in retrospect the worst catastrophe in Lesotho's political history since the Free State wars of 1865-8, had come home to roost. While most BNP ministers were shown the door and replaced by a Supreme Military Council with new civilian counterparts, a few, most notably Finance Minister E. R. Sekhonyana (reputed to have made the fateful call to Lekhanya on behalf of the South Africans and to have the goods on most major political figures in Lesotho) remained. Together they led the unassuming and modest General Lekhanya down the primrose path of autocracy and kleptocracy so much travelled elsewhere in post-independence Africa. More significant was the new cosiness between the Lesotho and South African militaries, who pledged co-operation in every sphere, including the pursuit of active opponents of the South African regime. Turning on the political refugees who had provided the justification for so many of Leabua's requests for international aid and the legitimisation of Lesotho's status as a Frontline State, the Lekhanya regime expelled the ANC from Lesotho. The king, whose hereditary legitimacy and opposition to Leabua had put back in favor, was made Head of

State. His unfriendliness to South Africa and attempts to exercise real authority, however, put him on a collision course with Lekhanya. Close associates of the king were dismissed from government and his personal secretary, O. Seheri, was found murdered and his body burnt in his car in a remote spot, a victim of *koeyoko* (secret political elimination). A commoner, Lekhanya was almost from the beginning challenged by royalist senior officers, especially two members of the Military Council, Cols. Sekhobe and Thaabe Letsie. Lekhanya got the better of this faction, however, and succeeded in having Sekhobe Letsie convicted and sentenced to 15 years for having ordered the *koeyoko* murders of two of Leabua's closest ministers and their wives in the wake of the coup. Administering the coup de grace, Lekhanya deposed the king in 1990. Moshoeshoe II abdicated in favor of his son Mohato, who became Letsie III, reportedly at the urging of his exiled father, who feared that otherwise Lekhanya might be moved to abolish the monarchy altogether. Sons of Moshoeshoe I; Oh, How the Mighty are Fallen!

Accepting R67 million in military aid from South Africa, Lekhanya signed the Lesotho Highlands Water Scheme agreement that would send the country's mountain waters down to the thirsty industries and suburbs of the Pretoria/Witwatersrand/Vereeniging metropolis, and to the parched farmlands of the Free State, something that Leabua had resisted for two decades. Among Lekhanya's other 'achievements' was Order No. 4, a law that curtailed public criticism and abolished academic freedom at the National University, providing for the dismissal of any staff member at the government's discretion without explanation required. Accustomed since before the time of Moshoeshoe I to free expression in chiefs' public fora called *lipitso*, Basotho mourned the late Leabua as they smarted under the rule of an army that had not even existed at independence. Although the rank and file and many of the officers came from humble backgrounds, their exercise of power was more repressive than that of the most autocratic colonial chief. 'When you ask the soldiers the reason for something,' despaired an elderly wisehead, 'they show you a gun.'

Ultimately the widely believed accusations of massive embezzlement against Sekhonyana and others in Lekhanya's coterie moved junior officers under Col. Phisoana Ramaema to remove Lekhanya in early 1991. It was not corruption per se, apparently, that led to such a dramatic move but rather that the small group at the top enriched only themselves, allowing the equipment and living standards as well as the public reputation of the army to decline. Additionally, the excesses of the Lekhanya regime and the Major General's lack of real progress towards the restoration of civilian rule was annoying formerly sympathetic donors. North American governments and the European Community threatened cutoffs in development assistance unless such progress, in line with moves towards democracy in South Africa, was made, further threatening the security of the

army's junior ranks. By this point, however, another military coup could do little to cool discontent among workers and peasants, further fueled by a sudden return of thousands of Basotho migrants retrenched from the South African mines. There were, unfortunately, few politically productive avenues for this discontent to take, as long as the Lesotho military and police and their South African counterparts effectively repressed both political participation and expression. In the event, this pervasive sense of grievance crystallised understandably into an extreme and resentful grass-roots nationalism. In May 1991, local security personnel at a South African-owned clothing outlet in Maseru beat to death a young Mosotho mother accused of shoplifting. The response was the 'race riot' in which Chinese, Korean, and Indian-owned small businesses, and not the large South African chain stores, were the specific focus of attack. Under irresistible pressure from both within and without Lesotho to reinstate civilian rule, Ramaema finally agreed to the resumption of free political activity that culminated in the democratic elections of March 1993. In those elections, Sekhonyana led the 'new model' BNP, confident in what he had come to consider an historical right to rule and the continued support of the ANC across the border.

Basotho, however, were in a strongly nationalist mood and chose to right what was widely viewed as the historical wrong of 1970. In a model of free, fair, and peaceful polling, the electorate gave the returned Mokhehle and his BCP a unanimous victory, though this did not reflect the 20 per cent of the vote that had gone to the BNP. But surely now, most people hoped, the unity of the nation that had been so badly fractured both vertically, between sections of the elite, and horizontally, between social classes, would be restored.

Playing the Script: Next Episode

No such luck. The BCP had done much to win the election, but little to prepare themselves to govern. Rather than giving an appearance of vigorous activity along the lines of new American presidents' first '100 days', the aged Mokhehle and his ministers were from the outset paralysed when faced with the complex and risky business of governmental decision-making, and to a great extent remained dependent on the existing civil service, largely BNP and unchanged from Leabua's time, for administration. Among the few decisions the new government did make in the early months was to give members of parliament - entirely BCP - pay increases of 300 per cent. Parliament had not sat for over a decade, and the trebling of even older pay scales may thus not have made its members' remuneration excessive. The significance of this move and the rhetorical largesse of '300 per cent' was not lost on the army, nor was the appointment of members of Mokhehle's LLA, and the promotion of officers known to be loyal to the BCP, to senior military commands. Fear circulated through the ranks about

a more fundamental issue: the future of the army itself. A child of the BNP, the army wondered what use they would be in a time when Lesotho's old antagonist South Africa was itself moving towards democracy and regional co-operation, and their own government was in the hands of the BCP and the army's old antagonists the LLA. So the rank-and-file decided to test the waters. Appeals to their most senior officers to secure better pay, allowances, and benefits from the government went unheeded - leading to the forced resignation of the four senior officers that signalled the impending crisis.

The army, however, was not itself united. Makoanyane Barracks housed younger, lower ranks who nonetheless considered themselves superior to their seniors over at Ratjomose because many were among those recruited by Leabua to be sent for advanced training in North Korea. Their sympathies were with the BNP, and Sekhonyana and his party elite, black-balled at the ballot box, were widely suspected of having fed their anxieties and triggered their peremptory demands. The faction at Ratjomose countered, not so much out of loyalty to the government as in fear of being ousted by the Makoanyane and punished by Pik Botha. One important expression of all this was the still-unresolved debate, throughout the capital and both inside and outside government circles, as to whether the army demands were fundamentally about money. We must be mindful, of course, of the words of Abe Martin, the old fictional sage of Brown County, Indiana: 'When someone says, 'It's not the money, it's the principle of the thing' - It's the money!' But let me hazard a guess: the soldiers demanded the 100 per cent pay rise both for the money and as a clear sign of the government's recognition of their continuing power in the Lesotho state structure. 2,500 strong, with a payroll of 3,500 (!), these men and their equipment, facilities, and dependents consume a portion of the national budget equal to one-third of all school fees paid annually within the country,³ at a time when unemployment and poverty are forcing growing numbers of children out of the schools. And who are the soldiers to fight, if not each other, the government, and ultimately the people themselves?

So it appears that not only Prime Minister Mokhehle but Lesotho itself is riding Leabua's military tiger. At the extreme, the possible failure of Lesotho's latest flirtation with democracy could lead to a full-scale elopement with South Africa. Indeed, it was commonly suggested around Maseru that the ANC, still bitterly antagonistic towards Mokhehle because of his alliance with Pik Botha and attacks on their ally Leabua, are even now (through Sekhonyana) behind the mutiny in the army. A possible goal, which many Basotho members of the ANC-allied National Union of Mineworkers would support, is to destabilise ('Mangope-ise') the Lesotho government in preparation for the country's eventual political incorporation as South Africa's 'tenth region'.

Not even the wily Sekhonyana, of course, can be certain if or when such an outcome would be in his political interest, but Sekhonyana's credit with the ANC apparently still holds good. It was he who, with the assistance of then ANC Secretary General Alfred Nzo, would have brought Nelson Mandela to Lesotho in December 1990 despite Lekhanya's collaboration with the South African regime and military, were it not for the strenuous protests of junior ANC organisers in Lesotho to such a visit. During the Lesotho campaign, it was Sekhonyana, and not Mokhehle, who was invited and indeed appeared at major ANC functions in South Africa. Still, Mandela was among those who led the charge in forcing Letsie III to reinstate Mokhehle and his government, in the aftermath of which Minister Sekhonyana was said to have taken up residence in Makoanyane Barracks.

Conclusion: A Text?

What, if anything, can usefully be made of all this? The lessons are not encouraging. From 1824 to 1869, the reign of Moshoeshe I, the Basotho maintained a functioning autonomous state which, if not democratic in any of the various Western senses - how could *any* form of political practice approximate such an abstraction, even in the West? - did inscribe processes of accountability and vertical flows of political communication and material resources. Contradictions and conflicts, though manifest, were effectively mediated by Moshoeshe's innovative political structure, though significantly he never gained control of the military system, which remained in the hands of regional chiefs. Despite the defeats of 1865-8, this structure - a sort of lineage mode of consensual, consultative feudalism I have called 'hierarchical reciprocity' (Coplan, 1994) - was strong enough to resist colonial dismantling in the Gun War, when Basotho successfully retained the right to bear arms and secured direct 'Protection' (irony as discourse; mockery as practice) and administration by the British Crown, leading to the eventual independence in the mid-1960s of not only Lesotho but Botswana and Swaziland as well. Decades of colonialism changed all that, co-opting and distorting the chieftaincy in the name of 'indirect rule' to such an extent that by the time of independence the Basotho were prepared to let Moshoeshe II reign only on condition he would not rule. The Westminster system they were given instead, however, proved to be an even greater danger it seems than a post-colonial monarchy, leading to the nation's further political undoing. With a vested interest in the state and its revenues, the small Basotho commercial, bureaucratic, professional, and aristocratic elite thunder in protest when political integration into a new South Africa is suggested. But the failure of Lesotho's new democracy to take hold may prove to be the hole in the dike, with thousands of Basotho flooding into a majority-ruled South

Africa despite the undiminished determination of the authorities on both sides of the border to stop them. Over the past year, the South African department of Home Affairs reported the (largely futile) deportation of 3 000 Basotho to Lesotho.

What of democracy? Of course almost everywhere but in Foggy Bottom⁴ and the White House the whole concept, stretched to the point of dismemberment on the rack of George Bush's New World Order, has been exposed as a code for the imposition of what amounts to an alien, imperially universalised institutional rhetoric. Ironically, while in Africa itself there are increasing and genuinely felt demands for democracy:

it is not always clear what kind of democracy is being demanded
 ... Often it appears as if the West seeks to impose a model of
 democratisation increasingly moribund in the West itself (Simone,
 1994:21).

Inevitably, the resulting structures provide more useful instruments for autocracy and self-aggrandisement than even the patrimonial feudalisms Weberian theory insisted they must supersede. We are talking then about 'the failure of the (social democratic) state', not of course as a mode of power, but as a model for providing any well-being or security for people. It now seems the cynical shoddiness that formerly characterised state usages of 'socialism' in the Second and Third Worlds has been transferred to usages of 'democracy' projected in the First. Out in Africa, the loudly publicised embrace of multiparty democracy and national conventions 'may simply be a smokescreen to legitimate and resuscitate existing regimes', (Simone, 1991:33) notably in Kenya, Malawi, Cote D'Ivoire, and Togo. Such failure is the result, as South African cultural critic Rob Nixon points out, more from the attempt to apply centralised, over-determined rigidities onto social forms that are essentially fluid and dynamic, than from ethnic oppositions, invented or otherwise. Indeed, echoes Maliq Simone, not only the absence of democracy but also 'its attempted imposition into seemingly anachronistic and situationally dystonic forms fuels many of the anti-system movements taking place in Africa' (Simone, 1994:21-22).

Western governments, lending institutions, and aid agencies have made 'developing' countries (a tragically farcical notion when applied to Lesotho) dependent on the 'donor mode of production'.⁵ When they in turn fail to use - as in the case of Leabua - or insist on using - as with the Ramaema regime - the economic carrot-and-stick to enforce transitions to 'democracy', it is at the same time, *mutatis mutandis*, a process of 'cleaning the categories'; imposing a dominant particularity in the guise of a reified Wilsonian universalism. Contrary to what has so often been said, this is not simply a matter of democracy as the North Atlantic basin purports to understand it falling like an infertile seed on the

impenetrable political laterite of 'African tradition.' The history of post-colonial states even in those rare cases where, as in Lesotho or Somalia, such states are not themselves simply colonial residues, has not provided contexts for any form of autonomous evolution towards a liberalist political culture. Political infertility begins with conquest and superimposition, not with independence. Lastly, consider why it is that the G7 powers are so insistent that 'democracy' is the cure-all primarily in dependent and impoverished nations - from Haiti to Russia - with the least healthy and most resistant social body. These prescriptions are less confident, if prescribed at all, in the Pacific Rim, where economically successful regimes are held to have found (and proved they're entitled to) their own route to institutional consensus.

Conversely, we must remain fully aware of and concerned about the conservative implications of such an argument, and autocratic politicians and regimes have not failed to exploit them. In a recent public statement from house arrest, Burmese opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi warned against arguments by the regime in Myanmar and elsewhere that 'democracy' is a Western import, the product of an alien political culture inherently unsuited to social order, consensus, and progress in the 'developing world'. Below the state level, ethnic/regionally-based politicians can argue 'democracy' in seeking autonomy from the centre while practising patrimonialism at home. In South Africa, 'traditional' (semi-colonial really) chiefs argue against liberalist conceptions of universal human (individual) rights, and explanations based on oppressed, colonised, or false consciousness notwithstanding, an apparent majority of the populace concerned support them.

Not long ago, my adopted compatriots and I voted for a new South Africa in an intensely fetishised, anti-witchcraft ritual of Election. As one Chicago newspaper headline screamed, HAIRY SEX DEMON STALKS SOUTH AFRICAN ELECTION.⁶ Even those of us not given to superstition have to hope the magic works, but it's seeming failure in Lesotho (I hope I am speaking too soon) has that kindred nation - unlike South Africa, a 'real' nation - whistling (and sometimes shooting) in the dark. Let us face it: discourses of democracy are popular but elections, however free or fair, do not even begin to institutionalise democracy. Further, there are many cases in which election-driven 'transitions to democracy' produce disjunctions, contentions, and impasses that provide less public progress and private well-being than the autocracies they ostensibly replace. How inspiring to see The People line up for hours and days to vote for hope in Angola, Mozambique, Nigeria, Haiti, 'Palestine'! - even Brazil and Russia; and how dispiriting to see those hopes repeatedly crushed. Here in southern Africa, only vast, wealthy little Botswana seems - so far - exempt (is it safe to say the jury is still out on Zimbabwe and Zambia? on

Malawi?). In Lesotho, a *very* popular electoral transition brought to power or perhaps paralysis a government of one people, one language, one political history, one nation. But, like every one of its predecessors since the fight for Basotho autonomy in the Gun War, it is a government that apparently listens, when it listens at all, only to those who have the economic, physical, or organisational capacity to threaten it. Is Lesotho too small and, more to the point, too peculiar to serve as an example of anything but itself? Or is it, indelibly, the writing on the wall?

So then, back to the future. Can South Africa avoid Africa's fate? One important advantage has been provided by the political genius of Nelson Mandela in the form of the ANC's consistent policy of inclusiveness, which brought no fewer than twenty-six parties to the Kempton Park negotiations and, unlike Lesotho, instituted a system of proportional representation that made sure that virtually every group had someone in government to speak for them. The election itself was brokered rather than counted, thus ensuring that the parties received the proportions of votes that (more or less) were needed to secure universal acceptance of the results. On the negative side, the starkly racial nature of the poll, with Africans outside KwaZulu-Natal voting for the ANC and Whites, Coloureds, and Indians voting primarily for the National Party, shows how much progress will have to be made before South Africans can rightly answer to Bishop Tutu's name of the Rainbow people. On a more enduring level we may be thankful for the liberalist Freedom Charter, the existence of a self-reproducing, institutionalised state structure, and the widespread willingness to conduct most - though not all - forms of civil enterprise in full view of authority. Elsewhere in Africa, African administrations took over extractive mechanisms, not state structures, and today there is little but extraction for the governors to preside over as the energies of the common citizenry and 'civil society' are of necessity almost entirely given over to the avoidance of the eye and hand of government. Only by holding our leaders to the spirit and the letter of the Freedom Charter may South Africa avoid such a devolution but, below the level of State President, have we at present any democrats?

NOTES

- 1 This ridge is well-known in Lesotho military history as the place from which colonial forces shelled the Basotho rebels under Prince Lerotholi in the Gun War of 1880. In a fight, those who control this ridge control the town.
- 2 Akhil Gupta, public presentation, American Anthropological Association, Annual Meetings, December 1990.
- 3 Personal communication, David Ambrose
- 4 The headquarters of the U.S. Department of State, including its Agency for International Development (USAID) are located in a section of Washington, D.C. called Foggy Bottom.
- 5 Judith Gay's phrase
- 6 My thanks to John Comaroff for this gem.

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Although unions are widely recognised as key actors in the transition to democracy in South Africa, remarkably little research has been done on worker expectations. This book reports on the findings of a nationwide survey, conducted in April 1994, into worker expectations of democracy.

This pioneering study argues that a gap has opened up between worker expectations developed during the struggle against apartheid and the particular form of representative parliamentary democracy under the Government of National Unity.

The majority of respondents subscribed to a notion of direct participatory democracy in the workplace - accountability, report back and recall. Most were firmly of the view that parliamentary democracy should be substantially the same. More disturbingly, there are growing signs of a 'democratic rupture' between union leaders drawn into corporatist structures and rank and file members.

The authors conclude that the Congress of South African Trade Unions is likely to emerge as a left pressure in its alliance with the African National Congress. But two conditions are necessary if the alliance is to survive.

Firstly, unions will have to shift from the antagonism that characterised their relations with the apartheid state to a closer working relationship with their allies in Parliament and in the Government. Secondly, there will have to be a programme that supplements and extends, rather than destroys, representative parliamentary democracy.

This will require integrating the principles and practices of direct participatory democracy with indirect parliamentary democracy. In this way, South Africa will be *Taking Democracy Seriously*.

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